

Shit stick

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Shit stick means "a thin stake or stick used instead of toilet paper" and was a historical item of material culture introduced through Chinese Buddhism and Japanese Buddhism. A well-known example is *gānshǐjué/kanshiketsu* (lit. 乾屎橛 "dry shit stick") from the Chan/Zen *gōng'àn/kōan* in which a monk asked "What is Buddha?" and Master Yunmen/Unmon answered "A dry shit stick".



Gaki zōshi 餓鬼草紙 "Scroll of Hungry Ghosts", a *gaki* condemned to shit-eating watches a child wearing *geta* and holding a *chūgi*, c. 12th century.

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History

People have used many different materials in the history of anal cleansing, including leaves, rags, paper, water, sponges, corncobs, and sticks.

According to the historians of Chinese science Joseph Needham and Lu Gwei-djen,

In very ancient times, instruments of bamboo, possibly spatulas ([cèchóu] 廁籌, [cèbì] 廁篋, or [cèjiǎn] 廁簡), may have been used with the assistance of water in cleaning the body after defecation. At other times and places, it seems that pieces of earthenware or pottery were so used. Undoubtedly one material which found employment in this respect was waste silk rag. (2000:373)

When monks and missionaries introduced Buddhism into China and Japan, they also brought the Indian custom of using a *śalākā* "small stake, stick, or rod" for wiping away excrement. Translators rendered this Sanskrit word into a number of different neologisms such as Chinese *cèchóu* 廁籌 and Japanese *chūgi* 籌木,

and the custom of using shit sticks became popular. They had advantages of being inexpensive, washable, and reusable.

The Chinese invented paper around the 2nd century BCE, and toilet paper no later than the 6th century CE, when Yan Zhitui noted, "Paper on which there are quotations or commentaries from the Five Classics or the names of sages, I dare not use for toilet purposes" (tr. Needham 1986: 123).

The earliest Japanese flush toilets date from the Nara period (710–784), when a drainage system was constructed in the capital at Nara, with squat toilets built over 10–15 cm wide wooden conduits that users would straddle. Archaeological excavations in Nara have also found numerous *chūgi* wooden sticks that were used for fecal cleansing (Chavez 2014). (Matsui et al. 2003: 133) explain that Japanese archeologists have discovered comparatively few toilets because "the decisive factors in identifying toilets were fly maggots and flat sticks called *chugi* used as a toilet paper", but preservation of such artifacts requires the environment of a wetland site where organic remains are constantly soaked with groundwater.

Archeologists discovered 2,000-year-old shit sticks in a latrine at Xuanquanzhi 悬泉置, in the town of Dunhuang, Gansu. Xuanquanzhi was a Han dynasty military base and relay station (111 BCE–CE 109) at the eastern end of the Silk Road. Analysis of preserved fecal matter found on cloth covers wrapped around the ends of sticks revealed the remains of roundworm (*Ascaris lumbricoides*), whipworm (*Trichuris trichiura*), tapeworm (*Taenia solium*), and Chinese liver fluke (*Clonorchis sinensis*) (Yeh et al. 2016; Bower 2016; Newitz 2016).

Terminology

The Chinese and Japanese lexicons have various words meaning "shit stick". They are divisible into compounds of *chóu* or *chū* 筹 "small stake or stick", *jué* or *ketsu* 榧 "short stake or stick", and other terms.

Chou or Chū

Chinese *chóu* or Japanese *chū* 筹 "small stake; stick; chip; tally; counter; token" is used in the "shit stick" terms and *chóumù* or *chūgi* 筹木 (with 木 "tree; wood") and *cèchóu* 廁筹 (with 廁 "toilet").

Chóu or *chū* was used to translate the polysemous Buddhist Sanskrit term *śalāka* or *śalākā* (Pali *salākā*).

śalākā any small stake or stick, rod (for stirring [etc]), twig (smeared with lime for catching birds), rib (of an umbrella), bar (of a cage or window), chip, splinter, splint, pencil (for painting or applying collyrium).

(1) a piece of bamboo (borne as a kind of credential by mendicants and marked with their name).

(2) the quill of a porcupine.



Japanese *chūgi* from the Nara period (710-784), shown with modern toilet paper for size comparison.



Ming Dynasty Xuande Emperor playing *touhu*, 15th century.

