

# The “dining table revolution” in China: the question read through the lens of newspapers

Elena Morandi

**Abstract:** Food is not only the source of nutrition for humans but also plays various roles in our daily lives, beliefs, and relationship. In China, one of the fundamental cultural elements is the sharing of food. Typically, the courses are served in the center of the table from which guests serve themselves on their plates or serve guests using their chopsticks. With the COVID-19 outbreak, people were advised to separate dining or at least use *gongshao* 公勺 ‘serving spoon’ or *gongkuai* 公筷 ‘serving chopsticks’ instead of picking food directly from serving plates with their own chopsticks. The “table revolution” is a crucial issue: if it succeeds, it will change China’s face. Public advertisements, as giant billboards on Shanghai’s streets talking of serving chopsticks as a way to set the heart at ease, showed slogans like: “The distance between you and civilized dining is just one pair of serving chopsticks.” Nevertheless, serving chopsticks have not quite caught on yet in China as they have done in Taiwan and Japan. According to the survey from Ma Lihua *et al.* (2020) resistance is strong. In a declaration from China Hotel Association, we find out: “Some restaurants in China have provided individual meals and public chopsticks and spoons for decades, but not everyone chooses to use them due to traditional eating habits.” According to the *Global Times*, “if they eat with close friends and relatives, they would feel too embarrassed to use serving chopsticks as it seems like they dislike sharing with others, which often makes people uncomfortable” (Li Lei, Zhang Hu 2020). *The New York Times* adds: “Many see sharing food with one’s own chopsticks as among the most authentic expressions of China’s communal culture and emphasis on family, no less integral than hugging is to Americans or the cheek kiss is to the French.” The “dining table revolution”, through the lens of newspapers, is going to be an uphill battle.

**Keywords:** Chopsticks, Table Revolution, Covid-19, Food culture.

**摘要:** 物不仅是人类的营养来源,而且在我们的日常生活、信仰和人际关系中扮演着各种角色。在中国,分享食物是基本的文化元素之一。通常,课程是在桌子中央供应的,客人可以从桌子上自己端上餐盘或用筷子为客人服务。随着 COVID-19 的爆发,人们被建议分开用餐或至少使用公勺或公筷,而不是用自己的筷子直接从盘子里挑食物。“餐桌革命”是一个关键问题:如果成功,它将改变中国的面貌。像上海街头的巨型广告牌一样,用筷子来安抚人心,广告上的标语是:“你与文明用餐的距离,只有一双筷子”。然而,公筷在中国还没有像在台湾和日本那样流行起来。根据 Ma Lihua 的调查 (2020) 阻力很强。在中国饭店协会的一份声明中,我们发现:“几十年来,中国一些餐馆提供个人餐,公筷和公勺,但由于传统的饮食习惯,并不是每个人都选择使用它们”。据《环球时报》报道,“如果和亲朋好友一起吃饭,他们会觉得用筷子太尴尬了,因为他们似乎不喜欢与人分享,这往往让人不舒服”(Li Lei, Zhang Hu, *Global Times* 2020)。《纽约时报》补充说:“许多人认为,用自己的筷子分享食物是中国社区文化和重视家庭的最真实表达之一,就像拥抱对美国人或对法国人来说脸颊亲吻一样不可或缺”。从报纸的角度来看,“餐桌革命”将是一场艰苦的战斗。

**关键词:** 筷子,“餐桌革命”,新冠肺炎,饮食文化。

Elena Morandi, University of Bologna, Italy, elena.morandi@unibo.it, 0000-0002-8222-1514

FUP Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing (DOI 10.36253/fup\_best\_practice)

Elena Morandi, *The “dining table revolution” in China: the question read through the lens of newspapers*, pp. 161-176, © 2021 Author(s), CC BY 4.0 International, DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-506-6.14, in Miriam Castorina, Diego Cucinelli (edited by), *Food issues 食事. Interdisciplinary Studies on Food in Modern and Contemporary East Asia*, © 2021 Author(s), content CC BY 4.0 International, metadata CC0 1.0 Universal, published by Firenze University Press (www.fupress.com), ISSN 2704-5919 (online), ISBN 978-88-5518-506-6 (PDF), DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-506-6

## 1. Introduction

On January 18th, 2020, forty thousand families in Wuhan's Baibuting District gathered for a banquet before the Lunar New Year. Photographs from the event, proudly published by local state media, showed residents wearing red and yellow bibs, reaching out to hundreds of plates on banquet tables with their chopsticks. Five days later, the city was placed in solitary confinement, and several Coronavirus infections occurred in the neighbourhood within a few weeks. That banquet would be cited as an example of how little local officials had done to prevent the virus from spreading to their city for months to come.

In the aftermath of the Coronavirus epidemic, Chinese authorities are pushing for the 'dining table revolution' to change the centuries-old traditions of sharing eating, such as those of the Baibuting banquet, where diners serve themselves from dishes shared with their own chopsticks.

The government has pointed the finger at the ubiquitous tool on the table and in the kitchen: chopsticks. Authorities have launched an aggressive campaign to persuade diners to use designated serving utensils such as *gongkuai* 公筷 "public chopsticks" or *gongshao* 公勺 "public spoon". Officials are also encouraging the adoption of separate portions instead of the 'family-friendly' style with which the group usually shares different dishes. Across the country, celebrities, tycoons, public health experts and propaganda teams have been deployed to educate the public. "Divide meals, not love," the state media slogan. Dr Zhong Nanshan and Dr Zhang Wenhong, infectious disease specialists who have become celebrities since the outbreak began, have explicitly expressed their support. In addition to them, one hundred Chinese academics have joined the 'table revolution', encouraging the public to have meals with individual portions, use serving spoons and chopsticks, or even better, bring their own cutlery from home.

