



# THE IVORY TRADE OF LAOS: NOW THE FASTEST GROWING IN THE WORLD

LUCY VIGNE and ESMOND MARTIN







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SAVE THE ELEPHANTS  
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Kenya

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Front cover:

In Laos, the capital Vientiane had the largest number of ivory items for sale.

Title page:

These pendants are typical of items preferred by Chinese buyers of ivory in Laos.

Back cover:

Vendors selling ivory in Laos usually did not appreciate the displays in their shops being photographed.

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# Contents

07

## Executive summary

09

## Introduction to the ivory trade in Laos

09 *History*

11 *Background*

13 *Legislation*

15 *Economy*

17 *Past studies*

19 *Methodology for fieldwork in late 2016*

21

## Results of the survey

21 *Sources and wholesale prices of raw ivory in 2016*

27 *Ivory carving in 2016*

33 *Retail outlets selling worked ivory in late 2016*

33 *Vientiane*

33 *History and background*

34 *Retail outlets, ivory items for sale and prices*

37 *Customers and vendors*

41 *Dansavanh Nam Ngum Resort*

41 *History and background*

42 *Retail outlets, ivory items for sale and prices*

43 *Customers and vendors*

44 *Savannakhet*

45 *Ivory in Pakse*

47 *Luang Prabang*

47 *History and background*

48 *Retail outlets, ivory items for sale and prices*

50 *Customers and vendors*

54 *Ivory in Oudom Xay*

55	<i>Ivory in Luang Nam Tha</i>
56	<i>Boten</i>
58	<i>Huay Xai</i>
59	<i>Kings Romans</i>
59	History and background
61	Retail outlets, ivory items for sale and prices
63	Customers and vendors
65	<i>Substitutes and alternatives to ivory in Laos</i>

## **69**

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### **Discussion**

69	<i>Trends in the ivory trade in Laos</i>
73	<i>Price trends for raw and worked ivory over time and space in Laos</i>
75	<i>Prices in Laos compared with China, Vietnam and Sudan</i>

## **77**

---

### **Conclusion**

## **78**

---

### **References**

## **80**

---

### **Acknowledgements**

## **81**

---

### **Tables**





*Displays of newly processed ivory beads, bangles and pendants dominate the items in shops selling ivory.*



# Executive summary

- From 2013 to 2016, Laos's retail ivory market has expanded more rapidly than in any other country surveyed recently.
- Laos has not been conforming with CITES regulations that prohibit the import and export of ivory. Since joining CITES in 2004, only one ivory seizure into Laos has been reported to the Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS).
- Almost no arrests, let alone prosecutions and punishments, have been made of smugglers with ivory coming in or out of the country.
- Most worked ivory for sale in Laos originates from elephants poached in Africa.
- Ivory has also been entering Laos illegally from Thailand, as Thai traders have been offloading their ivory following the imposition of much stricter regulations there.
- In late 2013 the average wholesale price of raw ivory sold by Lao traders peaked at about USD 2,000/kg.
- By late 2016, the average wholesale price of raw ivory in Laos had declined to USD 714/kg, in line with prices elsewhere in the region. This price was much higher than in African countries, such as Sudan (Omdurman/Khartoum), where the average wholesale price of ivory was USD 279/kg in early 2017. This price differential is due to the extra expenses incurred in transport and bribes to government officials on the long journey to Asia.
- In Laos, the decline in the wholesale price of raw ivory between 2013 and 2016, as elsewhere in the region, was mainly due to the slowdown in China's economy, that resulted in an oversupply of illegal ivory, relative to demand.
- Ivory items seen for sale in Laos are carved or machine-processed in Vietnam by Vietnamese and smuggled into Laos for sale, or are processed by Chinese traders in Laos on new computer-driven machines. Ivory carving by Lao people is insignificant.
- In Laos, the survey found 81 retail outlets with ivory on view for retail sale, 40 of which were in the capital, Vientiane, 21 in Luang Prabang, 8 in Kings Romans, 5 in Oudom Xay, 3 in Pakse, 2 in Dansavanh Nam Ngum Resort and 2 in Luang Nam Tha.
- The survey counted 13,248 ivory items on display for sale, nearly all recently made to suit Chinese tastes. Vientiane had 7,014 items for sale, Luang Prabang 4,807, Kings Romans 1,014, Dansavanh Nam Ngum Resort 291, Oudom Xay 93, Luang Nam Tha 16, and Pakse 13.
- Most outlets, displaying the majority of worked ivory, also sold souvenirs, Chinese herbal teas or jewellery, or were hotel gift shops.
- Outlets were usually owned by traders from mainland China. The number of Chinese-owned shops had risen in Laos from none recorded in the early 2000s to several in 2013, including one main shop in Vientiane's Chinese market and two on the main tourist street of Luang Prabang. By 2016, there were 22 and 15 outlets, respectively, in these two areas, both of which are popular with Chinese visitors. By 2016, Chinese outlets with ivory had also sprung up in other locations, mainly those visited by the increasing number of Chinese.
- In 2016, the most common ivory items for sale were pendants, followed by necklaces, bangles, beaded bracelets and other jewellery, similar to items for sale in 2013, but in far larger quantities.
- The least expensive item was a thin ring for USD 3 and the most expensive was a pair of polished tusks for USD 25,000.
- Retail prices for ivory items of similar type were higher than elsewhere in Kings Romans, which is visited primarily by wealthier Chinese visitors with money to spend.
- Mainland Chinese buy over 80% of the ivory items in Laos today. There are sometimes buyers from South Korea and other Asian countries, according to vendors.
- Laotians today generally buy amulets that are made of bone or synthetic material, rather than ivory items.
- Virtually no mammoth ivory items were seen for sale.

- Retail prices in Laos for worked ivory on display were considerably lower than in China, as most items in China at that time were in expensive licensed outlets incurring higher official paperwork costs. Lao prices for worked ivory were a little lower than in the cities of Vietnam as Lao shop owners have smaller overheads.
- In the absence of effective law enforcement, vendors believe that sales of ivory items in their

shops to Chinese consumers will continue to do well, in line with the anticipated increase in the number of Chinese in Laos and the projected expansion in Chinese investment.

- Nearly all the items seen for sale today originate from illegally imported (post-1990) ivory. There is virtually no law enforcement so shops are able to display these items openly.



*Utilitarian items that are fast to make, especially cigarette holders and chopsticks, were often seen for sale.*

# Introduction to the ivory trade in Laos

## *History*

**L**ao People's Democratic Republic (referred to as Laos in this monograph) is a landlocked country bordered by Myanmar (Burma) and China in the northwest, Vietnam to the east, Cambodia to the south, and Thailand to the southwest and west (see map).

Laos traces its history and cultural identity to the Kingdom of Lan Xang (million elephants) that was founded in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. For four centuries it was one of the largest kingdoms in Southeast Asia. It was then a popular hub for overland trade. But internal conflict broke up the kingdom into three territories, until they were reunited in 1893 under the French Protectorate as the country of Laos. Independence came in 1953. At first, Laos was a constitutional monarchy; then a civil war resulted in Laos becoming a communist state in 1975. Laos is now a one-party socialist republic with the party leadership consisting mainly of military figures.

Laos is a mountainous country of nearly 238,000 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of just over 7 million people. Laos has the youngest population of any Asian country. The Lao are the most common ethnic group (55%) followed by the Khmu (11%), Hmong (8%) and others (26%). Most live in the lowland areas along the Mekong River and its tributaries, with smaller populations in the more mountainous north. Many practice traditional agriculture and hunting. The gross domestic product per capita in Laos was USD 1,530 in 2015, a considerable increase from USD 177 in 1986 (Asian Development Bank 1988; Trading Economics 2017). GDP expanded by just over 7% annually in 2014 and 2015.

Historically, Laos was covered by thick forest that provided a perfect habitat for tens of thousands of elephants, as estimated for 1900 (Chadwick 1991). By 1988, only 3,000 to 5,000 wild elephants and about 850 domesticated elephants were thought to be remaining (Martin 1992a). There were an estimated 950 to 1,300 wild elephants left in Laos in 2000, according to the IUCN Asian Elephant Specialist Group. By 2009 the figure was estimated at 720 wild elephants with another 480 domesticated elephants (Maurer and Duffillot 2009). By 2016 the number of elephants had declined even further, to an estimated 450 wild and an equal number of domesticated animals (Gies 2016).

According to various recent investigations (Rademeyer 2012; Connett 2014; Davies and Holmes 2016a,b;

Dasgupta 2016; Sherwell 2016), there are several known traders in Laos who have become some of the largest illegal dealers in endangered wildlife in the world. Some are involved in farming wildlife and use farming licences as a cover to launder illegal wild-caught endangered animals and their products, as it is easier to obtain them in the wild. These traders, although known, have not been prosecuted in Laos. They have connections all over the world enabling them to continue to trade in wildlife products, including ivory.

In 2014, illegal wildlife dealers in Laos were reported to have been responsible indirectly for the poaching of more than 16,000 elephants, as well as at least 650 rhinos and 165 tigers (Davies and Holmes 2016a,b). These findings were reported by the conservation organization Freeland, based in Bangkok.



*Historically, domesticated elephants would wear a metal neck bell so their mahouts could find them in the mornings in the nearby forest, before their working day.*



*One of the magnificent Luang Prabang temples (Wat Mai Suwannaphumaham), built in 1821, displays carved scenes from village life that depict the common presence of wild elephants.*



## Background

For centuries Lao people killed elephants for their tusks to sell to traders in neighbouring countries, especially China and Thailand which had large markets for tusks for their ivory carving industries. A traveller called Garnier who was in Laos in the 1860s wrote that he watched traders bartering raw ivory from the southern Laos forests, destined for the Chinese market (Garnier 1869–1885). The trade in Lao tusks probably increased in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Duckworth et al. 1999). Following a decline during World War II, the killing of elephants in Laos for the Chinese and Thai markets rose again after the war until the communist takeover in Laos in 1975. With the subsequent nationalization of much of the economy and the closure of some of the land routes to China and Thailand, the Laotian ivory export trade almost collapsed.

In the past, some Lao people who had access to tusks made use of them on a small scale. For hundreds of years, certain forest-dwelling tribes (notably the Katu and Hmong ethnic groups) wore ivory discs in their earlobes; these cotton-reel shaped earlobe plugs are sometimes occasionally seen for sale in antique outlets, together with old ivory bracelets and knife handles. Traditionally, the Lao people revered whole tusks, usually in pairs, that they would put uncarved onto their altars, and those who have inherited an heirloom continue this practice today (Vigne 2013a). For centuries Lao artisans carved wood, producing softer floral styles compared with the more varied styles of the Chinese and Vietnamese. Such designs can be seen in the old architecture of Luang Prabang, for example the gilded carved wooden doors at Wat

Xieng Thong (the Temple of the Golden City, that was built in 1560).

Buddhism, the dominant religion in Laos, is the focus for most art works in the country. For many years, small 1–3-cm pendants with carved religious figures were made of Lao ivory and worn as necklace amulets. These are the main items traditionally carved by the Lao from ivory, and they are still available occasionally today. Similar amulets are seen in Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. More often, nowadays, they are made of substitute materials, namely bone and synthetics.

In Luang Prabang, the Royal Palace Museum displays traditional art objects and items made in Laos. Here 16 old ivory items can be seen, all of which were used for utilitarian purposes in the palace. In late 2016, there were eight swords with ivory handles, seven 6–10-cm royal seals, and a dagger with a carved ivory handle.

After World War II, more Lao artisans became involved in producing ivory objects, using raw ivory originating from Laos but also some tusks imported from Thailand and Myanmar (Martin 1992a). The French encouraged more interest and variety in ivory production, and helped the artisans develop carving skills to some extent. The commercial use of ivory continued until the 1975 communist revolution. In the late 1980s, when the government allowed private enterprise, some artisans returned to their various crafts and there was a small revival in worked ivory production, although by this time the use of Lao ivory for trade was illegal in the country.



*Amulets such as these are popular amongst the Lao people, but nearly all seen nowadays for sale are made of bone or synthetic materials as the old ivory ones have been sold to rich tourists.*



Now that Asian elephants are so few and demand for ivory so great, the African elephant (as seen here) is under great threat. Weak legislation against ivory and poor enforcement in Laos remains a huge problem.

Chinese vendors selling newly made ivory items in Laos advertise these items openly on sign boards outside their shops in Luang Prabang. We saw no signs or posters against the illegal ivory trade in Laos.

# Legislation

In October 1986 the Laotian Council of Ministers passed Decree No. 185/CCM. Article 1 reads: 'All kind of wildlife trade, trade in animal articles, trophies, live or dead specimens of wild animal will be prohibited'. The Decree then lists Category 1 animals in which all trade is banned. These are all native Lao animals, including the country's Asian elephants (Lao People's Democratic Republic 1986). The Decree opened up loopholes, as animals originating in other countries are not included. In 1989 the government issued the Decree on Management and Protection of Aquatic Animals and Wild Animals and on Hunting and Fishing No. 118/CCM (Lao People's Democratic Republic 1989). This outlawed the hunting of 'totally protected animals' (including Asian elephants in the country) without government approval, and prohibited the import and export of 'wildlife and aquatic animals (living or dead)', without permission of the government. But the legality of selling foreign endangered wildlife products, such as ivory, within the country was left unclear in the Decree (Nash 1997).

The next regulation enacted was Decree 1074 of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of 1996 which 'bans wildlife trade', except for research and conservation (Lao People's Democratic Republic 1996), but apparently again only refers to indigenous species. In 2004 the country joined CITES, whose member states had prohibited the international elephant ivory trade in 1989, a measure which came into force in 1990. Thus, for Laos, the import and export of ivory from African and Asian elephants for general trade has been illegal since 2004. But CITES has no power to prohibit internal trade in a country,

only to recommend it. In 2007, the government produced the Wildlife and Aquatic Law No. 07/NA, 2007 (Lao People's Democratic Republic 2007). It refers only to the prohibition of domestic trade and possession of Asian elephants (Lao People's Democratic Republic 2015b). For those breaking the law, penalties could result in a fine of at least 400,000 kip (about USD 50 in late 2016) and/or a prison sentence of three months to five years (Lao People's Democratic Republic 2015b; Leupen et al. 2017). Fines for such wildlife crimes can amount to a maximum of around USD 600 (UNODC and Freeland 2015). There appears to be no clear Lao legislation, however, prohibiting the internal/domestic trade in ivory from African elephants; at any rate this is not stated explicitly in the Decree. In practice, new African ivory items all come into the country illegally, and are thus being sold illegally (Nijman and Shepherd 2012). But the domestic legislation is not explicit in this regard.

With respect to international trade, over recent years CITES has criticized the ineffectiveness of wildlife legislation in Laos and the government's failure to implement CITES regulations. In March 2013, the 64<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the CITES Standing Committee and the 16<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Parties (COP 16) required Laos, along with 14 other countries, to develop a National Ivory Action Plan (NIAP) to put in place strict measures to address weaknesses in law enforcement. Countries requiring NIAPs were identified under the headings of 'primary concern', 'secondary concern' and 'important to watch'. Laos was placed in the third category and instructed to improve its policies and actions on ivory. At the 65<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the CITES



## Lao People's Democratic Republic Peace Independence Democratic Unity Prosperity

Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment

NO: 5289 /MONRE  
Vientiane capital, date: 4/11/2015

### National Ivory Action Plan –Lao PDR

#### Background

Lao PDR ratified the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora in on May 30<sup>th</sup> 2004.

*The Laos government, following international pressure, finally issued in 2015 their National Ivory Action Plan to curtail illegal ivory trade, but the plan has yet to be enacted effectively.*



*Illegal wildlife products displayed as a warning near the departure gates of the international airport in Vientiane have remained the same for several years, but there is no elephant ivory present.*

Standing Committee in 2014, Laos was requested to work with the CITES Secretariat and its consultants to finalize the development of NIAP. Various NGOs put pressure on the Lao government to finalize its NIAP. Due to slow progress, on 19 March 2015 the CITES Secretariat recommended that all 170 members of CITES should suspend commercial trade in specimens of CITES-listed species with Laos until further notice. In response to this threat, Laos finally produced its NIAP later that year. As a result, at COP 17 in September 2016, the Parties did not implement the suspension of trade with Laos (Clifton 2015; CITES 2016a).

The Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS) has also expressed its concern that the illegal ivory market has been increasing in Laos. From 2004 to 2014 the government did not report a single ivory seizure to ETIS (Milliken et al. 2016). Since then, there has been only one known seizure in Laos. In 2015 two suitcases from Ethiopia containing 48 kg of ivory were seized at Wattay Airport in Vientiane (EIA 2016), but this was not reported at the time to ETIS as required by the agreement with CITES (CITES 2016b; Tom Milliken, TRAFFIC's Elephant and Rhino Programme Leader, pers. comm. October 2016). There have been, however, many seizures of ivory destined for Laos, especially in Thailand. In 2015, three consignments of raw ivory from Africa containing over 500 kg each were seized in transit in Thailand. The ivory had come from Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Nigeria, totalling 6,052 kg, and all three consignments were bound

for Laos, according to the shipping documents (Krishnasamy et al. 2016a). This further illustrates the increasing importance of Laos in the global movement of illegal ivory.

In Laos there has been very little official follow-up to these events regarding punishments. For example, as recorded in the *New York Times*, in April 2015, the Thai authorities seized a 'container of beans' containing 700 raw elephant tusks sent from the Democratic Republic of Congo bound for Laos; there was no effective follow-up to arrest those in Laos to whom the container was destined (Fuller 2015). Despite media coverage, Lao authorities almost never arrest anybody smuggling illegal ivory in raw or worked form into or out of Laos, nor trading with this illegal ivory in the country itself. The Environment Investigation Agency (EIA) estimates that, from 2010 to 2016, 11.3 tonnes of ivory seizures were linked to Laos (EIA 2016). Bribes to government officials enable ivory to enter Laos (Anon. 2015). This is part of a more widespread, major corruption problem in Laos. According to the Inspection Committee of the Party Central Committee of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, from 2012 to November 2016 737 police officers were dismissed for taking bribes and/or abusing their power; about USD 580 million exchanged hands in corrupt deals (Anon. 2016). There is strong evidence that some of the major wildlife dealers in Laos have direct connections to corrupt government officials (Rademeyer 2012; Dasgupta 2016; Davies and Holmes 2016a,b; Sherwell 2016).



