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VIETNAMESE CULTURE IN CHOPSTICK USE COMPARED TO WESTERN CULTURE IN UTENSIL USE

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Keywords: chopstick use, chopsticks, utensil, Vietnamese culture, Western culture, comparative cultural studies, eating devices.

Culinary culture is an interesting and meaningful aspect that has captivated the scholars' attention recently. This article introduces and analyses some features in chopstick use of Vietnamese culture in comparison with the use of utensils (forks, knives, spoons) in Western culture. Comparative cultural studies viewpoint and typological method were applied to highlight the differences and similarities in tangible and intangible culture of those cultures. The findings of the research will help the audience have better understanding and knowledge of cultures in the world aiming to orientate towards the empathy and mutual appreciation.

WIETNAMSKA KULTURA KORZYSTANIA Z PAŁECZEK A KULTURA
POSŁUGIWANIA SIĘ SZTUĆCAMI W KRAJACH ZACHODU

Słowa kluczowe: użycie pałeczek, pałeczki, sztuce, kultura wietnamska, kultura zachodnia, kulturoznawstwo porównawcze, przybory do jedzenia.

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Kultura kulinarna jest ciekawym i ważnym tematem, który wzbudza zainteresowanie badaczy. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie i analiza niektórych cech korzystania pałeczek w kulturze wietnamskiej i porównanie jej do wykorzystania sztućców (wideliców, noży, łyżek) w kulturze zachodniej. W celu podkreślenia różnic i podobieństw pomiędzy tymi dwoma obszarami w zakresie kultury materialnej i niematerialnej przyjęto punkt widzenia kulturoznawstwa porównawczego oraz wykorzystano metodę typologiczną. Wyniki badania przyczynią się do lepszego zrozumienia i poznania kultur na świecie, kierując uwagę czytelnika na kwestie empatii i wzajemnego szacunku.

Introduction

According to documents from historical records, chopsticks were first used to pick up food by Bach Viet people in Southern China. According to Le Quoc (2018) in the book *L'histoire culturelle de la Chine*, Dam Gia Kiem affirmed that Chinese people before the time of the Qin (Qin Shui Huang) still ate with their hands. As for the people of Northern China, using hands to eat was a traditional habit. "Because of the cold climate, the people here could only grow barley (orge) and millet and eat bread, of course, with their hands, because they had to use their hands to hold bread then put it into their mouths," he said. Only when they expanded southward where the climate was warm, with lots of bamboo forests, residents planted paddy rice and used a rudimentary tool made of bamboo to pick up rice and put food into their mouths. Two bamboo sticks are probably the oldest images of chopsticks.

According to another research, "chopsticks originated from the Shang Dynasty (1776 - 1122 BC) in China. Archaeologists found a pair of copper chopsticks in the Shang capital, Anyang City, Henan Province, China, and determined that the chopsticks were made in 1200 BC" (Free Japanese Materials, 2017). Another explanation came from cultural researcher Tran Ngoc Them (2006), who claims that the use of chopsticks imitated the behavior observed in the natural environment, i.e. the movements of a bird to pick a seed or to catch a fish; how the birds use their beaks to grip food and put it into their mouths easily. Moreover, hot and humid countries often have a lot of vegetables and soup (cooked from vegetables), so they cannot be eaten with one's hands. In addition, in Southeast Asia, bamboo and wood are available to make chopsticks. Chopsticks are also a very versatile tool, because they combine a number of functions of other eating utensils.

In the Western diet, mainly knives, spoons and forks are used. Also, based on Tran Ngoc Them's explanation, using a knife, a spoon and a fork is a way to mimic the actions of predators. The bait is too big for them to eat, so they have to use all their strength to tear it, take it, and grab it into their mouths.

