

I

Introduction

Over one and a half billion people eat food with chopsticks daily. This is the first book in English that traces the history of the utensil from ancient times to the present day. The aim of this book is threefold. The first is to offer a comprehensive and reliable account of how and why chopsticks became adopted by their users and continued, as a dining habit, through the centuries in Asia and beyond. The second is to discuss the culinary impact of chopsticks use on Asian cookeries and cuisines and vice versa: how the change of foodways in the region influenced people's choice of eating tools to aid their food consumption. And the third is to analyze the cultural meanings of chopsticks and chopsticks use in the respective cultures of their users. Chopsticks are distinctive in that though mainly an eating implement, they also have many other uses. A rich and deep cultural text is embedded in the history of chopsticks, awaiting our exploration.

Over many centuries, chopsticks have helped distinguish their users in Asia from those in the rest of the world. So much so that some Japanese scholars have identified a distinct “chopsticks cultural sphere” vis-à-vis the other two spheres on the globe: those who feed with fingers, which was a dining tradition for the people in the Middle East, South Asia and some parts of Southeast Asia, and those who eat with forks and knives, or the people who live in today's Europe, North and South America, Australia, etc.¹ Other scholars, such as Lynn White, have also noticed this tripartite division among

¹ Isshiki Hachirō, *Hashi no Bunkashi: Sekai no Hashi Nihon no Hashi* (A cultural history of chopsticks: world chopsticks and Japanese chopsticks) (Tokyo: Ochanomizu Shobō, 1990), 36–40; and Mukai Yukiko & Hashimoto Keiko, *Hashi* (Chopsticks) (Tokyo: Hōsei daigaku shuppankyoku, 2001), 135–142.

the finger-feeders, the fork-feeders and the chopsticks-feeders in the world.² Centering on China, where the utensil originated, the chopsticks cultural sphere encompasses the Korean Peninsula, the Japanese archipelago, certain regions of Southeast Asia, the Mongolian Steppe and the Tibetan Plateau. Thanks to the increasing global popularity of Asian foods in recent decades, this sphere is expanding – people outside the zone have increasingly adopted chopsticks while eating Asian foods. Indeed, in Chinese and other Asian restaurants throughout the world, many non-Asian customers attempt the use of chopsticks, with some showing admirable dexterity. In Thailand and Nepal, where the traditional dining method is to use one’s right hand, it is now increasingly common to see people use chopsticks to convey foods.

For many chopsticks users, employing this Asian eating utensil does not just continue a time-honored dietary practice. They also believe its use brings myriad benefits besides conveying food. Kimiko Barber, a Japanese-English author living in London, wrote *The Chopsticks Diet* (2009), in which she argues that while Japanese food is by and large healthier than Westerners’, the key to a healthy diet is not what you eat, but *how* you eat. Chopsticks, she claims, bring such a benefit. “Eating with chopsticks slows people down and therefore they eat less,” she writes. And eating less is not the only benefit. Since one eats more slowly with chopsticks – by as much as twenty more minutes per meal – by her calculation, “it also has,” Barber proclaims, “the psychological benefit of making you think about the food and the enjoyment you get from it.”³ In other words, eating with chopsticks helps you to appreciate food and turns you into a gourmet!

Others argue that there are even more benefits. Isshiki Hachirō, one of the Japanese writers who coined the term “chopsticks cultural sphere,” maintains that since chopsticks use requires brain–hand coordination (perhaps more so than using other implements), it improves not only one’s dexterity but ultimately also the development of one’s brain, especially among children. And Isshiki is not the only one who holds this belief.⁴ Scientists in recent years have conducted experiments exploring,

² Lynn White, a professor of history at UCLA, gave a speech, entitled “Fingers, Chopsticks and Forks: Reflections on the Technology of Eating,” at the American Philosophical Society meeting in Philadelphia on July 17, 1983, in which he discussed these different dining habits. *New York Times* (Late Edition – East Coast), July 17, 1983, A-22.