## *Economy*

The economy of Laos is one of the least developed in Southeast Asia. This is partly due to the implementation, in 1975, of a communist political system and socialist economy. Businesses were nationalized in 1975 with the introduction of price controls leading to massive inflation. Thousands of Lao people, especially the most skilled and educated, left the country to make new lives elsewhere (Achren 2007; Rehbein 2007). In 1986, in reaction to a worsening economy, the government changed policy and in the years that followed gradually allowed some private enterprises to operate. In 1990 a privatization law was introduced (Rigg 2005).

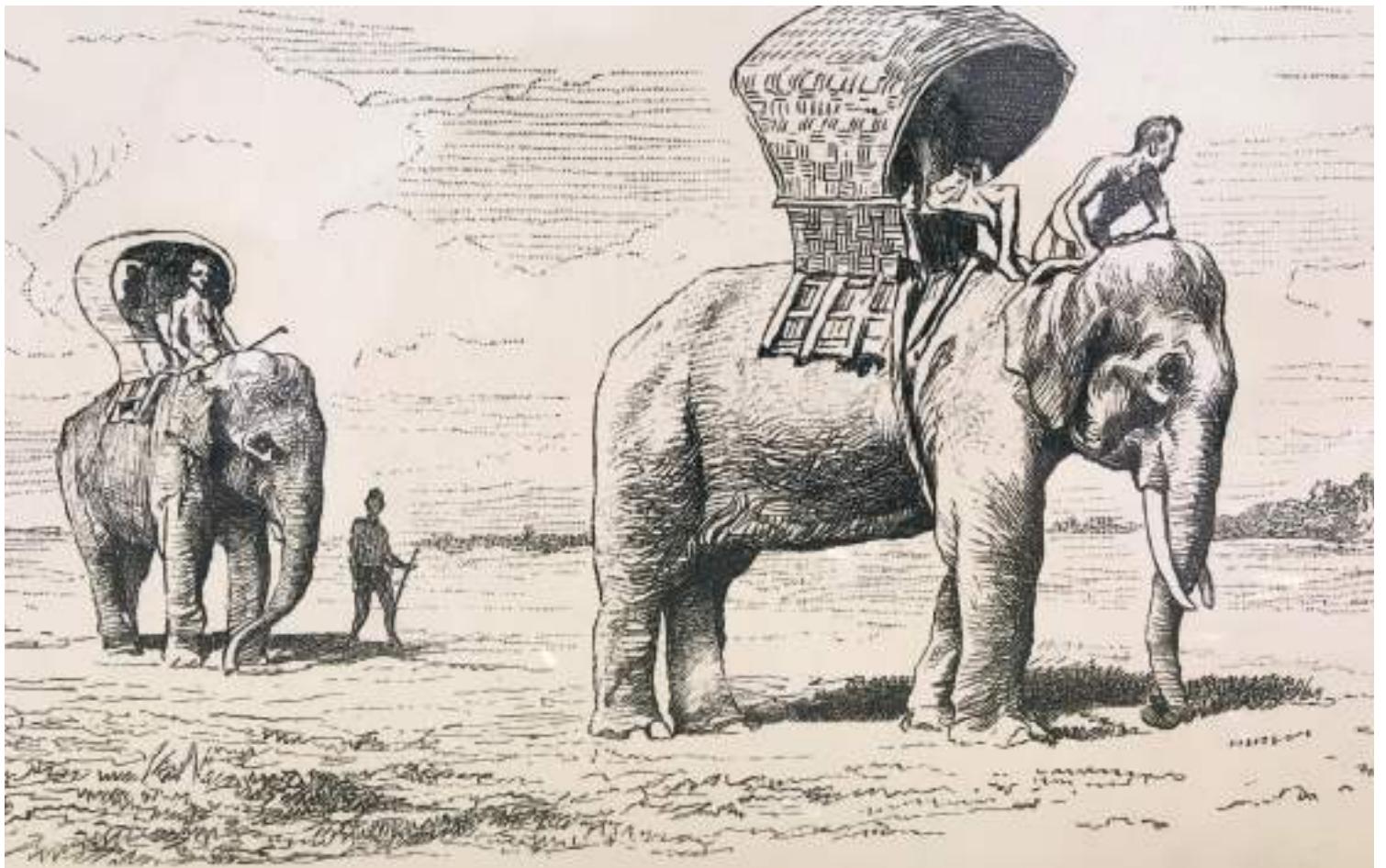
From the mid-1990s, Chinese investment in the economy of Laos began to increase in many sectors, such as the timber trade, mining, hydroelectric power and road construction. In northern Laos, the number of Chinese businesses and volume of border trade increased very significantly. By 2008, most businesses in this region were Chinese owned; many Chinese nationals were involved in smuggling (Cooper 2009).

The number of Chinese ‘tourist arrivals’ to Laos has been increasing rapidly. In 2009, the number of Chinese arriving in the country was 128,226; by 2015 the number had risen four-fold to 511,436 (Lao People’s Democratic Republic 2015a). Despite a strong increase in the per capita income since 1986, most people in Laos are still very poor. Hunting and gathering of wildlife, especially in the northern areas of Laos, is an important sector of the economy. This is clearly visible at stalls along the major roads and in local markets, where large numbers of live and dead wild animals can be seen for sale, especially early in the morning before the police appear, as this trade is illegal.

Major sources of foreign exchange include remittances (mostly from Lao people living overseas), tourism, foreign aid and exports of electricity, timber and clothes. In recent years, the tourist industry has been especially robust. From only 14,400 foreign tourists visiting Laos in 1990, the figure rose to 4,684,429 in 2015, earning the country about USD 725 million, of which Chinese tourists officially spent USD 53,780,000 (Lao People’s Democratic Republic 2015a).



*Tourists enjoy the beauty of Laos and its friendly people. They enter the country by many routes, including by boat, like the day-shoppers arriving here at Don Sao Island market.*



Éléphants du Laos avec leur harnachement (voy. p. 36).

*There are few early accounts of Lao elephants, but pictures from early travellers and from the French colonial period capture the prevalence of elephants as working animals in everyday life.*



Eléphant trainant une bille de tek (voy. p. 68).

## Past studies

The earliest published study of Lao ivory carving was carried out in 1990 (Martin 1992a). Most raw ivory being carved in Laos at that time originated in Asia, especially southern Laos (Martin 1992a). The wholesale price rose from USD 100/kg in 1988 to USD 200/kg by 1990 (Table 1). This was due to increased demand for raw ivory in Thailand and other countries (Martin 1992b). In 1990 there were about 10 craftsmen in Vientiane carving wood and sometimes ivory. There were perhaps a dozen ivory artisans in Luang Prabang producing small items (Laurent Chazee, agricultural engineer and anthropologist, pers. comm. 1990). The carvers used simple hand tools without electricity to make small religious amulet pendants. These sold retail for USD 8 each on the local market. The Lao artisans also occasionally produced ivory bracelets with an amulet (USD 35), rings, and a few small Buddha figurines for foreign visitors. These could be found in curio stalls that also sometimes sold older ivory items: handles for swords, bangles and human figurines.

In 1991 an ivory study found a retail shop in Vientiane specializing in ivory items. The owner was Vietnamese and he obtained his tusks from Lao elephants for a wholesale price of USD 240/kg. He sent them to Vietnam for carving before selling them in his shop. Most customers were Thai visitors working in Laos (as there were few tourists in the country in the early 1990s). They smuggled items home overland to avoid being caught at the airports on departure from Laos or arrival in Thailand. The 1991 study found

that a minimum of 10 pairs of carved ivory tusks had been sold in 1990 in Vientiane in retail outlets (Srikosamatara et al. 1992).

In 1997 poaching for the ivory trade continued in southern Laos, the last main refuge for wild elephants in the country. Traders took the raw tusks to Thailand, where there was a much larger market that catered to the huge number of foreign tourists (Nash 1997). Thailand was the main market for raw Lao ivory until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with tourism there steadily increasing from the 1970s and throughout the 1990s.

In 2001 the wholesale price of raw ivory was USD 275/kg in Vientiane for Lao tusks. There were three wood-carving teachers at the National School of Fine Arts in Vientiane who made a little extra income carving ivory amulets, and two Vietnamese carvers working for a shop in the so-called Morning Market, where many curio and jewellery shops can be found. The first survey quantifying the number of ivory items in Vientiane and Luang Prabang showed that in 2001 there were 50 retail outlets in Vientiane displaying 1,346 ivory items for sale and 10 retail outlets in Luang Prabang displaying 78 ivory items. These were mainly the tiny religious amulet pendants, although they were difficult to differentiate from bone, according to Dan Stiles's fieldwork (Martin and Stiles 2002). Items included 1.5-cm bangles (USD 62) and 10-cm cigarette holders (USD 30).



*Chinese visitors do not generally like old ivory items, such as these. The Lao vendor offered these bangles to us for USD 600 and USD 400.*



*A well-known Vientiane hotel used for international conferences had a gift shop with a central glass cabinet filled with ivory items in 2013.*

In 2011 there were still some Lao artisans working ivory, making mostly amulets. A detailed survey showed 2,391 ivory items openly for sale in 22 retail outlets in Vientiane. The largest quantities by weight were in two luxury hotels selling mainly well-carved ivory jewellery items (Nijman and Shepherd 2012).

In 2013 one of the authors of the present study carried out a further ivory study in Laos (Vigne 2013a,b). At this time, small pieces of raw ivory pruned from domesticated elephants in Laos were selling on the wholesale market in Laos for USD 1,282/kg. Additionally, when a domesticated elephant died, the elephant owner would sell the whole tusks to middlemen working in the ivory trade. The middlemen preferred to buy these tusks as they were generally less expensive than tusks from so-called jungle elephants. These traders would sell on the whole tusks from both tame and wild elephants, mainly to Vietnam for carving, for USD 1,600/kg wholesale (Vigne 2013a,b). Just a very few local carvers still produced mainly small amulets from pieces of Lao tusk by that time. There was also a new and growing trade in African ivory, smuggled into Laos and destined for the Chinese market. In Vientiane, a recently built Chinese shopping centre called San Jiang had one new outlet with about 1,000 ivory items on display for sale, specifically for Chinese shoppers. These were mostly new small jewellery items, processed and carved by hand using electric drills from ivory originating from

Africa, the vendor said. In Luang Prabang there were three large souvenir shops (two Chinese) in the central area of the town, where 61 ivory items were openly for sale, primarily for the Chinese. Again, these were nearly all new ivory items, which had not been found by previous surveys in this town. The average price of a plain bangle of 1-2 cm was USD 588, and a 10-cm plain cigarette holder was USD 420 (Vigne 2013a). By this time, prices had risen steeply in Laos, driven by the increasing demand for ivory items from Chinese consumers.

In late 2015, one of us (Lucy Vigne) visited Vientiane briefly on a 'recce' to collect up-to-date information on the outlets and ivory items for sale in Vientiane, at the request of the Elephant Crisis Fund, to see if a larger study was needed. From 2013 to 2015 the Chinese San Jiang market had seen a considerable expansion in outlets selling new ivory items to meet Chinese demand. These shops sold mostly jewellery, wood carvings and medicinal teas to Chinese living in Laos and visiting the country. There were now 16 shops (compared with one in 2013) in the same area of this market. The items on display in 2015 still consisted mainly of newly-made ivory jewellery (Table 2), and traders made it clear that more ivory items could be made available on request. Prices in the Chinese market were quoted in yuan. Nearly all vendors in the market were Chinese who could not speak English. They also spoke very little Lao, as they



*In 2015 this same hotel gift shop in Vientiane still had ivory items on open display.*

were relatively new to the country. One vendor said in Chinese that he, like others in the San Jiang market selling ivory items, had come in the last two years or so for the sole purpose of retailing to Chinese customers in this market. Another section of the market was being constructed to provide space for more shops, in preparation for the planned increase in the number of Chinese coming to set up businesses and settle in Vientiane.

One luxury hotel in the city, that is popular for international conferences, still had the same glass cabinet in 2015 displaying ivory items similar to those seen in 2013 (Vigne 2013a,b). Gift items in this shop were for the international conference guests staying

in the hotel and prices were quoted in US dollars. No guests at that time, it appeared, had put pressure on the hotel to remove the ivory items from the shop. The vendor was happy for me to examine the items, hoping for a sale.

These findings in late 2015 made it clear that a more detailed and longer study was needed in Laos in 2016. There were many more shops, and large numbers of new ivory items were for sale. These were in the Chinese style, especially ivory pendants (not the small Lao amulet pendants counted in past surveys, which are now commonly made of bone or plastic). Certain vendors and ivory dealers made it clear they understood the ivory was from in Africa.

## ***Methodology for fieldwork in late 2016***

Following the recce to Vientiane in late 2015 described above, the Elephant Crisis Fund supported a detailed survey the following year. From mid-November to mid-December 2016 the authors visited the country to survey ivory markets across the country. We collected data on the origins of raw elephant tusks and trade routes into and through Laos, as well as on wholesale prices of tusks in the country. We learned about where the ivory was being carved and processed and by whom. We visited towns and casino areas where we suspected there was trade

in ivory in order to survey the retail outlets and ivory items on view for sale. The survey work involved counting the outlets and ivory items for sale, as well as itemizing all the objects, photographing the majority of them, and recording prices. We learned about the ivory trade from carvers, middlemen and vendors in shops selling ivory. We collected information regarding the customers of ivory items and asked the vendors' opinions on the trade. We also observed any substitutes for ivory being sold.



*Elephant bones are also used sometimes for carving, as seen here for sale in Vientiane.*

# Results of the survey

## *Sources and wholesale prices of raw ivory in 2016*

We learned from a Vietnamese trader married to a Chinese and living in the Lao capital, Vientiane, that most raw elephant ivory comes from Africa today and is brought to the region by ship in containers that are consigned to Vietnam as the destination country. Until recently, 90% of a large consignment of this nature would be moved on directly to China, in both raw and worked form, but nowadays much of the ivory is being diverted instead to Vientiane for Chinese retail buyers.

Another trade route, that one of Laos's biggest wildlife traders uses, involves shipping raw ivory out of Africa in a container by ship via another unsuspecting country as a decoy and then onward to Bangkok's Lachabang port. The Lao traders bribe the Thai customs officials so that the container can be taken overland by lorry in transit through Laos to Vietnam where the container is opened. The tusks then are removed to be dispersed in smaller quantities back to Laos, increasingly in raw form for fast processing by machines. This roundabout route is chosen to confuse the paper trail as shipping from Africa directly to Laos would be too obvious. By not mentioning Laos in any of the documents, the trader

can 'keep Laos out of trouble', we were told, so that his trading network is not exposed.

Why is much of the ivory smuggled out of Africa that illegally reaches Vietnam no longer going on illegally to China, as occurred until recently, but rather being diverted illegally to Laos for sale in this smaller and poorer country? Basically it is due to the fall in wholesale demand from Chinese traders based in China. Vendors in Vientiane explained to us that Chinese traders, who until a few years ago were paying high wholesale prices for raw and worked ivory in Vietnam, and then smuggling it into China, are running out of cash for this trade. Since about 2015 the Chinese government has not been lending money so readily to Chinese businesses for big development and infrastructure projects, due to the country's economic slowdown. Chinese traders used to siphon off some of that money for use in illicit activities, including ivory trading, for their personal gain. Now they have less money available, so wholesale demand for ivory smuggled from Vietnam into China has fallen. As a result raw ivory prices have also fallen in the region and there is a surplus of ivory on the market. Much of the raw ivory reaching Vietnam is



*Lao people traditionally revere full plain Lao tusks for worship, but as so few elephants remain in Laos, most tusks seen today are imitations. Nearly all the carved items on sale today are made from ivory smuggled in from Africa.*

now being machine or hand crafted and then is either sold in Vietnam (usually to Chinese there) or passed on illegally across the border to Chinese traders in Laos for retail sale there to the growing numbers of Chinese residents and visitors. This is why more ivory is reaching Laos. In the words of one informant: ‘Now, the wholesale price of raw ivory is very low, because no Chinese boss has money from loans, so more ivory is coming into Laos to sell here. There are now many tourists here, especially the Chinese, who spend money on souvenirs.’

There are other trade routes for ivory. Raw ivory is smuggled from Myanmar and made into items in Jing Hong, China, explained a vendor in the far northern town of Luang Nam Tha who had a friend in the business. This ivory is transported by minivan, not via the Boten border that has x-ray machines, but through a smaller border crossing with no x-ray machines. If the police or customs ask about ivory items, the traders simply say they are fake plastic handicrafts. Small items are no problem to smuggle.

A further trade route for ivory coming into Laos is via Thailand. Thai dealers are offloading their ivory and smuggling it across the border into Laos, now

that Thai officials have stepped up law enforcement efforts in Thailand, we learned from an ivory dealer in Luang Prabang. This concurs with findings of a recent study in Thailand (Krishnasamy et al. 2016a). Some of this offloaded ivory also goes via Myanmar to Jing Hong in China, to be processed there, and is then transported in a minivan to Laos via Boten. This dealer said minivans are not searched to the same extent as the big lorries.

Sometimes this illegal ivory entering Laos from the north is transported by boat down the Mekong River to Muang Sing and then on to Luang Prabang, a vendor in Luang Nam Tha said. When smuggling illegal ivory items across the Mekong River by boat, smugglers simply bribe the police on arrival if required. Alternatively, young boys are paid a small amount by big traders to carry illegal wildlife products across the Friendship Bridges, especially the one close to Vientiane. If they are caught, the police do not want to ruin their young lives by arresting them and thus let them go, with no follow-up or prosecution.

