

Supporting Roles in Food Culture

Chopsticks

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Japan's diet, while accepting and incorporating aspects of the food cultures of China and other countries, has developed its own unique culture. Elements that make up the food culture are not limited to the ingredients used, but also include seasonings, cooking utensils, and eating utensils, the roles of which should not be underestimated. In this issue, we will trace the roots of chopsticks and explore their impact on Japan's food culture.

Origins of Chopsticks in China and Japan

The exact date of the origin of chopsticks is unknown, but those believed to be the oldest were unearthed at Yin Xu, the capital of China's Shang dynasty (1300–1046 BC), making chopsticks at least 3,400 years old. They are thought to have been used not for everyday meals, but as a ritual tool in making offerings to the spirits of ancestors.

Besides their being a more hygienic way of eating and convenient for handling hot foods, the stimulus that prompted the invention of chopsticks may be based on the Confucian canon. Before the invention of chopsticks, people ate rice by grasping an amount with their fingers and then rolling it into a ball. However, some people tended to grasp more than others, giving their guests or superiors a bad impression of them. Therefore, a utensil that limited the amount of rice that could be taken at a time was called for. This reason for the origin of chopsticks is mentioned in the *Classic of Rites*, which describes the social forms, ancient rites, and court ceremonies of the Zhou dynasty (1122–256 BC), and is one of the Five Classics in the Confucian canon.

The chopsticks born of this necessity seem to have been



Classic of Rites (property of the Kyoto University Library)

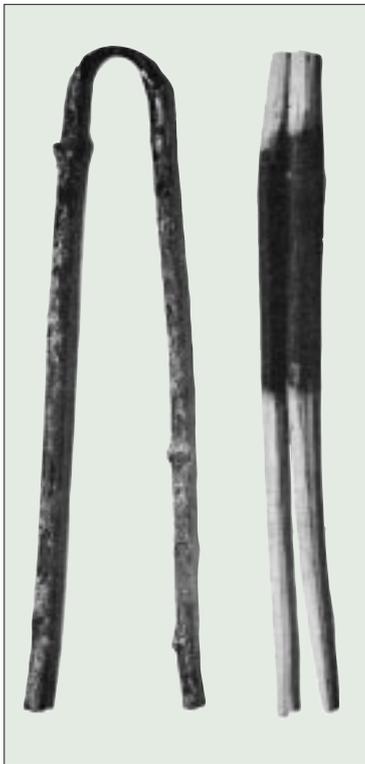
used by royalty and the aristocracy at feasts over a long period of time. It was around 100 BC, during the Former Han dynasty (206 BC–9 AD) that chopsticks began to be used by commoners. The *Classic of Rites* indicates that chopsticks should be used for side dishes while a spoon should be used for rice. It further states that chopsticks should not be used with soups that do not contain solid ingredients. Therefore, it seems that chopsticks were used in addition to spoons. This same way of using chopsticks continued up until the Tang dynasty (618–907). Noodles became popular during the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127). As it is easier to eat noodles with chopsticks

than with a spoon, chopsticks came to be an essential utensil that gained in popularity at the same rate as noodles. During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), all of China was ruled from Jiangnan, to the south of the lower reaches of the Yangtze river. The sticky rice eaten along the Yangtze river was best eaten with chopsticks. So, as this *japonica* variety of rice spread, chopsticks came to be the predominant utensil for eating.



Chopsticks used by nomads of the Gobi desert. Rosewood, sharkskin, cloisonne, ivory, tortoise shell, and other materials are used. (Reprint from *Ginka* Vol. 39, Bunka Publishing Bureau. Photo provided by Tsunehiro Kobayashi.)

Originally, chopsticks were placed horizontally in front of diners. Today, however, chopsticks are positioned vertically in the same manner as Western silverware. When, and why, did this change in etiquette occur? During the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (907–960) of political upheaval following the collapse of the Tang dynasty, the manners and customs of the Han people were greatly influenced by the invasion of nomadic equestrian tribes from the north and other peoples along the Silk Road. The Chinese diet changed greatly to consist primarily of mutton and other meat, which necessitated the use of knives. It is believed that, as knives were positioned with their tips pointing away from diners to prevent accidents, chopsticks began to follow the same rule. During the Song dynasty (960–1279), positioning chopsticks vertically became the custom, which has continued to this day.



