Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

CHINA AND TAIWAN: FOOD AND DRINK G167



China and Taiwan are two nearby countries, separated by the Taiwan Strait. (see the map on the right) They share a similar cultural background because the largest ethnic group in Taiwan, the Han Chinese, originally migrated from mainland China in 230 AD. There are many other ethnic groups in both countries, but the cultural appearance of China and Taiwan is mostly influenced by the Han Chinese. China and Taiwan share similarities as to how they produce the things they eat and drink and how they consume them. This is all inherited from their shared ancestor.

Food and drink have always played an important role in Chinese lives. They provide people with nourishment and the whole economic system of China since ancient times was highly dependent on the trading of food and drink - for example, crops and tea.

Tea cups



Tea is one of the most popular beverages in China and Taiwan - as it is in Britain. Normally a tea set is used when a group of people are drinking tea together (see the picture shown on the right). The set consists of a teapot, several small tea cups and some other contents depending on the style.



These two tin tea cups date back to 1979 and are much bigger than normal size tea cups. Bigger tea cups are most likely used when people are having tea on their own in everyday life either during their working or leisure time. In this way, they don't have to keep adding tea to their cups all the time.

Chinese people nowadays use mugs instead of this kind of tin tea cup.

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Bowls





Bowls are without doubt the most common dishware found on Chinese people's dining tables. While in Britain we usually have our meals on plates, Chinese people use bowls instead. Food is usually served on plates in the middle of the table and rice served in bowls before the beginning of the meal. During the meal people hold their chopsticks in one hand and the bowl upright in the other with the thumb always on the edge of the bowl. As well as their practical use as dishware, bowls and other food containers in China and Taiwan can also be used as decoration in the home.

These two bowls were probably made especially for decoration, as bowls for eating are usually deeper and can contain more food.



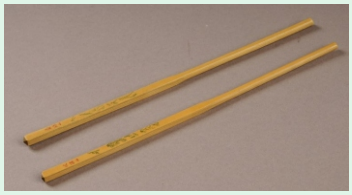
The blue and white print on the bowls is significant in the history of Chinese porcelain making. The first blue and white porcelain wares can be traced back to the ninth century in Henan Province, China. (See the red area in the map) This kind of print was then mass-produced in the fourteenth century at Jingdezhen, also known as the 'Porcelain Capital' of China. It then influenced porcelain making in Europe during the early eighteenth century.

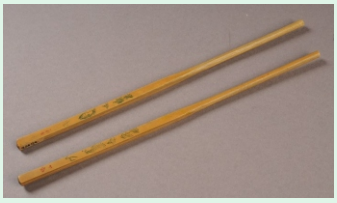
The fish pattern is very common, especially on the bottom of a bowl but do you know why? This is a Chinese joke. Fish in Chinese is pronounced as 'Yu', however, the sound 'Yu' can also stand for another word which means 'remaining'. So if people eat all the food in their bowl and find that on the bottom of the bowl there is a 'fish', it means that there is still some food remaining in their bowl which, for the Chinese people especially, is a good omen suggesting that they won't be hungry for the next meal or the next day.

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Chopsticks





Chopsticks are the constant companions of bowls. They originated in China and are widely used in other Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam. The style and etiquette of use varies from country to country.

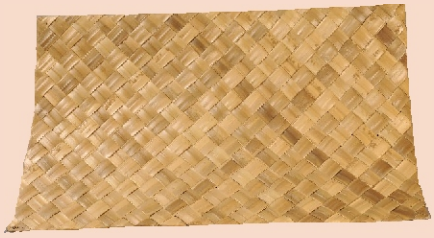
These two sets of chopsticks are in the Chinese style. Compared to the Japanese style chopsticks (see the picture on the left), the Chinese ones are usually slightly longer and they are not tapered to a pointed tip. They usually have a round shape from the middle down to the end and blunt tips. The top part is square.

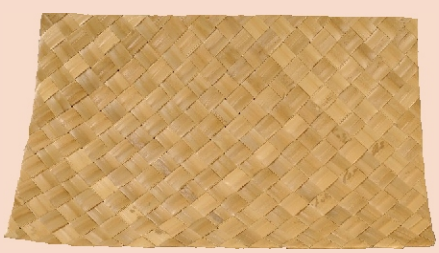


It is not necessary to eat with chopsticks if you are not confident enough to use them. You can always ask the host for a spoon or fork to replace them. However, you are always welcome to try and this would please your host! The main thing to bear in mind is that chopsticks are tools that help people to eat more easily, not toys to play with. One should not use the chopsticks to tap the edge of the bowl, as Chinese people believe that only beggars do this to attract attention. Another tip to remember is never stick your chopsticks vertically in your bowl of rice as this resembles the Chinese ritual of incense burning at a funeral.

Palm-leaf mat

These palm-leaf mats were used as table mats. They protected the table from hot plates and bowls. Today, people tend to use plastic mats or thinner palm-leaf mats.





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Bamboo Baskets

Bamboo is the fastest-growing plant in the world. Records show that it can grow as fast as 4 to 5 cm each hour with a suitable environment. Bamboo's fast growth rate is dependent on its rhizome system. Rhizome is a horizontal stem that usually grows underground and its main function is to send out roots and shoots from its nodes.

Bamboo is wide spread across East and Southeast Asia where it has been used for many purposes. For example, bamboo shoots can be made into delicious cuisine. Bamboo itself can be kept as an ornamental plant in the garden. It can be used as material for building houses or making smaller things such as toys, musical instruments and all sorts of containers for daily use.

The round-shaped basket can be used as an ornament or multi-purpose container. It is usually used to hold dry and small objects, for example, sweets or ready-to-eat pumpkin seeds. The boat-shaped basket might be a container for foods such as mussels that need to be washed before cooking. The tips of the basket are held and shaken so that the mussels can be washed and drained. What do you think it might have been used for?





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Bamboo Plates



The bamboo plates are suitable for both practical use and decoration as many other Chinese dishwares are. They are well-lacquered to prolong their life. As dishware, they might have been used to serve snacks or dessert because they are small and made out of bamboo. Plates for serving main dishes are usually made of porcelain in China and Taiwan.

The flowers painted on both plates are called the peony. They are very popular and can be seen in many traditional Chinese paintings. Peony is native to Asia, southern Europe and western North America. They are fragrant flowers with varying colours such as red, pink, white or yellow. Despite their formal name peony, they are sometimes referred to as 'flower of riches and honour' within the Chinese culture as they could be found in the royal garden of the Chinese emperors and the gardens of the rich. The peony flower represents nobility, wealth and prosperity. Having a painting or drawing of the peony flowers at home symbolises the possession of those qualities.

The other interesting thing to note is the seal prints on the plates. Seals are widely used in China and Taiwan to confirm a personal signature in legal or formal documentation. However, they are also widely used in paintings or calligraphies to confirm the artist's name and are usually printed right next to the signature of the artist.



Intriguingly, on the second plate, we can see three seal prints. This is not to say that the painting is drawn by three different people. However, it shows that it is possible that more than the artist's name can be put on a piece of artwork. The two Chinese characters followed by a seal print on the top left of the painting is the artist's name. Next to the two characters is a line of a poem that praises the painting itself and the seal print of the poem. The seal print, which stands alone on the bottom right, might be the seal print of the painting's owner.