In Ningxia, northwest China, a video tutorial was launched by local state media to educate residents about a 'new trend in civilian catering' in the local dialect.

Gigantographs have appeared on the streets of Shanghai describing service chopsticks as a way to feel more comfortable, displaying slogans such as: "The distance between you and the civil dinner is only in a pair of serving chopsticks". In Beijing, billboards ask citizens to join the campaign with the slogan: "Love is another pair of chopsticks".

Some restaurants answered the call. Since the outbreak of Covid-19, a campaign on chopsticks and serving spoons has been promoted in many Chinese restaurants. As of June 2020, restaurants have begun to provide serving utensils and, when possible, separate portions. Several provinces and cities have joined the initiative. For example, four Shanghai departments jointly issued the "proposal for the use of chopsticks and serving spoons", and a group of one hundred Shanghai restaurateurs pledged to provide chopsticks and serving spoons for each dish. Also, in Hangzhou, over one hundred leading restaurants have formed a 'Serving Chopsticks Alliance'; others offer discounts to diners who use service chopsticks. "Dividing meals and chopsticks does not mean dividing love", they assure.

However, what do chopsticks and food sharing really represent in China? Is it likely that China will abandon traditional chopsticks in favour of serving chopsticks, and the Chinese people will renounce the conviviality of food in favour of individual meals? Let us see how the “Chinese Table Revolution” has been presented by international newspapers.

## 2. Methods and relevance

My research aims to understand what chopsticks really represent for the Chinese to fully understand the true meaning behind the habits of sharing food in China. Moreover, I tried to analyze how the ‘Table Revolution’ has been tackled by the international press, decoding the message it conveys.

For the first part, to understand the significance of Chinese food habits, I used monographs, essays, research, and other material both printed and in digital format.

For the second part, to see how the table revolution was presented, I mainly used articles in newspapers and magazines and blogs and forums to a lesser extent.

I choose to focus in particular on the international press to have an “external” point of view on the issue, hopefully, more objective, less ideologically and politically marked, because my goal was not so much to understand how China presented its citizens the table revolution, but to know how the rest of the world interpreted this effort to overturn such an established tradition radically. I have consulted exclusively online sources for many reasons: for the difficulty of getting international newspapers and the impossibility of travelling in this period of restrictions.

The method I used was press-clipping, that is, research and interpretation of the main articles published online on the subject. Finally, I have deliberately excluded from the press review all the articles somehow connected to the consumption of wild meat in China, because despite this custom has often been pointed out as the triggering cause of the pandemic, the exact origins and zoonotic transmission pathway of the virus remain uncertain. Scientists suggest that SARS-CoV-2 probably jumped from horseshoe bats to an unknown intermediate animal vector, from which it spread to humans, but exactly how, where, and when this happened is still unknown. In any case, it falls outside my investigation objectives, whose focus is to understand the way of eating of Chinese people, and not what the Chinese people eat.

The relevance of my research lies in the fact that if the table revolution really takes hold in China, it will mark a turning point of epochal significance, not so much as regards the food and culinary fields, and not even for the hygienic-sanitary field, as for the enormous social and political implications that it will bring with it.

## 3. Chopsticks’ history

Over one and a half billion people eat food with chopsticks every day. The peculiarity of the chopsticks lies in the fact that, although they are mainly a

tool for food use, they also satisfy many other uses. A rich and profound cultural history is embedded in the chopsticks. For many centuries, chopsticks have distinguished their users in Asia from those in the rest of the world. For many, it is not just about continuing a tradition; their use is believed to bring a myriad of benefits that transcend the mere function of transporting food. Kimiko Barber in ‘The Chopsticks Diet’ (2009) writes: “Eating with chopsticks slows down the ingestion of food and therefore you eat less”. Furthermore, since chopsticks eat more slowly, “they also have the psychological advantage of making you think about food and the pleasure you get from it”. Isshiki Hachiro (1991) argues that since the use of chopsticks requires good hand-brain coordination, it improves not only one’s dexterity but also one’s brain development, especially among children.

The use of chopsticks goes back a long way. Archaeological finds have unearthed samples of bone sticks at various Neolithic cultural sites in China, suggesting that a chopsticks prototype already existed 5,000 years ago. Thicker and square in shape at the top and thinner and rounded at the bottom, these sticks were very similar to those in current use (Liu 2006).

Historical texts and researches have shown that from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC feeding with utensils rather than with fingers gradually became the favourite culinary custom among the Chinese (Ōta 2001). Thus, those proto-chopsticks probably served a dual function: as a kitchen utensil and as a dining utensil. This, curiously, is what still happens today in many Asian families, where chopsticks represent a convenient kitchen tool for mixing, tasting, adding ingredients, etc. (Wang 2015).

Some of the Han tombs contain stone reliefs and frescoes depicting scenes of cooking and convivial meals. For example, the stone relief found in Xindu, Sichuan depicts a party scene: three men seated on the floor with the man in the centre holding a pair of chopsticks pointed at the food presented by the person on the left. Two additional pairs of chopsticks are placed on the large mat in the centre of the floor. The famous Wuliang Shrine in Jiangxiang, Shandong Province, also features a food scene painted on the wall. Named “Xingqu Bu Fu 邢渠哺父”, which means Xing Qu feeding his father, the mural depicts Xing Qu holding the food with a pair of chopsticks in his left hand and a ladle in his right as he presents the food to his father.

In the *Shiji* 史记, Sima Qian 司马迁 (c. 145–86 BC) recounts many fascinating episodes during the Han dynasty (206–220 AD), some of which concern the chopsticks themselves. For example, in the biographical account of Liu Bang 刘邦 (256–195 BC), Sima Qian reports that, while Liu was preparing to be empowered, a councillor submitted a strategic plan to him over a dinner party; Zhang Liang 张良 (256 BC–186 BC), his chief and most trusted advisor, opposed that plan. To persuade Liu, Zhang took several chopsticks and used them to build his strong counter-argument. He succeeded, and Liu felt ill during dinner, having heard what dire consequences his wrong decision would lead to. The story went down in history to the present day. It confirms that Liu and his entourage, among other things, used chopsticks to eat food.