Left: Ancient ori-bashi (reprint from Ginka Vol. 39, Bunka Publishing Bureau)
 Right: White ryokuchi-bashi, thick at the middle with both ends tapered (reprint from Ginka Vol. 39, Bunka Publishing Bureau)

On a side note, Chinese and Korean chopsticks are made with blunt ends. Preventing diners from injuring themselves and preventing their use as weapons are generally considered the reasons for this. The same principles apply to the table manners of the West, where knives and forks are used. In addition to chopsticks, Chinese tables are set with porcelain soup spoons and Korean tables set with metal spoons. In these countries today, chopsticks have again taken a backseat to spoons.

There are a number of theories as to how

chopsticks were introduced to Japan. One states that they were introduced at the end of the Yayoi period, during the 3rd century. Another suggests that they were brought to Japan as one of many gifts, along with a statue of Buddha and sutras, to the emperor Kimmei from the Korean king, Seong of Baekje, around 552. A third theory has it that an official envoy sent by the empress Suiko to China during the Sui dynasty (581–681) brought the chopstick culture back to Japan. Prince Shotoku then adopted this culture for feasts and ceremonies at the imperial court.

Chopsticks Form a Bridge between Gods and Humans

Though there are many theories regarding the introduction of chopsticks to Japan, physical evidence remaining today indicates that there were two kinds of chopsticks. One of these types is based on several hundred pairs of chopsticks made of Japanese cedar and Japanese cypress that were unearthed from the ruins of Heijo Palace in Nara. The other type is identified by silver chopsticks preserved at the Shosoin treasure house at Todai-ji Temple also in Nara. Based on these relics, one theory states that chopsticks began to be used in Japan around the 7th century, and at Heijo Palace from around the 8th century.

On the other hand, there is another theory that suggests that chopsticks developed from *kanabasami*, or tweezer-shaped utensils made of iron, that have been found among the Shosoin treasures. These *kanabasami* were among the items, such as sake and food, offered to the gods in ceremonial rituals. It was believed that when chopsticks were offered to a god, that god's spirit inhabited the chopsticks and the god then dined with humans. These divine chop-

sticks were either *ori-bashi*, made with a single long stick of bamboo bent to a tweezer-like shape, or *ryokuchi-bashi*, made of two sticks of white wood that were heavy at the center and tapered at both ends.

Ori-bashi chopsticks were probably used during the Yayoi and Nara periods for Shinto rituals and ceremonies. *Ryokuchi-bashi* chopsticks were made heavy at the middle and tapered at both ends so that the gods could inhabit them and dine with humans. Supposedly, humans used one of the tapered ends and the god inhabiting the chopsticks used the other. This variety of chopstick became the mainstream from the Nara period until the Meiji era. *Ryokuchi-bashi* chopsticks made of willow were used as the formal utensils for feasts during the Heian period (794–1185), with the highly ritualized form of serving food, *honzen ryori*, during the Muromachi period (1336–1573), and on ceremonial occasions during the Edo period (1603–1897) and thereafter. As with today's disposable chopsticks, *ryokuchi-bashi* chopsticks were discarded after use.

Willow was used for *ryokuchi-bashi* chopsticks due to the ancient belief that the wood wards off evil spirits and impurities. Willow is also considered a lucky tree because their leaves form earlier in the spring than those of other trees and plants. Today, *ryokuchi-bashi* chopsticks made of willow are essential items at weddings and New Year's celebrations.

It may well be said that the Japanese people's unique concept of gods inhabiting chopsticks is a remnant of the ancient belief that chopsticks contained the spirit and vital energy of the particular god that inhabited them, which was then imbued in the person that used them. It is certain that remnants of this belief remain in today's food culture, as the *ryokuchi-bashi* chopsticks were among the utensils used at the Great Thanksgiving Festival, a communion between the new emperor and the gods, in November 1990.

Japan's Food Culture Developed with Chopsticks

Chopsticks merchants first appeared during the Heian period (794–1185). Kino Haseo (845–912) wrote in *Shirhashi no Okina no Jo*, "An old man selling white chopsticks resides beside the town gate." The old man



A set of ritual utensils used at the Great Thanksgiving Festival. All are made of willow, except for the long *tori-bashi* serving chopsticks; from left, bamboo *tori-bashi*, rice spatula, ladle, tapered chopsticks, spoon, skewers, *ryokuchi-bashi*. (Property of Hashikatsu Honten K.K. Photograph: Tadashi Iguchi)

owned a chopsticks shop at the market located in front of the East Gate of the Imperial Palace.

