

BRICS in Africa: Chinese merchant gateways for ivory and rhino horns

From the Zambezi River to Joburg and Maputo

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Namibia has enjoyed a good reputation for its nature conservation, but there is evidence the illegal trade in wildlife products is taking off.

In the remote Zambezi region of Southern Africa, where Namibia shares international borders with Angola, Zambia, Botswana and Zimbabwe, geography and opportunity create ideal circumstances for ivory poachers.

With more than 9,100 residential elephants and 30,000 migrating elephants, according to 2013 data, elephant poaching was not a serious issue in the transborder area until recently. In 2010 and 2011, the numbers of elephant poached in isolated cases were four and six respectively. However, in 2012 the situation changed, with at least 78 elephants poached by international smugglers in one year. By November 2013, official records showed that at least 20 elephants had been poached since the start of the year, and 35 smuggling suspects had been arrested.

Namibia was the first African country to incorporate protection of the environment into its constitution and today more than 40 per cent of the country's surface area is under conservation management. Community-based conservancies are well integrated into the tourism industry. In the Zambezi region, formerly known as Caprivi, officials noticed a growth in wildlife trafficking from around 2010. 'That Chinese [man] you mentioned appears to be the most important middle player in it, although some other nationals have their channels as well,' said Shadrack Siloka, chief warden in the Ministry of Environment and Tourism (MET) office of Katima, the capital of Zambezi region.

During my first visit to the MET office two days previously, officials had been reluctant to release any information. However, but once I shared some results from my own undercover investigation in the Chinese community of Katima, they were prepared to admit they were investigating the same person.

According to Siloka, the change in the status quo was associated with hearing the name of Guo Yunhui, a Chinese businessman in Katima. In 2010, the MET heard from informers that Guo was collecting pythons and pangolins. In 2011, Guo was arrested for buying two ivory tusks from MET staff, fined 20,000 Namibian dollars and released. But informers and the MET allege that he is again at the centre of the Namibian ivory trade, and is using the same transportation and trading routes as his formal business. My undercover investigation supported this theory.

In his everyday persona, Guo Yunhui is the owner of Sweet Guest House, the only Chinese hostel in Katima. Most of its clientele are Africans, many from Zambia. Like many other Chinese, he has his main business and then informal business, and consequently rarely shows up at his guesthouse, which is managed on a daily basis by two local women.

As a Chinese journalist I was able to meet and socialise with many Chinese shop owners in Katima,

and to ask about Guo Yunhui and the trade in animal products. Zheng, a Chinese worker in a Chinese construction company near Katima, is a friend of Guo's family and he visits them frequently. According to Zheng, Guo is still engaged in his wildlife smuggling business.

Chen, a Chinese businessman in Rundu, also confirmed that Guo is active in the business, although he didn't characterise it as smuggling, but rather as helping Chinese in far-flung cities to acquire ivory souvenirs. Ou, a Chinese shop owner, claimed he lent Guo money when Guo was buying ivory in the past, and that Guo was conducting a lot of informal 'side business' of a dubious nature. However, Ou had not seen Guo for a long time.

Guo may not be the largest player in the Zambezi ivory market, according to Li, a leader in the Chinese-Fujian business communities of Namibia. Li referred to another Chinese man in Katima whom he said was found by police in early 2013 with more than 100kg of ivory, but MET said it did not know about the case. The low risk of getting caught, added to monetary incentives and the Chinese community's lack of support for the Namibian conservation effort, are all factors encouraging and enabling wildlife smuggling.

Katima is a central hub of trading between trans-border African smugglers and Chinese shop keepers and traders. Chinese shops dominate the main road in town, and unlike employees from Chinese state-owned companies who are driven by state policy, these Chinese shop owners are usually self-driven immigrants simply looking for business space and an opportunity to make money.

Most of the time they are from second or third-tier cities or small towns in China where services are poor, and consequently they are characterized by low educational achievements and poor foreign language skills. Outside China, even the Chinese government does not have clear statistics about them, not to mention effective management.