Some raw ivory is still sourced within Laos from the few remaining wild and domesticated or domestic elephants. A mahout of a male elephant will cut his



*Laos is a landlocked country but the Mekong River provides a navigable link to neighbouring countries. In the area known as the Golden Triangle, Thailand, Myanmar and Laos converge at the confluence of the Mekong and Ruak River. This Mekong River border crossing to Myanmar is famous as a conduit for the illegal trade in drugs and wildlife.*





Despite efforts to stop the illegal ivory trade at Bangkok airport, with posters at arrivals and departures, smugglers have been bringing ivory from Thailand into Laos for sale.

tusks at three years old when the tips start getting sharp and dangerous, removing 10 cm, and then every three years he again cuts 10 cm from each tusk. The tusks grow steadily thicker and longer and after an elephant is 20 years old, the mahout can cut off 20 cm per tusk leaving 10 cm behind for the nerve. A pair of such tusks can weigh a kilo and can be sold by the mahout for 50,000 baht/kg (USD 1,429/kg at the late-2016 exchange rate. (In Laos the Thai baht is used interchangeably with the kip, with baht usually quoted for more expensive items). When the elephant dies, the mahout can obtain USD 5,000 for the tusks.

A Lao ivory dealer in Luang Prabang said that the price of raw ivory has been falling and now is 'very, very low'. He said the price for Asian and African elephant tusks is the same, 'as the trader and buyer don't care'. In 2013, the wholesale price in Laos was 50,000 baht/kg or USD 1,600/kg (Vigne 2013a). It reached a pinnacle of 70,000 baht/kg wholesale (about USD 2,000/kg) about three years ago (late 2013), a dealer said, before dramatically falling to the late-2016 figure of only 25,000 baht/kg or USD 714/kg wholesale (Table 1). The reason he gave was that there is a lot of ivory from Africa and also from

Thailand now on the market. This has been verified by the Lao government (Lao People's Democratic Republic 2015b). The ivory dealer we spoke to in Luang Prabang knew about the new Thai government having made Thai traders register their ivory, and that some had too much so they had to sell their raw ivory stocks, sending ivory to Laos and Vietnam. He said it was not a good time for dealers to buy raw ivory now as the price is still going down. 'Next year it will only be 20,000 baht', he predicted, as plenty of ivory is still available.

Traditionally, Lao people did not use elephant parts except for worship, for which the most sought-after item was a full pair of blemish-free tusks from a male Lao elephant. The female tusks may be used for worship at Lao altars or shrines as well. Sometimes these can be seen in shopkeepers' display cabinets, along with other items for worship, including elephant molar teeth or occasionally a piece of broken tusk from a Lao elephant that would have been found in the forest long ago, not cut off or taken from a dead elephant. These items are worshipped for *kham khoun* or 'good luck in wealth' in Laos.

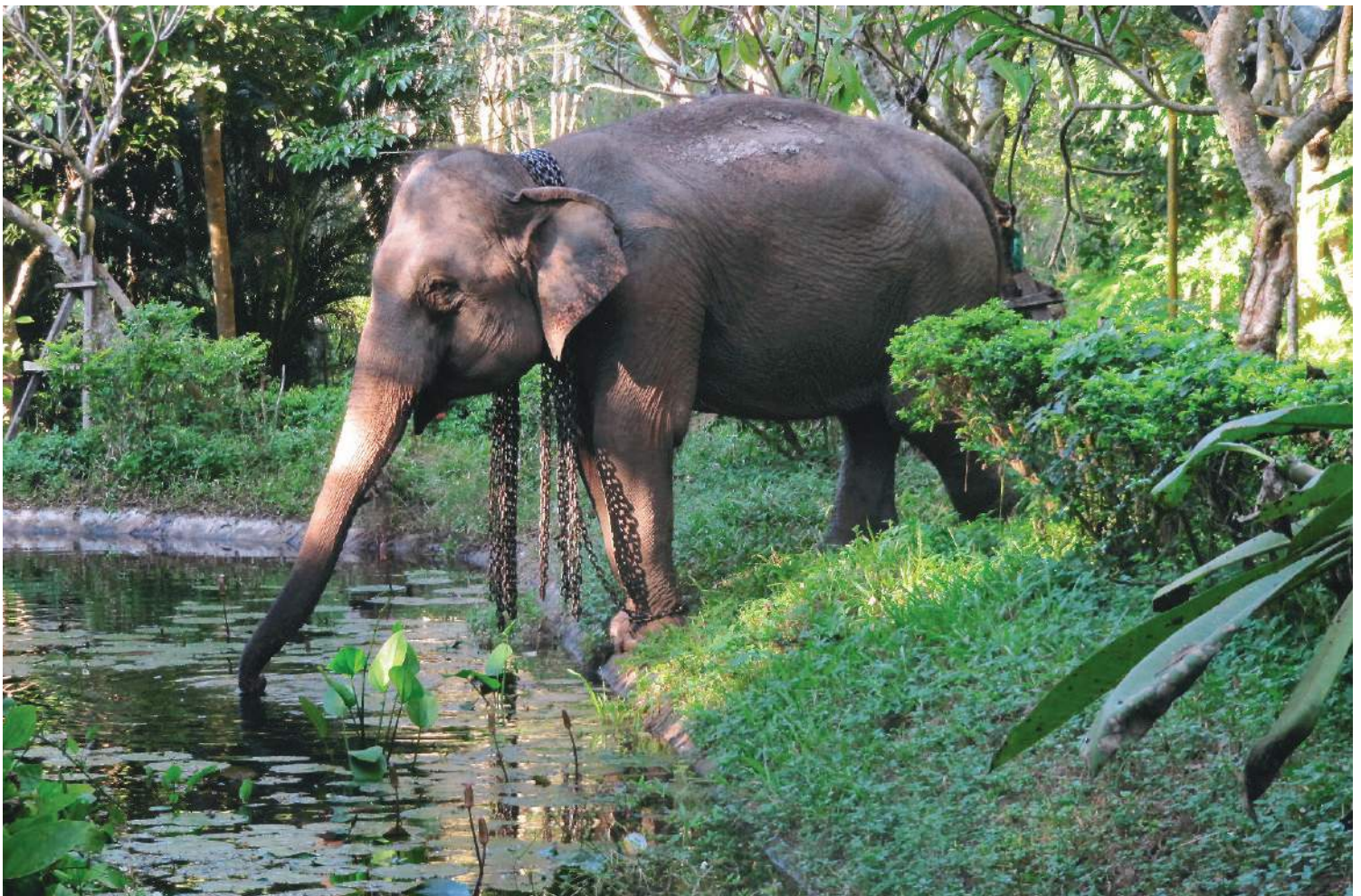
## The use of Lao elephants

A live elephant, originating most commonly from Xayaboury Province and taken from the forest long ago, has offspring that may be sold by a villager for 600,000–700,000 baht (USD 18,570) when three to four years old. These may be brought to work around Luang Prabang in the tourism industry, or arrive as adults having finished work in the logging industry. A mahout we interviewed said that working in tourism was a much better life for the elephants than doing strenuous logging work as previously. He explained that the rosewood trees that elephants used to collect in the depth of the forests have now virtually disappeared. A tourist ride on an elephant costs USD 19 for half an hour. The elephants need to work to ‘earn their keep’ as a lot of money must be spent on food. An elephant requires 300 kg of plant material a day. Mahouts buy about 60 thick banana stems that cost 4,000 Lao kip per stem, which works out at about USD 30 per day for each elephant. Elephants also browse in the forest from 4 pm to 8 am when they are not working, tethered to a tree with a 30 metre chain. In the mahout’s home area, elephants had their front feet hobbled so they could not wander far and wore a bell around their necks

so the mahouts could locate them in the mornings.

The female elephant is more valuable as she can produce a calf. Elephants can no longer be taken from the wild. The villagers in Xayaboury Province, an area now famous for breeding rather than capturing elephants, sell them at a young age so that they can be trained by the new mahout. (The mahouts are all men as the chains are too heavy for women to handle, we were told.) Once elephants reach adulthood, tour operators may sell them among themselves. A female elephant today costs 2 million baht and a male 1.8 million baht, or about USD 57,000 and USD 51,000 respectively.

With the death of an elephant, the mahouts explained that ‘in the past we just buried our elephants, when we were children, as the parts then had no value’. This has changed today. The mahouts usually sell the parts to Vietnamese and also Chinese buyers, who come to Laos especially for this trade, buying the skin, ears, trunk, feet and tail. Chinese buyers give a better price than the Vietnamese, who bargain more, a mahout commented. If the Chinese trader sees and



*This female Lao elephant, between 30 and 35 years old, has been retired to a zoo.*



*Domestic elephants sometimes 'earn their keep' taking tourists for rides.*

likes the elephant he will pay. He gives the mahout about 100,000 baht (USD 2,850) for a whole dead elephant, excluding the tusks. Not many Lao people will process the elephant parts, especially if they had a connection to the elephant; most mahouts do not want to touch their dead elephant to cut it up for its parts. The Vietnamese and Chinese traders tend to do this work as they believe a carcass must not be wasted and is for processing. We learned that mahouts earn only about USD 150 a month plus tips, so the extra income from elephant carcasses is a much-needed bonus.

Elephant bones can sell for USD 37/kg. Now that elephant bones have a value, Lao people who have

buried elephants in the past now dig up the bones to sell. They must wait 10 years to dig the bones up. They only started to dig up the old carcasses a few years ago, because of this new demand for the bones, which comes mostly from Vietnam, explained a mahout who worked at the Elephant Village at Ban Xieng Lom.

Once an elephant carcass has been sold, traders prepare the elephant products for sale. A kilo of dried/smoked skin sells for 300,000 kip (USD 37). One adult elephant provides 50–60 kg of skin when it is dried that is worth about USD 2,000. Traders prepare it in strips to sell in plastic bags, in the same way as domestic water buffalo skin.



*There has been no Lao ivory carving 'industry' traditionally, but ivory earlobe plugs, such as these, used to be worn by members of some Lao forest dwelling tribes.*



*A Lao carver demonstrates how he carves a ring made from ivory obtained from a domestic elephant.*

## *Ivory carving in 2016*

By far the most ivory items seen in the retail outlets in Laos were carved by Vietnamese artisans into jewellery items, especially for Chinese tastes. Most of the items are carved in Vietnam, we were told. Middlemen, such as a Vietnamese woman broker we met, bring Vietnamese items to certain Chinese shops in the Chinese San Jiang market in Vientiane to sell. These are mainly carved pendants that they make by hand with electric drills or with automated machinery in Vietnam. Some carvers or brokers go to the established shops that sell ivory and offer a vendor items from a large selection that are then sold in the shop on a commission basis. Generally, the wealthier Chinese shop owners have their own sources for their ivory items.

A growing form of carving is by sophisticated computer-run machines. Mostly it is the Chinese who can afford top quality expensive machines, that come from China and apparently cost about USD 30,000. They save labour and time and can churn out large numbers of ivory or wood beads and pendants of uniform shape. We saw one such machine in Kings Romans making wood beads, but the machine can also be used for ivory and rhino horn beads. The computer-driven machine we saw was processing a bead that was held by a thin horizontal rod, with one drill coming

forwards and two more drills simultaneously coming sideways to create the item. Another vendor in Kings Romans said that she obtains all her ivory and rhino horn items from a Chinese company in Vientiane that has a sophisticated computer-run machine. We saw some film footage on a smartphone of a Chinese operator using one of these machines to make an ivory pendant in Vientiane. As anyone can operate a computer-driven machine, this option avoids the problem of finding skilled carvers in Laos. Sometimes an artisan will be employed to touch up the details of an item by hand. The fast processing of identical items has speeded up the production of ivory jewellery considerably, enabling traders to turn over their large stocks of illegal raw ivory at a fast pace.

A Chinese vendor in Luang Prabang demonstrated how, after his items had been made by computer-driven electric drills, he used a dentist's drill that he had in his shop to touch up his items to give them a unique finish. Items such as figures and carved tusk tips, for example, may be made partly by machines and partly carved with hand drills, the latter being used for detailed work such as faces.

The majority of items we saw in Laos, whether made by Vietnamese carvers or computer-run machines, were



*Today, mass-produced ivory pendants, often machine made, predominate among ivory items seen for sale in Laos.*



Round ivory pendants resembling flowers are preferred by East Asian women.

of Buddha, animals from the Chinese horoscope, or flowers. For example, Buddhists like to choose a pendant showing the Buddha in a position corresponding to the day of the week on which they were born, as this is auspicious. The carvings are commonly seen on large rectangular pendants measuring from 4 × 6 cm. Round pendants are often shaped into flowers, such as chrysanthemum, frangipani and peony; and also jasmine that is called *mali* in Thai and Lao, meaning mother, and is given to mothers on Mother's Day (on 12 August in Thailand).

In Vientiane, pendants were sometimes displayed for sale plain so that a customer buying a pendant could choose the pattern or figure to be carved on it. As this could be sometimes done in only two days, it was clear that there were processors on hand nearby, ready to complete the work quickly. Usually a week was required to produce a special, individually carved pendant and a deposit was required.

Regarding Lao ivory carvers, the main items carved in the past were earlobe plugs worn by the Katu from southern Laos and the Hmong ethnic group from northern Laos. The Katu people lived in a mountainous area in what is now Salavan Province, that once had many elephants, and were famous for capturing wild elephants from the jungle for domestication. The Tai Lue ethnic group in northern Laos also captured wild elephants, and are still known

today for breeding elephants to sell the babies, but they did not use ivory so much for ornamentation.

We came across some rather poor present-day Lao wood carvings of animals made by Lao prisoners who are being trained by the government to carve so they have something they can do when they leave prison. Policemen take them pieces of wood to carve and they then display the carvings for sale in a local market to make some money for themselves. Nowadays, however, most Lao do not have the patience to learn time-consuming carving, and they do not feel they can compete with the machine-made items increasingly on the market today, according to a carver who had given up his work to run a café near Savannakhet instead.

A very small number of Lao ivory carvers still work with traditional hand tools (and no electric drills) producing tiny traditional ivory amulets that are usually carved in the form of *Nam Kwak*. This is a female figure representing the household divinity and is popular in Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. *Nam Kwak* is an incarnation of the Thai rice goddess and a version of the Hindu goddess Lakshmi, the bringer of luck, especially in the form of money. This is the most common Lao amulet and the figure of *Nam Kwak*, with her right hand raised and her fingers bent as if inviting customers to come towards her, is popular among vendors and merchants. These items

are generally made of cheap, affordable bone or resin for the Lao people, not for the Chinese who are not interested in these tiny 2-cm amulets.

We interviewed a traditional Lao carver at his workshop on the outskirts of Luang Prabang. He had been interviewed in 2013 (Vigne 2013a) and he was sitting in the same spot as before, carving a piece of wood using simple hand tools with no electricity. He told us he carves mostly wood and very little ivory nowadays. He was teaching an apprentice monk who had been learning for several months, coming to the workshop when time permitted. There had been a group of three apprentice monks learning, but the other two found that the chisels cut their fingers so only one was continuing. He was copying the master carver making a 20-cm wooden Buddha statue on the ground in front of him. The master carver said that it takes him five full days to carve a 20-cm Buddha statue with a chisel. He carves mostly rosewood (*Dalbergia* sp.), but also ebony and sandalwood; there are extremely few such carvers left in Laos.

A group of Chinese tourists came to watch and take photographs. They were interested in buying the rosewood carvings for sale in his workshop as this is

the traditional wood from Laos. The carver brought out a bag containing some tiny ivory items from domestic elephants: a small carved ring and a tiny pendant that could be used, he said, as a ring head. The quality of work lacked the detail of Chinese and Vietnamese carvings. He said he can make five small ivory pendants in a day. He uses left-over pieces of ivory from figures commissioned by rich Lao, who provide the ivory from domestic elephants. His wife was wearing an ivory amulet that he had carved. It was of *Nam Kwak* in gold casing and was worth USD 900, she remarked. Lao men like to wear Buddha in meditation and seated Buddha protected by the seven headed Naga, the carver commented.

He demonstrated to us how he carves a tiny ivory pendant for himself. He places a small piece of ivory onto some wood and secures the ivory on a piece of black gum or rubber obtained from a tree. This gum peels off easily when the carving work is complete. He showed how he uses a hand tool to cut grooves into the material. The Chinese there said (and we gathered this was typical) they were only interested in seeing big pieces of ivory, not the small Lao ivory carvings. The carver said he had no large ivory pieces.



There are extremely few Lao carvers, but here a monk is learning how to carve wood with a hammer and chisel for the temple. Shown in the top corner, the teacher carver had made the small ivory amulet for his wife from part of the tusk of a domesticated Lao elephant.

## Wood carving in Laos

Most elaborate carved wood items for sale in Laos are made by Vietnamese. Rosewood carvings are especially popular with the Chinese and also the Lao people. The Lao forests have been denuded of large trees, and supplies of new big pieces of wood have essentially run out. Factories must use their past stores of wood or use the root of the rosewood nowadays. Most people want heavy large items of furniture and value the widest planks most in order to make furniture with no joins. Some Lao people store an unused wide plank of wood as a future investment. Good rosewood was selling for USD 600/m<sup>3</sup>, a rosewood factory owner near Savannakhet remarked, and the more knots it has the higher the price.

There is a recent law that rosewood and hard teak can no longer be sent out of Laos for carving in another country. Thus, Vietnamese carvers come to work in furniture shops in Laos on a work permit, arriving in a group to work on a sofa set (usually a wooden sofa with a large table, two big armchairs and two small tables). In a wood carving factory near Savannakhet, they also produce cheaply-made rosewood tables and chairs for roadside cafes that are sold for USD 360–1,200. A larger table and 8 chairs, that would take a team of five Vietnamese artisans a month to make, were for sale for 180,000 baht (USD 5,140). Another very heavy long table and 8 intricately carved big chairs carved in a dragon design (a traditional Chinese design)

were selling for USD 10,000. With a hike in taxes for imported and now also exported goods, fewer large pieces of furniture are being exported from Vietnam back into Laos. Nor are they being exported to China, as it is difficult to bribe officials to let these large items cross the frontier, we were told, in contrast to the easier flow of small items like rosewood pendants. Thus most Vietnamese carvers in Laos are employed in producing large wooden items of furniture for sale in Laos, not pendants, we were informed.

