

A RETURN TO

MACAU

GAMBLING SUPPLANTS IVORY AS ISLAND'S LURE



Esmond Martin, a geographer, specialises in monitoring the trade



in wild animal products, especially rhino horn and elephant ivory. Recently he has been

examining the expanding commerce in mammoth ivory tusks, many of which are tens of thousands of years old. He and his wife, **Chryssee Martin**, have carried out research in Russia, where most of these tusks originate, and have worked in China, western Europe and the United States.

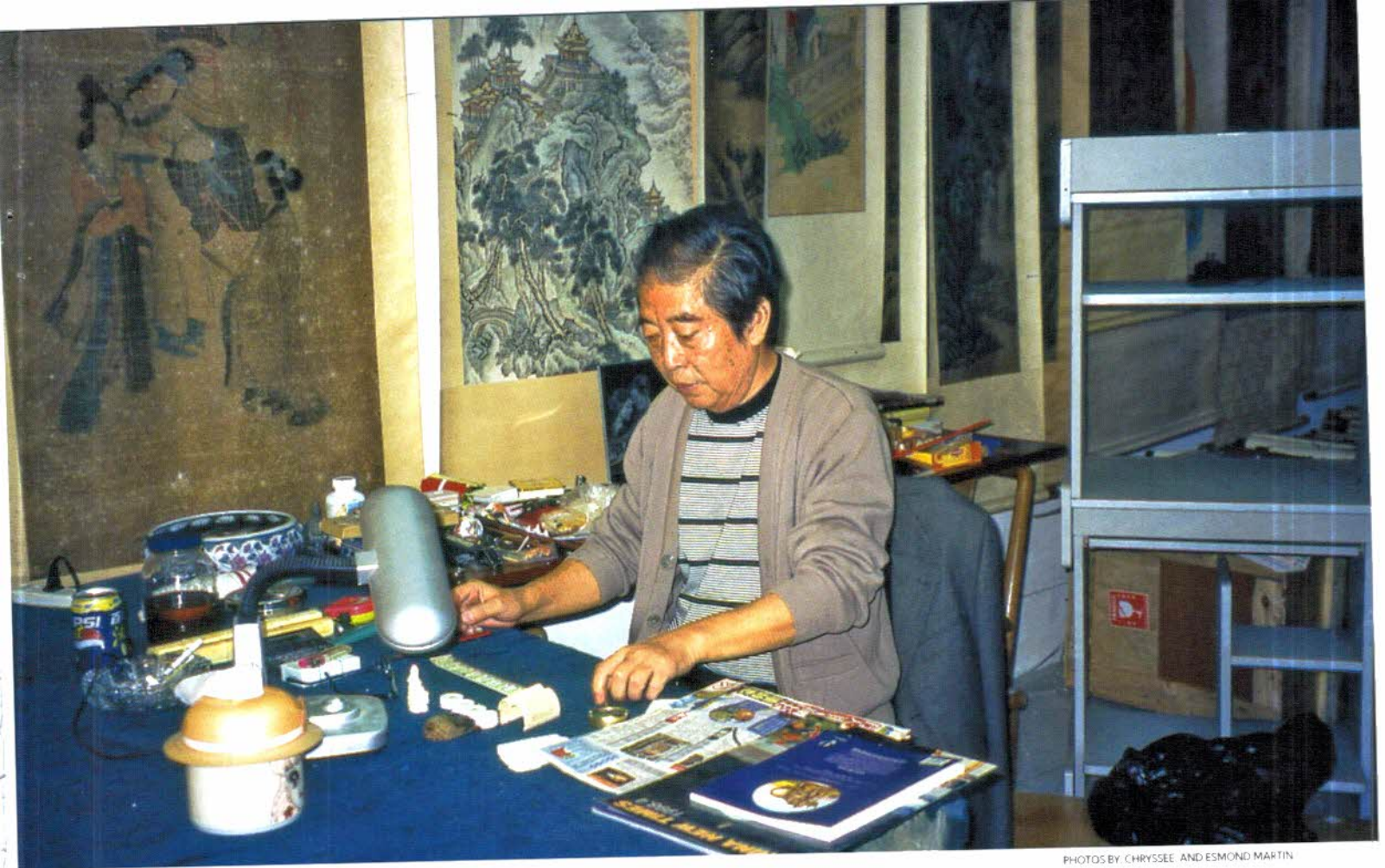
We've been carrying out research on rhino horn and elephant ivory products since the late 1970s. Three and a half decades ago was our first survey in Macau, when it was then a tiny, 16 square kilometer, quiet backwater settlement of only 270,000 in the Pearl River Delta, which China had given to the Portuguese in 1557 as a reward for their role in putting down the pirates in the South China Seas. Nevertheless, Macau in 1979 was well known for its attractive tree-lined boulevards and its beautiful red and ochre-coloured Portuguese villas. Macau's reputation at the time was based on its Grand Prix, fireworks and textile factories, the ruins of

