

February 8, 2008

**PAGE ONE**

## Banned in Beijing: Chinese See Green Over Chopsticks

**Disposable Utensils  
Are Target of Protest;  
Angry Ape Weighs In**

By **JANE SPENCER**  
*February 8, 2008; Page A1*

BEIJING -- A dozen environmental activists stormed the cafeteria of Microsoft Corp.'s Chinese headquarters on a lunchtime mission to change the way 1.3 billion people pick up their noodles.

As startled diners looked up from their pork fried rice, Cao Yu, a 26-year-old activist dressed as an endangered orangutan spoke passionately about the ecological perils of China's most common eating utensil.



Cao Yu

"Disposable chopsticks are destroying China's forests," said Mr. Cao, whose voice was muffled by the 2-foot-high ape head he was wearing. "We must protest this pointless waste!"


Disposable chopsticks are under attack all across China.

Over the past three decades, the snap-apart sticks have become a staple of hectic city life, used by everyone from migrant workers eating fish balls at street stalls to busy professionals ordering takeout sashimi. China's disposable-chopstick factories turn out roughly 63 billion pairs each year.

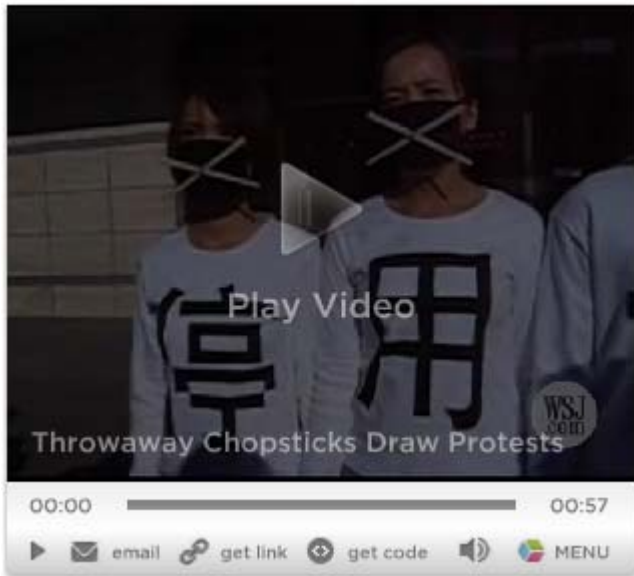
But to China's growing ranks of environmentalists, the splintery sticks have become a contemptible symbol of the nation's out-of-control consumption, as well as a threat to forests. The campaign to banish them from Chinese tables is pitting environmentalists against the nation's booming disposable-chopstick industry, which employs more than 100,000 people.

Since November, about 300 Beijing restaurants have vowed to replace disposable chopsticks with reusables. Big companies, including Microsoft, Intel Corp. and International Business Machines Corp., which already use reusables have invited Greenpeace to stage

**DOW JONES REPRINTS**

 This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit: [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com).

- [See a sample reprint in PDF format.](#)
- [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)



In China, environmental activists are waging a war against the use of wooden chopsticks that are ubiquitous in the country, saying they waste trees. In this Greenpeace China video, protestors gather outside a Beijing fast-food chain.

antichopstick rallies in their cafeterias. And chopsticks-bashing has become the cause du jour of some of China's pop stars.

"I use energy-saving lights at home, and I resolutely protest the use of disposable chopsticks," said Li Yuchun, the wildly popular winner of "Super Girl," China's answer to "American Idol," during a TV appearance last year. The spiky-haired Ms. Li, known for her rebellious tomboy style, was blasting chopsticks while promoting her single "Green," a song about forest protection.

The latest campaign was orchestrated by Greenpeace, which reins in its radical tactics in China to avoid confrontations with the government, with which it consults regularly. And while Beijing hasn't officially endorsed the effort, some government agencies are quietly

backing chopstick-related reforms.

### ON THE AIRWAVES

1

Chinese popstars Xiao Wei and Li Yuchun are crusading against disposable chopsticks. The singers teamed up for a duet about the environment called "Green" which was performed on MTV. [Listen to a clip of the song.](#)<sup>2</sup> *Relevant lyrics are below.*



"If you brush a line to the sky,  
paint a big tree in your mind.  
Together we face toward the sun,  
like forests we stand.  
If we can be the pouring rain  
rushing down into the lakes  
from the rivers to the sea, deep blue sea."

In December, China's Ministry of Commerce issued new guidelines urging restaurants to "reduce the use of disposable chopsticks." Beijing's Olympic committee is banning disposables during the Olympic Torch Relay and at a number of other events at this year's "green Olympics." In 2006, the government levied a 5% consumption tax on a range of environmentally unfriendly goods, including sport-utility vehicles and disposable chopsticks.

### Backlash

These efforts are triggering a backlash from China's chopstick industry, which says the activists are just a

bunch of ill-informed *Qi ren you tian*. The term refers to people from the ancient province of Qi who worried that the sky was falling.