Some research documents said that the knife was probably the oldest tool, derived from the ax used to chop down a tree. The spoon derives from Latin and Greek words for the seashell used to scoop up liquids or gelatinous material. Forks have only been on the dining table for a few centuries. There are a number of theories that the fork was adapted from Neptune's trident, who used it to pick up food from a boiling pan. A manuscript book appeared in the 11th century during the Roman Empire, depicting two men fighting at the dining table with a two-pronged fork-like object.

The above-mentioned ideas inspire a number of questions: what are the differences in using chopsticks in Eastern culture and using eating utensils in Western culture? And do eating devices in any way relate to or reflect the lifestyles and thinking of a nation or culture? Hence, we propose two hypotheses: 1. Using eating devices amongst cultures and nations always shows only differences; 2. There are some clear relations or reflections of the lifestyles and thinking of a nation or culture through using eating devices.

In order to answer these questions and prove the hypotheses, comparative cultural studies is considered the appropriate methodology. Because it researches the relationships between the cultures of nations, the culture(s) in each area to highlight the values, the cultural identities of each nation, the unity in diversity of regional culture, the world culture, and to clarify the rules of operation of the world culture. Its basic purposes are as follows: Determining the universality of human culture and proving the particularity of national culture. Steven Totosy de Zepetnek (2003, p.1) said that "comparative cultural studies are a field of study in the humanities and social sciences where tenets of the discipline of comparative literature are merged with the field of cultural studies; the objects of study are all sorts of culture and culture products" and "comparative cultural studies are no master theory, but one framework among several others; they have to be tested and applied, and to be used as a tool in order to understand and to produce new knowledge." Its purposes are to bring new and objective insights into the similarities and differences of cultures as well as provide us with deeper knowledge, and profounder understanding of cultures in order to live better, more harmoniously without a sense of higher appreciation or contempt for any cultures, preserve the diversity of national cultural identities, and prevent globalization from turning countries into uniforms.

It is said that any aspect or phenomenon of any culture can be the object of comparative cultural studies. Definitely, cuisine is a cultural phenomenon bearing the universality in all cultures in the world. However, depending on each nation, ethnicity, and the type of culture the ways of producing food and eating are so different and diverse. People may use fingers, chopsticks or utensils (forks, knives, spoons) to eat their dinners. In this paper, from the framework of comparative cultural studies developed by Steven Totosy de Zepetnek (2003), we applied the typological method to conduct a research on Vietnamese culture in chopstick use compared to Western culture in utensil use. Our interesting tangible and intangible findings will help the mutual understanding of Eastern and Western cultures, thus we have more suitable communication behaviors while having dinners, respecting the differences of other cultures.

Tangible culture in chopstick use

Materials and methods to produce chopsticks

As Tran Ngoc Them (2006) mentioned above, bamboo and wood are perhaps the first materials used to make chopsticks because they are readily available in hot regions like Southeast Asia. Rich or old kings can use chopsticks made of good materials such as ebony, ivory, or pearl-inlaid wooden chopsticks, which are different from knives, spoons, forks made from man-made materials such as steel, aluminum, stainless steel. Along with the development of today's society, chopsticks can also be made of artificial materials such as plastic, aluminum, stainless steel as well as silver and gold. However, wooden and bamboo chopsticks are still the most popular, inexpensive, convenient and environmentally friendly materials. They reflect the lifestyle of Vietnamese people, in harmony with the natural environment, always taking advantage of what nature offers to people. At the same time, the trio of knives, spoons and forks in Western culinary culture expresses the desire to conquer nature right from the materials they are made of, i.e. artificial materials.

In the past, people used to choose old and straight bamboo trunks to make chopsticks. The process comprises four stages: cutting into pieces, splitting, sharpening, and rounding to make a new pair of chopsticks. Chopsticks are made primarily by the manual method, while knives, spoons and forks are created by industrial methods: pouring molten metal into a mold to shape the tools.

Dishes in Vietnamese meals

Vietnamese meals consist mainly of rice with vegetables, tubers and fruits.