Sao Paulo, Triad gangsters, a few casinos, the oldest European library in the Far East, many prostitutes, gold smugglers and a magnificent old Portuguese theatre presenting striptease shows with full nudity (the girls were imported from Europe), ogled by South Korean and mainland Chinese patrons. We found Macau quaint, fascinating and a place whose wildlife commerce was hard to uncover.

We collected little information on the ivory trade in 1979. There were only about 20 ivory artisans practicing their craft in Macao. The rhino commodity trade,

Only the grand staircase and splendid facade remain of the Sao Paulo cathedral. Designed between 1620 and 1627 by a Jesuit priest, the facade stone masonry carved by exiled Japanese catholics depicts the history of Christianity in Asia with decorative Japanese chrysanthemums on the four colonnaded tiers. Most of the antique shops selling ivory are on the side streets around Sao Paulo.





PHOTOS BY CHRYSSEE AND ESMOND MARTIN

In early 2004 when we took this photo of the ivory carver Heong Ka Wa, he still had a few apprentices, but 10 years later none continued the profession and Heong Ka Wa had retired.

however, was significant. We surveyed seven traditional Chinese medicine shops selling rhino horn that originated from Africa; the average retail price per kg was \$4,127, a low price for Asia. We also discovered five such shops offering rhino skin, most likely from South Africa, averaging \$442 per kg retail. The Macau retail shop owners purchased their products from wholesalers in Hong Kong and Guangzhou. Retail prices were cheaper in Macau than in Hong Kong, partly because rents and salaries were much lower.

We next visited Macau in early 1986, when it had briefly become one of the most important ivory manufacturing centres in all of Asia. This was due to its huge neighbour, Hong Kong, having clamped down on imports of tusks from dubious sources without proper CITES documentation. Macau had not yet implemented restrictions. Traders, mostly from Hong Kong, decided to take advantage of the situation. Consequently, Macau's ivory imports rose from

only 294 kg in 1981 to 71,005 kg in 1986. Major players in the ivory business in Hong Kong set up ivory factories in Macau or expanded those already there in the early and mid-1980s. We carried out extensive interviews with managers of seven of the factories and many of their 60 to 80 artisans. There were perhaps 20 more artisans in other ivory factories. We also discussed the ivory business with managers and salespeople in the larger retail shops.

The difficulty we have usually is where to go to write down the large amount of information we collect orally. We never use tape recorders nor hidden cameras, as we think these practices are unethical, and if found out in some countries, especially non-democratic ones, we could be arrested. Instead, we keep the information in our heads from a specific factory or shop until we can find a suitable place to write down the data. In Macau, which has a plethora of 17th-century Baroque churches, we sat in their pews to write

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ABOVE: On our first visit to Macau in 1972, before we had embarked on wildlife trade research, there was little traffic on the streets. Most of the cars were old models; bicycles and rickshaws were regularly used by shoppers.

BELOW: In 1972 fishing was a major economic resource, and many fishermen lived on traditional craft.

up our notes. In other cities, we use restrooms that don't have surveillance cameras, sip endless cups of espresso in cafes, and sit on park benches, sofas in shoe shops and sometimes the steps in alleyways. At the end of our day, we transcribe our notes with details in our hotel room.

Almost everywhere we have influential friends who can help us if we have problems with local government officials or wildlife traders. We also hire excellent interpreters who smooth over misunderstandings and who often know the authorities and some shopkeepers.

In 1986, after extensive interviewing, we ran into trouble in Macau. Our good friend, Manuel Teixeira, an old bearded Portuguese priest and scholar of the Portuguese empire who lived

almost alone in the huge 18th-century Seminario Sao Jose, could not help us because of the timing of an irate phone call around midnight which we received in our hotel room. It was from a representative of one of the world's biggest ivory traders in the world. He threatened us with dire consequences if we did not leave Macau the following morning. He had found out that we had entered his factory without his permission and had interviewed members of his staff. He ordered us to return to Hong Kong on the first ferry in the morning and to go report to his "big boss" in Hong Kong. We disregarded his aggressive phone call and returned to Hong Kong according to our own schedule. We called the "big boss", and he invited us for dinner, an invitation we readily accepted. We have found it best to get to know traders in order to understand their business methods.