³ Kimiko Barber, *The Chopsticks Diet: Japanese-Inspired Recipes for Easy Weight-Loss* (Lanham: Kyle Books, 2009), 7.

⁴ Isshiki, *Hashi no Bunkashi*, 201–220. In their study of chopsticks, Mukai and Hashimoto also describe how learning to use chopsticks helps children’s development of fine motor skills. *Hashi*, 181–186.

among other questions, whether or not habitually using the eating device improves one's deftness. Psychologists too have examined whether chopsticks manipulation among children could promote a higher level of independence in eating. The findings in both cases are positive. In the meantime, scientific research also suggests that while helping to develop fine motor skills among children, lifetime chopsticks use might result in a higher risk of osteoarthritis in hand joints among the elderly.⁵

To investigate and explain the various benefits as well as possible harms associated with chopsticks use is certainly a worthwhile scientific undertaking. Yet my goals are limited to the three I set out at the beginning; as a historian, I shall mainly discuss the advantages and disadvantages of chopsticks use in history and base my discussion on historical and archaeological evidence. To describe the multiple functions of chopsticks as a social token, literary symbol, cultural artifact and religious object, I will rely on literary sources, folklore and religious texts.

As an eating implement used across Asia for several millennia, chopsticks have shown their continuing utility and persistent appeal, even though it requires some practice to wrap one's fingers around them properly and put the tool to effective use. In the chopsticks cultural sphere, such training usually begins in childhood. In more recent years, reflecting Western cultural influence, forks and knives have increased their presence in Asian countries, not only in restaurants frequented by Western customers. Meanwhile, the level of skillfulness among young Asians in proper chopsticks use also is said to have declined. Having failed to receive adequate instruction at home, where one traditionally learned how to use chopsticks, many children nowadays simply apply the utensil in their own way, however inelegantly. Nonetheless, compared to the other parts of the world where many now depend on Western cutlery to transport food, the base of the chopsticks cultural sphere remains intact and solid – the utensil is indispensable to people in their day-to-day life. Moreover, those living in the zone also expect outside visitors to use the implement, as

⁵ Sohee Shin, Shinichi Demura & Hiroki Aoki, "Effects of Prior Use of Chopsticks on Two Different Types of Dexterity Tests: Moving Beans Test and Purdue Pegboard," *Perceptual & Motor Skills*, 108:2 (April 2009), 392–398; Cheng-Pin Ho & Swee-Pi Wu, "Mode of Grasp, Materials, and Grooved Chopsticks Tip on Gripping Performance and Evaluation," *Perceptual & Motor Skills*, 102:1 (February 2006), 93–103; Sheila Wong, Kingsley Chan, Virginia Wong & Wilfred Wong, "Use of Chopsticks in Chinese Children," *Child: Care, Health & Development*, 28:2 (March 2002), 157–161; David J. Hunter, Yuqing Zhang, Michael C. Nevitt, Ling Xu, Jingbo Niu, Li-Yung Lui, Wei Yu, Piran Aliabadi & David T. Felson, "Chopsticks Arthropathy: The Beijing Osteoarthritis Study," *Arthritis & Rheumatism*, 50:5 (May 2004), 1495–1500.

it is the only utensil put on the table in most eateries. In Chinese and other Asian restaurants outside Asia, simple illustrations on how to use the eating device are often printed either on the chopsticks' sleeves or on the paper tablemat, encouraging all their patrons to experiment with it.