Daikyo ryori, banquet-style feasts held among the nobility at that time, is said to be the oldest form of Japanese cuisine. Plates filled with seafood, poultry, dried fish, and the

like were placed on tables with four bowls of seasonings (salt, vinegar, sake, and a fermented seasoning), allowing individuals to season their food according to their own taste. Chopsticks and spoons were also placed on the table, indicating that spoons were still used in those days. Though the cooking methods themselves were not complex, the manner in which ingredients were cut gave the cook his chance to show off his culinary skills. *Konjaku Monogatari-shu (Anthology of Tales from the Past)* includes a story that says that on the recommendation of Emperor Sutoku (reign 1123–1142), a nobleman named Fujiwara no Ienari exhibited his skills with a knife on a carp dish, leaving everyone present truly amazed. As cooks were not permitted to touch foods that would be served to the nobility, he must have used only a knife and long cooking chopsticks to prepare the fish. The long cooking chopsticks, known as *manabashi*, which appeared during the Heian period (794–1185), were used not only for cleaning and preparing fish and poultry, but also for filling plates. This custom of preparing food using only knives and long chopsticks was later formalized by various culinary schools, and established Japan's unique culinary style of making a show of food preparation. Even today, *manabashi* made from bamboo or metal are used in cooking.

During the Kamakura period (1185–1333) and Nanbokucho period (1336–1392), *shojin ryori*, a Buddhist vegetarian cuisine, became popular as priests returning from China began spreading the belief that meat was impure. The distribution of commodities was also developing and a variety of regional products from throughout Japan began making their way to Kyoto. As *kombu* kelp from Ezochi (present-day Hokkaido) and *katauo*, or dried bonito, became more common, soup stocks made from these ingredients helped to establish the highly ritualized *honzen ryori* cuisine during the Muromachi period (1336–1573).

As Japan entered the Azuchi-Momoyama period (1568–1603), *kaiseki ryori*, the simple meals served at tea ceremonies, was introduced. This culinary style inherited much from *honzen ryori* and was also influenced by the vegetarian *shojin ryori*. It is said that Sen no Rikyu, who developed *kaiseki ryori*, had a new block of Japanese cedar delivered before his tea ceremonies and that he personally carved new chopsticks for his guests from the cedar block. The chopsticks he made were tapered and rounded at both ends but flat in the middle to make them easier to hold. This type of chopstick is still used today.

Japanese Cuisine and the Chopstick Culture in Edo

The food service industry developed during the Edo period (1603–1867) to support the hordes of single men who had come to Edo. Food stalls and shops opened at all places regularly frequented, including the front gates of temples and shrines, sightseeing stops, and festivals and fairs. They sold tempura, soba noodles, sushi, broiled eel, and other quick foods. Japanese-style bars and eateries for the common people lined the streets of Edo. In addition, high-class restaurants, unknown to the common people, were

also established to serve formal *kaiseki ryori*. (This *kaiseki ryori*, a fancy meal served at formal occasions, is pronounced the same as that mentioned above, referring to the light meals served at tea ceremonies, but is written with different Chinese characters.) *Honzen ryori* and the tea-ceremony *kaiseki ryori* were also passed down from the previous period and all three became firmly rooted as the foundations of modern Japanese cuisine.

Lacquered chopsticks made their appearance during the early Edo period. Among the various types produced, Wakasa lacquer chopsticks are the oldest and of the highest grade. These chopsticks, mottled with tiny flakes of shells and with an additional layer of lacquer, were used by feudal lords and samurai families. Later, lacquer chopsticks were produced in regions known for their lacquerware, such as Wajima, Tsugaru, Hidehira, Aizu, and Hida Shunkei. It wasn't until the second half of the Meiji era (1868–1912) that high-quality lacquer chopsticks become common among the general public.

