

Eating Utensils between China and America

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Abstract: Eating utensils illustrate different cultures both in China and America. Chopsticks have integrated into Chinese daily life, and in America fork and knife are typical upon the dining-table. They are different in shapes. Thus they contain different connotations. This paper tends to unfold them from their origin. By comparing different shapes, it explains their connotations from three aspects: public senses, family and society. The explanation can increase our understandings, deepen our friendship and advance our cooperation.

Keywords: eating utensils; China; America

Animals need to survive with food, so do human beings. How to eat wisely? It is what the wise does. The fate of the nation is influenced by the way they eat. And it is fantastic to discovering a new cooking method for us. Before our eating, it is interesting to mention the charming of the tableware. Different tableware casts light upon different cultures between China and America. In China chopsticks fit nicely into Chinese daily life on the dining-table; fork and knife are typical in America. They are different in shapes, but there is an art to what the way they take. It is significant to discuss different cultures between China and America through the different tableware.

The English word “chopstick” may have derived from Chinese Pidgin English, in which “chop-chop” meant “quickly”. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the earliest published use of the word is in the 1699 book *Voyages and descriptions* by William Dampier: “[T]hey are called by the English seamen

Chopsticks”. The Chinese term for chopsticks is *kuaizi* (Chinese: 筷子). The first character (筷) is a semantic-phonetic compound with a phonetic part meaning “quick”(快). Chopsticks originate from China, which become a symbol of oriental civilization. During Tang dynasty, it was brought to Japan and Korea. It was brought to Southeast Asia during Qing dynasty. From recorded history, chopsticks we use have has more than three-hundred years. Chopsticks were called *zhu*(箸) in ancient time. The earliest known extant textual reference to the use of chopsticks comes from *Han Feizi*, a philosophical text written by Han Fei (280-233B.C.) in the 3rd century B.C.. It is recorded in *Han Feizi* that the King Zhou of Shang dynasty uses ivory chopsticks to eat, which illustrates that chopsticks made of ivory have been appeared in the 11th century B.C. So the origin of chopsticks can be traced back to ancient times. Human ancestors gained the fire to eat cooked food, but the cooked food was too hot to touch with hands and the bones they hunt were too fragile. Thus our ancestors broke the trees to get the food from the bowl, which evolves into chopsticks we use now. The materials of chopsticks vary in south and north because there is a large amount of woods in north and bamboo in south of China. Based on what Professor Yi Zhongtian said, fork and knife were the eating utensils in our ancient time. Chopsticks were only the tools for getting out of cooked food from bowls. So the question arises. When did chopsticks replace the role of fork and knife? In ancient times, people sit on the ground. The hosts sit in the middle and guests sit in on line. There was a man like a waiter in America. He used chopsticks to catch the food and hand out food one by one. Then people used fork and knife to cut food and

eat. After the appearance of table and chair, people sit around one table with the same dishes. So fork and knife gradually disappeared over the dining table.

Comparatively, the appearance of fork and knife is much later than chopsticks. According to the study of Professor You Xiuling, the origin of fork and knife is related to the living habits of ancient nomadic people in Europe. They live on horseback and carry knives to cut meat. After settlement, knives become the main utensils because beef and mutton are the principal foods. Compared with chopsticks in China, knives play more roles in function. It can be used as a butcher tool as well as a kind of tableware. Around fifteenth century, Europeans began to use two-pronged forks at table in order to promote table manners. Until the end of the seventeenth century, upper classes in British began to use three-pronged forks. Around eighteenth century, four-pronged forks appeared. Compared with the history of British, America has a short history. In Europe, fork and knife is symbol of aggression, like in Roman. While, different views are held in America. This paper will show a distinct view toward fork and knife.