When were chopsticks invented and how were they originally used in ancient China? Archaeological finds have yielded samples of bone sticks in various Neolithic cultural sites in China, which suggests that prototype chopsticks had appeared as early as 5000 BCE, if not before. Yet if they were indeed chopsticks, they might have not been used exclusively for conveying food. Rather, those proto-chopsticks probably had a dual function: either as a cooking or as a dining utensil, or as both. This, interestingly, remains the case in many Asian households; that is, chopsticks are a convenient kitchen utensil to this day. For instance, when boiling food, one can use (chop)sticks as stirrers and/or mixers. One, too, can use them, in pairs, to pick up food contents in a cooking vessel in a pincer movement. When one also transports the foodstuffs from the vessel to the mouth, then the sticks one uses become an eating tool, or chopsticks. This is how food experts generally believe chopsticks originated in ancient China. Historical texts and research have shown that from the fourth century BCE, eating with utensils (chopsticks included), rather than fingers, gradually became the preferred dining custom among the Chinese.⁶

Once invented, both cultural and culinary factors played, distinctly or relatedly, a part in enhancing chopsticks use, and utensil use in general. To the Chinese and other Asians, using utensils to convey foods represents cultural advancement, a point we will return to throughout the book. But utensil use may also be essential if food is cooked and eaten hot. During the Shang dynasty (1600–1046 BCE), or China's Bronze Age, bronze vessels in the form of cauldrons and tripods were commonplace. Without a doubt, these utensils were made for cooking, especially for boiling. Of course, one can eat cooked food with fingers. But if the contents are immersed in the broth, as is common with boiled food, then it is difficult. Moreover, it seems the early Chinese not only preferred boiled foods, but they also liked to eat them hot. To avoid scalding or soiling their hands, utensil use thus became necessary. No definitive explanation, however, has been given as to how and why this food habit – eating hot food – became favored among

⁶ Ōta Masako, *Hashi no genryū o saguru: Chūkoku kodai ni okeru hashi shiyō shūzoku seiritsu* (Investigation into the origin of chopsticks: the establishment of the habit of chopsticks use in ancient China) (Tokyo: Kyūko Shoin, 2001), 1–23; and Liu Yun et al., *Zhongguo zhu wenhuashi* (A history of chopsticks culture in China) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2006), 70ff.

the Chinese, and remains so more or less to this day. The climate of North China might be a factor, as it was (and is) mostly cold and dry except in the summer, which made hot food gastronomically more agreeable. Stew (*geng* in Chinese) was recorded as the most popular dish in historical texts from ancient China. Meat consumption, which seems to have been more prevalent in earlier times than in later periods, might be another, for cooked meat becomes less palatable when it becomes cold.

Once utensil use became a dietary custom and accepted as a form of culture, it appealed to peoples across various geographical zones. The Japanese, for instance, do not necessarily prefer eating hot food as do the people in North China, but they have been committed chopsticks users since the seventh century. Vietnamese cookery features some hot dishes, even though the region's climate is much more warm and humid than North China's. It can be argued that the Japanese and the Vietnamese turned to utensil use in eating mostly because of Chinese cultural influences. In the case of Vietnam, which was ruled by imperial China for a millennium, this cultural factor is particularly salient since most of their neighbors in Southeast Asia traditionally consumed food with hands. By contrast, the Vietnamese have adopted chopsticks as a utensil for many centuries.

If one decides to use a utensil to eat, does it have to be a pair of chopsticks? Not necessarily. Indeed, although the chopsticks cultural sphere has existed in Asia from approximately the fifth century to the present, the eating device was *not* the only one invented and used by the people in the zone. Indeed, spoons and ladles, as well as knives and forks, all appeared in the continent and were used as either cooking or eating utensils. Moreover, according to archaeological finds and historical texts, though invented early, chopsticks were *not* the earliest nor, for a long time, the primary eating tool, even in ancient China, their birthplace. Spoons were. More precisely, it was a dagger-shaped spoon, known as *bi* 匕 in Chinese, that was used as the essential implement for eating among the ancient Chinese (Plate 1).