There are several wood furniture-making workshops (called factories) in the area employing Vietnamese carvers. We learned in Vientiane that the new Prime Minister has imposed onerous financial requirements on these factory owners. As a result many owners have relocated to remote areas away from the capital, and some companies have merged. Prices are down in general, as there had been a glut in output up to March 2016, we were informed. The Vietnamese wood carvers we saw were working on large wood items, not ivory.

Managers of wood carving outlets explained to us that while the Lao like to hire Vietnamese carvers, a new law supported by the new Prime Minister, Thongloun Sisoulith, makes this more difficult to do. Mr. Sisoulith, who took over in March 2016, has stated that he wants to control the number of



*This typical Vietnamese-carved furniture set with Chinese dragons made from Lao rosewood was selling in a Vientiane shopping mall for USD 36,000.*





*This window shutter, showing the typical Lao carving style, was made by hand by a Lao wood carver for his house.*



*A Vietnamese carver works on furniture made of rosewood, a Lao material that is highly sought after and now rare.*

Vietnamese workers who come to Laos and take jobs away from local people by working illegally. Some commented that Mr Sisoulith was trying to clean up the many irregularities and corruption problems that exist in the country, including in the wildlife trade.

With the problems nowadays in getting work permits, Vietnamese carvers arrive on a one-month tourist visa and extend it each month. After six months they have to pay a bribe to get an extension. They like to stay for a year in order to earn enough money. Often they live on the wood factory premises to save money and will work as a team to complete a job. In a factory we visited, they were not paid a salary but for what they produced, and could probably earn about USD 840 a month if they worked hard enough, which is more than double what a Lao wood carver can earn. Lao like to employ Vietnamese for carpentry and carving work, while Lao family members help with varnishing.

Another Lao businessman we met in Luang Prabang employed a team of four Vietnamese who had come especially to make 5 big armchairs, a big table and 2 small tables that would take a month to complete; together they were paid 120,000 baht, which works out at about USD 860 a month each. In contrast, around Hanoi, where the competition is much greater, they earn about USD 600 a month. Skilled carvers can carve wood and ivory. However, here again we were told that Vietnamese carvers in Laos

do not waste their time making small pendants (of wood or ivory), since these can be smuggled into the country easily from Vietnam.

The large pieces of rosewood furniture we saw being made were for a customs official who was moving into a new big house, a vendor explained. The Lao are not interested in the pattern, and do not mind whether it is Lao elephants, bamboo and flowers or Chinese dragons; they simply want good quality.

Lao people in the past mainly carved wood into items for temples, such as decorative wooden window frames, shutters and door panels. Their style of carving consisted mostly of curling floral patterns, producing works of tranquillity and attractiveness. Some Lao were taught carving skills by the French, who passed on their knowledge at carving schools. But their skills remained limited compared with those of Vietnamese carvers, whose work shows a far greater Chinese influence.

Chinese vendors in two expensive wood shops in Vientiane both said the wood they use to carve originated from Laos. However they said that their best items were carved in China as they prefer to employ Chinese who they can communicate better with and because they have the best skills, even though the wages for Chinese carvers are higher.



*Vientiane remains a low-rise city without the traffic congestion of many Asian cities, making it popular for tourists.*



*Patuxai (Victory Gate), completed in 1969 with Lao-style mouldings and scenes from the Ramayana, provides a panoramic view around Vientiane.*

## *Retail outlets selling worked ivory in late 2016*

We found seven locations scattered across the country with ivory items on display for retail sale, out of 10 locations that we visited in Laos. The survey count excluded the tiny Lao pendants/amulets that are nearly always made of bone or resin when displayed for sale. The locations with ivory for sale, in the order visited, were: Vientiane, Dansavanh Nam Ngun Resort, Pakse, Luang Prabang, Oudom Xay, Luang Nam Tha and Kings Romans (see

map). Places where we did not see items definitely identified as ivory for sale were Savannakhet, Huay Xai and Boten. Altogether 13,248 ivory items were counted on display, for sale in 81 retail outlets, an average of 164 ivory items per shop (Table 3). Nearly all were new ivory items from African elephant ivory made in the Chinese style for the Chinese market, the majority being jewellery.

### *Vientiane*

#### History and background

Vientiane, capital of Laos (see map), was settled a thousand years ago on both sides of the Mekong River, which is well known for its fertile and extensive alluvial plains. Vientiane has had a particularly turbulent past, falling successively to Vietnamese, Burmese, Siamese, Khmer and French conquerors. Of these, the Siamese invaders caused the most havoc, destroying the town and burning down nearly all the buildings in 1828. In 1893, French colonial forces took control of Laos. The French colonial administration was based in Vientiane (except during World War II) until 1953, when France withdrew and Laos finally became an independent country. Vientiane remained the capital of the newly-established Kingdom of Laos, which was run jointly by royalist forces and the communist party known as the Pathet Lao. But on 2 December 1975 the Pathet

Lao seized full control and the Kingdom of Laos was renamed the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Laos has been governed by the Pathet Lao since then and Vientiane is still the administrative capital.

In April 1994 the First Lao-Thai Friendship Bridge was opened south of the city, connecting Vientiane with Nong Khai Province in Thailand, and this helped to expand trade in the region. Since the 1990s, with a change towards a more capitalist free-market economy, many types of trade and businesses have been set up, predominantly by Chinese investors, some of whom now live in the city. Vientiane today has a population of 200,000, with further expansion planned to accommodate more Chinese immigration from mainland China, and several new Chinese building projects are underway.



*This old colonial French house has yet to be restored and perhaps turned into a boutique hotel, shop or restaurant for the tourists.*



*This is a traditional Lao wood house in Vientiane, but most have been replaced by concrete buildings.*

## Retail outlets, ivory items for sale and prices

The survey found 40 retail outlets selling ivory openly on display in the city. These shops displayed 7,014 ivory items for sale or an average of 175 per outlet (Table 3). Most of the outlets (22) were in the Chinese shopping area known as San Jiang. This market was first surveyed in 2013, when one ivory shop had recently opened for the Chinese (Vigne 2013a). Ivory items were nearly always in the front display counter, on the top shelves and in full view to encourage Chinese customers, with retailers clearly having no fear of inspectors.

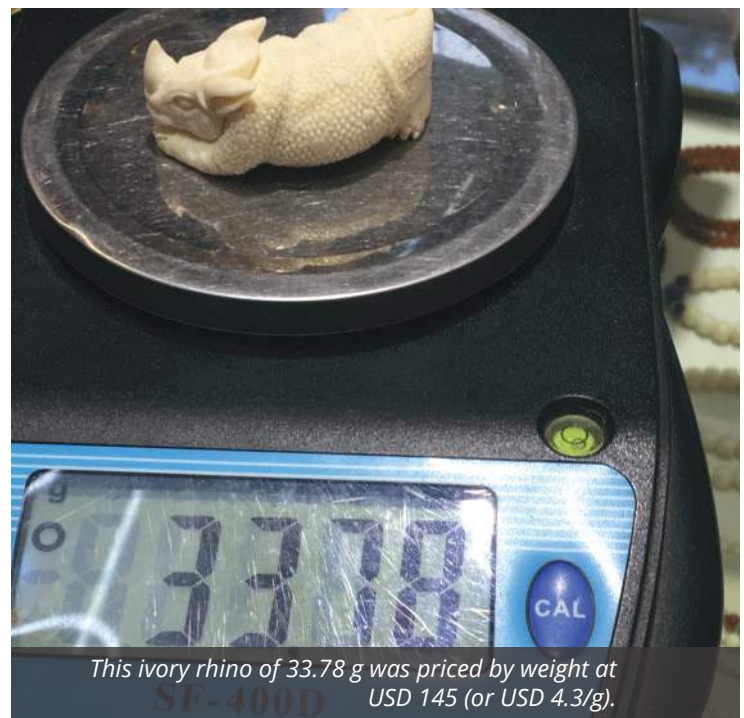
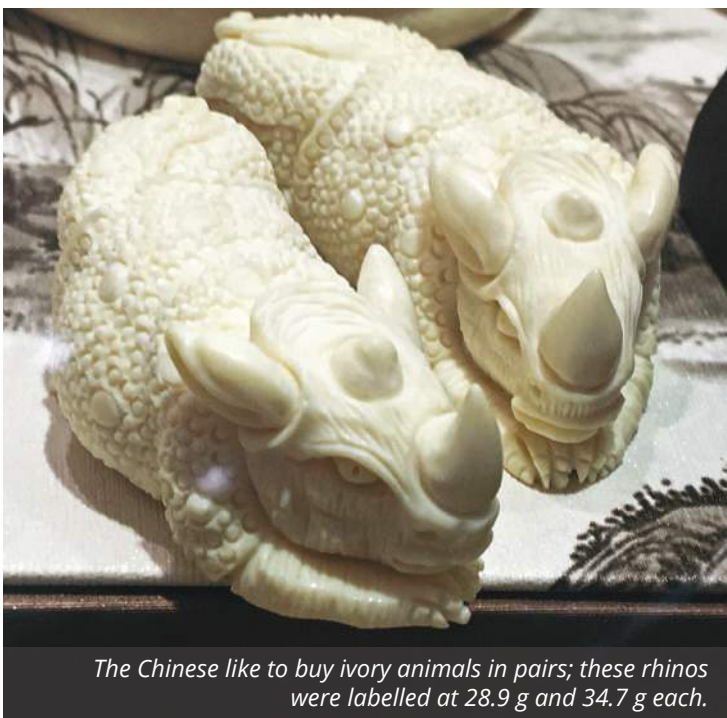
The shops in Vientiane displaying ivory items were mostly gift shops and jewellery outlets in luxury hotels (10), with Chinese vendors and catering primarily to the Chinese. These shops and stalls in luxury hotels usually had ivory items dominating their displays, mainly the same recently-made jewellery seen in the Chinese market area. Ivory outlets also included Chinese speciality shops selling Chinese herbs, teas and dried mushrooms for medicinal use; jewellery shops selling ivory and wood ornaments, predominately for the Chinese; and shops selling imported alcohol that doubled up as travel agents (where Chinese get help with visa extensions and to buy air tickets, with advertisements for Lao Airlines at their entrances) (Table 4).

The Chinese like new items of ivory jewellery; the majority of items seen for sale were pendants, necklaces, bangles and bracelets (Table 5). Apart from jewellery, the Chinese like to buy utilitarian objects that double up as a status symbol when made

of ivory, including cigarette holders, chopsticks and occasionally name seals. Only a scattering of figures and smaller figurines were seen, and very few tusks or carved tusk tips as these are too large to take back to China easily.

In downtown Vientiane, where tourists of many nationalities go to see the famous temples in the city, there were a number of antique and curio shops, of which six antique shops had 387 old and unusual items of ivory on display (Table 4). The most common items were knives with ivory handles, along with thick bangles and a few earlobe plugs. Other antique items, mainly carved in other areas of Asia, included opium bottles, hair pins and combs. There were also some larger carvings, including tusk bridges. None of these items were typical of the items made nowadays for the Chinese market.

Regarding prices, most ivory items for sale in the Chinese San Jiang shopping area, if labelled, were priced in US dollars and Chinese yuan. Ivory items in the non-Chinese shops in downtown Vientiane were quoted by Lao vendors to tourists in kip or baht. In Chinese shops, if items were not priced with a label, they were often sold by weight to Chinese customers at USD 4.30–4.50/g. Items sometimes had weights shown on the bottom of them or, if a customer wished to know the price, they would be weighed by the vendor on the counter using electronic scales. Most Chinese vendors were reluctant to disclose prices to us, as westerners, especially for name seals that are not used in the west, or gave inflated prices, similar





*Lao people like to buy gold as opposed to ivory, and gold shops can be found in all the main towns of the country, where sometimes small Lao ivory look-alike amulets are seen also for sale.*

to those in shops outside the Chinese shopping area that cater to tourists.

The expensive hotels offered a 20% discount on ivory items. Overall, items were very reasonably priced for the Chinese customers, with a thin ring for USD 10 being the cheapest item seen. Thin bangles were generally USD 100 and those of 1–2 cm only USD 200, while round 1-cm earrings were selling for as little as USD 30. We even saw a large oblong pendant of 6 × 4 cm on sale for USD 100 with USD 10 added on for carving in one retail outlet that hoped to make a sale. The most expensive item was a pair of polished tusks for USD 25,000 from Vietnam that were for sale amongst other Vietnamese carvings, nearly all made of wood, in an outlet catering to tourists (Table 6). In one very large Lao souvenir shop that sold mostly to Thai, Chinese and South Korean tourists arriving in big buses, the guides and bus drivers received at least 10% commission for bringing customers to the shop and so prices were higher on the labels compared to the Chinese shops, but discounts could be offered if no guide was expecting a commission.

The traditional tourist shopping areas had much less ivory than in the past. The Night Market has always sold cheaper handicrafts and clothes. It consists of temporary stalls put up every evening along the Mekong River. The Morning Market is known for the huge array of items for sale, including curios and gold jewellery. It consists of a large building with old very scruffy sections in the outer parts and recently built smarter sections in the middle. Gold and jewellery

shops in the Morning Market continue to sell the traditional Lao amulets that are usually very small (1 × 2 cm) and normally encased in transparent plastic or with ‘gold’ back casing. Vendors we spoke to told us their items were bone; therefore, as in 2013, Lao amulets were not included in the count. The main buyers for these are Lao who cannot afford ivory. The Chinese are not interested in these tiny pendants and amulets. These jewellery stalls sometimes display old Lao silver jewellery and other ornamental items, or small wildlife items used as amulets or for worship that can be seen for sale on the lower glass cabinet shelves. Old ivory Hmong earlobe plugs are only occasionally seen nowadays, but we saw one pair selling for USD 50.

The shop with the most ivory items for sale was an ivory specialty shop on one of the busy main streets of the city centre. The vendor was Chinese and was selling to Chinese customers, and was hostile to our entry. He had a large display of items ranging from jewellery to carved ivory figures, but he would not disclose any prices or any information about his items. The antique shops in this downtown area sold old Lao knives with ivory handles, priced at USD 990 for a small one and USD 1,600 for a big one.

The Lao people do not generally buy ivory and it was rare to see ivory in their shopping centres, apart from one recently opened mall that had a handful of jewellery items priced in kip and baht at inflated prices compared with the Chinese shops. The Lao prefer to spend their money on gold jewellery.



*These ivory paint brush (or pen) holders were selling for USD 8,900 and USD 7,800 in Vientiane, but such large and expensive ivory items are unusual compared with the typical trinkets.*



*Occasionally, old ivory items can be found in some antique shops, as seen here.*



*This Chinese customer, wearing an ivory bangle and an ivory beaded bracelet, was planning to buy some ivory pendants.*

## Customers and vendors

The majority of Chinese want to buy new small ivory items that are more affordable as souvenirs and easier to transport, and are aware that the items must be smuggled out of Laos and into mainland China. We often saw Chinese men choosing plain ivory bangles for themselves; many bangles are large sized and wide, designed especially for a Chinese man's wrist. They also like large bead bracelets and pendants.

Ivory and wooden pendants, with agarwood/eaglewood (*Aquilaria* sp.), being the most expensive, are often displayed near to each other, and both are bought by customers for good luck and good health. In the luxury hotels, Chinese were said to be the main customers, followed by South Koreans, and thirdly Japanese. If a customer wanted to see more items than those displayed under the glass counter top, he or she could be shown more items from storage. In some outlets we saw additional bangles being brought out from plastic bags kept elsewhere in the shop.

The Chinese customers prefer to buy ivory from Chinese vendors, for reasons of familiarity and

language. Most vendors were located in the Chinese San Jiang market. The market has been expanding, with a new building due to open soon to accommodate more shops and Chinese vendors. Most vendors have moved from mainland China into Vientiane specifically to sell ivory and other items to Chinese visitors from the mainland – both tourists and workers – as well as to Chinese nationals resident in Laos.

These vendors have a positive view about their future prospects in Laos. Some Chinese have Lao spouses which means they can obtain Lao passports (if they give up their Chinese ones) or, preferably, their children can buy land and build up the business. Thus Chinese interest in investing in Laos in the long term is increasing. The Chinese are well-known in Laos to be the buyers of over 80% of the worked ivory that is sold there, and Chinese traders are responding to this demand. They are taking advantage of the greater availability of ivory in Laos to stock their shops with items for sale to the growing number of Chinese visitors, most of whom take their purchases back home with them. This is why there has been an increase in shops in the San Jiang Market selling ivory



*Chinese men, as well as women, like to buy ivory items.*

items. These vendors prefer to display mass-produced items that can be sold cheaply, often simply per gram as explained above, for a fast turnover. The Chinese are great opportunists in business and, after years of economic suppression, are always ready to occupy a new niche in order to increase their profits.

Vendors, often also the shop owners, were hard working; sometimes they owned another shop where a spouse or family member worked. Vendors generally knew the prices of all the items, but if a young and inexperienced assistant vendor was not sure, he or she had immediate smartphone access to the boss to obtain the information required for a sale.

Some vendors would sell extra items that were not part of the shop's stock, including ivory items, on a commission basis. A Vietnamese middleman, for example, would sell worked ivory items, mainly ivory

jewellery, to certain shops, replacing the most popular items as and when required. Vietnamese carvers are not comfortable selling directly to Chinese traders as usually they do not share any language and the Chinese are ruthless bargainers, so they prefer to have a middleman who can negotiate in the Chinese language on their behalf and get a better price. Prices of items in shops vary according to the cost of renting the shop, that may be as much as USD 3,000 a month in a hotel. A vendor is paid a salary of about \$250 a month, or more if the Lao vendor can speak Chinese, and also receives lunch and fuel for a motorbike (that most Lao use for transport). Thus rental and staff costs help determine the ivory prices in a shop.