What had especially irritated many of the ivory dealers in Macau was that we had learned that the main purpose of the newly opened ivory factories was to circumvent CITES restrictions in Hong Kong on the import of tusks that had dubious origins. The Portuguese officials had not yet implemented a ban on them. Crafting various items from that ivory in Macau, traders could





The streets are now very crowded with millions of mainland Chinese visitors walking to and from the historical sites, but they rarely show any interest in the shops displaying ivory carvings and are in Macau mainly to gamble in the casinos.

legally send them to Hong Kong for sale because although non-documented raw ivory was not allowed to come into Hong Kong, worked ivory items were permitted.

Soon after we completed our research in Macau, the CITES Macau Management Authority took action against this practice and announced that from 22 February 1986 the Authority would fully conform with CITES regulations on the import of raw tusks. This devastated the Macau ivory trade, and within a year several of the ivory factories closed down, due to their lack of legal raw ivory. Some of their owners transferred their artisans to the United Arab Emirates to work on ivory there, but this move was short-lived as the United Arab Emirates closed down all ivory factories by late 1989.

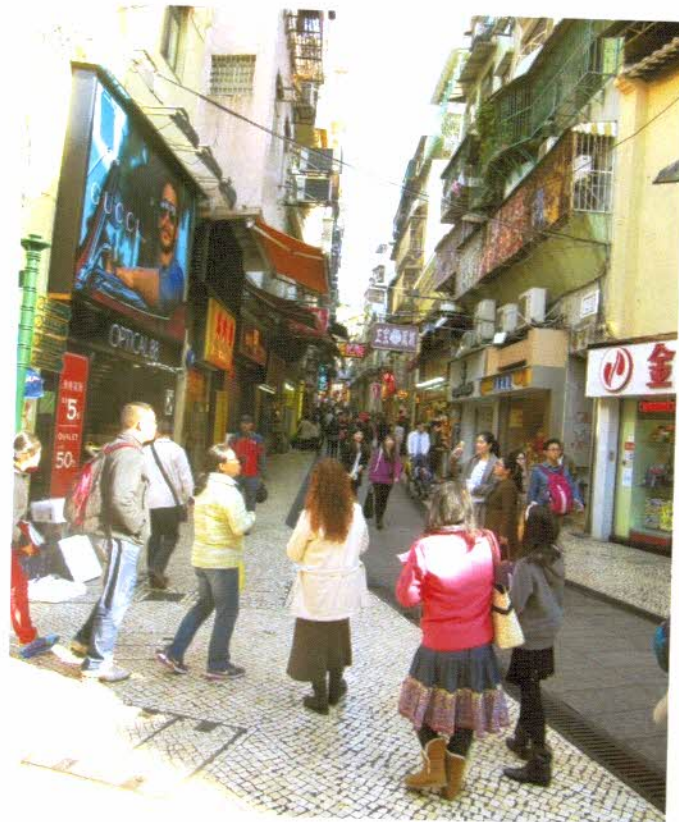
In 2004 when we again went to Macau to carry out further research, we found only one ivory craftsman still working. He was Heong Ka Wa, an older man who had come to Macau in 1994 to be with his family. He was spending his time teaching students how to carve little figurines and name seals. He had some of his own carvings for sale in his little workshop; there were 11 gift shops in Macau selling ivory items and nine antique shops with several very good pieces. We counted a total 1,718 ivory items, the most common of

which were figurines, bangles and pendants. Most were new pieces, but there were at least 289 old items. The main buyers were American, European, Japanese and Taiwanese tourists, not yet mainland Chinese.

We did not carry out research in Macau again until early 2015, and we were amazed by all the development. In 1999, the Portuguese had handed over their sovereignty to the mainland Chinese government, and its status had become a Special Administration Region of the People's Republic of China. However, it was not until 2001 that the issuing of gaming licenses was liberalised in Macau. Casino owners from Las Vegas began building big casinos in Macau. Around this time, also, the mainland government made it much easier for mainlanders to visit Macau, and in 2013, 18.6 million mainlanders came to Macau, almost all to gamble since gambling is not allowed on the mainland nor in Hong Kong. In 1980 there had been only four casinos, but by 2013 there were 35. These casinos are extremely ornate, often garish, with extensive shopping arcades attached where one can buy the same types of luxury items that one sees in Hong Kong or Paris. They do not fit in well with the elegant Portuguese colonial architecture, but fortunately most of them are located on a new strip of land,



PHOTOS BY CHRYSSEE AND ESMOND MARTIN



Cotai, reclaimed from the sea adjoining Taipa and Coloane islands.