To understand why the spoon was initially a more important eating tool than chopsticks, one needs to consider the types of food the Chinese and other Asians consumed historically. Food historians tend to divide human foods into two categories: grain and nongrain food. The former, apparently, is more important because in many places, consuming a meal is often equivalent to eating a grain cereal, be it rice, wheat, millet or maize. Asians are no exception. In the Chinese language, *fan* is a rubric word for all cooked grain food, even though in modern times, it usually means “cooked rice.” Pronounced *bap* in Korean, [*go*]han in Japanese

and *co'm* in Vietnamese, the word conveys the same meaning in those Asian languages as well. As such, eating a meal in Chinese is simply *chifan*, which literally means “eating cooked grain (rice),” even though the meal most likely also consists of nongrain food dishes, which are referred to as *cai*. Likewise, *gohan o taberu* carries the same dual meaning in Japanese, rather than just meaning feeding oneself with cooked rice. These similar expressions suggest the importance of grain food in a meal. In fact, nongrain food dishes – *cai* – in colloquial Chinese are sometimes called *xiafan*, or “rice downers,” revealing that their principal function is to help people ingest the grain food.

The spoon was the main eating utensil in ancient China because the Chinese used it to transport grain food (not soup as in later times). By comparison, chopsticks were the device designed initially for carrying nongrain foods. As a dual set, these two instruments were termed *bizhu*, or “spoon and chopsticks” in parallel, in Chinese literature for many centuries. That the spoon precedes chopsticks in the word compound suggests its primacy, extending the *fan* and *cai* relationship in food intake. A reflection of this dining tradition can still be observed today, in the Korean Peninsula, where the people use both a spoon and chopsticks as a set in eating a meal. Like the dining custom of ancient China, the recommended practice among Koreans is to apply the spoon in transporting grain food, or rice, whereas chopsticks are used for nongrain dishes.

Yet the Koreans’ eating etiquette reflects more a cultural decision than a culinary need, for as rice increased in popularity as a grain staple across Asia, chopsticks became an effective tool to convey it in clumps to one’s mouth. This is what most chopsticks users usually do these days, including many Koreans on less formal occasions, such as in family dining. But from ancient to Tang times (618–907), the dominant grain in North China (and the Korean Peninsula) was millet, a hardy crop suitable for the region’s climate. Unlike cooked rice, which is sticky and can be moved in globs, millet is best cooked as porridge, which, as recommended by Chinese ritual texts, made the spoon a better tool in transporting it. Chopsticks, by comparison, were then mostly used to pick up foodstuffs from a soupy dish, such as a stew.

If chopsticks were used as a secondary eating implement in ancient China because their assigned function was to transfer only the nongrain food, or the foodstuffs in a stew, this role soon changed. In fact, the change began as early as the Han dynasty (206 BCE to 220 CE), due to the growing appeal of floured wheat foods, or noodles, dumplings and pancakes. Archaeology has shown that the Chinese had long learned how to grind

grains on mortars and pestles to make noodles. Indeed, the world's earliest sample of noodles has been discovered in Northwest China; made of millet grains, it is over 4,000 years old. During the Han period, powered either by humans or by animals, stone mills became widespread. And besides millet, the Chinese also milled wheat, possibly due to the cultural influences from Central Asia. Before milling became a widely accepted method in processing wheat, the Chinese had consumed wheat whole by boiling it. Yet without question, it was flour that turned wheat into a more popular grain; by the end of the Tang dynasty, or the early tenth century, wheat indeed had become important enough to shake the predominance of millet in North China.

In addition to pancakes and buns, noodles and dumplings are two well-liked forms of wheat foods, in Asia as well as in other parts of the world. For eating these two foods, chopsticks were considered a better tool than the spoon. In other words, thanks to the appeal of wheat foods, chopsticks began to challenge the spoon's primacy from approximately the first century in China. Interestingly, food experts in the West have observed that the pasta noodle's popularity also caused Europeans, much later, to use the fork and eventually other table utensils from the fourteenth century onward. According to an Italian story, the fork had been introduced to Europeans as an eating implement – as opposed to its being a kitchen tool in Roman times – by a Turkish princess after she married a wealthy nobleman from Venice in the early eleventh century. Yet it only became widely used once Europeans grew accustomed to pasta. Indeed, according to some research, medieval Turks not only used the fork but, at one time, also chopsticks to eat pasta.⁷ In any case, if the fork is the tool for handling noodles among Europeans and others, chopsticks are the choice for Asians, including those outside the bounds of the chopsticks cultural sphere. In such countries as Thailand in Southeast Asia, people also tend to use chopsticks to convey noodles whereas for other foods they use either fingers or other utensils.⁸