The Chinese customers often shop in groups of men. 'The Chinese buy all ivory, real or if they think it is real', said a Lao vendor in a hotel. Many Chinese





*A Chinese customer examines an ivory bangle with a torch to check the quality of the ivory.*

take a long time to make a purchase, examining an item carefully with a torch to check the authenticity of the piece. As few westerners buy ivory, and with the fear of criticism from wildlife protectionists and journalists, vendors are reluctant to give prices or permission for photos to be taken, and much less to give their views on business, to non-Chinese. They generally said they would give a price only if we were interested in buying the item.

The benefits clearly outweigh the risks regarding selling worked ivory in Laos. In one outlet in the Chinese shopping area, Lao customs inspectors came in and were paid USD 300 not to look at the things in the shop and to go away again as we watched! We learned that these officials warned the vendor to be wary of foreigners who are trying to get information, but the vendor was not concerned about the officials. She had known them for some time and they often

have tea together. Here it is the customs, not the police, who carry out inspections in shops in order to check the traders have paid their taxes. When they come to warn her, she always gives them something. 'If business is poor they do not hassle me for money, so our relationship is good.'

One hotel gift shop well known for international conferences had stopped selling ivory items. The vendor claimed there was a new law against it, which is not the case. Being a hotel, however, where people of many nationalities stay, it is not surprising that ivory items displayed in 2013 (Vigne 2013a,b) and in 2015 were - finally - no longer there. In contrast, the Chinese shops, including in Chinese hotels, that are not popular with western tourists increasingly display worked ivory for Chinese customers, with nobody worrying about laws that are not being enforced.



*Within the Dansavanh Nam Ngum Resort, nestled on the bank of a spectacular reservoir and surrounded by forest, is a casino popular with Thai and Chinese gamblers.*

# Dansavanh Nam Ngum Resort

## History and background

Dansavanh Nam Ngum Resort (see map) was built in 1996 and is located about 85 km north of Vientiane. It is located on the southern edge of the Ang Nam Ngum reservoir. The reservoir was created by the construction of a hydroelectric dam in the early 1970s and covers an area of 370 km<sup>2</sup> on the Nam Ngum River, a major tributary of the Mekong River.

Following the revolution in 1975, prostitutes, drug addicts and other criminals were incarcerated in prisons on islands in the reservoir (Georgiou 2002). About 20 years later the resort was established with Chinese and Malaysian support; it has a Chinese/Malaysian owner. The resort now includes a yacht club, and a golf and country club, both used mainly at the weekends by people from Vientiane, as well as a casino that is mainly visited by Chinese and Thai

gamblers. While the Chinese fly to Vientiane and take road transport north to the casino, Thais normally cross the border by bridge to Vientiane and travel to the casino using shuttle buses. Some gamblers also come from Malaysia and South Korea. There is a law that prohibits Lao people from gambling in casinos inside the country.

It took us about two hours to reach the resort from Vientiane due to traffic congestion north of the city; traffic problems are increasing as the city spreads out. The resort is nestled among peaceful forested mountains that are protected from deforestation. A wide, 8-km long empty tarmac road winds up through the hilly tropical forest, then descends spectacularly to the huge Nam Ngum reservoir and the resort/casino complex.



*These pendants were designed for Chinese customers.*

## Retail outlets, ivory items for sale and prices

There were two outlets in the opulent casino area selling 291 ivory items on open display, or 146 ivory objects on average per outlet (Table 7). At one outlet the vendor had gone to lunch, making it easier to examine the items. At the second outlet, the Chinese vendor was absorbed in his computer and paid no attention to us. Both were jewellery outlets. The second was selling solely recently-made worked ivory in the Chinese-style. Another shop in the building selling Chinese teas and carved wood items also had some endangered wildlife products, but only imitation ivory jewellery was seen during our visit there.

In the two jewellery outlets, ivory items for sale included pendants (62% of the items on display) and plain bangles (24%), as well as bracelets (bead), necklaces (nearly all bead), pairs of chopsticks, a few rosaries with the familiar toggle at the base, and a pen of exactly the same design as one we saw being made in a northern village in Vietnam in 2015 (Vigne and Martin 2016) (Table 8). They were all displayed in the top of new-looking display cabinets, and clearly laid out to attract customers, indicating that the vendors had no fear of inspectors preventing this trade. Ivory

dominated the items on display for retail sale in this casino, and all items looked recently made. The casino surroundings were lavish, encouraging the gamblers to enjoy themselves in an atmosphere of wealth, extravagance and spending.

In the first outlet items were labelled by hand in US dollars and in the second stall they were labelled by hand in yuan. The first outlet was more expensive: a pair of chopsticks was USD 220 as opposed to 1150 yuan or USD 169 in the second; a thin bangle was USD 120 versus USD 63 in the second. For an expensive casino, prices were very reasonable. The cheapest item was a pendant for USD 4 and the most expensive was a wide, thick bangle for USD 700 (Table 9). The items lacked expensive packaging, helping to keep prices down. Chopsticks were held together with rubber bands in pairs and, in the second outlet, some items, such as certain bangles and pendants, were kept clean in sealable little plastic bags. No customers were buying items during our visit as they were all at the gambling tables. The majority of people at that time were from Thailand; they were not wealthy, judging by the number who had arrived in Thai minibuses in the car park.



*This ivory pen was selling for USD 300 and the chopsticks for USD 220 for a pair.*



*Priced in yuan, the large bead bracelets were the equivalent of USD 371.*

## Customers and vendors

The resort was refurbished five years prior to our visit, we were told, and is preparing to expand the business, with more Chinese residents expected in Laos. The Chinese are investing a lot and the Lao government has been steadily opening up the country to Chinese developers. Resorts and casinos such as this one have growing potential, with more Chinese residents and tourists expected to come and spend money. There are increasing numbers of Chinese hotels and restaurants in Laos; the Chinese traders know what the Chinese tourists like and

cater to their tastes. The increased Chinese presence is thus likely to stimulate business activity in this resort, vendors believe. The Chinese like endangered wildlife products, including ivory. People in Vientiane commented that if you want to open a shop to sell carved ivory jewellery, this resort was a good location, as it attracts many Chinese and others with money, and is only an hour's drive north of the capital. It is a popular resort due to its location on a beautiful reservoir, and it is also near a zoo; so the area has potential to grow in terms of trade and prosperity.



*The Savan Vegas casino did not have shops selling ivory as this casino is visited mainly by Thai gamblers, not Chinese.*

## *Savannakhet*

Savannakhet is located in the southwest of Laos, a region that was part of the Champa Kingdom from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> century, the Khmer Kingdom until the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and the Lane Xang Kingdom in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Situated on the eastern bank of the Mekong River, Savannakhet (see map) was probably founded around the 17<sup>th</sup> century and, as time went on, it became an important trading post between Thailand and Vietnam. During the French era in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the town was developed as the administrative and commercial centre of southern Laos. Some French architecture still remains. It is also an important tobacco producing area. In January 2007, the opening of the Second Lao–Thai Friendship Bridge across the Mekong River boosted trade in the town and province, strengthening trade links with Thailand in the west and through to Vietnam due east. In recent years the growth in trade with Thailand has improved the economy of the region. The town is the third largest in Laos with a population of 67,000, and is capital of Savannakhet Province.

In Savannakhet we saw no retail outlets displaying ivory, apart from two jewellery shops that claimed eight amulets for sale were ivory. However they could not be positively identified as ivory products and, like other amulets seen (mainly in Vientiane), they were not included in the survey.

In Savannakhet we visited the Savan Vegas Hotel and Casino in case ivory items were for sale here. This casino attracts Thais from across the border, but, as we learned, not the wealthy Chinese gamblers as it is too far south for them to come compared to other casinos. This casino was built primarily for the

Thai market and free shuttles bring the Thais here to gamble (as they are not allowed to gamble in Thailand). The Thais are keen gamblers, but there were no shops in the casino area for them.

In the small town centre was a market with gold jewellery stalls and there were other gold jewellery shops along the main street. These only sold the tiny Lao amulets seen elsewhere (142 in 14 shops). In two of these shops, the vendors tried to sell to us an amulet as ivory for 3,500 baht or 835,000 kip or USD 100. They usually sell bone amulets, they said, but some gullible Thais who come to visit believe that Lao amulets are good quality and may be ready to believe they are made of ivory. Dealers bring these amulets to the shops in the town and sell them wholesale for 300 baht (USD 9) without a cover; the vendor we interviewed said she sells them to her customers for 100,000 kip (USD 12) making a USD 3 profit. They cover them in plastic to prevent them from going yellow, she explained. Some are encased in gold leaf. The gold jewellery was selling for USD 690/g and, as in all big towns in Laos, there were many gold jewellery outlets with a large variety of gold necklaces and other gold jewellery for sale to the Lao women, who like to wear gold, but not ivory.

The town does not have famous historical sites to attract the wealthy Chinese sightseers. Chinese vendors, who can gauge the market well, have thus not opened shops to sell in downtown Savannakhet. Most of the Thais who come for entertainment or to shop in Savannakhet do not want ivory items. They prefer to purchase good-quality gold jewellery, at cheaper prices than in Thailand. So far, there has been a lack of demand for ivory due to the absence of Chinese visitors.

## *Ivory in Pakse*

Pakse is located 242 km south of Savannakhet in southwest Laos at the confluence of the Xe Don and Mekong rivers (see map). It was the capital of the Lao Kingdom of Champasak until 1946 when the Kingdom of Laos was formed. It was developed by the French as an administrative outpost in 1905. The town, capital of Champasak Province, has the second largest population in the country (about 88,000 people) and serves as a major transport and commercial hub for the region. The construction of a 1,380 m bridge built with the Japanese over the Mekong River and completed in August 2000 provides the town with links to neighbouring countries.

In the old single-storey covered market built by the French, a number of gold jewellery stalls sold the usual cheap Lao amulets/pendants (22 outlets with 190 amulets). Thai visitors, as in Savannakhet, sometimes buy them here thinking they are ivory, and vendors may also be fooled as to what is ivory, bone or plastic. Being so small and generally within a casing it is hard to tell. A bone amulet with no case was 20,000 kip (USD 2) and with a plastic container 30,000 kip (USD 4), while an amulet in a gold case cost 80-90,000 kip (USD 10 on average). Thais buy these to leave as offerings at temples to the *Nam Kwak* deity. Ironically many of these small pendants

are apparently made in Thailand and brought to Laos for sale, but Thais like to buy them here as souvenirs, we were informed. Thai tourists like to cross the Mekong River by bridge to shop here for jewellery, preferring the Lao gold to Thai gold as in Thailand it can be mixed with copper to make it heavier, a vendor explained.

In this market there were three outlets with 13 ivory items for sale. One was an antique outlet and two were jewellery stalls. The antique stall displayed four old-looking average-sized ivory bangles priced at USD 100-500 (average USD 300) each, and four old ivory bead necklaces, two with 0.5-cm beads for USD 300 each, and two with 1-cm beads for USD 500 each. A nearby jewellery outlet displayed a 4-cm high ivory Buddha figurine but the vendor would not give a price. She was also selling four small Buddha pendants similar to those made in Cambodia that are slightly larger than the amulets for sale in Laos.

In Pakse, Chinese traders have not opened souvenir outlets for the Chinese to buy ivory, as there is not enough interest to attract Chinese tourists to Pakse. Thai shoppers are not very interested in ivory, preferring gold. Thus there is currently no interest among Chinese vendors to come here to sell ivory.



*In Pakse in the south, only a few oldish ivory items, mainly jewellery as seen here, were for sale.*



*Wat Ho Pha Bang, a multi-roofed temple, is one of several with very fine workmanship that attracts thousands of tourists to Luang Prabang.*



# *Luang Prabang*

## History and background

**L**uang Prabang, (see map) is surrounded by rugged green, thickly forested mountains and located 390 km north of Vientiane by road at the confluence of two rivers that almost surround the town. From 1353 it was the capital of the first Lao Kingdom that was then appropriately called Lan Xang - land of a million elephants. At the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Luang Prabang became a militarily weak independent city state that paid tributes to the surrounding kingdoms. Chinese invaders sacked the town in 1887 and this led to the Luang Prabang monarchy having to accept French protection, whose influence led to the construction of many French colonial buildings that still stand amongst the traditional Lao wooden architecture, golden-roofed temples and Buddhist monasteries. Luang Prabang fell into decline after the withdrawal of the French and further declined with the end of the Luang Prabang monarchy in 1975. Following the reopening of Laos for tourism in 1989, the town was elevated to UNESCO World Heritage status in 1995. The old buildings were carefully restored and increasing numbers of tourists are now attracted to the many small boutique hotels. Tourists come especially to see the Royal Palace and over 30 Buddhist monasteries. The growing tourist presence has encouraged a revival of traditional Lao

craftwork, and the re-emergence of small workshops producing silver items, textiles, paintings, lacquer work, wood carvings, and other handicrafts (but not ivory carvings). The Royal Family, over the centuries, had supported handicrafts, but the communist revolution in 1975 had put an end to many of them (Anon. 1987).

In recent years the crafts industry has rebounded and the tourism industry is now the major source of income for the people of Luang Prabang, who today number 75,000. Some Lao share shops in Luang Prabang with western business people who have settled in the town to enjoy its tranquil pace of life. Lao and western talents have combined to create attractive boutique hotels and arts and crafts shops to suit the taste of the many tourists, while Buddhist monks continue their traditional life in the temples. Tourists and monks live in harmony in the town, side by side.

In the mid-2000s, Chinese visitors saw the potential in opening shops and hotels in Luang Prabang and the number of Chinese businessmen based in the town has increased. The main high street now has numerous Chinese shops.



*At the entrance to Wat Ho Pha Bang amongst the ceiling mouldings is a mahout climbing onto his long-tusked male elephant.*

## Retail outlets, ivory items for sale and prices

The count revealed 21 retail shops in Luang Prabang with 4,807 ivory items seen on view for sale or an average of 229 ivory objects per outlet (Table 3). All the shops selling recently-made ivory items were Chinese-owned and run by Chinese, and the vast majority of sales of ivory were to Chinese visitors. Apart from a few shops selling antiques, Lao-owned outlets for tourists sell local handicrafts, not ivory items.

Most souvenir outlets are located among shops lining Sisavangvong Road, the old main street on the peninsula. The street runs the length of the old town and is famous for its Night Market. Lao vendors set up stalls on sides of the road in the late afternoon for tourists to shop in the evenings for cheap souvenir handicrafts. No ivory items were seen in these stalls.

Most of the shops in the town with ivory were souvenir shops (13), with an average of 344 recently-made ivory items per outlet. These were followed by antique shops (6) that sold an average of 20 old items per outlet. There were also some new ivory items seen in an expensive Chinese jewellery shop and a Chinese shop specialising in wood carvings (Table 10). In addition to Chinese shops located along the old main street, there were some others in other parts of the

town that sold ivory and other items to the Chinese.

As these outlets cater primarily to tourists, they sell mainly small ivory items that are easy to carry in suitcases. By far the most numerous ivory items were pendants (47%), followed by bangles, necklaces, rings, bracelets, rosaries, and earrings. There were also figurines and some larger figures, old knives, chopsticks, name seals, cigarette holders, charms, combs and a few miscellaneous items (Table 11). The antique shops were scattered about in the town and sold varied items, but the Chinese outlets all sold the same types of recently-made mass-produced ivory items, like those seen elsewhere.

Of the nearly 5,000 ivory items counted in this town, nearly all were recently made with less than 200 old items observed in antique shops. Most of the ivory antiques were unusual amulets from Southeast Asia and old Lao knives with ivory handles. These knives were common among the elite of Laos long ago. The only other old ivory utility items or carvings seen were in the Palace Museum: eight silver swords with ivory handles used by the King's bodyguards, a silver dagger with an ivory handle, seven royal seals made of ivory, and various ivory 'gifts' from Chinese and Indian dignitaries given to King Sisavang Vong (who abdicated in 1975).



These typically shaped ivory tooth pendants were priced at 400 yuan (USD 59) and 280 yuan (USD 41), according to size.



*A Chinese vendor demonstrates how torchlight distinguishes the best quality ivory that shows a so-called egg-yolk glow. The colouring can affect the item's price per gram.*

Ivory objects in the shops were sometimes priced in US dollars and in yuan, and only very occasionally in baht or kip. Most shops had no price labels on their items. Sometimes common items such as pendants were priced per gram and the weight was shown on the base of each item so that the price could be calculated. The common Chinese-style round plain pendants with a hole in the middle were quoted in one outlet at either USD 4/g for items at one end of a cabinet or USD 7/g for items at the other end. The price depended on the quality of the ivory. The expensive ivory had a pink-orange hue when a torch was shone into the ivory and was said to be from the solid upper part of the tusk that the vendor said was more valuable. Prices quoted by weight for items varied in different shops from USD 3/g to USD 8/g. The less expensive pendants, when carved, were made by computer-driven machines. As noted above, machine-made items can be churned out rapidly and much less skill is required, compared to those made by Vietnamese craftsmen with electric tools (dentist's drills). But it was hard for the untrained eye to tell

the difference between the two in the dimly-lit shops. Many of these objects looked very similar to those produced in the northern villages of Vietnam. There were a few pens for sale of exactly the same kind as those we saw being made by Vietnamese artisans in late 2015 (Vigne and Martin 2017).

Although the recently established Chinese outlets were all fairly similar in terms of size and contents, and most were in the same part of town, prices sometimes varied considerably, with some vendors offering very reasonable prices and others trying their luck at higher prices. There were no very valuable items. The least expensive item was a thin ring for USD 3 and the most expensive one a wide bangle for USD 988 (Table 12). There were some ivory figures, mostly in one of the main shops selling ivory, but their prices were not disclosed to us. The vendor was suspicious of anyone who was not a Chinese buyer. This shop appeared to be the busiest, in terms of numbers of customers, with groups of Chinese observed buying items on each of several visits.



