**Chinese Chopsticks As An Element Of National Culture**

**Introduction**

According to Wikipedia, Chop sticks are eating utensils shaped in pairs of equal length and usually tapered at one end. They have been used in many parts of Asia especially in east Asia in countries like China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Singapore, Japan, Malaysia, Nepal, Thailand, Korea, and others. They trace their origin in China in the early days of Chinese history. In Chinese they are called “筷子” and exist in different colors in various places and in homes as shown in. Having lived in China, (Beijing) for close to four years, I have had the privilege to travel to different places around China and of course in all those places, I have tasted the different cuisines prepared by indigenous Chinese people. Interesting to note is that unlike in my country (Uganda), where we use spoons and forks and sometimes hands to eat, Chinese use Chop sticks” to eat.

### What makes chop sticks unique as a cultural heritage in China (insight into the history of chop sticks in China)

Today, we see many people in China and across the globe eating with chop sticks. Chop sticks have replaced forks in many parts of the world. For example, in many restaurants in China, chop sticks are widely used both by Chinese and foreigners. I am always interested in seeing how the Chinese hold them and eat their food with ease. Firstly, I will look at the materials that the chop sticks are made of. Bamboo has been widely used to make chop sticks in China and most of the chop sticks in restaurants and homesteads are made out of bamboo. The reason bamboo is widely used is definitely obvious. Compared to other materials available, bamboo is readily available in China and is found in many parts of the country. Bamboo is not expensive and is ready to split especially when dry and also it cannot be affected by heat especially the heat from the food [2]. Since I have used chop sticks made out of bamboo almost everyday in China, I can happily note that such chop sticks do not have any odor or smell of any kind and are thus health wise okay. Chop sticks have also been made out of wood like pine. Metals have also been used to make chop sticks. These kind of chop sticks are for the rich class since the material is expensive. Some materials in this metal category may be gold, jade, bronze, brass, silver, and others. With the rapid technological advancement, porcelain and plastics have also been used to make chop sticks. Available literature asserts that there are basically three legends in the Chinese culture and history, narrating how chop sticks came into being. It is believed that during the 11th century BC, master Jiang Ziya (姜子牙) who assisted the emperor of the Shang dynasty, had a miraculous moment when a bird requested him to use sticks made out of bamboo to pick up some meat that had fallen on the ground. Upon picking up the meat, smoke came out of the bamboo sticks implying that his real wife had plotted to assassinate him with poison [3]. In the same trend, another legend believes that the origin of chop sticks traces back to the 11th century BC when one beautiful woman by the names of Da Ji (妲己) impressed emperor Zhou when she picked up hot meat using hair sticks [4]. As if that is not enough, during the 21st century BC, Da Yu (大禹), the father of the first emperor of the Xia dynasty, spearheaded the use of wooden sticks to pick hot food during the busy work schedules [5].

### How to use chop sticks to eat any food

In this part, I talk about how to use chop sticks from my personal experience and also lessons given to me by my Chinese friends. I have had a chance to dine with Chinese both in their homes and outside. In all these sessions, I have enjoyed using chop sticks. This part forms the main reason as to why I chose to write about chop sticks a cultural heritage in China. In the end, I will compare the influx in usage of chop sticks in China and in other countries where I have been to. Firstly, holding chop sticks is an art just like learning how to write when you first go to school but after catching up, no one can compete with you. As per the Chinese culture, the standard way of holding chop sticks is as detailed below;

* There is always one moving stick and one fixed stick while eating. For the fixed chop stick, hold the pair of chop sticks within the third and fourth fingers and support the pair with the thumb.
* Hold the moving chop stick with the end protruding from the finger tips.
* Dip into the plate or sauce pan and pick the food making sure that one chop stick is moving while the other is kept still.

It is believed that holding the chop sticks further apart while eating the further from home you will go [6]. Hence, they are normally held parallel to each other. Although most rich Chinese people and definitely foreigners hold them in any angle. It is fascinating to note that chop sticks are not only used for eating in China but also for playing games. I have witnessed a number of games involving use of chop sticks. For example, in our school during the new year party celebrations, such chop stick games are more popular. These work more less like the common brain twisters because the games need you to first think how to hold the chop sticks and finally how to pick the given element steadily and quickly if one must win the game. Usually small objects like peanut, needle, are picked with chop sticks during such games. My Chinese friends always invite me to play the relay race which involve passing small objects using chop sticks. Such interesting games to bring happiness to the people who are stressed. The games not only bring happiness but also bring togetherness. In the Chinese culture specially during a wedding ceremony, chop sticks are given as gifts. I have witnessed one Chinese wedding ceremony of my friend and among the gifts they packed for him, were chop sticks. When I asked my friend why of all gifts available in big shopping malls, some of his friends chose to give him chop sticks, he had this to say. “In Chinese language, we call them “筷子”, the 筷 resembles the pronunciation of “快” which literally means quick or soon or fast, and “子” which means son; hence, it is believed that by giving me 筷子, they are wishing me luck to have babies quickly and smoothly”.

Indeed, in most places in China, chop sticks are popular wedding gifts to the newlyweds. This is similar in my country, because some people opt to give a dozen of forks and spoons having a set of knives, as gifts to the newlyweds to imply that the wife should henceforth start cooking good food for the husband. Having looked at how to use chop sticks and meaning of giving chop sticks as a gift to a newly wedded Chinese couple, I now compare chopsticks usage in China and the rest of the world. To begin with, In Uganda, Chop sticks are mainly used in the Chinese restaurants like Fang fang, and others. Rich Ugandans can only afford to eat from such restaurants because the Chinese cuisine served in there alongside the local dish are damn expensive for an average Ugandan to afford. That is the reason why when one uses a chop stick in Uganda people think you have accumulated wealth. In the United states, the foreigners and also Chinese people use chop sticks to enjoy their food. In summary, with the rapid wide spread of the Confucius institutes in many countries, people have been taught how to use chop sticks and are now being used in other countries other than Asian countries.

## Conclusion

From the past to present, this work has indeed highlighted that chop sticks form a major part of the Chinese culture. The usage of chop sticks traces back in the early days when emperors used to be the heads of dynasties. In my view, use of chop sticks is not only healthy but also entertaining since a number of games have evolved where chop sticks are widely used to play such games. I use chop sticks every time I am to enjoy my food in China and they have become part of my daily tool. With the rapid technological advancement, chop sticks are destined to being used worldwide for easier and faster eating of hot foods. As per the Chinese culture, the following points about the taboos of using chop sticks must be adhered to; a) Never point the chop sticks at others while eating, b) Don’t knock on the tableware with chop sticks as it is perceived a sign of begging in Chinese culture, c) Don’t invert the chop sticks. This equates to using them the wrong way and is disrespectful, d) Never stir the food with chop stick as it is perceived unhygienic and rude in Chinese culture, e) Never stick the chop sticks into the food while eating, instead place them horizontally, f) Don’t wave the chop sticks around in the air while eating, this is not good in Chinese culture. I personally enjoy using chop sticks and recently I included “I enjoy eating with chop sticks” on the list of my hobbies

**Reference**

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