My investigation indicated the majority of them are from Fujian province, including the ivory smuggler Guo Yunhui. Many of the shop owners are linked to the ivory trade in the guise of buying and selling of ivory souvenirs and artefacts for export and sale to tourists. Because of the widely perceived permissibility of the small 'souvenir' trade in ivory products, the Chinese community members are reluctant to blow the whistle on the larger ivory smugglers, and alleged involvement by Chinese diplomats themselves, even though they are aware that these individuals are ruining the reputation of Chinese businesspeople more generally in Africa.

Many Chinese shun the easy money to be made by ivory and rhino horn smuggling because they know it is wrong and illegal. But relations with host country law enforcement and conservation officers remain too weak for them to break their false loyalty to other Chinese nationals, even when they are indulging in criminal behaviour.

In Katima, it is common for Chinese people to be approached by African ivory sellers, mostly Zambians. Ou said in the 10 years he has lived in Zambezi he has been approached many times by sellers who tell him how high the profit is if he would transport ivory from Namibia to China.

This is confirmed by the MET, who recorded that the price Guo paid to the sellers of ivory was 300 Namibian dollars per kilo, whereas in Asia the selling price is at least 3 000 US dollars per kilo. In Oshikango, another border town west of Katima, I spoke to Yang, a shop owner in Chinatown. 'Zambians used to come to our Chinatown with boxes full of ivory, and lots of Chinese shop owners have bought them,' he said. He claimed to have taken small amounts of ivory back to China many times, and they were never found by customs.

Yang also said he had bought some rhino horn powder, but did not want to give further details 'I

know there are people smuggling full rhino horns back to China, but you are being too curious. Don't ask too much about such things,' he said.

'In 2012 the amount of ivory we captured was 70 per cent to 80 per cent of the amount of ivory taken from poached elephants in Namibia,' said Morgan Saisai, the chief control officer of MET in Katima. According to MET officials, the ivory on the Zambezi market is not only from local sources, but is being transported from surrounding countries. The criminal groups they have apprehended included Zambians, Congolese and Zimbabweans working with Namibians.

'Zambia is where ivory and smugglers are most likely to come into Namibia,' said Oswald Rall, a former policeman still living in the region. Katima is where it is easiest for the Chinese people to buy ivory from Zambians. Infrastructure is rapidly improving, at least because of Chinese road construction projects. Truck routes from Walvis Bay on the coast to Rundu and Katima, then on to Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo, are relatively efficient and fast.

Using trucks and networks for transporting other goods businesses, ivory is transported to areas with the highest densities of Chinese. It is placed in the retail markets, and becomes small souvenirs for Chinese people to carry home to China in their luggage.

What is most worrying for the conservation of elephants is that the ivory trade is just one of a number of illegal behaviours which are viewed as normal and far from wrong among the Chinese residents. Eager to make personal gains, many do not care whether it is legal or not as long as punishment is avoidable. In such a context, buying small amounts of 'souvenir' ivory is not considered smuggling, so that a large ivory market is formed by many individuals buying small retail amounts which collectively represent a large amount wholesale. According to the Chinese who take home souvenirs, the chance of ivory being discovered by airport customs in Namibia or China is very low and even when it is found, the consequences are not severe.

During this investigation, many Chinese expressed the view that they wished the Chinese immigrant communities could be better managed in order to reduce the reputational damage being done to all Chinese people in Africa by the activities of just a few. This view is made more apposite as long as the small traders remain beyond the reach of the law, and are thus tempted to join the illegal trade.

While ivory trade in Namibia is not yet as large as in other African countries like Mozambique, it is growing. There is evidence that the scale of trade is more than a few Chinese families buying from Africans across the border and reselling small souvenirs to other Chinese people. In fact, this characterisation indicates a dangerous complacency, particularly as the evidence shows that much bigger volumes are trading through these networks - and they include wildlife products from other endangered species besides elephants.

