Why Chopsticks?

Utensil-use, Changing Foodway and Eating Style in Asia

Online talk by

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His book *Chopsticks: A Cultural and Culinary History* (2015) was well received broadly. He also authored *Inventing China through History: the May Fourth Approach to Historiography* (2001) as well as a dozen books in Chinese. He serves as the editor of *Chinese Studies in History* (Taylor & Francis), and is on the board of International Commission for the History and Theory of Historiography and *Storia della Storiografia*.

**Abstract:**

The use of chopsticks is invariably related to how one eats food. It has been believed that chopsticks were invented in North China because of the people’s preference for eating food hot. If it were the reason (transporting hot food to the mouth without hurting your fingers), then all types of eating devices could meet the need. From ancient times to approximately the Tang dynasty (618-907), the spoon, while using together with chopsticks, was indeed regarded as the primary eating implement. During and after the Tang this eating custom spread from China to Vietnam, the Korean Peninsula and Japan, forming what has been known as the “chopsticks cultural sphere.”

The formation of the “chopsticks cultural sphere” witnessed and influenced the change of foodway in the region. The appeal of wheat flour foods such as noodles rendered more importance to chopsticks use. After communal eating became accepted in fourteenth-century China, followed by Vietnam and Korea, chopsticks were turned into an exclusive eating tool. Using visual images, this talk will analyze social, economic and cultural reasons for the ascent of chopsticks in East Asian history and their growing appeal in today’s world.