Vegetables are often cut or chopped into small pieces to be eaten raw, cooked as a soup, or boiled to dip in fish sauce. What is more, in processing food, the ingredients are often cut into pieces so that they are easy to put into the mouth, to pick up and save fuel as well as cooking time. Therefore, using chopsticks is probably the most appropriate way. Using chopsticks can help put rice into one's mouth, pick up food and can do a number of other actions like picking, grabbing, stirring, mixing, tearing, slicing, skewering, and scooping or extending hands to get food which is away without having to use too many tools while eating. This reflects the integral, pliable and flexible thought of Vietnamese people. And based on the thought of lifestyle "depending on nature", Vietnamese and people in some Asian countries choose the simple and fast way of cooking, especially by eating raw foods or boiling them. Besides, in order to make it easy for people to select their preferred or favorite food, all the courses in a meal are served on the table at the same time.

In contrast, Western meals consist mainly of bread, rolls with stews and roast or fried animals like cows, pigs, and sheep, sometimes fish. Westerners also eat soups and vegetables but using utensils rather than chopsticks since soup and vegetables are two different kinds of dishes, which is different from Vietnamese soups cooked from various vegetables. There are big or thick pieces of food, so Westerners use a knife to cut bread, butter, cheese spread on the bread roll, or to cut meat in order to taste it more easily. They use a fork to spear the meat or hold it in place, which is why these utensils are the most suitable. This kit also shows the analytical thinking and high professionalism of Westerners: every tool has a special function. In Western cuisine, the processing way seems so sophisticated and complex but not so much flexible in choosing one's favorite food, the meal is served on the plate. Once the first course is finished, one can enjoy the next one.

Methods of using chopsticks

For Vietnamese adults, using chopsticks is a very simple task that everyone knows, but for Westerners, using chopsticks at meals like Vietnamese people is a hard job. Fluent chopstick use also takes a long time to practice. Vietnamese people often teach children using chopsticks from 4-5 years old, sometimes a bit later, and until 10 years old, they can use chopsticks quite competently. In Vietnamese culture, they consider using chopsticks to eat rice to be an art. This is why people can speculate about the personality type of a person while eating, especially through the way of holding, using chopsticks according to a folk concept. Holding chopsticks must be soft, slow and gentle. They must be coordinated with each other smoothly.

When handling food, we are taught to be neat and careful to avoid dropping food on the table or floor. It is also not good to make sounds while eating with chopsticks when they hit or swing into the dishes, or eat noisily. Such people are said to be careless, extravagant, unrefined or impolite. One must practice using chopsticks fluently and skillfully, especially at a young age. While eating, Vietnamese people do not use chopsticks to stir, find good food or poke at dishes, nor to get food from the other diners' chopsticks (this is a taboo in Japanese culture). In the past, in some areas of the North and Central North, chopsticks could also be used to clean the mouth after finishing the meals by putting two chopsticks close together to use them as a tissue.

Chopsticks are often used in pairs, no one uses one, even in the old days, "big" chopsticks were used to dig rice in the pot. Two chopsticks must be equal in size, balanced, straight and even to pick up the food. Chopsticks often have two heads: large heads are usually round or square often upper, small heads lower are used while having meals. When finishing eating they are washed, sun dried to kill bacteria and avoid termites. One taboo in Vietnamese chopstick use culture is that people never plug their chopsticks into a rice bowl because that symbolizes a rice bowl placed on the altar to worship the dead.

Compared to using chopsticks, the use of knives, spoons and forks is a bit simpler because the food is already divided into the plates for each individual. Children have to learn how to use them from a young age, so that it is less likely to be scattered on the table or on the floor. Knives, spoons and forks can be used independently: knives are mainly used for cutting meat, spreading butter or cheese on bread; spoons are used for scooping up liquid foods like a soup; forks are used to pierce meat or food tightly to cut it or put it into one's mouth¹. In addition, the trio can be used in pairs, a knife and a fork to hold or pierce food, but even when they are used together, each device still has a separate function rather than the same function like a pair of chopsticks.

