

CHINESE IVORY SMUGGLERS IN AFRICA

By Huang Hongxiang

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Dong has been sent to Mozambique by his employer, a Chinese communications company. At a busy weekly market he uses his phone to record a message of congratulations for a relative back home who is getting married, before buying several ivory bracelets: "Look, this is the biggest ivory market in Maputo. I'll find some good stuff for you."

The traders sell a range of crafts – paintings, carvings, cabinets, stone jewellery. But for Chinese shoppers, it's just 'the ivory market'.

"What are you looking for? Ivory? Ebony? We've got it, cheap!" The sellers are particularly happy to see Chinese customers and have learned the Chinese words needed to attract them. Cardboard boxes by their stalls are full of ivory products, only to be shown to Chinese shoppers. Ebony, a precious and slow-growing hardwood, is another popular choice with the Chinese.

Li, an employee of a Chinese oil company, has lived here for two years. He explains to newly-arrived colleagues how to get ivory bead bracelets back home.



Crafts market in Maputo.

“Cut the string and hide the beads in your luggage, then restring it when you get back – it’s still the same bracelet.”

Chen, a construction company employee, has more advice: “Just don’t take more than a kilogram or two at one time. You won’t have any trouble leaving here and if the customs in China find it you just have to hand it over – it’s cheap to buy here anyway.” He’s been working here for a year and visits the market every week, choosing the best products. He showed me his collection of bracelets, chopsticks, and stamps.

The growth of the illegal trade in ivory and the involvement of Chinese citizens is a cause of major concern both internationally and in China. In late October, customs officers in Xiamen, a city in south east China, seized a 12-tonne shipment of ivory worth 600 million yuan – the biggest ivory bust in Chinese history. Days later 1.8 tonnes of ivory were found in the Tanzanian home of a Chinese man.

The most common way in which Chinese get involved in the ivory trade in Africa is as souvenir hunters, such as Dong, Li and Chen. Employees sent here by their companies, migrants running small shops – many of them take small quantities of ivory on trips home. Ivory is cheap here, a bracelet might cost the equivalent of four or five hundred yuan, but would sell for up to 10,000 yuan on the black market in China. In Asia, a kilogram of ivory could cost up to US\$3,000, but hunters in impoverished areas of Africa will sell it for about 300 yuan, and it still won’t be too expensive by the time it reaches Beijing.

It’s not just the huge profits that attract customers, they also know the risks are low. “In theory legitimate ivory products can be sold locally, they just can’t be exported,” says Baodai, an official at Quirimbas National Park in the north of the country.

Mozambique’s laws on ivory are weak, and the situation is worsened by rampant corruption. Legally each type of animal has a value, for example an elephant is worth about US\$4 million. Poachers who are caught have to pay that value in compensation, but are freed in order to get the money and are only jailed if they can’t pay. And in reality poachers are rarely caught and those who are easily slip through the net. Corruption makes a mockery of the rules on the sale and export of ivory.

Zhu works at the airport: “Give the customs people 2,000 metical (400 yuan) and they won’t check your luggage.” As long as you’re happy to spend a little on bribes at the airport, he says, there’s no need to worry.

The souvenir hunters might only smuggle a little at a time, but the huge numbers of Chinese people travelling



Ivory and ebony clandestinely on offer for Chinese shoppers.

to Africa make for a huge market. In addition, there is another class of smuggler altogether.

The north of Mozambique is a major centre for elephant poaching. The region’s main port, Pemba, is home to many Chinese businessmen, mostly in the timber trade – shipping containers of local wood back home to China. According to an Environmental Investigation Agency study in 2011, many of the Chinese timber firms are involved in smuggling. They do not fell timber themselves, but buy it cheaply from locals, asking no questions about whether or not it has been cut legally, then ship it back home for sale. They exist in a grey zone, taking advantage of regulatory and customs loopholes, and often they are also involved in other shady businesses.

In 2011, 126 tusks were found in a container of timber belonging to a Chinese company, Tianhe, along with one rhino horn and some pangolin scales. The firm was ordered to pay its local partner MITI US\$3.5 million, and the case was closed in August 2013.

Dewa, a MITI official, insisted in the local media that his company had nothing to do with their Chinese partner’s ivory smuggling. He expressed anger: “We might not have any evidence, but we know it’s not just the one

company that's doing this. The Chinese are all at it!" Most of the port's Chinese traders exist in a grey area and know only too well how to work within a corrupt system.

On a visit to a local Chinese timber firm I saw two uniformed Mozambicans watching Chinese soap operas on the office television.

"One is a customs officer, the other's with the police. In theory they're here to inspect the containers as we load them, but they just come for the bribes and to watch television," explains a company employee, smiling.

"Tianhe got caught as they failed to pay enough bribes, that was a false economy," says Zhou, manager of another large Chinese timber firm. He claims his company is the only clean Chinese firm locally, but it too has been involved in multiple cases of timber smuggling, with local media referring to the firm as a repeat offender.

Higher up the chain there is a small number of more powerful smugglers. In Kenya an official with a Chinese firm told me that "a lot of ivory is moved via 'diplomatic channels', not by us ordinary folk."

He was referring to corrupt government officials who take advantage of their diplomatic flights to avoid customs and smuggle ivory. These are all high-ranking figures, and so it is rare for there to be any arrests.

In June 2013, Xinhua's English edition reported that a Chinese diplomat and a military officer had been detained in Zambia on suspicion of smuggling 27 kg of ivory worth US\$140,000. But there were no details on who these people actually were.

When I asked the Chinese embassy in Mozambique about this, the response was that "the vast majority of Chinese citizens obey Mozambique's laws, but it is possible that certain individuals trade in illegal ivory. The embassy will continue its education efforts."