



# Chopsticks

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A CULTURAL AND  
CULINARY HISTORY

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Q. EDWARD WANG



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## 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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*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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## Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page ix</i>
<i>List of plates</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>Timeline</i>	<i>xvii</i>
<i>Map of East Asia</i>	<i>xix</i>
1 Introduction	1
2 Why chopsticks? Their origin and original function	16
3 Dish, rice or noodle? The changing use of chopsticks	41
4 Forming a chopsticks cultural sphere: Vietnam, Japan, Korea and beyond	67
5 Using chopsticks: customs, manners and etiquette	93
6 A pair inseparable: chopsticks as gift, metaphor and symbol	120
7 “Bridging” food cultures in the world	144
Conclusion	166
<i>Glossary</i>	<i>171</i>
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>176</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>185</i>



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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.

In completing the book, I owe my greatest gratitude to the History Department at Rowan University. Before submitting my prospectus to Cambridge University Press, I first presented it in the Department and received warm encouragement and valuable suggestions from all my

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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.

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## 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: huihua 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)
7. A food tray with wooden bowls and a pair of bamboo chopsticks found in the Mawangdui Tombs, Han China, c. second century BCE. (*Changsha Mawangdui yihao hanmu [Mawangdui # 1 Han tomb in Changsha]*, Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1973, II. p. 151)
  8. “Fire sticks” from Edo-period Japan – used to arrange charcoals and stoke flames – are another example of how chopsticks could be used other than as an eating utensil. (*Courtesy of the Edo-Tokyo Museum, Japan*)
  9. The Manchus usually combined the use of chopsticks with knives and forks. (*Manchurian implements, c. 17th–19th centuries. Courtesy of Lan Xiang, a private collector of chopsticks in Shanghai*)
  10. Eating and drinking in a tent tavern portrayed in a fresco in Dunhuang, a famous Buddhist grotto of Tang China, eighth–ninth centuries. (*Dunhuang shiku quanji [Complete collections of Dunhuang Grotto murals]*, ed. Dunhuang yanjiuyuan, Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2001, vol. 25, p. 45)
  11. “A Picnic Outside” – a mural painting of the Tang Dynasty showing that chopsticks were used to convey foods and that diners sat on the benches instead of the floor, c. eighth century. (*DaTang bishu [Mural paintings of the great Tang dynasty]*, eds. Tang Changdong & Li Guozhen, Xi’an: Shanxi lüyou chubanshe, 1996, p. 127)
  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*)
  13. “Han Xizai’s Night Banquet,” or “The Night Revels of Han Xizai” (detail), c. 970, by Gu Hongzhong, showing that the Chinese sat on chairs to eat individually rather than communally as in later periods. Handscroll, ink and color on silk, 28.7 cm high, 335.5 cm wide. (*Courtesy of the Palace Museum, Beijing*)

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.  
(*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. 86)
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.  
(“Women 22” by Utagawa Kuniyoshi [1797–1862], *Public Domain*)
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)
18. Portrait of Li-Lieu Ying, Empress Tzu-Hsi’s Great Eunuch, late nineteenth century.  
(*Chinese School, nineteenth century, Private Collection / Bridgeman Images*)
19. “The Latest Craze of American Society, New Yorkers Dining in a Chinese Restaurant,” Leslie Hunter (fl. 1910), Illustration from *The Graphic Magazine*, 1911.  
(*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	Japan	Vietnam
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>✓ Paleolithic and Neolithic periods (Jomon)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Neolithic period</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>✓ Neolithic period</li> <li>✓ Origin myths</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Neolithic period</li> <li>✓ Bronze Age</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>✓ Neolithic period (Jomon)</li> <li>✓ Yayoi Culture</li> <li>✓ Origin myths</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Bronze Age</li> <li>✓ Iron Age</li> <li>✓ Conquest by Han dynasty of China</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>✓ Kofun (Tomb) period</li> <li>✓ Asuka period</li> <li>✓ Buddhism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Bronze Age</li> <li>✓ Iron Age</li> <li>✓ Buddhism</li> <li>✓ Chinese rule continued</li> <li>✓ Use of utensils for food</li> </ul>

Time	China	Korea	Japan	Vietnam
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>✓ Asuka period</li> <li>✓ Nara period</li> <li>✓ Heian period</li> <li>✓ Spread of Buddhism</li> <li>✓ Japanese missions to China</li> <li>✓ Introduction of utensil use</li> <li>✓ Discovery of wooden chopsticks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Chinese rule continued</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>✓ Late Heian period</li> <li>✓ Kamakura and Muromachi periods</li> <li>✓ Chopsticks for food</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ End of Chinese rule</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>✓ Muramachi period</li> <li>✓ Unification of Japan</li> <li>✓ Tokugawa period</li> <li>✓ Edo period</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Independent period</li> <li>✓ Le dynasty against Champa</li> </ul>



1. Map of East Asia.



## 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.<sup>1</sup> Other scholars, such as Lynn White, have also noticed this tripartite division among

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

the finger-feeders, the fork-feeders and the chopsticks-feeders in the world.<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> Scientists in recent years have conducted experiments exploring,

<sup>2</sup> 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.

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

<sup>4</sup> 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.

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