In Western culture (e.g. Polish, British) when the tableware is set on the table, the knife and spoon are put on the right hand of the user, the fork is on the left with their tips pointing up. According to Debby Mayne (2019) generally diners can follow utensil placement in order from the one farthest from the plate and work your way inward. Forks go on the left, with the salad fork first, and then the dinner fork beside the plate. On the right side of the plate, diners will find the knife, appetizer or salad knife,

¹Bread is finger food, so diners don't use your fork or knife to cut it into bite-sized pieces (Debby Mayne, 2019).

spoon, soup spoon, and oyster fork. The knife blades should be positioned with the cutting sides closest to the plate. The fork and knife closest to the plate are for eating diners' main course.

When eating a soup, diners should use the bowl-shaped or larger oval spoon. Keep the soup bowl firmly on the table; never lift or tilt it. Scoop the soup away from diners starting at the center of the bowl. Bring the spoon to diner's mouth and tilt it while sipping soup from the edge.

Dana Velden (2012) said that: "The European style is also referred to as "hidden handle" because the knife and fork are held in such a way that the handles are tucked into the palm and held by the thumb and forefinger". She compared to the European style to the American one: "The American style is also referred to as the "zig-zag method" where the fork is held like a spoon and indeed sometimes used like a spoon to scoop rather than spear food" (Dana Velden, 2012).

What is more, during the meal, diners should know the etiquette of using utensils in a proper way in a formal dinner in Western culture. According to *The Times* (2017), there are 5 signals:

1. The signal meaning diners stop for a while but still eating: Americans, Canadians and Europeans put knives and forks closer to the center of the plate to make an angle of a square/ 90 degrees.
2. The signal meaning diners want to be served to the next course: "put the knife and fork perpendicular to each other. At this point, the knife and fork should be in the middle of the plate" (The Times, 2017).
3. The signal meaning diners have finished eating: put knives and forks in parallel. Depending on where in the world people will place it in either straight or inclined direction. If the Americans chose the upside-down method, the Europeans chose the upside-down way to show their courtesy.
4. The signal meaning diners compliment the dishes: place the knife and fork parallel to the horizontal facing your right hand.
5. The signal meaning diners complain about the dishes: insert a knife into two tines of the fork and place in the center of the plate.

Intangible culture of chopstick use

Organization of Vietnamese meals

In the past, before the meal started, Vietnamese people often brought out a bunch of chopsticks and selected the most beautiful, straightest pairs first for the elderly (such as grandparents, parents, distinguished guests) and then for younger ones and finally for themselves. The way of delivering

chopsticks also shows the respectability of the older, love for children, and the hospitality of Vietnamese people.

Vietnamese meals, like Western meals, are an occasion for socializing, reuniting with family and showing love and care for each other, but the difference is the way to express these.

Vietnamese food is usually put in large plates or bowls and placed in the middle of the table along with a cup of fish sauce to dip boiled vegetables or for those who need to eat with a stronger taste. People use a small bowl and a pair of chopsticks to pick up food into the bowl and eat according to their needs and taste. To show respect, love, take care of others or hospitality, Vietnamese people often choose the most delicious dishes on the table to be picked up by their grandparents, their children, their spouses or guests.

In contrast, in Western meals, the food is divided into large plates for each person, along with the utensils, spoons and forks attached and each person finishes his/her own food but rarely shares food with other people. During Vietnamese meals, people often laugh and smile, joke, tease, tell each other about their daily tasks at work, children tell their parents and grandparents about their schooling, while in Western meals they eat in a more silent manner, they usually share or exchange information with each other after each course.

It can be said that the way of enjoying food with chopsticks also shows a collective, a community lifestyle, a lifestyle that respects mutual affection and sharing, while eating with a knife, spoon and fork expresses an individual lifestyle, appreciating privacy and reason. However, regardless of the nation's culinary culture, both East and West have a common tendency to gather around family and relatives, chat and share.