In Song China, the use of chopsticks also expanded because Chinese cuisine entered a new phase of development in addition to the increase in rice consumption. In fact, as Michael Freeman (1978) argues, during the Song period, cooking in China became an authentic cuisine characterized by the adoption of new ingredients and new cooking techniques. Meng Yuanlao (1996) details these new culinary developments in his account of Kaifeng's city life. In fact, of all the businesses in the city Meng recorded, more than half were public restaurants. The food was cooked in a wide variety of ways, from various types of stews, traditionally prepared but with new ingredients, to new and innovative stir-fried dishes. To eat all these foods, one can easily imagine that people naturally turned to chopsticks as a practical and inexpensive kitchen utensil.

#### 4. Different uses and different meanings of chopsticks

However, the chopsticks did not satisfy the dietary needs alone. Some fortune-tellers of traditional China used them as a tool of prediction. Starting in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, this practise has continued to gain popularity, fueling the belief in magic and the mystical power of chopsticks. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it had become a religious cult (Liu 2006).

It can be said that chopsticks symbolically and spiritually represent life itself, of which they express the metaphor or perhaps even the metonymy. Although this perception may vary from person to person, in general, throughout Asia, it is considered a bad omen if an accident occurs with the tool, including someone not holding the chopsticks correctly or carefully causing them to fall to the ground, which is generally considered unfortunate.

There is an interesting description of chopsticks in the book *L'Empire des signes* by Roland Barthes (1970). Looking closely at how chopsticks were used to transport food, Barthes provides his own cultural interpretation that contrasts with the use of fork and knife, cutlery he was most accustomed to:

By chopsticks, food becomes no longer a prey to which one does violence, but a substance harmoniously transferred; they transform the previously divided substance into bird food and rice into a flow of milk; maternal, they tirelessly perform the gesture which creates the mouthful, leaving to our alimentary manners, armed with pikes and knives, that of predation. Another function of the two chopsticks together is that of pinching the fragment of food; to pinch, moreover, is too strong a word, too aggressive; for the foodstuff never undergoes a pressure greater than is precisely necessary to raise and carry it; in the gesture of chopsticks, further softened by their substance—wood or lacquer—there is something maternal, the same precisely measured care taken in moving a child: a force no longer a pulsion; here we have a whole demeanour concerning food: the instrument never pierces, cuts, or slits, never wounds but only selects, turns, shifts (Barthes 1970, 15).

Barthes is not the only one to have advanced this interpretation. After seeing chopsticks during their travels to Asia in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, many Westerners

have developed a similar impression, praising the use of the tool by Asians as a more civilized gastronomic custom, to the point that, among Chinese people, this belief has become a boast. This belief is not only of the Chinese but shared by other Asian peoples belonging to the cultural sphere of chopsticks; following the words of Confucius, they prefer to leave the knife in the kitchen rather than bring it to the table.

Furthermore, it is also thanks to these interpretations that chopsticks have transcended their very essence to become a cultural symbol throughout Asia.

Whether used skillfully or not, chopsticks must be used in pairs. Because of their inseparability, together with their design, colour and material, they have become, over time, a popular gift, throughout Asia, on the occasion of weddings, to indicate the exchange of affection between lovers, and to express good wishes for couples.

Even among Chinese minority groups, chopsticks are a popular and widespread wedding gift and a symbolic item during wedding ceremonies. In fact, in his book, Lan Xiang (2005) describes several wedding customs, many of which involve chopsticks. In Shanxi province, for example, when the groom and his entourage go to the bride's house, the father often prepares a couple of bottles containing grain which he then binds together using red thread and a pair of chopsticks, thus expressing the wish for inseparability and lasting love for marriage. Elsewhere, to ensure the inseparability of the couple, the two sticks must be as identical as possible and have a smooth surface in the hope that the couple will lead a quiet life.

Finally, among some Chinese minorities, when the bride arrives in her new home, she grabs a new pair of chopsticks, a symbolic gesture that represents her willingness to embrace her new life. Chopsticks are also used as a symbolic tool for proposing marriage and announcing new relationships; often, it is not even necessary to utter a word because the chopsticks are already sufficient to clarify the purpose.

In short, since they were born as a daily tool in ancient China, chopsticks have been loved by everyone, even becoming a literary metaphor used by writers, poets and philosophers. While sages and scholars philosophize about their characteristics to offer political wisdom about good governance, writers use them as an effective metaphor to describe sadness, anxiety, and awe.

Love stories mentioning chopsticks abound in Asian folklore and legends. From ancient times to today, Chinese poets have made endless references to chopsticks, commenting on their usefulness and characteristics, exploring their hidden cultural meanings, real and imaginary at the same time, explicitly coining specific expressions for the way they are used, and providing us with vivid and imaginative illustrations.

Similarly, even today, we find frequent references to chopsticks in the literature. For example, a poem—translated in English and quoted in Wang (2015, 143)—was written by a contemporary Chinese poet, which appeared in an online blog, recalls almost all the characteristics that can be thought associated with the use of chopsticks to represent the love of a couple:

Our lengths are the same,  
 Just as the sameness of our hearts;  
 Bitter or sweet,  
 We spend our life together.  
 Having tasted it all,  
 We always live side by side.  
 One knows the other;  
 Our intimacy is so seamless,  
 No space even for a single word

As an ancient tool with a long history, chopsticks have evolved over time to become multifaceted and indispensable tools.

