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CHOPSTICK ECONOMICS AND THE “MY HASHI” BOOM

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**The humble waribashi – disposable wooden, or literally ‘split-apart’ chopsticks.** Japan consumes a massive 25 billion sets of them every year – about 200 pairs per person. Earlier this year, in a move that was cheered by environmentalists, China’s latest 5 year plan slapped a 5 percent tax on their chopstick exports over concerns of deforestation. The tax along with the rising costs of raw wood and transportation because of higher oil prices have contributed to big price rises. A pair of waribashi that used to cost a little over 1 yen 4 months ago are now 1.5-1.7 yen. As some 97% of the throwaway chopsticks in Japan come from China, restaurants and convenience stores alike have been scrambling to find viable alternatives.

Stores are curtailing their once lavish distribution of waribashi with many convenience store chains now only providing waribashi to people who ask for them. Restaurants have started using reusable chopsticks as a main stay, whilst still stocking waribashi in case customers have trouble snaring elusive noodles with the plastic chopsticks. And some establishments have even begun to offer small discounts to people who bring their own chopsticks. The number of environmentally conscious people taking their own hashi along to work and to restaurants has increased dramatically and the movement has stirred something of a [‘My Hashi’](http://www.my-hashi.jp/index2.html)boom. Online shops offering everything from coloured to personally lettered or logo’ed hashi are flourishing.

Until about 20 years ago waribashi produced by domestic makers accounted for half of the market, but were taken over by the cheaper and higher quality Chinese counterparts. China’s annual production of disposable wooden chopsticks now exceeds 45 billion pairs — equivalent to about 25 million trees. The majority of Chinese chopsticks go to Japan and South Korea, with the remainder being used locally. Some in Japan fear we soon won’t even be able to get expensive chopsticks from China: Japanese newspapers Mainichi and Nihon Keizai have both reported that China could stop waribashi exports to Japan altogether by as early as 2008. Environmentalists see this as an opportunity for Japan to better manage its own forests, currently Japan produces only 500 million of its own waribashi, only a sixth of what they produced only 1 or 2 decades ago. Indeed much of the country is currently seen as over-forested with an estimated 80% of the Japanese forests requiring thinning. Can Japan make the changes needed?