- (3) an oblong quadrangular piece of ivory or bone (used in playing a partic[ular] game).
- (4) a peg, pin, arrow-head, needle, a probe (used in surgery and sometimes taken as the N[ame] of this branch of, surgery), any pointed instrument.
- (5) a sprout, sprig, shoot of any kind.
- (6) a ruler.
- (7) a toothpick or tooth-brush.
- (8) a match or thin piece of wood (used for ignition by friction).
- (9) a bone.
- (10) a finger, toe.
- (11) a porcupine.
- (12) a partic[ular] thorny shrub, *Vangueria Spinosa*.
- (13) the Sārikā bird, *Turdus Salica*.
- (14) N[ame] of a town.
- (15) of a woman. (abridged, Monier-Williams 1899)

In Indian Buddhist contexts, *śalākā* particularly meant "a piece of wood or bamboo used for counting or voting". *Salaka-Grahapaka* was the elected "collector of votes" in the Santhagara "general assembly hall used for voting". The Jain cosmological term *salakapurusa* "illustrious or worthy person" compounds *salaka* "stick used for voting" and *purusa* "person".

Chou 籌 originally meant "arrow used in *tóuhú* (ancient drinking game decided by the number of arrows thrown into a pot)" or "tally stick (used in counting)", and by extension came to mean "plan; prepare; collect" (Karlgren 1957: 281). *Chóu* 籌 "shit stick" was first chronicled around the 3rd century CE. The Jin dynasty (265-420) *Yulin* 語林 by Pei Qi 裴啟 has stories about the especially ostentatious bathrooms of wealthy merchant Shi Chong 石崇 (249-300) (see Needham 1970:373), including one about Shi mocking the politician Liu Shi 劉寔 (220-310) for being unfamiliar with the perfumed shit sticks offered by two female washroom attendants (*Hanyu Da Zidian* 1989 8:1272).

Cèchóu 廁籌 was first recorded in the (c. 659) *History of the Northern Dynasties*, when Emperor Wenxuan of Northern Qi (r. 550-560) said that getting Yang Yin to serve as Prime Minister was a difficult as making him present shit sticks (*Hanyu Da Cidian* 1993 3: 1251).

The *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten* (2001) defines *chūgi* 籌木 or *chū* 籌 as "chips of wood anciently used instead of toilet paper", and cites the earliest recorded usage of *chūgi* ちうぎ in Ono Ranzan's 小野蘭山 (1847) *Jūtei honzō kōmoku keimō* 重訂本草綱目啓蒙 "Illuminated Compendium of Materia Medica". Modern Japanese dialect pronunciations of *chūgi* include *chyōi* or *chūge* in Hida (region) and *tsū* in Iwate Prefecture.

Translations in English dictionaries of Buddhism include:

- 籌 To calculate, devise, plan; a tally. (Soothill and Hodous 1937)
- **Chū** 籌 *śalākā*. 1. A small stake or stick. A piece of bamboo used for counting and voting. 2. A thin piece of wood, used for wiping away excrement. (Daitō 1991: 35)
- 籌 (Skt. *śalāka*, *śalākā*; Pāli *salākā*). A piece of wood or bamboo used for counting and voting. A tally. To calculate, devise, plan. (Skt. *kaṭhikā*, *vartikā*, *tūlī*, *tūli*, *kalāpa*) ... A thin piece of wood used for wiping away excrement. (Muller 2014)

Jue or Ketsu

Chinese *jué* or Japanese *ketsu* 榧 "short wooden stake; stick; peg; post" is compounded with *shi* or *shī* 屎

(written with 尸 "body" and 米 "rice") "shit; excrement; dung" into Japanese *shiketsu* or Chinese *shǐjué* 屎橛 "shit stick".

The famous term *gānshǐjué* or *kanshiketsu* 乾屎橛 "dry shit stick", modified with *gān* or *kan* 乾 "dry, dried; hollow", occurs in a famous Chan *gōng'àn* or Zen *kōan* recorded in *The Gateless Gate* (see below).