In real life, whether and how chopsticks should be handled over food is a grave matter. When eating a meal in China, people are required to behave civilly and pay attention to good table manners. For example, it is customary to wait for the guest or an elder first to put their hand on the chopsticks. To demonstrate hospitality, on the contrary, a guest will raise his chopsticks, effectively starting the meal, making symbolic gestures and repeatedly inciting diners to eat.

Even in less formal settings, it is equally customary to let an elder grab his chopsticks and start eating before anyone else.

According to a Ming text, wielding chopsticks without an invitation was considered disrespectful social behaviour even at that time (Wang 2015). Likewise, in modern times, focusing on your plate and accessories, watching TV, using the phone, or doing something else while having your meal is considered a bad habit.

##### 5. The sharing food's habit

Food embodies many symbolic meanings: it establishes and expresses the relationship between people, between them and their environment, as well as between people and what they believe in. Therefore, food is an essential component of a society. When consumed by a group of people together or during a religious ceremony, the sociability of food is identified. Sharing food is an effective way to improve human relationships. It is expected that when a person wishes to pursue or prolong a friendship with another person, they often suggest they eat together. When the friendship reaches a certain level, or when the two become lovers, sharing food and drink becomes an integral part of the relationship, an act of affection. In other words, intimacy often overrides other concerns, such as health or otherwise.

The distribution and exchange of food reflect human beings' social characteristics and cultural presentation; food and the way to consume it are both cornerstones of the Chinese lifestyle and a component of the Chinese ethos (Chang 2003). Feng Yen Hung Doreen wrote:

The joy of eating is given great importance in China; and cooking, through the decades has been dreamed and fussed over, in terms of want as well as in terms of plenty, until it has ceased to be plain cooking, but has grown and developed into

an art. Food has been represented through other mediums of art, especially poetry, literature and folklore; and these tales and food beliefs have been handed down, from generation to generation, with even increased glamor. (Feng 2006, 3)

The Chinese food culture has the characteristics of inheritability and development, and throughout history, it has maintained its momentum of development since its primitive society. Neither the change of dynasty nor the change of social system has had a profound influence on it, and the philosophy of supplying enough food to people and food being the top priority was very popular. Because of the attention to diet, Chinese people would work out a variety of food when they had leisure time or abundant raw materials. In the event of a disaster, they tried to develop all sorts of wild vegetables and weeds for survival. Therefore, the number of food breeds and designs continued to rise, which caused many Westerners to have the illusion that the Chinese dare to eat all the edible items. According to Zhou (2007) there are ways but not rules in Chinese cooking, making Chinese dishes have infinite names, designs and colours.

What is most striking in China are the banquets, with their ostentation of wealth, so much so that in food anthropology, the Chinese one is classified precisely as a banquet culture, as they do not represent only combinations of food, staging the exchange and distribution of food, but also a demonstration of culinary arts, table arrangement, and feeding models. Furthermore, they show the status, rank, authority and interactions that take place in the banquet. In a sense, the banquet is the most frequently performed human ritual.

Traditionally, the Chinese government was based on rites. Thus, banquets became an integral part of the ritual and personalized system. The banquet ritual and custom were incorporated into customs and festivals, revealing the life, social interactions and other activities of royal families and government officials on the one hand and citizens on the other. They embodied all kinds of implications related to power, friendship, respect, exchange, symbol, etc. Over the centuries, the banquet has formed a cluster of Chinese banquet culture, which has not substantially changed since it was codified in the Zhou era, some 3,000 years ago. Especially today, in central or suburban cities, restaurants of all kinds and orders are extremely popular, with lights on and people drinking generously in extremely noisy circumstances. Offering a meal to others is a way of life for some people. Sometimes it is a burden and a luxury beyond expectations for others.

In this meal-ritual relationship, the protagonists want everything to go smoothly to feel at ease. Business people usually earn respect. As a result, banquet fashion has evolved as the hottest way to manage a business, although in some cases, the banquet has been partially converted or replaced by new forms such as the cash bribe or the sexual offer (Wilson 2010). Not restricted only to the sphere of business, dinners and banquets have become, due to their emblematic in rituals and relationships, also customary in important life events, such as marriage, baptism or other religious ceremonies, redefining the relationship between man and divinity, and between people (Ma 2015).



Many social and political factors have had a significant impact on the development and transformation of Chinese food culture. Influenced and transformed by political ideology, eating gradually moved away from the physical and physiological meaning of appeasing hunger and feeding, even overcoming the hedonistic pleasure of eating, eventually becoming not only the bearer of ritual and order in a series of relationships. Policies and ethics such as those between the nobility and the popular classes, dignitaries and subordinates, elderly and young people, and so on, represent privilege and honour but also become a tool in the political arena to build trust and secure personal favours. Through rewards in food resources or food offerings as a tribute to the emperor, food has become a political means of obtaining the support of others or for officialdom; many acute social contradictions have arisen from significant disparities in food consumption and ownership of food resources among people (Lin 1997).

In Chinese culture, foods are used, on many occasions, with a particular symbolic meaning: Chinese dates indicate that couples can soon have children; peanuts are also known as the fruit of longevity; oranges and chestnuts mean good luck; rice cakes, promotion; seaweed is synonymous with wealth; long pasta indicates health and longevity; glutinous rice balls indicate that the family will stick together. Thus, different foods convey different meanings and are often indicators of the closeness of the relationship.

In Chinese culture, the offering of expensive and rare foods usually indicates respect for guests; such foods often represent wealth and high social-economic status. Furthermore, food can indicate not only social status but can also be used as a unique and identifying characteristic of a group (e.g. region, family, ethnicity or religion).