Noodles are a grain food. Yet more often than not, people do not eat noodles by themselves. They tend to mix them with something else, be it a

⁷ See Giovanni Rebera, *Culture of the Fork*, trans. Albert Sonnenfeld (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 14–17; James Cross Giblin, *From Hand to Mouth, Or How We Invented Knives, Forks, Spoons, and Chopsticks and the Table Manners to Go with Them* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1987), 45–46; and Peter B. Golden, “Chopsticks and Pasta in Medieval Turkic Cuisine,” *Rocznik orientalistyczny*, 49 (1994–1995), 71–80.

⁸ Penny Van Esterik, *Food Culture in Southeast Asia* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), xxiv; 54–55.

soup, a sauce or sometimes meat and vegetables. In so doing, noodles become a meal. In this mixture, the supposed *fan* and *cai*, or grain and nongrain food dichotomy, comes unraveled. A good example in Asia is the *lamian* (*ramen* in Japanese), a type of soup noodle that originated in China but gained wide popularity throughout Asia in more recent centuries. The noodle in the *lamian/ramen* is made by stretching, or “pulling” as the word *la/ra* suggests, the wheat dough many times into strands and strips, by hand or by machine. But its appeal is due as much to the accompanying soup, which is flavored with meat, vegetables, green onions, soy sauce and other condiments. The Japanese *ramen* also typically has seaweed, *kamaboko* (a fish cake sliced into pieces) and sometimes an egg. All of this suggests that once seasoned, a noodle dish coalesces and blends grain and nongrain foods into one. Similarly, a Chinese dumpling, which wraps ground meat and vegetables with a thinly rolled dough skin, also transcends the traditional grain/nongrain food divide. When these wheat foods were consumed with the aid of chopsticks, the eating device effectively rivaled the spoon (Plate 24).

But the spread of wheat foods probably was only the story of North China. In such regions as South China, where rice had been the staple grain from time immemorial, the inhabitants probably had used chopsticks to carry both the grain starch and the accompanying nongrain dishes for a long time. In the Song period (960–1279), rice production grew considerably in both North and South China, thanks to the adoption of a new – early ripening – rice variety from Vietnam. The growth continued well into the Ming period (1368–1644) and expanded also into Korea. The increase of rice consumption during those periods reinforced and solidified the foundation of the chopsticks cultural sphere. From the fourteenth century, historical and literary sources reveal that chopsticks became the exclusive eating implement for many. This change was especially notable among the Chinese, since their dining tradition before had been to employ both spoon and chopsticks together. Likely reasons for the exclusive use of chopsticks in China were myriad, one being the broad adoption of the communal eating style, with all diners sitting together at a square table. Once chopsticks were used in transporting both the grain and nongrain foods, the utensil became the primary eating tool in the chopsticks cultural sphere. As a result, the spoon was relegated to use for soup, with a modified design (Plate 26). It remains so in China, Vietnam and Japan today.

Besides rice consumption, tea drinking, another distinct cultural tradition with an Asian/Chinese origin, might have also increased the appeal of chopsticks as a table utensil. For although many tea experts like to savor

the beverage by itself, it was/is also customary among tea drinkers to nibble on some snacks or small dishes to go with the drink. These snacks and appetizers are called either *xiaoshi* (lit. small foods) or *dianxin*; the latter is more commonly spelled as “dim sum” in English, meaning appetizers. Both terms appeared in Tang China, thanks to the growing trend of tea drinking. The custom of drinking tea while sampling a variety of small dishes was to intensify and expand in the following centuries and continues to this day. Most of these small dishes – pancakes, meat, shrimp or fish balls, etc. found commonly nowadays in Cantonese restaurants around the world – are best and customarily eaten with chopsticks. And chopsticks are indeed often the most common utensil found in inns as well as in teahouses in Asia (Plate 19).