China is responsible for an estimated 70 percent of the world trade in elephant tusk ivory, and research by the international wildlife trade monitoring organisation traffic indicates that nearly 80 percent of reported illegal rhino horn seizures in Asia between 2009 and late last year happened in China. For the first time, journalists from mainland China worked with African journalists on an undercover investigation into the Chinese role in the ivory and rhino horns market in South Africa and Mozambique.

Wildlife trafficking syndicates brazenly sell rhino horn and ivory at Chinese markets in Southern Africa's capital cities, in the face of global attempts to crack down on the illicit trade in endangered species. Who are the people involved, and how do they go about buying these illegal products? Until it was closed, the Bruma Lake flea market in eastern Johannesburg and nearby New Chinatown have been a hub of the illicit trade in rhino horns and ivory in South Africa. Transactions between African

sellers and Asian buyers occurred relatively openly on a daily basis.

From 9am to 5pm, sellers hung around the entrance to the Bruma flea market and eagerly surround Chinese people as they approach. 'What are you looking for? Do you want xiangya? I have,' said Mike, a seller who hails from the Democratic Republic of Congo. 'Do you have xiniujiang?' we asked. Xiangya is the Chinese term for ivory, xiniujiang for rhino horns, and it is clear Mike, as well as many other shop owners, is familiar with the terms. 'Xiniujiang... anytime but now. If you come back next month, maybe I could help you get some. Now it is impossible,' said Mike.

He opened a door which is covered by a hanged blanket, showed us into a secret room near his craft shop where he has a stock of worked ivory products: small sculptures of elephants, chopsticks, necklaces, bracelets. The price is not too expensive, starting at \$20 a piece. Matt, a Zimbabwean who works in Mike's craft shop, said most of the rhino horns and ivory they are selling comes from his home country. He explained how he imports it: 'There is a river that divides the two countries and we find a part where the water is not too deep and there is almost no security patrolling. We take off our clothes and carry the stuff on our shoulders across the river.' His biggest concern was crocodiles in some parts of the Limpopo River.

Other shop owners in the market called out to us with offers of xiangya and xiniujiang. 'Your Chinese friends may find it hard to get rhino horns, but we are Africans, we know how,' said Ernest, another shop owner from the Congo,

Along Derrick Avenue in New Chinatown, home to most of Johannesburg's recent Chinese immigrants, we spoke to Gong, a taxi driver whose business card includes various services related to immigration, the embassy and police. 'It is easy to buy ivory and I could help you tell which ones are fake — I have been buying it for many years,' he says.

Ivory is just one of the businesses Gong has engaged in since he immigrated to South Africa six years ago. Like most Chinese in the New Chinatown community, he did not have a good educational background and barely speaks English. He used to assist a friend running a brothel until police closed it down.

However, he does not think it is a good idea for a visitor to purchase rhino horns here because it has become too risky. 'Nowadays it is more dangerous than drugs,' he said. 'Even if I could get it for you, I would not take the risk of selling it to an outsider like you rather than known partners. Ivory and rhino horns are like weed [dagga] and heroine.'

Gong says fewer Chinese are directly involved in smuggling rhino horn these days, although some still buy from Vietnamese traffickers. Consumers would be better advised to buy horn in China, where he could introduce us to sellers, he adds. China accounted for an estimated two-thirds of the number and weight of horns seized in Asia between 2009 and September 2012, according to figures collated by Traffic.

Many employees of Chinese companies in South Africa avoid New Chinatown, so named to distinguish it from the original Chinatown in central Johannesburg, because of its reputation for being involved with smuggling and other dangerous business. 'I would usually not go to the New Chinatown area. There is a mix of good people and various criminals,' says Zhang Jinguo, the head of the Chinese Construction Bank in Johannesburg.