*Plain round pendants are popular among Chinese customers.*

## Customers and vendors

Chinese traders have been moving into the town in large numbers since 2010 and at an increasing rate since the Chinese New Year of 2013. In 2013, there were two shops that had been set up by a Chinese husband and wife team, each running one shop, both displaying worked ivory for sale (Vigne 2013a,b). On this visit we found 15 Chinese shops, selling ivory, souvenirs, jewellery and wooden items. There had been a boom in sales to Chinese tourists around 2014/15, Chinese vendors informed us, but it had levelled off by the time of our visit.

The Chinese typically come across the border on holiday as a family in a camper van, and then find Luang Prabang is a good place to sell their wares to tourists, so they start with mobile shops and then perhaps rent a small hotel, restaurant or gift shop to make more money. Some local people welcome their rent as they get more money from the Chinese, perhaps USD 1,000 a month for a shop the size of a large bedroom. The astute Chinese traders then sometimes divide the shop into two and rent one half to another Chinese, thereby getting their own space rent-free. The growing number of Chinese shops and the popularity of ivory items in these shops is a sign that business has indeed been good for the Chinese. Local Lao people, however, are starting to resent the increased number of Chinese souvenir shops. They say the Chinese are taking over prime areas to make money for themselves, with no benefit to the Lao people. An antique vendor lamented: ‘the Chinese here are defacing the Lao culture here with a Chinese

takeover and it must not get worse, but there is nothing we in Luang Prabang can do to fight it as the government allows it. The growing Chinese influence is spoiling this famed UNESCO World Heritage town, renowned for its traditional Lao culture.’

There is a general feeling of discontent about the growth in Chinese shops amongst the tour operators in the area too. Lao working in adventure travel outlets along the Sisavangvong Road explained that Lao-run businesses can only pay rental monthly or annually in advance, whereas the Chinese can pay rental for several years up front. ‘There are other foreigners who join local people to share a business together so they are popular, but the Chinese do not do this – they only benefit themselves,’ a local complained. When the Chinese come to Luang Prabang they keep to themselves, staying at Chinese-run hotels and restaurants. Some Lao artisans based in nearby villages were also concerned that the Chinese were taking business away from them; one said that if the Chinese came into his village he would leave, as the competition would become too great.

Chinese souvenir shop owners sell Chinese and Vietnamese wares, sometimes staying for about three to four years; when they are established they may find other Chinese to come and manage their shop. The vendors spend from about 8 am to 11 pm on the shop premises, sometimes resting behind a curtain in the back watching television or with their young children, as these are often family-run businesses. A husband

and wife may take it in turns to sit at the desk to help customers and supervise sales. Some employ young Hmong women to assist customers. The Chinese owners prefer to employ Hmong helpers as they too are ‘outsiders’; they instruct them not to talk to Lao about business, just to give prices of ivory items to a potential buyer. Some were told to say ‘sorry no photos’. One Chinese shop owner was particularly hostile to westerners in his shop who showed any interest in the ivory or took photos. Some would guide western customers to look at other items more suitable for western buyers. Most Chinese and Hmong in these shops spoke little English; they concentrated their efforts selling to the Chinese. It was difficult to communicate with them regarding their views as they were often secretive and suspicious. For ease in business, Chinese vendors commented they may say to westerners that their ivory items are made of buffalo bone, even when the items are clearly ivory, and usher questioning customers out of the shop. Most western customers we saw said they did not ask questions about the ivory to avoid any discomfort.

Lao vendors told us that ‘the Chinese are too smart in this business; they have lots of money now. Some arrived with one shop and now have two to three shops, so their business has increased.’ Local Lao realize the Chinese all sell real ivory, and that if it is imitation they say so and quote the price for

imitation ivory. ‘If it is expensive, 90% of the time it is real.’ Chinese traders can make more money selling real ivory than selling fakes, which were far less commonly for sale.

There were no Vietnamese shop owners selling ivory and no items were priced in dong (the Vietnamese currency). But Vietnamese people do supply their ivory items to Chinese shop owners, as well as metal animal figurines and figures made in Vietnam, we were told. If a customer asks where the items originate, they may be told they are from Laos to encourage a sale, as tourists like to buy souvenirs that are from the country they are visiting.

Lao antique vendors have also increased in number in recent years. They are aware of the difficulties western tourists face bringing legal antiques (not ivory) into their home countries. Ironically, one vendor said that he could write a letter to say that the antique object was not an antique to help the buyer avoid complicated customs procedures. Among antiques containing ivory, the traditional Lao knives were the most numerous. Large ones, called power knives, were worn in the past by Lao men as a symbol of power; small ones, called magic knives, were made by monks and given to people to thank them for donating money to the temples. But like most antiques, these are becoming very scarce.



*This shows a typical display of ivory items on open view in the Chinese souvenir shops of Luang Prabang.*

Their production was stopped following the 1975 revolution and they are no longer being made today. One vendor did not want to sell certain old Lao items that were in a glass cabinet, as they had been inherited from her father.

Chinese vendors who had first settled in the town selling ivory items commented that they had been affected by the recent Chinese economic slowdown and had reduced their prices by at least 20% in the last year or so, compared with earlier years (Vigne 2013a,b). But most Chinese vendors (who were newer to the town) were more positive, offering their items at higher prices. They were confident about the future, and said they expected China to continue to invest in Laos and more Chinese visitors to come to the country to shop in years to come. A Chinese hotel in a prime location on the main tourist street had been recently refurbished, demonstrating that there is optimism about the future.

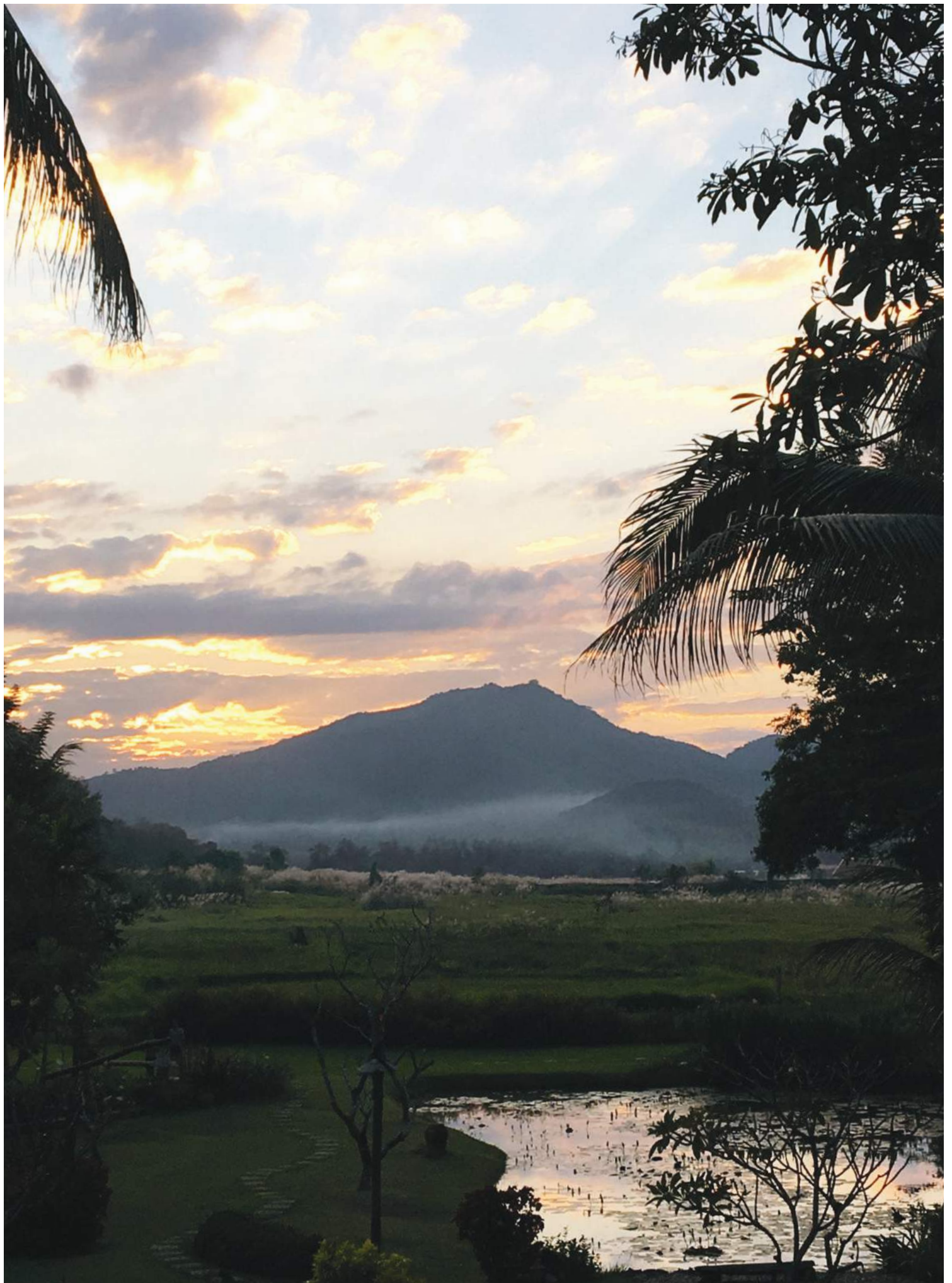
Chinese vendors are prepared to sell ivory items newly acquired from their sources in Vietnam more cheaply than before, provided they get a reasonable price, so their business is still good. This new trade route, whereby worked ivory is sent from Vietnam

to Luang Prabang for sale to Chinese tourists, has expanded rapidly since 2013, as have similar trade routes to Vientiane (Vigne 2013a,b). Jewellery is less expensive than large ivory items and is easy to hide and take into China, thus making a perfect souvenir. If caught, items can be passed off as bone, plastic, or synthetic/imitation ivory, vendors remarked. Western customers do not buy ivory, due to the much greater risk of bringing it back home. As a western tourist said, 'you would only buy it if you were very stupid as customs know exactly what it is!'

Lao gold jewellery outlets in the Da Ra market area of Luang Prabang sell traditional Lao bone pendants amongst their gold items, but not ivory. A total of 90 such amulets/pendants were seen in 9 gold jewellery shops. Vendors said that if the Lao people could afford them in ivory they would buy them, but the *Nam Kwak* amulets that they purchase are almost always made of bone or resin. One of the shops had three old Lao polished tusks mounted on silver in a glass cabinet for worship. They had been seen in 2013 (Vigne 2013a) and, as then, were not for sale; they were a Lao family heirloom. Unlike the Chinese vendors, the Lao jewellery shops are not involved in the ivory trade.



Amulets like these showing the Nam Kwak deity are usually made of bone for Lao customers.



*The timeless quality of the countryside and forested hills surrounding Luang Prabang attracts many adventure tourists, who do not appreciate seeing Chinese shops selling ivory.*



*In Oudom Xay, a couple of new Chinese shops were selling ivory items. Improved roads are opening up this northern region of Laos to neighbouring China.*

## *Ivory in Oudom Xay*

This region, known as the ‘heart of northern Laos’ has a famous and sacred temple that was built in Oudom Xay about 2,000 years ago. The modern province of Oudom Xay was established in 1976 when it separated from Luang Prabang Province. The town of Oudom Xay (see map) was formed by joining together a number of small villages and is located at an important intersection en route between China and Vietnam. In recent years it has grown as a main transport junction for vehicles going to the north, east, south and west. As a result of its proximity to China, the province has experienced rapid economic growth and infrastructure development, especially around the provincial capital.

The survey found five retail outlets in the town centre selling worked ivory, with 93 items on display for sale, or an average of 19 ivory objects per outlet (Table 3). There were two Lao outlets in the gold jewellery market with 10 items, consisting of three new bangles and the rest old knives. Most items (64) were displayed in one new outlet in a recently built hotel, selling new jewellery designed

for Chinese tastes. Nearby there was another recently established Chinese shop with the usual teas and herbs that also had some endangered wildlife products for sale, including ivory (18 items). There was also one Lao antique shop with an old ivory item for sale. The most common ivory objects seen for sale were pendant necklaces (23) and pairs of earrings (22), followed by bangles (17) and pendants (17).

The town, being located at a crossroads for drivers coming and going from China and Thailand, is thus well positioned for trade in items from endangered wildlife that the Chinese like, that may originate from Thailand, Myanmar or Vietnam. Chinese traders, however, prefer to sell ivory items in the cities and larger towns where Chinese tourists go to spend money, as opposed to selling to those passing through Oudom Xay. But there are more Chinese businessmen coming to stay in the town for conferences nowadays, hence the two new outlets that have emerged selling the usual kinds of recently-made ivory items.



## *Ivory in Luang Nam Tha*

Luang Nam Tha (see map), the capital of the province of the same name, is situated 50 km south of the China border. Like much of Laos, the region has witnessed many battles for domination by various powers over the centuries. The town itself was rebuilt in 1976 following the previous town's destruction during the Second Indochina War and by flooding. The new town was constructed 7 km away from the original town, based on a grid layout, and is surrounded by green paddy fields. The province is an important rubber and sugar cane producing area. Chinese encouraged the Lao to cut down indigenous forest to grow these cash crops, promising good returns, but in the last couple of years, prices have fallen due to the increased supply of rubber, and some Lao are regretting their decision to cut down their forest areas.

In Luang Nam Tha there were only two outlets displaying a total of 16 ivory items for sale (Table 3). These were both in the main market and were jewellery outlets selling the usual kind of Lao gold jewellery. Both sold old knives with ivory handles

but had no new ivory items for sale. Luang Nam Tha is a popular town for young western backpackers and adventure travellers enjoying ecotourism, especially hiking, in the surrounding forested hills. These travellers do not come to buy luxury goods, such as ivory, and the town has few souvenir shops compared to Vientiane and Luang Prabang with their World Heritage attractions.

Luang Nam Tha has a small casino in a luxury Chinese hotel, but the rich Chinese gamblers who can afford to buy ivory prefer to go to the big casino in Kings Romans on the northwest border of Laos. Ivory items were seen for sale in a Chinese outlet in Luang Nam Tha when the casino in the nearby town of Boten was open (see below) and gamblers' wives sometimes made day trips to Luang Nam Tha, according to an informer familiar with the area. Following the closure of the casino in Boten in 2011 there was less reason for Chinese to come to shop in Luang Nam Tha, and no Chinese vendors are marketing ivory items in the town today. This could change when Boten becomes a large trading centre.



*In Luang Nam Tha, these antique Lao silver knives with ivory handles were for sale in gold jewellery shops in the market, but no new ivory items were seen for sale.*

## Boten

Boten (see map) is on the border with China and is a major stopover point for lorries carrying goods through Laos between China and Thailand. The town has a history of trade in illegal wildlife products. In 2003, a Hong Kong company signed a long lease with the Laotian government to establish a special economic zone to be called Boten Golden City and construction started the following year. Many Chinese from across the border came to the Golden Boten casino and the town became a den of inequity. All sorts of illicit trade and gangster activities went on unnoticed in this trans-frontier ‘cowboy’ town tucked away on the Laos-China border, along with entertainments designed to make money from the pleasure-seeking wealthy Chinese. Gaming halls proliferated, along with rows of shops and prostitutes, including Thai lady boys. There was an active ivory trade during this period and also a bear farm producing bear bile that vendors freely sold, mainly to whisky-drinking Chinese gamblers who believed that bear bile was good for the liver.

Boten’s population reached a peak of 10,000 people by 2010, but shortly afterwards everything was to change. In December of that year, casino staff were found to be holding a number of Chinese customers as hostages until they could pay their debts, and there were also rumours of killings in the town. As someone

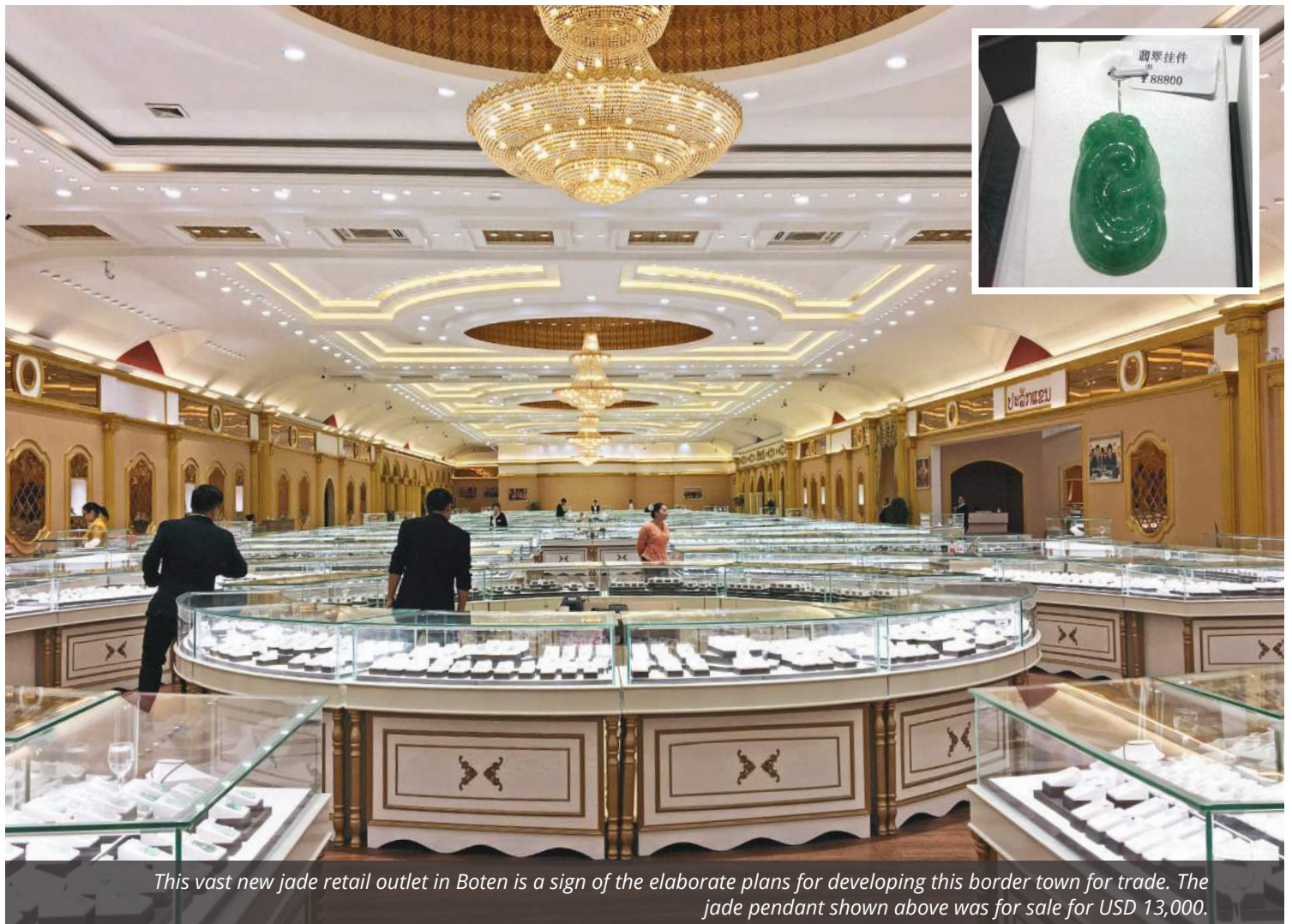
from the region explained to us ‘casino owner mafia were involved in killing Chinese businessmen players over unpaid money’. The Chinese government exerted pressure to close down the casino and this duly occurred in April 2011. A final blow to the town took place with the introduction of strict visa rules for Chinese tourists (Gluckman 2011; *The Economist* 2011).