It is not clear when the practice of sharing food began. In the *Classic of Rites*, we find: “When you eat with others from the same dishes, you should not try to eat (in a hurry) to your fill” (*Liji* 礼记, “*Quli* 曲禮”, I). It is known that during the post-Tang period, along with the rise of chopsticks as a tool for eating, this new habit emerged in China: diners began to sit on chairs around a table, on which plates were placed for all tastes (*heshizhi* 和食制, “sharing of food”, as opposed to *fenshizhi* 分食制 “individual eating style” of the previous period) (Wang 2015, 187).

In the famous 10<sup>th</sup> century painting *The Night Revels of Han Xizai* (*Han Xizai yeyan tu* 韩熙载夜宴图), we see how Han Xizai 韩熙载 (902–970), a respected scholar of the time who refused to serve the government, entertained his guests, offering them different dishes, arranging them on the rectangular table of in front of them, which was not much taller than the chair they were sitting on. The seat was high enough for legs to be extended and equipped with a backrest. Han and his friends shared the meal with chopsticks and wine cups in plain sight on the table.

Scholars believe that communal consumption of food in China took root in the Song era due to the marked culinary progress of the period. Zhao Rongguang states: “Community eating began to be widely adopted in Song society as the dishes on the table multiplied and diversified. People wanted to taste and

share these dishes throughout the meal, making joint dinner a logical choice. The individual eating style thus became obsolete” (Zhao 2003, 219).

People sharing food during meals is also described in some novels, such as the famous *Shuihu Zhuan* 水浒传 (*Water Margin*). Song Jiang 宋江, the hero of the novel who organized the revolt against the Song dynasty in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, is often depicted eating and drinking with his friends sitting together at a large table.

The sharing of food, as well as the exclusive use of chopsticks as a tool for eating, ideally associated with an informal context, took hold in China and in the areas of Chinese cultural influence, probably starting from the lower social classes and then extending to the higher social levels. For this reason, in China, the sharing of meals is deeply rooted in informal situations or between family members and extended to other more formal occasions.

Liu Yun *et al.* argue that the emergence of the common eating style had also encouraged the Chinese to turn to more use of chopsticks rather than spooning, citing evidence that Ming dynasty chopsticks tended to be somewhat longer—on average over 25 cm—compared to their previous counterparts. The longer length, Liu notes, was used by diners to pinch and collect the food contents in the centre of the table. Therefore, there is a cause-effect relationship between sharing food and chopsticks, a natural and essential bond (Liu Yun *et al.*, 2006).

According to some theories, given the close relationship between food tools and social culture, it is possible to identify the most macroscopic differences between Western and Chinese food culture: on the one hand, the use of a knife and fork combined with the divided and individual eating system, the basis of Western attention for independence and individuality; on the other hand, the chopsticks linked to conviviality and sharing, to sit together at the table, highlighting the family unity and cohesion between individuals, allowing the Orientals to express quite strong family values and the concept of harmony (Yin and Han 2007).

Sharing food is a distinctive feature of the way Chinese people convey affection. Parents collect selected treats and place them in their children’s bowls as an expression of love; children serve grandparents to show their respect, and the bosses do it as a gesture of magnanimity towards their employees.

## 6. Press-clipping: the table revolution on the newspapers

To support the government effort to abandon the traditional habits, state media and Chinese historians have scoured history to find cases where serving chopsticks or the individual dish was the norm. Newspapers reported that the Chinese have been eating individually for 3,000 years. During the Zhou dynasty, the emperor had his own table, set with much more food, as opposed to the ministers sitting across from him at a single table with fewer plates. In 1910, when the plague hit China’s northeastern regions, health and hygiene experts called for dinner separately to prevent the deadly virus from spreading. In China’s modern history, Beijing’s Dongxinglou restaurant was the first to

launch meals served in individual portions, course by course. This system has since spread to other hotels and restaurants in Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin. On China Global Television Network (CGTN), we read: “in the Chinese tradition, sharing dishes is a way to show hospitality to friends, guests or relatives; and, although habits are really hard to die, changes are underway as more and more people are developing a greater awareness of the importance of hygiene and health due to Covid-19”.

The situation is presented in a more varied way in international magazines. According to the article by Lily Kuo in *The Guardian*, the campaign promoted by the Chinese government seems to be working. In the interview, a manager of “Tianzhu Chopstick Factory” in Zhejiang province said: “the company has seen an increase of up to 30% on orders for *gongkuai*’ serving chopsticks’, which are longer, and decorated differently, than to the usual chopsticks”. Further on, we can read: “at Huajia Yiyuan, a chain known for its special Peking roast duck, there are two pairs of chopsticks and two spoons for each place setting. In a famous hotpot restaurant on Beijing’s Ghost Street, all tables are equipped with a set of serving utensils”. Lan Luoshi, a young employee, says: “Customers are very willing to use them, and I myself use *gongkuai* when I go out with friends to eat”.

Journalist Meng Dandan reports on the e-magazine *ThinkChina*:

Professor Wang Xiaohua of Shenzhen University School of Humanities strongly encouraged people to dine with individual portions. Sharing dishes in common is an obsolete lifestyle and has already been abandoned by most countries of the world [...] serving dishes individually guarantees reasonable distances between individuals, as well as representing a more modern way of dining.

On the online English version of *People’s Daily*, we read that the F&B industry is working hard across the country to formulate standards for personalized catering; Beijing, Shanghai, Shandong and some other regions have released guidelines for the industry, while some prefectural cities such as Taizhou in Jiangsu have even provided concrete suggestions on the colour and type of serving spoons and chopsticks to use, as well as the length of the chopsticks from scope to use.

In the *Legacy Times* (*Chuanchen shidai* 传城时代), we find an interview released by Xing Ying, executive Vice President of the World Federation of the Chinese Catering Industry, who rather optimistically states: “I believe that the COVID-19 epidemic will change people’s eating habits; this is a good time to promote separate meals”.