Definitions in English dictionaries of Buddhism include:

- **乾屎橛** A stick used in India as 'toilet paper', in China paper, straw, or bamboo. (Soothill and Hodous 1937: 341)
- **Kan-shiketsu** 乾屎橛 Excrement-wiping spatula. A word of abuse for a person who clings to things. A typical *zen* term. (Daitō 1991: 181)
- **Kan-shiketsu** Jap., lit. "dry shit stick"; a Zen expression designating a person who is attached to the world of appearance. *Kan-shiketsu* is the *wato* of a famous *kōan* (example 21 of the *Wu-men-kuan*). The expression stems from a time in China in which a wooden stick was used instead of toilet paper. (Fischer-Schreiber et al. 1991: 111-112)
- **Kan-shiketsu** (Jap. 'dry shit stick') Zen description of person attached to the world of appearance. It is the *wato* of *kōan* 21 in the *Wu-men kuan*. (Bowker 2000:306)
- **乾屎橛** 'Excrement-wiping spatula.' A stick used in India as 'toilet paper,' in China paper, straw, or bamboo. ... In Chan, a term of abuse for someone who is attached to things. (Muller 2014)

Bi or Hera

Chinese *bì* 篦 "fine-tooth comb; spatula" or Japanese *hera* 篦 "spatula; scoop" is compounded into Chinese *cèbì* 廁篦 "toilet spatula" and Japanese *kusobera* 糞篦 "shit spatula" or *kusokakibera* 糞搔く篦 "shit scratching spatula". While most Japanese "shit stick" words have Sino-Japanese *on'yomi* readings, such as *chūgi* from *chóumù* 籌木, both *kuso* 糞 "shit; crap" (cf. internet slang *kuso*) and *hera* 篦 "spatula; scoop" are native Japanese *kun'yomi* pronunciations of these kanji (which would be read *funhei* 糞篦 in Sino-Japanese).

Chinese *cebi* 廁篦 "toilet spatula" is first recorded in Buddhahadra's (c. 419) *Mohe sengqi lü* 摩訶僧祇律 translation of the Mahāsāṃghika version *Vinaya Pitaka* monastic rules; the toilet etiquette section (明威儀法之一) says inside toilets should have privacy partitions, with *cebi* shit-sticks placed at the side (*Hanyu Da Cidian* 1993 3: 1251).

Other terms

Chinese *cèjiǎn* 廁簡 or 廁筒 "toilet stick" is a synonym of *cèchóu* 廁籌 (above) using the word *jiǎn* 簡 "bamboo and wooden slips used for writing; letter; select; choose; simple; brief". *Cèjiǎn* was first recorded in the (c. 1105) *Book of Southern Tang* "Biographies of Buddhists" section. During the time of Queen Zhou the Elder (r. 961-964), a monk used a sharpened toilet stick to remove a tumor (*Hanyu Da Cidian* 1993 3: 1251). Jabamukhi salaka (also from Sanskrit *śalākā*) was "a curved needle (used in traditional Indian cataract surgery)".

English counterparts

The English language has some *shit(e) stick* lexical parallels to these Asian language terms. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (s.v. **shit**, **shite** n.) quotes two early *shit-stick* examples: "a hard chuffe, a shite-sticks" (1598) and "a shite-sticks, a shite-rags, that is to say, a miserable pinch-pennie" (1659); and (s.v. **poop** n.²)

defines **poop-stick** as "a fool, ineffectual person", with the earliest usage in 1930. *Shit-sticks* is metaphorically parallel to *shit-rags* (Doyle 1994: 96). In modern usage, Atcheson L. Hench (Hench et al. 1964: 298) suggests calling someone a *shit-stick* may combine the ideas of *shit* and *stick-in-the-mud*.

The lexicographer Eric Partridge (2006: 1726-1727) lists three slang terms.

- **shit-stick** "a despised person" (US 1964)
- **shit sticks!** "used as a mildly profane expression of disappointment" (US 1964)
- **shit(ty) end of the stick** "an unfair position to be in; inequitable treatment" (UK 1974)

Textual usages

Words meaning "shit stick" are associated with the Chan/Zen school of Buddhism. Victor Mair (2008: 107) explains that most great masters in this school "did not directly state what they wanted to say, but used a conclusive shout or a knock on the head with a rod, or yet spoke such words as "dry shit stick" that are situated somewhere between comprehensibility and incomprehensibility in order to make a suggestion that would enable their students to partake of enlightenment."

The Gateless Gate

The Gateless Gate is the Song dynasty Chan master Wumen Huikai's (c. 1228) compilation of 48 kōans. Case 21 is titled *Yunmen (kan)shiketsu* 雲門(乾)屎橛 "Master Yunmen's (Dried) Shit Stick", referring to the Tang dynasty Chan master Yunmen Wenyan (c. 862-949 CE).

