

## An Artifact Speaks • Artifact Information Sheet

**Artifact Name:** Chopsticks and Chopstick Rests

**Time Period of the Original:** The first chopsticks are thought to have been created before the Shang dynasty (1766-1122 BCE).

**Culture/Religion Group:** China

**Material:** Chopsticks = bamboo and paper. Rests = wood and clay.

**Reproduction?** The chopsticks are modern, but are traditional in shape. The chopstick rests are modern.

### **Background Information:**

Chopsticks have been used as utensils in China for thousands of years. The earliest found sets, made of bronze, were discovered in Shang Dynasty tombs in the ruins of the ancient city of Yin in Henan province. Chopsticks are the second most popular eating utensils in the world. Fingers are number one.

To save on the amount of scarce wood needed for fuel in early China, food was (and continues to be) cut up into bite-sized pieces before cooking. At first, long sets of chopsticks were used as cooking utensils, as they were perfect for stirring foods boiling in pots of oil or water or serving the cooked foods from these pots. The food was eaten with spoons or with the fingers. Over time, chopstick lengths were shortened and they were used for lifting food from the plate or pushing rice from a bowl held at the lips into the eater's mouth. The sticks were originally called *kuai zhu* (zhu being a word related to the Chinese word for "boil"). Since the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), when their use transferred completely to the personal eating of all solid foods, they have been referred to by the Chinese as *kuai zi*. It is said that the move to the use of chopsticks at the table was greatly aided by Confucius. The philosopher was a vegetarian and believed that having knives at the table was a distasteful reminder of both the slaughterhouse and warfare.

Traditionally, the rich had chopsticks made from expensive materials, such as ivory, amber, jade, coral, rosewood, sandalwood, and gold. Chopsticks were sometimes given silver tips, as it was thought that silver could detect poison in the food. The use of chopsticks has spread to other parts of Asia, and the appearance of chopsticks in each country varies. Japanese chopsticks are often shorter and rounder than those from China, and they are often covered in lacquer. Korean chopsticks are often made of stainless steel.

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### Etiquette:

Skillfully eating with chopsticks is seen as a sign of good breeding. There are many rules associated with good chopstick manners, and they can vary among different Asian cultures. Here are a few.

- Never stick chopsticks upright in a bowl. This resembles the incense sticks used to honor the dead.
- Don't lick your chopsticks.
- Don't wave your chopsticks in the air.
- Don't beat your chopsticks on a bowl or plate to get someone's attention.
- To help keep the table clean, chopsticks should be placed on a chopstick rest when not in use.
- In China, it is good manners to lift a bowl of rice to your lips and move the rice to your mouth with the chopsticks. In Korea, both spoons and chopsticks are common eating utensils, so the bowl is not lifted and the spoon is used to bring food from a bowl to the mouth. When not in use, the spoon is placed to the right of the chopsticks on the table. A spoon is only put on the left during funerals.

### Decoration:

These chopsticks have been decorated with the facial designs of Peking Opera characters. The Opera began in 1790 as an entertainment for the emperor, but is now performed for audiences of all ages and backgrounds. The stories often come from fairy tales, historical events, or classic literature. The actors use four types of artistry in their performances: singing, dialogue, dancing and martial arts.

The costumes worn by the performers are elegant and elaborate. The costumes and make-up worn by the performers helps the audience to know the type of character being portrayed. There are four main character types:

- The *sheng* is the main male role.
- The *dan* is a female role.
- The *jing* is a painted face male role.
- The *chou* is a male clown role.

Make-up can be applied either directly to the face or onto a mask. There are some characters that change masks frequently over the course of a performance. Visit this webpage to see some of the most common makeups and the meanings of the colors:

<http://www.cnto.org.au/the-culture4-2/beijing-opera.html>

Extra sets of chopsticks are included in the box. Watch either of the instructional videos listed here (or another you prefer) to learn how to use chopsticks. Then try picking up a variety of objects you find around the room or food you bring in from home.

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8mw8SWS5nM>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Y9HO-c0dxU>

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## Chopstick Rests:

Rests are pieces of tableware that serve as holders for chopsticks when they are not in use. Placing the tapered ends of the chopsticks on the rest maintains the cleanliness of the table linens. Rests are most often used in restaurants or at formal occasions at home.

Chopstick rests come in a wide variety of shapes and materials. They range from simple “mini-benches” to whimsical representations of animals to elegant reflections of nature. Wood and porcelain are common materials. Numerous webpages give instructions on how to fold the simple paper wrappers from disposable chopstick sets into decorative, temporary chopstick rests.

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