In the *Global Times*, the authors of the article advance some perplexities: “the crucial point that leads us to think that it will be a difficult undertaking to complete, is that *gongkuai* tend to be accepted and used in high-end restaurants in China and rarely used at home”. In support of this thesis, in a statement from the China Hotel Association, we find: “Some restaurants in China have been providing public chopsticks and spoons for decades, but not all choose to use them because of traditional eating habits”.

With family or friends, it seems that asking for service chopsticks can be embarrassing or perceived as rude. Again in *Global Times*: “Eating with close

friends and relatives, people would feel too embarrassed to use service chopsticks, because it can seem to dislike sharing with others, which makes everyone uncomfortable”.

Also, on *ThinkChina*, we discover that already after the Sars epidemic in 2002–2003, a similar initiative had been undertaken, but it soon ran out:

Sharing food is a fundamental part of Chinese social life and a sign of intimacy. Changing habits at home and among the older generations seems to be more difficult. A common scene at family dinners sees relatives using their chopsticks to put food on the plates of younger; younger family members serve food to older relatives as a sign of respect while couples exchange food with each other as a sign of affection.

Many do not consider the use of serving utensils necessary at home. In a recent online survey by Sina Shanghai, over half of the 650 respondents said they do not and would not use *gongkuai* or *gongshao* at home, agreeing with the traditional line of thinking: “I won’t. We are all family”.

*The Guardian* puts forward a hypothesis: “Chinese food culture could change in other ways, away from crowded restaurants, for quieter areas. Many restaurants are already limiting the size of dinners to two and setting the tables at least one meter apart”.

However, the resistance is strong. A study conducted by Ma Lihua (2020), based on a questionnaire submitted via WeChat to the rural population, aimed at investigating the knowledge, attitudes and behaviours related to the prevention and control of COVID-19 among rural residents, concludes: “the weak awareness of the importance of prevention and control measures is the greatest difficulty and challenge encountered among the rural population during the epidemic”.

*The New York Times* informs us:

Many see sharing food, with their chopsticks, as one of the most authentic expressions of China’s community culture and emphasis on family, no less than hugging for Americans or kissing on the cheek for the French. Serving chopsticks are associated with formal settings, such as banquets and meals with strangers. Sharing food with family and friends is so ingrained that chopsticks are seen as a threat to that expression of closeness. Even just asking for extra utensils can be embarrassing because it could imply the doubt that your diners might not be well.

In support of these statements, we find in *The New York Times* an interview with Liu Peng, 32, an education consultant, who declares: “although I have become accustomed to wearing a mask in recent months, my friends and I have not changed our eating habits. Maybe using chopsticks to serve is more hygienic, but eating for all of us is the time to relax and we don’t want to be bothered by all these little rules”.

Even though, on the one hand, people in large cities have deeper public health awareness, full implementation of individualized dining still has a long way to go. *ThinkChina* reports the forecast of Zhang Shuanglin, Vice President of the Society of History and Folklore in Beijing, about the situation after the end of

the pandemic: “the meetings to dine together will return to normal and there will not be a great change”.

In *The Washington Post*, we read some interviews of ordinary Chinese citizens: “It’s a bit difficult for people to use serving chopsticks when you’re eating with friends, you’re so happy that you just forget”, and also: “I don’t think it’s necessary, using serving chopsticks would seem excessively polite [...], you know the Chinese word ‘jianwai’? It means ‘not willing to be close to each other’”.

To confirm this, we find on *Statista*, edited by Ma Yihan, a survey among 747 Chinese consumers revealing that the impact of COVID-19 on eating habits is not as significant as expected. More than eight out of ten respondents reported no changes, whereas only around one in ten respondents practised healthier eating habits.

A survey by the state-run Jiangsu News found that more people in the province (64,000) answered that using serving chopsticks was annoying than said they would try it (57,000).

Also, in *The Washington Post*: “It’s a Chinese tradition and a custom that has been around for thousands of years, so it’s difficult to change it”, said Li Yibing, a food blogger in Chengdu who is involved in the public chopsticks campaign.

## 7. Conclusions

Extremely relevant to fully understand the importance of conviviality and food sharing in China is the study conducted by Wang, Huang, Liao and Wan (2020) that examines the influence of food sharing on people’s social evaluation. The study results suggest that Chinese young adults associate food sharing with assessing people’s prosociality. Taken together, the study results suggest that food sharing is closely linked to cooperation and trust (Kaplan and Gurven, 2005; Woolley and Fishbach, 2019).

Focusing on newspaper articles, based on the sources examined, it seems that the articles in Chinese newspapers, although published in English, are all in favour of a change, confident and proactive in supporting the cause of the table revolution. International sources, on the contrary, reveal a more cautious and more dubious attitude towards the so-called “Civilized Dining”, suggesting that we can legitimately expect that in China, in a post-pandemic scenario, many of the new habits against the spread of the new Coronavirus will remain, in the name of a healthier lifestyle, thanks to a deeper awareness of health and safety. However, traditional eating habits are unlikely to disappear. Most Chinese will still use personal chopsticks to choose food from shared plates, little or not at all inclined to consider the individual meal. This, therefore, leads us to hypothesize that the table revolution, despite Covid-19, will still be very long.

Perhaps what the Western observer lacks is the confidence in the capacity for change of Chinese society and in the innate ability to adapt to the needs of the times that the Chinese population possesses; for this reason, we have to pay attention non to fall victim to far too easy stereotypes, which refer to the collective imagination of a millenary and immutable China.

As far back as 1984, Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦 (1915–1989), then general secretary of the Communist Party and passionate liberalizer, suggested that his compatriots abandon chopsticks and common eating in favour of individual Western-style cooking practices to avoid contagious diseases. The idea was quickly ignored and forgotten. It may be that this time Xi Jinping, with his way to “The Chinese Dream” to “achieve the prosperity of the country, the revitalization of the nation and the happiness of the people”, will succeed where his predecessors failed. The table revolution could be a much more political issue than it seems, worthy of further and more in-depth investigation.