Among the Chinese residents of Johannesburg, it is common knowledge that the Chinese buy ivory and rhino horn much more often in Maputo, capital city of neighbouring Mozambique. The Saturday market at Praça 25 de Junho in Maputo is the main buying site for employees of Chinese companies

who are not well educated and have unskilled jobs. 'The products are unique and cheap,' says Chen, a frequent Chinese buyer in Maputo who works for a Chinese construction company.

At the Saturday market, Kai, a 29-year-old working for a Chinese telecommunications company, is shooting a video to send to his families in China. 'Hello dears, look where I am. This is the most famous ivory market here, I will bring you some good stuff,' he says.

Shop owners like Adam are visibly excited when they see a group of Chinese people approaching. 'Come, we have heimu and xiangya,' he says. He says the Chinese are generally interested in buying two things in Mozambique: heimu, which is a black wood, and xiangya, namely ivory.

He also offers rhino horns at \$15,000 a kilogram, though he says he does not keep it in the marketplace because it is too expensive. He opens a big box filled with various ivory products and displays them openly. However, when some Chinese customers lift the ivory too high he asks them to put them down, in case the police notice and make trouble.

Dong, an employee of a Chinese national oil company who has been in Mozambique for almost four years, is browsing through the market with three colleagues. He is mostly interested in buying bracelets made of black wood, animal horns and ivory. After bargaining, he buys two ivory bracelets for about \$50 and his colleague buys two as well. 'We will need to take them apart and hide the pieces in the corners of our luggage. Then even if customs finds some we can still make them up into bracelets again in China,' Dong advises his less-experienced colleague.

As Dong's group walks away, a nearby shop owner reminds them to hide their ivory bracelets inside their pockets, because if the police see them they will ask for money to 'solve the problem'. Policemen are patrolling the market all the time, but they seem more interested in asking foreigners for their passports and money than finding ivory.

Unlike the Saturday 'ivory market', the craft market on nearby Mao Tse Tung avenue opens every day. Chen, who has worked for a Maputo-based Chinese construction company for the past two years, is going back home in December and needs to stock up on souvenirs for friends and families. He buys two pairs of ivory chopsticks, and says even though they may be confiscated by customs he can afford the loss. 'Sometimes they pass and these things are cheap enough to be taken away if we have bad luck,' he says.

A colleague recently bought a large ivory sculpture and when it was found by customs officers in Mozambique he paid \$300 to get it through. No one at customs in Beijing found it, Chen says. He has a good collection of ivory products, and believes they can be an investment. 'When you have enough money, you display them in your house. When you need money, you can always sell them,' he says.

Most of the Chinese buyers know where the ivory comes from, but don't care about the slaughter of elephants. Kai, one of the buyers of ivory bracelets, sums up their feeling when he admits that he did not feel guilty about buying ivory products even though he knows how the sellers get it. However, there are some Chinese who refuse to buy into the market. 'These items are art from killing,' says Xu, a friend and colleague of Kai. But he indicates that there are few Chinese like him.

The Chinese embassy in Pretoria challenged this investigation in a letter published by the Mail & Guardian. Pan Peng, the embassy's press counsellor, wrote: 'The Chinese government attaches great importance to the protection of wildlife and has promulgated laws and regulations in this concern, established a multi-sectoral joint law-enforcement mechanism, and taken various measures to protect wildlife and raise public awareness.' As a signatory to the Convention on International Trade

in Endangered Species (CITES) since 1981, China has long been committed to co-operation with South Africa on wildlife protection, Peng said.

Hongxiang Huang and Oxpeckers

P.S.

* Pambazuka. 2014-04-10, Issue 673:

<http://pambazuka.org/en/category/features/91299>

* Chinese journalist and recent Oxpeckers fellow Hongxiang Huang, along with other journalists who chose not to be named, travelled to smuggling hotspots across Southern Africa, including capital cities and the Zambezi border region where five Southern African countries intersect to investigate the Chinese connection. The investigation by the Oxpeckers center of investigative environmental journalists was supported by the Wits China-Africa reporting programme and the forum of African investigative reporters. Some names have not been divulged because of the sensitive nature of this investigation.

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