Since chopsticks can be inexpensive (if made of bamboo or cheap wood) compared to other utensils, chopsticks have become the most used utensil in Asia also because they are cost-effective. In a sense, both tea drinking and chopsticks use are habits that can be enjoyed by people of different social backgrounds. Undeniably, class differences do exist in practice. The rich, for example, can afford expensive tea and chopsticks whereas the poor cannot. But whether rich or poor, one can drink tea to relax and use chopsticks to eat. Indeed, as will be argued in this book, the exclusive use of chopsticks as the eating tool, as well as the development of communal eating, probably began with the lower social classes in Chinese and other neighboring societies. As they are casual and informal, these customs are more likely to be practiced first among the ordinary people and gradually move upward to the members of the upper social strata. That some Koreans use chopsticks – instead of the ritual-required spoon – to transport rice in family dining and on other similarly relaxed occasions might also help illustrate the point.

What about the knives and forks that had once appeared almost in tandem with spoons and chopsticks in ancient China? In the Han tombs unearthed by modern archaeologists, there are several cooking and eating scenes portrayed on the walls. These stone paintings and carvings show that knives and forks were then used as kitchen utensils, but not as eating implements. And in the subsequent centuries, knives, or cleavers, and forks retained this function without any change, till their being (re) introduced as tableware by Europeans in modern times. In other words, unlike chopsticks, which began as a cooking tool but later became a table utensil, forks and knives failed to undergo such a metamorphosis in China and neighboring regions. Again, culinary and cultural factors played their part.

Culinarily speaking, the popularity of the stew in early China is something worth our attention. A stew is generally made by boiling and simmering solid food ingredients in liquid and is served together with the gravy or the sauce. Both historical texts and archaeological finds from Han China suggest that during this period, if not before, the solid ingredients in the stew were already cut into bite-size morsels before cooking. The knife used to cut the meat thus could stay in the kitchen, since there was no need for it to be on the table. As the morsels were small and in a broth, chopsticks were a more effective tool than, say, a fork to pick them up.

One could, of course, say that meat was pre-cut into bite-size portions because people preferred to use chopsticks. Roland Barthes (1915–1980), the French linguist and literary critic who visited Japan during the 1960s, indeed made such an observation, stressing that the food and the utensil were complementary to each other:

There is a convergence of the tiny and the esculent: things are not only small in order to be eaten, but are also comestible in order to fulfill their essence, which is smallness. The harmony between Oriental food and chopsticks cannot be merely functional, instrumental; the foodstuffs are cut up so they can be grasped by the sticks, but also the chopsticks exist because the foodstuffs are cut into small pieces; one and the same movement, one and the same form transcends the substance and its utensil: division.⁹

Having observed closely how chopsticks were used in carrying the food, Roland Barthes also speculated on the cultural significance of chopsticks use by comparing it to that of the knife and the fork, the cutlery to which he was more accustomed:

For the chopsticks, in order to divide, must separate, part, peck, instead of cutting and piercing, in the manner of our implements; they never violate the foodstuff: either they gradually unravel it (in the case of vegetables) or else prod it into separate pieces (in the case of fish, eels), thereby rediscovering the natural fissures of the substance (in this, much closer to the primitive finger than to the knife). Finally, and this is perhaps their loveliest function, the chopsticks *transfer* the food, either crossed like two hands, a support and no longer a pincer, they slide under the clump of rice and raise it to the diner's mouth, or (by an age-old gesture of the whole Orient) they push the alimentary snow from bowl to lips in the manner of a scoop. In all these functions, in all the gestures they imply, chopsticks are the converse of our knife (and of its predatory substitute, the fork): they are the alimentary instrument which refuses to cut, to pierce, to mutilate, to trip (very limited gestures, relegated to the preparation of the food for cooking: the fish seller

⁹ Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 15–16.