The symbolization of chopsticks in Vietnamese culture

From the familiar image of chopsticks in daily meals, from the close harmony and combination of the two chopsticks while manipulating in meals, the Vietnamese have attached chopsticks with much spiritual values that have not been recognized in other cultures. The chopsticks have entered the cultural lifestyle of the Vietnamese as a close but luxurious guest. It appears mostly in expressions, idioms folk verses and proverbs.

To refer to the miraculous solutions that bring high efficiency, people say "magic wand" or "magic chopsticks". Those who do not distinguish black and white, right and wrong, clearly attributable to a term where people say "grabbing all the bunch of chopsticks".

"Using one chopstick" (instead of a pair as usual) means being lonely, deserted, with no one to shoulder and share the burden of the family,

especially those who have lost her husband or his wife. Only those who have a better half, husband or wife, the Vietnamese say “like chopsticks have a pair” or “chopsticks become pairs”. The meanings of these expressions and idioms are the implicit or indirect interpretations, not a form of direct communication.

In western culture, we have found some of the following idioms: “like a knife through butter” (as easy as a butter knife), while Vietnamese have the saying “as easy as turning the hand”; “put the knife into somebody” (pointing a knife at someone) shows someone who is not friendly or aggressive; “born with a silver spoon in your mouth” means being born into a rich family. The saying that “When you have finished eating, and to let others know that you have, place your knife and fork together” is similar to the signal. While this sentence “Never lick or put your knife in your mouth” means that this action is too dangerous. Then, “Never use your fingers to push food onto your spoon or fork”, people do not do it for it is impolite.

These idioms or sayings are not symbolic or speculative. Their meanings are literal, direct from the words that have created them. For example, a knife that cuts into butter is actually easy because the butter is soft; or throwing a knife at someone else is probably a threat, meant to harm others.

Nothing is more beautiful and wonderful than a love that a couple has, its proportionate, harmonious appearance as well as soul. There is no gift that the Creator bestows upon man more than such a harmonious love, a love of “pearly chopsticks, golden tray”.

“We make a couple leisurely,

Like a pair of pearly chopsticks lying in a gold tray”

Or

“We are like chopsticks in the warehouse

They are equal even without cutting, engraving or putting two chopsticks on the flat”.

If harmonizing like a pair of chopsticks, then being unbalanced or limp, Vietnamese people also compare to a pair of chopsticks but a pair of “misaligned chopsticks” when the husband is short, the wife is tall and the couple do not have the similarity in their appearance in case like “a couple of an ugly owl and a beautiful fairy”. A staggering, tragic and satirical, ironic comparison as in reality a very misleading pair of chopsticks is difficult to use, like the following folk verse:

A staggering, tragic and satirical, ironic comparison as in reality a very misleading pair of chopsticks is difficult to use, like a common folk verse which means “The mother of the girl was very greedy, she loved materialism

and arranged her daughter to marry an unmatched spouse. This led to her marriage unhappiness”.

In Vietnamese culture, we have many similar folk verses. Such comparisons aimed to deter and admonish young people when choosing a spouse they should select a suitable and matching one to assure long-lasting and happy marriage. If not, their marriage would easily come to an end very soon or their love would quickly break.

Love is a category in which humanity has spent a lot of ink and paper to describe it. For Vietnamese when love or marriage is broken, it is like a pair of chopsticks now there is only one left. “The coin and chopstick went apart. You went your own way, I went mine.”

The survey in “*The Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*” only gives us three examples of proverbs that contain the words for eating utensils like a fork, a knife and a spoon.

“Fingers were made before forks” or “God made hands before knives” mean an apology when eating with one’s hand like a naturalist-style, not a fork/ knife: what comes first is used first.

“He who supps with the Devils should have a long spoon.” This sentence means to be careful when working or interacting with dangerous people or those who have wicked heart.