Chopsticks are shaped pairs of equal length sticks. Usually the upper part is square and the lower part is round, which is consistent with the belief in ancient “the Earth was square and Heaven was round”. To use chopsticks, the lower chopstick is stationary, and it rests at the base of the thumb between the ring finger and middle finger. The second chopstick is held like a pencil, using the tips of the thumb, index finger, and middle finger, and it is moved while eating, to pull food into the grasp of the chopsticks. Chopsticks, when not in use, are placed either to the right or below

one's plate in a Chinese table setting. One chopstick moves and the other follows, which employs level principle with fingers as the fulcrum. As Archimedes once said, "give me a fulcrum, I can leverage the Earth". Chopsticks are beneficial for our health. They pull the motion of joints and stimulate the neural activity in order to make people move swiftly and think quickly in physiological terms.

However, in the American style, also called the *zig-zag method* or *fork switching*, the knife is initially held in the right hand and the fork in the left. Holding food to the plate with the fork tines-down, a single bite-sized piece is cut with the knife. The knife is then set down on the plate, the fork transferred from the left hand to the right hand, and the food is brought to the mouth for consumption. The fork is then transferred back to the left hand and the knife is picked up with the right. In contrast to the European hidden handle grip, in the American style the fork is held much like a spoon or pen once it is transferred to the right hand to convey food to the mouth. Though called "American style", this style originates in Europe. Americans prize efficiency especially when it comes to food. If you try fork-swapping, you will find it so tedious. Others may argue that the cut-and-switch is just the kind of gastronomic speed bump we need more of. It is unwise to comment their choices. What we do in this paper is just to explain why different cultures embrace different utensils.

According to the features of eating utensils between China and America, it is significant to discover the connotations under these features.

Shapes reflect cultures. Chopsticks consist of two sticks with same length. And fork and knife cannot be separated. They both stress cooperation. The differences are

that chopsticks can pick up any food. Fork and knife cannot. They work together with an appropriate division of labor. From this point of view, chopsticks adhere to coping with shifting events by sticking to a fundamental principle. While fork and knife have different focuses with different tasks.

Yi Zhongtian has mentioned that different eating utensils are the mirror of different cultural personalities between China and America. He concludes that Americans are extrovert and Chinese are introvert. From example, Americans say hello and shake hands for greeting. If intimated, they would hug each other. But in China there is one custom that people greet each other with hold hands bowing and they do not touch other people's hands. So does the tableware. Chopsticks pick up food with pressing both sides; but fork and knife cut food apart. They both consume strength. But the directions are opposite. Chopsticks go inwards but fork and knife outwards.

Eating utensils demonstrate different senses of family. From the above, we know that chopsticks replaced knife in Chinese ancient time because of the appearance of table and chairs. It is table that gathers people. The whole families eat the same dishes and soups, which gradually becomes family reunion. In America, family plays the same important role as that in China. But they eat with separated plate more than same plate, which is the big difference from China.

Social management can also be reflected into eating utensils. China strives for the harmonious socialist society. The harmony can be found in chopsticks, which highlights the harmonious work of the two sticks under the control of the right hand.

And China is a country under the leadership of the communist party of China, which coincide with the principal of chopsticks. While fork and knife stand in separate part before working. They belong to different hands. This principal is the same at the American social management. America is a country that separates its powers into three parts. Each performs its own functions in order to check and balance the social management.

Nowadays, chopsticks serve many new functions besides tableware. For example, you can buy a pair as a gift to your friends and relatives. In Chinese, it reads “*kuaizi*”, which means to have sons soon, so a newly-married couple will be very happy to accept it as their wedding gift. Skillful craftsmen paint beautiful sceneries on chopsticks to make them like fine artworks. Many people love to collect them as their treasure. While fork and knife have no other connotations except of their use.

Conclusion

Different eating utensils reflect different cultures in China and America. It is nonsense to judge which one is more advanced. Both have the same purpose that put food into our mouth. Their appearance is accompanied with the people’s demands. As the international communications get more and more frequent, more and more people in China learn to use fork and knife to eat, and Americans also try to use chopsticks and understand Chinese culture. We both become members of the “global village”.

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