THE CASE

A monk asked Yün-men, "What is Buddha?" [雲門因僧問如何是佛]
Yün-men said, "Dried shitstick." [門云乾屎橛]

WU-MEN'S COMMENT

It must be said of Yün-men that he was too poor to prepare even the plainest food and too busy to make a careful draft. Probably people will bring forth this dried shitstick to shore up the gate and prop up the door. The Buddha Dharma is thus sure to decay.

WU-MEN'S VERSE

A flash of lightning,
sparks from flint;
if you blink your eyes,
it's already gone. (tr. Robert Baker Aitken 1999: 137)

Aitken (1999: 139) explains "dried shitstick" as "a soft stick that was used the way our ancestors used a corncob in their outhouses". Jack Kerouac (1958: 173) paraphrased "The Buddha is a dried piece of turd".

Owing to the ambiguities of Classical Chinese, the word *gānshǐjué* or *kanshiketsu* 乾屎橛 can be parsed as "dried shit-stick" or "dried-shit stick". English translations include:

- "Dried dung." (Senzaki and Repts 1934: 12)
- "A shit-wiping stick." (Hakeda and Haskel 1994: xxxiii)
- "*Kanshiketsu!* (a dried shit-stick)." (Yamada 2004:102)
- "Kanshiketsu!" (Sekida and Grimstone 2005: 77)

- "Dry shit on a stick!" (Sahn and Gak 2012: 259)

Sekida and Grimstone note: "*Kanshiketsu*. A *shiketsu*, or "shit-stick" (*kan*, dry; *shi*, shit; *ketsu*, stick), was used in old times instead of toilet paper. It is at once both private and polluted. But in samadhi there is no private or public, no pure or polluted."

Record of Linji

The *Línjì lù* or *Rinzai roku* 臨濟錄 "Record of Linji" contains the compiled sayings of the Tang dynasty Chan master Linji Yixuan or Rinzai Gigen (d. 866 CE). In one famous example of so-called dharma combat, Linji uses the word *ganshijue* as an epithet, comparable to "You shithead!" (Aitken 1999: 139).

The master, taking the high seat in the hall, said, "On your lump of red flesh is a true man without rank who is always going in and out of the face of every one of you. Those who have not yet confirmed this, look, look!"

Then a monk came forward and asked, "What about the true man without rank?"

The master got down from his seat, seized the monk, and cried, "Speak, speak!"

The monk faltered.

Shoving him away, the master said, "The true man without rank—what kind of dried piece of shit is he!"

Then he returned to his quarters. (tr. Sasaki 2009: 4-5)

In an editorial note, Kirchner (2009: 131) says Ruth Fuller Sasaki originally translated Chinese *ganshijue* 乾屎橛 as "shit-wiping stick," saying that the term literally means a "cleaning-off-dung-stick," a smooth stick of bamboo used in place of toilet paper, with 乾 being the verb "to clean." However, Sasaki changed this to "dried piece of shit", following the interpretation of Iriya Yoshitaka (1989: 21), an authority on Tang-dynasty slang, that it means "stick-shaped piece of dung". A comparable usage occurs in the record of Song dynasty Chan master Dahui Zonggao, *Dahui Pujue Chanshi yulu* 大慧普覺禪師語錄, where the two characters 屎麼 form a noun-compound: "I say to [such stupid monks], 'You're biting on the dung-sticks of others. You're not even good dogs!'" Sasaki's other collaborator, Yanagida Seizan (1977: 52), interprets the term 乾屎橛 to mean "useless dung stick," explaining that 乾 does not have its usual meaning of "dry", but is synonymous with the homophonous 閑 "useless".

Thích Nhất Hạnh comments,

Scholars still aren't sure if the phrase "a stick of dry fecal matter" means the fecal matter dries and becomes very hard like a stick or that the monks there used sticks as toilet paper. The Zen master expressed his disappointment but at the same time used an image opposite of the one we have of the true person. We tend to think of a true person as pure and noble, someone extraordinary, so the Zen master uses this image of a dry piece of fecal matter or dried excrement on a stick to neutralize our view. If we have a set view about what our true person is, then that view has no more value than a piece of dry fecal matter. (2013: 97)

See also

- Xylopongium
- Toilets in Japan

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External links

- Shit Stick (<http://nerdcomics.com/mysterious/2010/06/02/shitstick/>), Mysterious Ways webcomic.

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