The survey in another book “*Idioms – Proverbs – Quotations English – French – Vietnamese*”, we have found no examples. A question is raised here: has analytical thinking been radicalized in Western cultures that items used every day like knives, spoons and forks did not go into folklore? In contrast to the Eastern culture that is more about synthesis, flexibility and high adaptability, everyday items of ordinary meals have been attached to many spiritual values, especially in love and behavior.

Another symbol in the Vietnamese mindset of chopsticks symbolizes the unity of the people. Through the image: breaking a chopstick is easy, but breaking a bundle of chopsticks is extremely difficult in ancient folktales. The forefather taught his children the miraculous power of love, support and solidarity for each other to overcome difficulties and tribulations together. In fact, there is no simpler, more vivid but meaningful image than the image of a bunch of chopsticks sticking tightly together like siblings and family affection.

The following table summarizes the differences between the culture of using chopsticks and the culture of using knives, spoons and forks:

Table 1

Comparing the culture of using chopsticks and the culture of using utensils

Criteria	Tools and values			
	Chopsticks	Values	Utensil	Values
Materials	Bamboo, wood, ivory Plastic, aluminum, inox, silver, gold →natural orientation	Respect for nature, take advantage of nature Human beings live in harmony with nature	Plastic, aluminum, inox, silver, gold →artificial orientation	Conquering, overcoming nature Nature serves human beings
Mode of production	Hand-made orientation		Machine-made orientation	
Origin of food	Basically plant origin		Basically animal origin	
Used methods	Manipulating a pair of chopsticks with the same function	-Synthesis thinking -Collectivism -Lack of teamwork professional spirit	Manipulating one piece or a combination of 2 pieces with different function	-Analytical thinking - Individualism -Teamwork professional spirit
Symbolization	-Behavior -Love -Unity	Emotion-respected lifestyle, associative thinking, dialectic		

Source: own elaboration.

Conclusion

Although the culinary culture has been studied for a long time, its achievements mainly describe the habits and ways of preparing dishes of different countries and peoples in the world. We initially research how to use chopsticks in Eastern culture (Vietnamese culture) compared to Western culture in way of using knives, spoons and forks. Contrasting with the above hypotheses, we can make some rudimentary comments.

Using eating devices shows not only differences but also some similarities amongst cultures and nations as well as clearly expresses the thinking, soul and association of people in a culture with eating devices.

Vietnamese people, who imitate the natural environment, are pious, respectful, live in harmony with nature, take advantage of nature but are always close to it in the way of making chopsticks, using chopsticks and arranging everyday meals. In contrast, the use of knives, spoons and forks by Westerners shows a way of conquering and overcoming nature.

During informal dinners, Easterners and Westerners orientate towards an emotional, sharing lifestyle, a community-based way of life when they share their own stories, chat and laugh. In formal dinners, Vietnamese culture does not show much different like sharing a tray, food, a bowl of fish sauce put in the middle of the table. While Western people structure the rules of etiquette meals in a specific way.

A pair of chopsticks is very flexibly used, they can take on many functions of many Western eating utensils when combined, which shows a flexible, adaptive lifestyle, synthesis thinking, collectivism, but also a lack and professional team spirit in Vietnamese people. The Western utensils show analytical thinking, less flexible even when they are combined together, each of them also has a specific function. This expresses an analytical thinking, appreciates individualism and professional team spirit because they can combine and function their own duties effectively.

A pair of chopsticks in Vietnamese culture symbolizes love and being a couple of husband and wife; a bundle of chopsticks also symbolizes the power of solidarity and mutual affection. It can be said that only with a rich and humane spiritual lifestyle, a romantic but very practical soul, a nation can turn a very simple item in everyday life into a deeply and spiritually cultural symbol. We have not found any examples of association, symbolization or metaphor of using eating devices which expresses intangible aspects in Western culture.

A pair of chopsticks in Vietnamese culture is like a national pride – a pride in a simple, elegant, diverse and unique culture in the multicultural house of the world.

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