Another groundbreaking modification to chopsticks came with the introduction of *waribashi*, or joined disposable chopsticks, around the middle of the Edo period. *Waribashi*, which are made of raw wood and remain joined at the end not used to grasp food until they are split for use and took advantage of the antibacterial properties of bam-



People eating at a soba noodle shop in the Asakusa district of Edo (from Kane no Waraji, property of Milki Press)



Japanese cypress trees in the Yoshino-Kumano mountains of Nara Prefecture. These forests are used for building materials and the scraps are then used to make

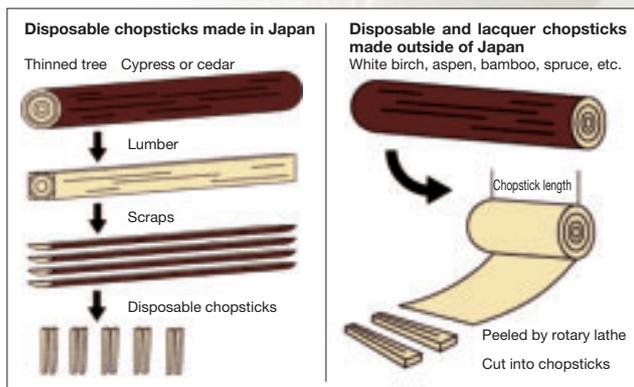
boo and other woods, were considered attractive as they showed the natural wood grain. The first disposable chopsticks were made of bamboo and commonly used in eel restaurants around Edo. Thereafter, scraps of Yoshino cedar, used in making sake barrels, were used for dispos-



Figure 1. As during the Edo period, cedar and cypress trees thinned from the forest are used to make disposable chopsticks. (Photo provided by Hashikatsu Honten K.K.)

able chopsticks. Unlike their lacquer cousins, these chopsticks were meant to be discarded after each use, but Edo society was a great promoter of recycling and such waste was not encouraged. When non-disposable chopsticks became old, they were taken to a chopstick shop where they were reshaped into round white chopsticks sold to soba noodle shops and the like. These recycled chopsticks could be recycled again with the application of lacquer and then sold again.

Most of Japan's disposable chopsticks are made of Japanese cedar, Japanese cypress, white pine, spruce, lime tree, bamboo, etc. Japanese cedar and Japanese cypress forests, for instance, are thinned and this wood is used to make building materials, with the scraps used for chopsticks. This is the same method used during the Edo period when disposable chopsticks were first invented. The utilization of wood scraps to make chopsticks shows that the original spirit of Japan's chopstick culture continues even today.



The use of chopsticks produced using domestic woods also protects Japanese forests. Thinning of these forests is necessary to maintain their health. Therefore, producing chopsticks made from thinned trees helps to preserve Japan's mountains and forests. The people of Shimoichicho, Yoshino-gun, Nara prefecture, famous as the birthplace of Yoshino cedar disposable chopsticks, have inherited this spirit of respect for their mountains. The beauty of the Yoshino mountains is representative of the spirit of those who work to protect and nurture its forests.

Information provided by Royal Warrant, Hashikatsu Honten K.K.

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The Spirit of the Japanese Chopstick Culture Protects the Global Environment

Roughly seventy percent of Japan is covered in forest. This may be one of the reasons why Japan's chopstick culture took a different direction from the bamboo and ivory chopstick culture of China and the metal chopstick culture of Korea. The introduction of disposable chopsticks during modern times can be said to have been revolutionary. The use of disposable chopsticks these days is the target of criticism by environmental groups and intellectuals around the world. They claim that the production of disposable chopsticks has accelerated the desertification of China and the destruction of forests in East Asia. And in fact, some surveys indicate that more than ninety percent of the disposable chopsticks currently used in Japan are imported, while consumption of domestic disposable chopsticks increases very little.



Cover: Fuzuki Nishijin no Hoshi-matsuri by Gototei Kunisada (Utagawa Toyokuni III)

During the Nara period, a particular myth and the Chinese Kikkoden (Festival to Plead for Skills) celebration were introduced into Japan. In the myth, the stars Vega and Altair, separated by the Milky Way, are allowed to meet once a year on the night of the seventh day of the seventh lunar month. The celebration of this meeting was combined with an existing Japanese legend about a Shinto shrine maiden who wove a special cloth on a special weaver called a tanabata and offered the cloth to a god to pray for protection of rice crops from rain or storm and for a good harvest in the fall. Originally, the Tanabata festival began as a festival to pray for girls' skills in domestic arts. During the Edo period, summer fruits, a concoction made from glutinous rice and wheat flour, and *somen* noodles were prepared for the Tanabata festival. It seems that *somen* was served in Edo castle and to the nobility in Kyoto during Tanabata celebrations, as well as being eaten by the general public.

It is said that the work on this issue's cover, only a portion of which is used, was drawn by Utagawa Toyokuni III during the Bunsei era (1818-1830). It shows a woman weaving at left and a person, who appears to be a man, with a bull on the right.

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