The wildlife trade collapsed, along with nearly all the hotels and many other buildings. By the end of 2011 the trade in ivory had essentially ended after the closure of the main casino, and nearly all the Chinese had gone. In August 2011 Nijman and Shepherd (2012) found only one shop with 12 ivory items, which was still there in 2013 (Karl Ammann, wildlife film maker, pers. comm. November 2016).

On our visit in 2016 we found this town once again undergoing a profound transformation. Although the current population of Boten is only about 500 (Strangio 2016a), a new economic free trade zone is under construction in this important trans-frontier location, and it is clear that the town will be a much expanded trading centre when the planners, contractors and builders have finished their work. On our arrival we saw massive forest clearance and ground levelling taking place. The forests still abound



*Boten, an economic free trade zone that is situated on the Laos–China border, is a transit point for smuggling ivory. Nearby areas are being cleared of forest for expansion.*



*This vast new jade retail outlet in Boten is a sign of the elaborate plans for developing this border town for trade. The jade pendant shown above was for sale for USD 13,000.*

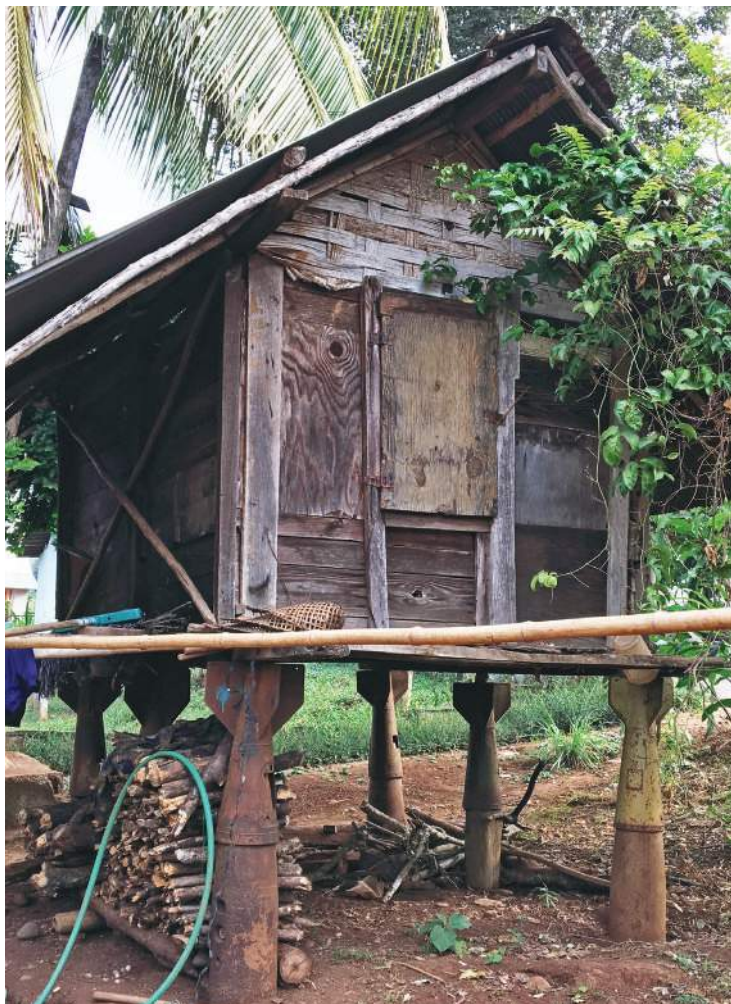
with wildlife, but disturbance in the area was great. A new building has been occupied by the architects and planners and already several other large buildings are under construction. When we arrived, work had already been completed on the largest jade outlet in the country, the size of a warehouse, with glittering modern lighting that was turned on especially for our visit. It had opened in June 2016. The huge building looked like a palace, with dozens of staff lining the many glass cabinets of jade pendants and other jewellery items, in preparation for Boten's Chinese-led expansion.

Meanwhile, the China-Laos border post continues to operate, as do the large lorry depots in Boten, which are a transit point for cargo consisting of items from Thailand and agricultural produce grown in Laos on large Chinese-run plantations for sale in China. These include bananas treated with dangerous pesticides that have given rise to much negative press coverage as they are causing massive health hazards, including deaths of tribal people working on the plantations and of fish in the Mekong River.

On our visit in late 2016, apart from those involved in its new development, the town itself felt deserted.

We saw a few Chinese gamblers in one insalubrious small casino and a few prostitutes who had come to the town to make money from the construction workers. There were no ivory items seen for sale in Boten, only several synthetic ivory bangles displayed in orange satin-lined boxes and resembling the real thing, which were for sale to Chinese construction workers at a Chinese grocery store check-out counter. The only elephant product we saw was smoked elephant skin, used by the Chinese to cure gallstones, for sale for 500,000 kip/kg (USD 61/kg).

However, vendors were optimistic about future trade. There are plans for big businesses here, vendors exclaimed. When the building of the economic free trade zone is complete, the area will be opened up even more than before to the Chinese. It is not clear how the vast newly-developed Boten, when complete, can be kept free of crime and avoid becoming a hub for the ivory trade, without effective controls to stop ivory illegally crossing the border into China. So trade in ivory and in other illegal wildlife products could become even more widespread than before, if the activities of traders are not carefully monitored and laws are not enforced.



*These two rice stores in private gardens in Huay Xai are supported by stilts made of old bomb cases that were dropped by US aeroplanes during the Secret War.*

## *Huay Xai*

Huay Xai (see map), capital of Bokeo Province, lies on the banks of the Mekong River in the northwest of Laos opposite Chiang Khong in Thailand, and is the northernmost border crossing between Thailand and Laos. A ruined French colonial fort stands on a hill in the centre of the town. It was allegedly the home to a US heroin processing plant during the Secret War (1963–1973) and there has been a long-standing illegal trade across the borders of this region, known as the Golden Triangle, for quite some time. The Fourth Lao-Thai Friendship Bridge was opened here in December 2013, replacing the old ferry service and opening up a new route for through trade between Thailand and Laos, and onwards north to China.

Huay Xai has a number of gold jewellery outlets in its market. We saw no ivory items on display for sale, only the usual small Lao bone and resin amulets. Ivory had been seen in the town before (Nijman and Shepherd 2012), but vendors said that all ivory amulets had been bought up by Thai shoppers and there were none left. We counted only nine bone amulets in five gold jewellery outlets. We did see two

Chinese men buying four tiger teeth in a curio shop that a verification specialist came to examine in order to check their authenticity as we watched. The sale was hurriedly completed as police were seen in the square outside. As Huay Xai is a transit town for Thai and Chinese lorries, sales of tiger products and ivory may take place among traders there, but items were not offered on display for Chinese tourists. Myanmar is just a short boat trip away up the Mekong River, so Huay Xai is also a good place for traders to obtain endangered wildlife products from wild animals that still exist in the forests of Myanmar, but this trade is not conducted openly.

Similar to Oudom Xay, this town is mainly a transit point for dealers and traders passing through, not for retail shoppers. Items for sale in the market were mainly for local Lao people, not foreign tourists. The town has an airport on its northern outskirts that is the main entry point used by mainland Chinese arriving from China en route to the Kings Romans gambling resort. But these Chinese visitors do not pass through the town centre, so Chinese vendors do not cater to Chinese customers in Huay Xai.

# *Kings Romans*

## History and background

In 2007 a Hong Kong registered company called Kings Romans Group signed an agreement with the Laos government for a 99 year lease of a 100 km<sup>2</sup> (10,000 hectare) concession in Bokeo Province in northwest Laos (Fawthrop 2011). This resort, set up mainly for gambling, is on the borders of Thailand and Myanmar, on the bank of the Mekong River, and 190 km from China by air (see map). Within this concession area is a 30 km<sup>2</sup> (3,000 hectare) duty-free zone, known as the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (GT SEZ). The shareholders and management of the Kings Romans Group are mostly from mainland China (EIA 2015), and some of them are allegedly connected to the drugs trade in Southeast Asia (EIA 2015). Near to the casino area, a large Chinese hotel called the Kapok Garden Hotel has been built for the many Chinese visitors, who commonly stay for several nights. Nearby is a so-called Chinatown, built in traditional Chinese style, which was opened in 2013 (EIA 2015). This complex includes restaurants and shops.

The concession area is well protected, with security guards frequently seen driving small vehicles around the grounds, especially near the casino buildings. These grounds are still being landscaped, in accordance with the initial plans, but some buildings

and grassland areas already look run down, giving the impression that maintenance work has been neglected recently, and that there has been a slowdown in the pace of development of the resort.

The massive casino consists of two main gambling halls on the ground floor, with other gambling areas approached by a grand staircase. There are many gambling tables and slot machines. In addition to the hotel residents, the casino is open to day-trip gamblers, who mainly arrive from Thailand by boat across the Mekong River. Kings Romans has its own border post on the river bank, making it easy for visitors of various nationalities from neighbouring countries to come and go for gambling.

Chinese clients make up the majority of those who come for a few days. These clients are mostly nouveau riche Chinese from mainland China who have money to spend and find pleasure in risk-taking. They fly into the airport at Huay Xai and then are driven north along the picturesque east bank of the Mekong River up to Kings Romans. There are plans to build an airport close to the casino. For the richest and most important guests, Rolls Royce cars, stretched limousines and Hummer vehicles stand in the parking area ready to transport them to the



*Statues of Roman emperors surround the main building of the Kings Romans casino. They contribute to the lavish and hedonistic atmosphere at the resort, encouraging its nouveau riche Chinese customers to over-indulge.*

Kapok Garden Hotel next to the casino and to the Chinatown.

It is the Chinese gamblers who dominate the expensive gambling tables with their extravagant betting. All financial transactions in Kings Romans must be in yuan or baht. Neither kip nor US dollars are accepted. The official time used in the whole complex is Beijing time (that is one hour ahead of Lao time). Virtually no westerners ever come here, except for some eastern European prostitutes. There are prostitutes of many nationalities living in the Chinatown area to entertain the gamblers.

The casino area, lavishly built, and reminiscent of the casinos of Las Vegas and Macau, is surrounded along the outer stone walls by carved statues of Roman emperors. Inside large, colourful, Poussin-like paintings, glittering chandeliers, and marble floors or thick carpeting give an opulent feel and provide an extravagant setting to encouraging the gamblers. As well as gambling, the Chinese guests

have opportunities to wine and dine on endangered animals, including tiger meat and bear paws (there are breeding facilities for tigers and Asiatic black bears in a so-called zoo in the grounds). Guests can also consume tiger whisky brewed with tiger bones in a shop specializing in this expensive item. An EIA investigation to Kings Romans in 2014 and 2015 found and filmed several shops selling endangered wildlife products (EIA 2015), including new ivory and rhino horn products. In March 2015, as a result of their publicity, Laotian authorities raided four businesses selling illegal wildlife products, and burned some ivory products and tiger skin (Strangio 2016b).

Reports in the world's media give the impression of Kings Romans as a garish, gaudy, glitzy extravaganza for the many nouveau riche young and middle-aged Chinese men and women who come to the resort to let their hair down and indulge in a fantasy life of gambling, sex and overconsumption of illicit products with wild abandon.



*At Kings Romans, restaurants and shops at the recently built traditional Chinatown next to the casino offer Chinese gamblers the chance to spend yet more money, including on ivory and other illegal wildlife products.*



*New ivory bangles and bracelets for sale at Kings Romans were typical of those seen elsewhere in Laos.*

## Retail outlets, ivory items for sale and prices

There were 8 retail outlets counted with 1,014 recently-made ivory items or an average of 127 per outlet (Table 3). There were two jewellery outlets in the casino near the restaurant that displayed ivory, as well as watches and other gifts, but these had the fewest ivory items on view at the time, just 13 smallish objects (Table 13). In the centre of one of the main gambling halls was an outlet specializing in ivory, and some of the largest objects we saw were on display here. The majority were figures and smaller figurines. The area was being reorganized in preparation for the Chinese New Year, and several cabinets in the display area were empty. We learned from visitors who arrived two weeks later that more ivory items had been put out on view, filling these display areas. Some of the shops in Chinatown were also closed during our visit, with shop owners collecting items for the Chinese New Year, we were told, which is the main time for shopping for the Chinese. Not only more ivory items, but also numerous other endangered wildlife products were indeed seen by visitors there after our visit in late December (Karl Ammann, pers. comm. January 2017).

In the purpose-built Chinatown, ivory was mainly seen in shops selling Chinese teas, herbs and wood carvings. There were four shops that had 948 ivory items, or 237 per shop, openly on display (Table 13). Another shop

selling mainly imported alcohol and cigarettes also had a display of ivory objects in the long glass-topped counter cabinet, designed for easy viewing.

The ivory items on display were mostly newly-made pieces of jewellery, the kind that is most popular with the Chinese, similar to the majority of pieces we had seen in Vientiane and Luang Prabang. Once again, the largest number were pendants (22%); other items, in order of numbers observed, included necklaces, bracelets (made of smaller beads for women and larger beads for men) and bangles (all sizes worn by both men and women), followed by rings, rosaries, figures/figurines, earrings, chopsticks, name seals, cigarette holders and netsukes of humans in sexual positions (Table 14). We also saw combs and a pen, very similar to those we had seen being made for sale in northern Vietnam in 2015 (Vigne and Martin 2016). Small numbers of tusks, both carved and uncarved, were also on display. These usually consisted of the top (pointed) portion of the tusk, about 30 cm long, displayed standing upright. There were several carved figures of 20–90 cm and two large plain polished tusks. There were also composites: these are made up of lots of small pieces of ivory glued together and are not as expensive as full ivory tusk carvings. They are common in China, but we saw no others in Laos, probably because they are too



*Bead necklaces for sale in this shop in Kings Romans were priced in yuan at 3,800, 4,800 and 5,000 (USD 559, 706 and 735) according to size, but a 10% discount was offered.*



*Only synthetic ivory items were seen on display in this inexpensive open-air market near to Kings Romans that is visited by day-shoppers from Thailand.*

bulky to transport home to China. There were more large (over 30 cm) ivory carvings for sale than seen anywhere else in Laos, suggesting that the wealthiest Chinese visitors to Laos come to this resort.

Only a few ivory items were labelled with prices and these were mainly in yuan. Some had a US dollar price attached giving poor exchange rates of 6.25 and 6.6 yuan to the US dollar compared to the official late-2016 exchange rate of 6.8. Therefore it benefited customers to pay in yuan. Usually the vendor told the customer the prices in yuan from memory, but one vendor had a book in which she looked up the yuan prices, all carefully and consistently catalogued. The prices were not hugely inflated, considering Kings Romans is an isolated, trapped market for rich casino-going customers who are unable to shop elsewhere in the rural vicinity, but they were higher overall than in other locations.

Vendors did not give out prices for the most expensive figures and tusks, knowing they are too large for westerners to smuggle back home. Thin rings were the cheapest items on sale at USD 29 and a name seal in the casino area had a relatively expensive price label of USD 900 (Table 15). A vendor in a shop in

Chinatown that had a large array of items helpfully gave some prices, but when we asked the price of name seals she got suspicious as these are not used in western culture. New name seals were uncommon, as elsewhere in Laos. This was also the case in Vietnam in 2015 (Vigne and Martin 2016), where there were relatively few seen for sale, compared with jewellery, chopsticks and cigarette holders.

Nearby the Kings Romans concession area is an island called Don Sao in the Mekong River that is joined to the land on the eastern Lao side by a short causeway. Tourists of various nationalities (Chinese, South Koreans and Israelis were mentioned) come across to this island from Thailand to buy cheap bric-a-brac and clothes in an open market. There were some fake ivory pendants for sale that vendors were trying to pass off as the real thing, asking 1,888 renminbi (RMB, the official name for the Chinese currency) (USD 278) or 10,384 baht (USD 297). The vendors shone a torch into a pendant convincingly to show the so-called egg-yolk colour, the characteristic inner colour of ivory that is visible under a bright light. The Chinese are generally too discerning to fall for this trick, but no doubt some visitors to this market may be fooled into buying a fake synthetic item thinking it is ivory.



