There have been many tales about the emergence of chopsticks and the evolution of their names. Chopsticks have been made in various materials and with diverse artistic styles, and numerous etiquettes are involved in their use. Disposable chopsticks have become an environmental concern today.

By tradition, silverware is the choice eating utensil of Europeans and Americans; the hand is the preference of Indians, Indonesians, and people of the Middle East; and chopsticks are the favorite of Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and Vietnamese.

Chopsticks are a pair of tapered sticks of even length. The Chinese word for chopsticks is kuài 筷 or kuàizi 筷子. Kuài is a phono-semantic compound (characters linked together to indicate a related meaning and a sound), the character for quick 快 indicating its pronunciation and the radical for bamboo 竹 hinting at the major material of its making. The word chopstick seems to come from Cantonese Pidgin English chop chop (quick, quick 快快).

The Chinese name for chopsticks has changed over time. Originally known as jia 茎 (to hold), the utensil assumed the name zhu 筷 around the Qin–Han period (221 BCE–220 CE). Zhu, however, is homophonous (having the same pronunciation) as stop 住 or bore 蛀 (by insects). The Chinese, especially those who boated in the south, considered the word unlucky and replaced it with a word sounding like kuài 快, a homophone of quick, sometime during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912).

Chopsticks are made primarily of wood and bamboo, though ivory chopsticks are said to have existed some 3,000 years ago, and royal families and aristocrats preferred silver ones, believing in the metal’s capacity to detect arsenic. Today chopsticks can be made of coral, agate, silk, plastic, horn, porcelain, animal bone, and stainless steel. Since the Song Dynasty (960–1279), artistic designs have become part of chopsticks. Dream of the Red Mansion, a classic of Chinese literature written in 1754, depicts a pair of ebony chopsticks decorated with sections of silver inlays.

The origin of chopsticks is unknown, but it must be closely related with the Chinese diet and cooking methods. Chinese eat grains as staple food, supplementing them with vegetables and meat. They cut the vegetables and meat to convenient sizes before cooking, and it would be hard to pick them up from hot soup with bare hands. A pair of improvised twigs may have led the early Chinese to create chopsticks. Later, as vessels like bowls became light enough to be held in one hand, chopsticks became useful for shoving rice and small pieces of food into one’s mouth.

Legends about the origin of chopsticks abound. One recounts Jiang Ziya, a legendary figure of the Western Zhou dynasty (1045–771 BCE). A magic bird gave him a pair of bamboo twigs capable of revealing poison to save him from his murderous wife. Another story tells that Da Yi, a concubine of King Zhou of the Shang dynasty (1766–1045 BCE), fed him with her hairpins when she found the food was too hot for her hand. Still another story recounts that Yu, a flood-fighting hero of the Emperors Yao and Shun period, which predated the Xia dynasty.
(2100–1766 BCE), was too busy to wait for his food to cool, so he fished it out of boiling soup with a pair of twigs he broke from a tree.

Many rules of etiquette govern the proper use of chopsticks. The following acts are considered bad manners: laying them in a disorderly fashion on the table; pointing them at people; sucking the tips; allowing sauces to drip from them; using them by their wrong ends; resting them upright in a bowl of rice; dropping them onto the floor; beating them on a surface like drumsticks; and using them to pierce food or to poke around looking for a particular item in a dish. To avoid smearing the tablecloth at formal dinners, people often place chopsticks on small rests of porcelain or glass specially crafted for the sticks.

For hygienic reasons China began using disposable chopsticks from Japan in the 1980s. Today China uses 45 billion pairs of disposable chopsticks a year, equaling 1,660,000 cubic meters (2,169,935 cubic yards) of timber.

Appeals are being made for supplementing bamboo for wood and encouraging people to bring their own chopsticks when they go out to eat. As of 1 April 2006 China levied a 5 percent tax on disposable wooden chopsticks in an effort to cut down on their use.

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Further Reading