## References

- Barthes, Roland. 1970. *L'empire des signes*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Boreham, Andy. 2020. “Chopstick revolution: How COVID-19 might change China’s eating habits.” *Shine*, May 31, 2020. <<https://www.shine.cn/opinion/2005319260/>> (2021-09-20).
- Capelli, Noemi Rebecca. 2020. “Rivoluzione a tavola: il Coronavirus cambia le abitudini alimentari cinesi.” *Ultima Voce*, April 28, 2020. <<https://www.ultimavoce.it/rivoluzione-a-tavola-coronavirus-cambia-abitudini-alimentari-cinesi/>> (2021-09-20).
- Chang, Kwang-chih. 2003. *Food in Chinese culture: the perspective of anthropology and history*. Hangzhou: Zhejiang People’s Publishing House.
- Chen, Desheng, and Tang, Zheng. 2013. “Chopsticks as a Cultural Symbol in China.” *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education* 1 (4): 1–2.
- Chen, Liu. 2020. *Food Practices and Family Lives in Urban China*, London: Routledge.
- China Daily. 2020. “Eating habit changes among Chinese during COVID-19 epidemic.” *China Daily*, August 20, 2020. <<https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202008/20/W55f3e3107a310834817261a8c.html/>> (2021-09-20).
- China Global Television Network. 2020. “Could COVID-19 bring about a dining table revolution in China?.” *CGTN*, May 17, 2020. <<https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-05-17/Could-COVID-19-bring-about-a-dining-table-revolution-in-China--QzvlzERG8M/index.html>> (2021-09-20).
- Cyranoski, David. 2020. “The Biggest Mystery: What It Will Take to Trace the Coronavirus Source.” *Nature*, June 5, 2020. <<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01541-z>> (2021-09-20).
- Feng, Doreen Yen Hung. 2006. *The joy of Chinese cooking*. [S.l.]: Vintage Cookery Books.
- Fifield, Anna. 2020. “Fire burns, cauldron bubbles — but public chopsticks trouble China’s hot pot purists.” *The Washington Post*, August 28, 2020. <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/china-coronavirus-hot-pot-chopsticks-sichuan-food/2020/08/27/68e06ec8-e2a1-11ea-82d8-5e55d47e90ca\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/china-coronavirus-hot-pot-chopsticks-sichuan-food/2020/08/27/68e06ec8-e2a1-11ea-82d8-5e55d47e90ca_story.html)> (2021-09-20).
- Freeman, Michael. 1978. “Sung.” In *Food in Chinese Culture*, edited by Kwang-chih Chang, 143–5. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Ghai, Rajat. 2020. “Chinese food is so entrenched in our lives; COVID-19 can’t change that.” *Downtoearth*, April 17, 2020. <<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/interviews/food/-chinese-food-is-so-entrenched-in-our-lives-covid-19-can-t-change-that--70528>> (2021-09-20).
- Goffman, Erving. 1974. *Frame analyses: an essay on the organization of experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Isshiki, Hachiro 一色 八郎. 1990. *Hashi no Bunkashi: Sekai no Hashi Nihon no Hashi* 箸の文化史：世界の箸・日本の箸 [A cultural history of chopsticks: world chopsticks and Japanese chopsticks]. Tokyo: Ochanomizu Shobo, 1990.
- Ji, Yuqiao, and Li, Yuche. 2020. “How the Covid-19 epidemic changed the way Chinese people live.” *Global Times*, December 17, 2020. <<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202012/1210253.shtml>> (2021-09-20).
- Jia, Peng, et al. 2021. “Changes in dietary patterns among youths in China during COVID-19 epidemic: The COVID-19 impact on lifestyle change survey (COINLICS).” *Appetite* 158: 105015. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2020.105015>
- Kimiko, Barber. 2009. *The Chopsticks Diet: Japanese-Inspired Recipes for Easy Weight-Loss*. Lanham: Kyle Books.
- Kuo, Lily. 2020. “For the chop: ‘dining table revolution’ takes aim at food sharing in China.” *The Guardian*, May 1, 2020. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/01/chinas-dining-table-revolution-takes-aim-at-shared-chopsticks>> (2021-09-20).
- Lan, Xiang, 2005. *Chinese Chopsticks*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.
- Li, Dekuan, and Guang, Tian. 2014. *Anthropology of food culture*. Yinchuan: Ningxia Peoples’ Publishing House.
- Li, Lei, and Zhang, Hui. 2020. “COVID-19 changes Chinese’ hygiene, dining etiquette – maybe permanently.” *Global Times*, May 20, 2020. <<https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1188896.shtml>> (2021-09-20).
- Liu, Yun 刘云 et al. edited by. 2006. *Zhongguozhu wenhua shi* 中国箸文化史 [A history of chopsticks culture in China]. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.
- Lu, Ji. “Gujin shuohai [Sea of stories of the past and present].” In *Zhongguo jiben gujiku* 中国基本古籍库 [Database of Chinese Classic Ancient Books]: 490–1.
- Ma, Guansheng. 2015. “Food, eating behavior, and culture in Chinese society.” *Journal of Ethnic Foods* 2 (4): 195–9.
- Ma, Lihua, et al. 2020. “Knowledge, beliefs/attitudes and practices of rural residents in the prevention and control of COVID-19: An online questionnaire survey.” *Research Square* (preprint article), April 20, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-22257/v1>
- Ma, Yihan. 2021. “Changes in eating habits due to COVID-19 among respondents in China 2021.” *Statista.com*, April 9, 2021. <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1225402/china-changes-in-eating-habits-due-to-covid/#statisticContainer>> (2021-09-20).
- Meng, Dandan. 2020. “No more sharing of communal dishes: A revolution of Chinese dining habits?” *ThinkChina*, April 27, 2020. <<https://www.thinkchina.sg/no-more-sharing-communal-dishes-revolution-chinese-dining-habits>> (2021-09-20).
- Meng, Yuanlao 孟元老, et al. 1982. 東京夢華錄、都城紀勝、西湖老人繁勝錄、夢梁錄、武林舊事 [History of Tokyo Menghualu, Jisheng Metropolis, Xihu Laoren Fanshenglu, Menglianglu and Wulin]. Beijing: Zhongguo shangye chubanshe.
- Kölla, Brigitte. 1996. *Traum von Hua in der Östlichen Hauptstadt: Meng Yuanlaos Erinnerungen an Die Hauptstadt Der Song*. Bern: Peter Lang Ed.
- Ôta, Masako. 2001. *Hashi no genryuo saguru: Chukoku kodai ni okeru hashi shiyo shu zoku seiritsu* [Investigation into the origin of chopsticks: the establishment of the habit of chopsticks use in ancient China]. Tokyo: Kyuko Shoin.
- Pan, Jingyi. 2020. “Will the pandemic permanently change people’s dining habits?” *CGTN*, April 19, 2020. <<https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-04-19/Will-the-pandemic-permanently-change-people-s-dining-habits--PNviPmKtVK/index.html>> (2021-09-20).
- People’s Daily Online. 2020. “China’s first local standard for using public spoons and chopsticks unveiled.” *People’s Daily Online*, March 16, 2020. <<http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0316/c98649-9668566.html>> (2021-09-20).