Astoundingly, the gross gambling revenue (excluding gratuities to staff) was \$45 billion in 2013, much higher than that of Las Vegas. This has made Macau's 620,000 inhabitants some of the richest people in the world: the per capita income was \$87,000 in 2013. Although the money is not evenly distributed, the government gives generous cash allowances to every man, woman and child. The rich are really rich and many show off their wealth ostentatiously. When we went to the New Yaohan Department Store, we saw on the walls above racks of couturier clothing paintings by Monet, Vlaminick, Buffet and Kuhnert (the German artist noted

for his superb oil paintings of wild animals that he painted in Tanganyika in the early 1900s). We went to the management offices on the top floor to ask about them. The department store's owner had recently started collecting them, and is a major buyer at international auctions. We were assured that all the paintings are original works of art and that they are his personal collection. He decided to display them here because he has so many and there is ample space to show them off.

How Macau has changed from the early 1970s! Macau has regained all the wealth and more that it had during Portugal's Golden Age in Asia. Today its booming economy is driven by the many millions of Chinese mainlanders drawn there for gambling and, to a much lesser extent, for shopping. In mainland China and Hong Kong, over 90% of the ivory buyers are mainland Chinese, and one might have expected the ivory business to flourish again in Macau. Just before going to Macau in 2015, we had surveyed 72 retail shops with 30,000 ivory items for sale in Hong Kong, but in Macau there has been a sharp decrease in the ivory trade.

Heong Ka Wa has retired, and his workshop and retail outlet are closed. We were told that there's not a single ivory craftsman working fulltime now. Only a few can be found to make repairs on ivory-inlaid furniture or to

TOP LEFT: Traditional Chinese medicine shops still attract large numbers of clients and some, like this one, have modernised premises. However, rhino horn, used for lowering fever, is no longer available.

TOP RIGHT: While there are still many side streets in the centre of Macau where old buildings remain, on the main avenues most of the traditional shops have given way to modern office buildings and malls.

BELOW: A local artist expresses his affection for elephants by painting one on a cement wall.





AS ELSEWHERE, DURING OUR VISITS TO MACAU FROM 1979 TO 2015, WE NEVER KNEW TO WHAT EXTENT WE COULD CARRY ON COLLECTING INFORMATION FROM CERTAIN IVORY FACTORY OWNERS, DISHONEST IVORY TRADERS AND SMUGGLERS WITHOUT BEING THREATENED, BEATEN UP OR ARRESTED.

The Senado is the epitome of Portuguese neo-classical architecture. Surrounded by other 18th-century, pastel-coloured buildings, this square is the centre for public events, and at Christmas time the decorations are fabulous.

mend figurines. We found just 22 retail establishments, of which 17 were antique shops, selling only 327 ivory items. Figurines and small statues made up 40% of the total, jewellery another 40%, and chopsticks 3%; the remaining objects were combs, ear picks and other personal items. The retail prices for name seals and pendants were almost a 100% more than in Hong Kong, probably because rent for shops and salaries for salespeople have risen more sharply in Macau than in Hong Kong during the past few years. Prices for figurines and bangles were, however, roughly the same as in Hong Kong. Most Chinese mainlanders and

people from Hong Kong who visit Macau are not interested in ivory but mainly in the gambling. The number of ivory items displayed for retail sale in Macau has declined by 81% since 2004. The demand is too limited to be profitable, and the vendors are not replacing their stocks.

As elsewhere, during our visits to Macau from 1979 to 2015, we never knew to what extent we could carry on collecting information from certain ivory factory owners, dishonest ivory traders and smugglers without being threatened, beaten up or arrested. Few people in the ivory business, even those fully compliant with laws, wish to have their premises, carvers, sales employees, or items on display photographed, and that has sometimes caused more problems than our interviews. Usually we don't follow up our investigations in the same city more often than once every four years, and we have been fortunate in that most cases where we are recognized, we continue to be able to discuss ivory issues and gather further information. Only once have we been picked up by police and locked up, and that had nothing to do with ivory trade, but when we were studying the dhow trade of the western Indian Ocean.

We would like to thank Save the Elephants for supporting our research in Macau in 2015. ●