"The chopstick industry is making a great contribution by creating jobs for poor people in the forestry regions," says Lian Guang, founder and president of the Wooden Chopsticks Trade Association in Heilongjiang Province, who owns a large factory producing disposable chopsticks, popsicle sticks and toothpicks. "We are battling a widespread misperception that we are purposely chopping down trees to make chopsticks." Mr. Lian says that disposable chopsticks are typically made from fast-growing woods like birch, poplar and bamboo that are not endangered. He says chopstick production is carefully managed by China's State Forestry Administration, and often uses leftover wood that is not suitable for other industries.

The subject has led to heated debate in the Chinese news media. "Are disposable chopsticks really so terrible?" the Beijing News ventured in a headline in November. The Southern Weekend newspaper published a dramatic tale on how the controversy is tearing families apart, with a

profile of a chopstick-industry executive whose daughter turned against him after learning in college about the environmental hazards of chopsticks.



Yuchun Li

"Dad, you're an evildoer," she told him, according the newspaper. "You've been in the chopstick industry for so many years, you are a criminal."

Throwaway chopsticks are actually a Japanese invention. They were uncommon in China until the early 1980s, when Japanese chopstick manufacturers began shifting production to northeastern China in order to cut costs. Since then, China has become the world's biggest disposable-chopstick producer, as domestic demand has boomed.

But to activists like Xiao Wei, the shaggy-haired lead singer of the rock group Catcher in the Rye, such arguments "are just a bunch of excuses."

**B.Y.O.C.**

Inspired by the environmental activism of his idol, U2's Bono, Mr. Xiao is helping Greenpeace China launch a Bring Your Own Chopstick (B.Y.O.C.) campaign by carrying his own chopsticks to restaurants, and urging his fans to do the same. On a recent afternoon, Mr. Xiao, clad in skinny jeans, a turquoise flowered shirt and rubber bracelets, showed off his latest accessory: a pair of elegant wooden chopsticks, which he stores in the breast pocket of his black velour blazer.

"They're ethically certified rosewood from Papua New Guinea," boasted Mr. Xiao as he sipped tea in Greenpeace's Beijing office, surrounded by furniture made of recycled cardboard.

But persuading hundreds of millions of Chinese to lay down their chopsticks is no small task. In a country where food safety scares are common, many Chinese think disposables are more sanitary than restaurant chopsticks that may not be washed thoroughly.

"Our customers demand them for hygiene reasons," says Tong Hong Liang, manager of a Beijing branch of Hong Zhuang Yuan, a Chinese fast-food chain that sells 30 kinds of medicinal congee, or rice porridge, including a variety that "aids urination and intellect," according to the English menu.

Many diners aren't sold on the idea of toting around personal chopsticks. "Yuck," says David Tang, a Hong Kong socialite and restaurateur. "How are we supposed to wash them afterward? With our saliva? Let's forget about the environment for a moment and just be practical." Greenpeace has enlisted Daniel Koo, a prominent Taiwanese industrial designer, to create the ideal pair of portable chopsticks. After months of research and focus-group discussions, Mr. Koo has developed a pair of collapsible chopsticks made of recycled stainless steel that can fit in a wallet.

### **A Way of Life**

B.Y.O.C. is becoming a way of life for young Chinese activists like Margaret Yang, a 28-year-old market researcher for Intel in Beijing. On a recent lunchtime visit to a Beijing branch of the Chinese hot-pot chain Little Sheep, Ms. Yang put her ideals into action. When the waitress approached with a fistful of disposable chopsticks, Ms. Yang flashed her personal chopsticks, sending her scurrying away.

After a lunch of lamb strips, mushrooms and bok choy, Ms. Yang illustrated the cleanup protocol, requesting a cup of hot water from the waitress to rinse her chopsticks in, before slipping them into the organic cotton sack she uses to carry them.

--Sue Feng, Zhou Yang, Juliet Ye and Miho Inada contributed to this article.

Write to Jane Spencer at [jane.spencer@wsj.com](mailto:jane.spencer@wsj.com)<sup>3</sup>

**URL for this article:**

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB120243065514952215.html>

**Hyperlinks in this Article:**

(1) <http://wsj.com>

(2) [/public/resources/documents/info-audioPlayer\\_image.html](/public/resources/documents/info-audioPlayer_image.html)

(3) <mailto:jane.spencer@wsj.com>

**Copyright 2008 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved**

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com).

## RELATED ARTICLES AND BLOGS

---

### Related Articles from the Online Journal

- [China Flexes Its Muscles](#)
- [China Releases Hong Kong Journalist After 3 Years in Jail](#)
- [China Focus May Stall Bush's Trade Plans](#)
- [Common Need for Energy Pulls China, India Closer](#)

### Blog Posts About This Topic

- [Bento item of the week: Make your own chopsticks kit, collapsible chopsticks](#) justbento.com
- [Chinese DIY Designers Fight Single-Use Chopsticks](#) psfk.com

**More related content** Powered by *Sphere* 