- Qin, Amy. 2020. "Coronavirus Threatens China's Devotion to Chopsticks and Sharing Food." *The New York Times*, May 25. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/25/world/asia/china-coronavirus-chopsticks.html>> (2021-09-20).
- Qin, Amy. 2020. "疫情下中国的“餐桌革命”：你愿意用公筷吗？” [China's "table revolution" under the epidemic: Are you willing to use public chopsticks?]. *Niuyue Shibao Zhongwenban*, May 26, 2020. <<https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20200526/china-coronavirus-chopsticks/zh-hant/>> (2021-09-20).
- Shorkar, Naim. 2018. "Chopsticks is a Divine Art of Chinese Culture." *International Journal of Research Culture Society* 2 (11): 9–11.
- Tian, Robert Guan, Tian Kathy, Dandan Zhao, and Camilla H. Wang. 2018. "Food culture in China: From social political perspectives." *Trames* 22 (72/67), 4: 345–64.
- Wang, C., Huang, J., Liao, J. and Wan X. 2020. "Food Sharing With Choice: Influence on Social Evaluation." *Front. Psychol.* 11: 2070. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.02070>
- Wang, Edward Q. 2015. *Chopsticks: A Cultural and Culinary History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wang, Shiqi 王世琪; Shen, Yan 沈雁. 2020. "Zhejiang xinwen kehu duan: dancan peisong shu chao 200 xu bei'an Zhejiang dui linshi tuancan peisong shishi bei'an guanli 浙江新闻客户端：单餐配送数超200需备案 浙江对临时团餐配送实施备案管理" [Zhejiang News Client: The number of single meal delivery exceeds 200 and requires filing. Zhejiang implements filing management for temporary group meal delivery]. *Zhejiang Provincial Market Supervision Administration*, February 15, 2020. <[http://zjamr.zj.gov.cn/art/2020/2/17/art\\_1228969894\\_41928824.html/](http://zjamr.zj.gov.cn/art/2020/2/17/art_1228969894_41928824.html/)> (2021-09-20).
- Wen, Jun, Kozak, Metin, Yang, Shaohua, and Liu, Fang. 2021. "COVID-19: potential effects on Chinese citizens' lifestyle and travel." *Tourism Review* 76 (1): 74–87.
- Wilson, Bill. 2010. *Delicious fraud: food counterfeiting and its history*. Beijing: Sanlian Bookstore.
- Xinhua. 2020a. "Bu yong gongkuai you shenmen houguo? Youren zuole ge duibi, jieguo jingren 不用公筷有什么后果？有人做了个对比，结果惊人" [What are the consequences of not using public chopsticks? Someone made a comparison and the result was amazing]. *Xinhua*, May 5, 2020. <[http://www.xhby.net/zt/zccckfyq/yw/202005/t20200505\\_6629793.shtml/](http://www.xhby.net/zt/zccckfyq/yw/202005/t20200505_6629793.shtml/)> (2021-09-20).
- Xinhua. 2020b. "Survey shows eating habit change among Chinese during Covid-19 epidemic." *Xinhua*, August 20, 2020. <[http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-08/20/c\\_139305146.htm/](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-08/20/c_139305146.htm/)> (2021-09-20).
- Yang, Guo Yi, Lin, Xin Lei, Fang, Ai Ping, Zhu, Hui Lian. 2021. "Eating Habits and Lifestyles during the Initial Stage of the COVID-19 Lockdown in China: A Cross-Sectional Study." *Nutrients* 13 (3): 970.
- Yu, Jingying 喻京英. 2020. "Gongshao, gongkuai fencazhi, rang lianghao de jiucan xiguan cong zheli kaishi 公勺、公筷、分餐制，让良好的就餐习惯从这里开始" [Serving spoons, serving chopsticks, and meal sharing system, let good dining habits start here]. *Renmin Ribao*, June 26, 2020. <[http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrbhwb/html/2020-06/26/content\\_1994253.htm/](http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrbhwb/html/2020-06/26/content_1994253.htm/)> (2021-09-20).
- Zhao, Rongguang. 2003. *中国饮食文化概论* [Introduction to food and drink culture in China]. Beijing: Gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe.
- Zhou Xinhua 周新华. 2005. *Tiaodingji 调鼎集* [Collection of food essays]. Hangzhou: Hangzhou chubanshe.