## Customers and vendors

Vendors selling ivory in Kings Romans only expect to sell to Chinese customers. They are virtually the only people who come to spend money on luxury goods in the Chinatown shops. The only non-Chinese we saw shopping for less expensive items were staff, mostly Burmese, employed in the hotel and restaurant or as croupiers in the casino (while Chinese employees handle the money). And there were also prostitutes from a variety of countries, including eastern Europeans. They are all there to make money rather than to spend it and none have any interest in buying ivory. The shop owners were all Chinese and did not speak English; sometimes they had a Burmese shop assistant who spoke no English either. To communicate with us, they displayed the prices of items on a calculator. However, the owners were usually highly suspicious of us as we were not Chinese. We learned that the reason for their suspicion was that they had caught a wildlife protectionist filming their wildlife products a year or so earlier. The film footage had already been sent out, before the person was caught, to be shown to Lao officials. Vendors still recalled with fury how their wildlife items in Kings Romans had been confiscated as a result. Therefore, we had to be particularly cautious looking at ivory in order not to offend the vendors, due to their extreme suspicion towards foreigners.

During our visits to the shops, we noticed there were cameras on the ceiling in the corners of the rooms. Sometimes on opening the shop door a bell

would ring attracting the vendor into the shop from a back room. The shop owners often appeared to be watching televisions, either at their desks in the shop or in another room. In fact the 'televisions' were monitors showing the shop from different angles and the owners were not watching films or playing games but observing what their cameras revealed. Vendors could thus check on what we were doing in the shop, making it impossible to take photographs without explicit permission. Some vendors were friendly, but others would not disclose any prices. We had to limit our time in the shops with ivory so as to avoid arousing distrust in an area that was full of security guards and where we were 'fish out of water'. Our presence was all too noticeable, since we saw no other non-Asian visitors during our four days in Kings Romans. In many cases it is advantageous being a western foreigner asking vendors about ivory as they think we are just different and curious. But here in Kings Romans the vendors' bad experience meant they were not forthcoming. But overall, trade in endangered wildlife products seemed good, with vendors getting ready to display more ivory and other wildlife products after our departure for sale over the busy shopping period of Chinese New Year. There were no indications of a declining demand and it was clear that Kings Romans attracts the more 'dodgy' and wealthy Chinese who have no guilty conscience about consuming endangered wildlife products. On the contrary, they seem to get a thrill from it, being gamblers and therefore the opposite of risk-averse, while vendors are delighted to cater to their expensive tastes.



*Several Rolls Royces, as well as stretched limousines, were available at Kings Romans for the wealthiest gamblers.*



*These synthetic ivory items in a shop on Don Sao Island were selling at 480 baht (USD 14) for bangles, 380 baht (USD 11) for cigarette holders and 180 baht (USD 5) for earrings.*

## *Substitutes and alternatives to ivory in Laos*

Some shops in Laos displayed heavily bejewelled ivory jewellery. These items come from Thailand or across the river from Myanmar, vendors said. We found these bejewelled items in several shops in Laos, usually in the form of bangles and pendants. Some were made of elephant hair (and look-alike plastic) shaped into bangles and rings, again with colourful jewels. It was the gemstones that gave the item the most value, as a decorative and expensive addition to the ivory setting. Similar items were recorded in a recent TRAFFIC report on ivory in Bangkok (Krishnasamy et al. 2016a).

We only found mammoth ivory items for sale, named as such, in one small antique shop in Luang Prabang. The vendor knew they were made of mammoth ivory, although it is a substance that few people in Laos know about. There were four 3-4-cm pendants of Ganesh for USD 150 to USD 180 each, with the tell-tale dark streaks that are common in mammoth ivory. They had come from Thailand already carved. Mammoth ivory is legal in China. It comes from an extinct species and is collected in northern tundra regions, mainly in northeast Russia. So there is no need for Chinese consumers to purchase it in Laos as it is readily and openly available in shops in China.

There appeared to be an increase in jewellery items made of new types of wildlife products for the growing Chinese presence in Laos. Some amber-like pendants with translucency when held to the light were said to be made of saiga antelope horn and cow horn, but many were synthetic.

The most expensive items were those made of African rhino horn, some plain and others lightly carved by computer-driven machines. Large carved rhino horn pendants were often decorated with shallow Buddhist images, in an attempt to attract customers to this novel substance. The largest flat pendants, especially the plain ones, were often clearly recognizable as rhino horn by their dark heart/oval-shaped central core. The darker rhino horn items of jewellery were considered more valuable than those of pale horn when there were both to choose from in a shop, as in Kings Romans. Unlike small antelope and cow horns that are hollow, rhino horn is solid, and thus more versatile for making into objects. Thick rhino horn bangles were seen for sale in some outlets in Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Kings Romans, as a more expensive alternative to ivory bangles, for sale for around USD 3,000 each. These rhino horn items had not been seen for sale in Laos in the 2013 study (Vigne 2013a,b). Another new and valuable material



*Mammoth ivory items for sale in Laos show the brown colouration or streaking, typical of mammoth tusks that are thousands of years old.*

used for carving is the casque of the helmeted hornbill (*Rhinoplax vigil*), which was seen on sale, sometimes carved, in Chinese outlets in Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Kings Romans. Sometimes these casques were seen for sale beside rhino horn items, near to ivory items, openly on display. This critically endangered bird was voted onto Appendix I at the CITES Conference of the Parties in 2016 due to greatly increased demand that is wiping out the species in Southeast Asia. Its casque is made of solid keratin, ideal for carving (Krishnasamy et al. 2016b).

Wood is the most common substitute for ivory seen in most outlets selling ivory items, usually in the form of pendants, beaded necklaces, rosaries and bracelets. The most expensive wood items were made of dark scented agarwood/eaglewood or the paler rosewood. Bead bracelets made of scented woods are popular in China. Agarwood 14-bead bracelets were for sale for USD 400–500 while a rosary with small agarwood beads was around USD 160. These items are popular with Chinese men.

Lao people do not buy these alternatives to ivory, except for imitation tusks. As most Lao cannot afford

ivory tusks for their altars, some buy ‘tusks’ made of a pale wood that may sell for about USD 20 for a small pair about 20 cm long or USD 40 if double the size. Plastic/synthetic tusks for Lao altars can also sometimes be seen in shops.

There were not as many synthetic jewellery items for sale in Laos as in China and Vietnam; the Lao do not generally buy them and they are easily available in China. In any case, most Chinese visiting Laos have the money for the real thing. Imitation ivory bangles we saw were priced at USD 50 in Vientiane, a tenth of the price of an ivory bangle in the same shop. Some are displayed on red material to make them look authentic, but the prices are normally much lower. In one shop imitation ivory items were clearly labelled with prices: a synthetic 12 bead bracelet (with 2-cm beads) was USD 35, a 1.8-cm bead bracelet (with 13 beads) was USD 32, a 1.6-cm bead bracelet (with 18 beads) was USD 30, 2-cm bangles were USD 30 and a rosary with small beads was USD 30.

There were a few elephant bone pendants for sale for USD 45, lightly machine-carved on both sides. A similar pendant made of ivory in the same shop was



*The casque of the helmeted hornbill, which is listed under CITES Appendix I, is increasingly used for carving as an expensive alternative to ivory.*



*These pendants carved from expensive agarwood were selling in a Vientiane hotel gift shop for USD 350 each.*



*This rosewood pendant beaded necklace was priced at USD 75.*

USD 134. One jewellery outlet in Vientiane had two unusual marble oblong pendants on display, priced at USD 100 each. Obsidian is also popular for pendants, its dark colour contrasting with the creamy whiteness of ivory. Obsidian pendants are often made using computer-driven machines and then touched up with electric drills. Traditional hand tools are not used because they are too slow. We saw very few Chinese shops selling jade, unlike in China where it is a very sought-after material. Since jade is legal in China, there is no reason to sell it to Chinese consumers in Laos; like mammoth ivory, jade items are for sale openly in China. Sometimes necklaces are made of beads of ivory mixed with coloured beads. We also saw necklaces made of rhino horn beads alternating with agarwood beads, creating new designs that were a more expensive alternative to ivory necklaces.

There were some unusual small antique jewellery items from various Southeast Asian countries,

especially Indonesia, that were made of boar teeth and fish bone. We did not see carved hippo teeth, narwhal tusk, or walrus teeth, new or old. There is no demand in Laos for these items. Curiously, there were some imitation walrus tusks for sale in Oudom Xay. These were made of bone, with carved grooves along their length to make them look like walrus tusks. They were fitted with silver-like bases for use in Lao altars and were for sale at USD 75 a pair. The most common imitation tusks seen in souvenir shops and in Hmong traditional medicine stalls in Vientiane are made of buffalo or cow leg bones. These have been on the market for several years, and were frequently observed in 2013 (Vigne 2013a,b). There were numerous fake and imitation tiger bones and bear teeth sold as pendants, as well as a few real ones, notably in Kings Romans. There were a few elephant molars for sale, as in 2013 (Vigne 2013a), especially in Vientiane, but these are not bought by the Chinese, but by Lao for altars and use in traditional medicine.



*In 2015 scaffolding covered a large extension to Vientiane's San Jiang Chinese market, where many outlets selling recently-made ivory items can be found. The building was near to completion by late 2016.*



*The San Jiang shopping centre, geared mainly for Chinese, sells virtually everything a Chinese customer could want.*

# Discussion

## *Trends in the ivory trade in Laos*

The amount of ivory smuggled into Laos for the retail market, especially from poached African elephants via Vietnam, has increased significantly since 2012. Most ivory is sold as jewellery, and mainly to the Chinese. Jewellery in styles popular with the Chinese were the most numerous items seen for sale in 2013 and 2015 (Vigne 2013 a,b; Vigne, unpublished data). South Korean visitors were also buying some of these items in 2016, vendors said, but the most notable change had been the sharp rise in the number of Chinese visitors purchasing ivory in Laos. The first comprehensive price survey conducted in Vientiane and Luang Prabang in 2001 (Martin and Stiles 2002) did not find the kinds of ivory items produced for Chinese consumers that are so common in Laos today. At that time, the most common ivory items seen were religious amulets for the Lao people, as well as antiques and Gwan Yin (Goddess of Mercy) figures for sale mainly to visitors from Thailand, China, Hong Kong and Japan.

In late 2016, the most common outlets seen in Laos displaying ivory items were Chinese jewellery shops in locations the Chinese like to visit, especially in Vientiane, Dansavanh Nam Ngum Resort’s casino, Luang Prabang and Kings Romans (Table 16). Chinese shops selling teas, herbs and wood carvings also frequently sold worked ivory, as did Chinese souvenir shops in Luang Prabang for Chinese tourists visiting this popular UNESCO World Heritage site. Chinese luxury hotels, especially in Vientiane, also sometimes had gift shops selling mostly ivory jewellery. Although there were a number of antique outlets selling ivory in both Vientiane and Luang Prabang, they displayed the smallest number of ivory objects: 516 old ivory items or an average of 37 per outlet (Table 16). These

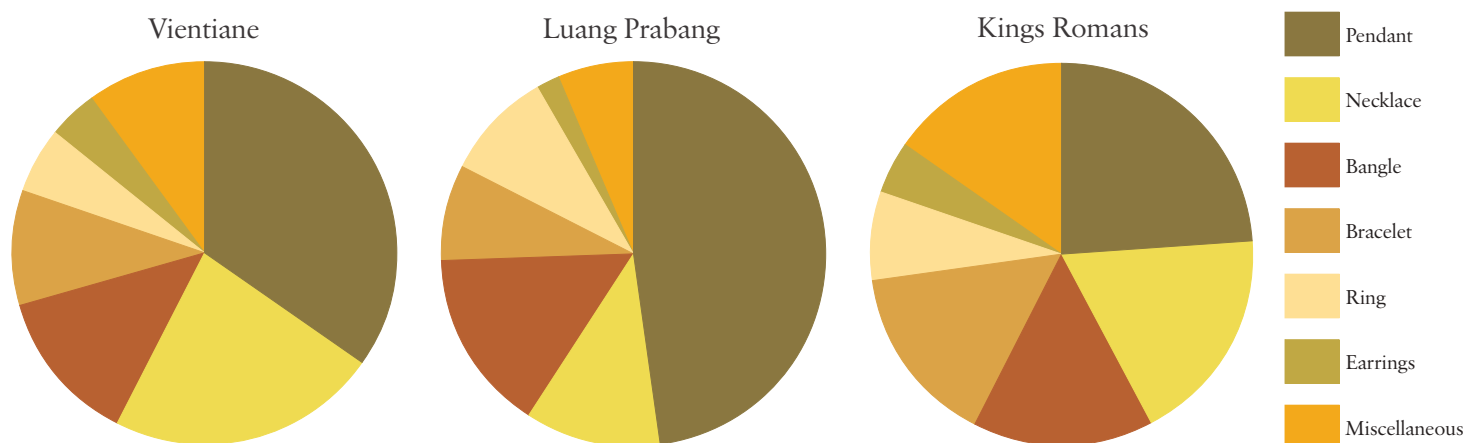
old items are not favoured by the majority of Chinese ivory buyers today. The largest numbers of ivory items were counted in souvenir shops, Chinese teas shops, Chinese hotel gift shops and jewellery shops: 10,957 items (Table 16).

Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Kings Romans had the most outlets displaying ivory items seen: 69 out of 81 shops surveyed (Table 17). In these three locations, ivory pendants were the most numerous items seen for sale, followed by necklaces, bangles, bracelets and then other items (Table 18). Chinese tourists prefer to buy small newly-carved items as these are not so expensive and are easy to carry in luggage and to smuggle out of the country when they go home.

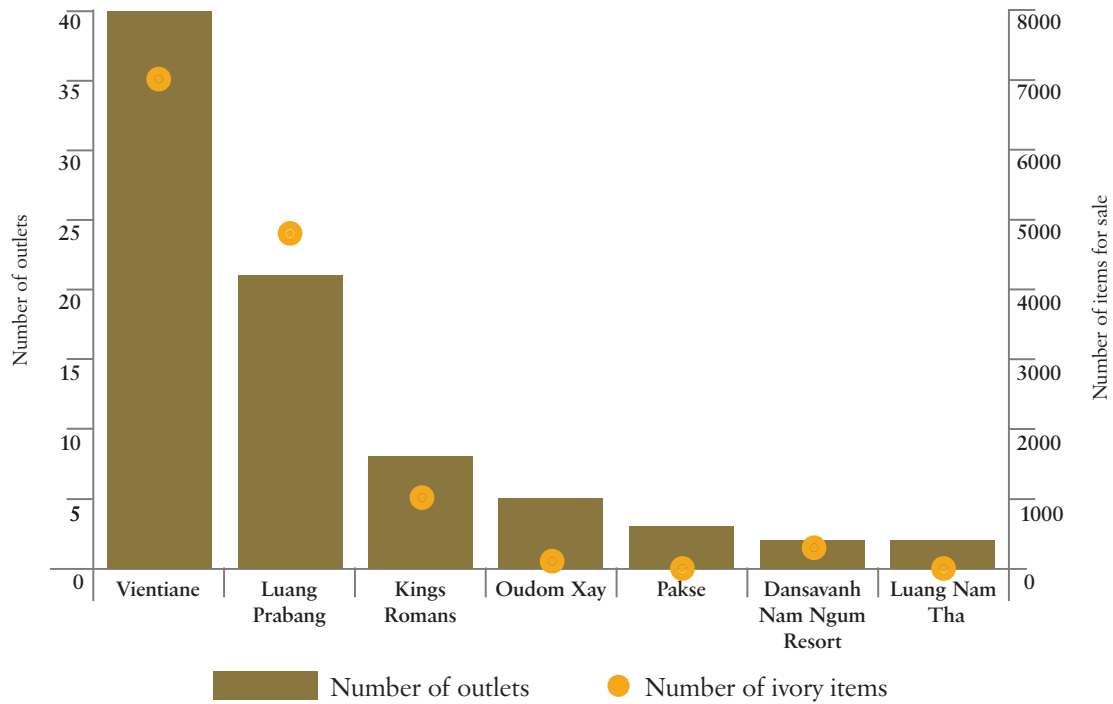
The number of outlets and quantities of ivory items on view for sale catering to the Chinese have increased very considerably since 2013, when the study found only one large Chinese ivory shop in Vientiane’s San Jiang market and two Chinese-owned souvenir shops in Luang Prabang (Vigne 2013a,b). In late 2016 there were 22 shops in Vientiane’s San Jiang market area displaying 4,069 ivory items, over half the number of ivory items seen in the city. Worked ivory dominated the front display cabinets in these shops. Chinese vendors now like to sell worked ivory along with wooden jewellery and sometimes assortments of other specialist Chinese goods, such as teas, mushrooms and wood carvings. All these items cater to Chinese culture as opposed to Lao culture. The vendors sell an increasing variety of items in order to be able to respond to fluctuating demand.

In Luang Prabang, the number of Chinese outlets with worked ivory for sale had also significantly grown

Proportions of ivory items for retail sale seen in main locations in Laos, late 2016



Numbers of retail outlets and ivory items on display for sale in seven locations in Laos, late 2016



in number, to 15 in 2016, with 4,687 ivory items on view for sale, the vast majority of items seen. Luang Prabang is an important UNESCO World Heritage site that attracts many tourists from all over the world, including a growing number of Chinese tourists (with China being so close across the border). Chinese traders are prospering in Luang Prabang, but the sharp rise in their numbers has been at the expense of the Lao shopkeepers who are starting to resent the competition.

Other towns in Laos, where there are far fewer Chinese visitors, remain unimportant for the retail ivory trade. The other locations with ivory items for sale in large numbers were Dansavanh Nam Ngum Resort and, more notably, Kings Romans. These cater to Chinese gamblers, with the richest gamblers going to Kings Romans where ivory items were more expensive overall than anywhere else visited (Table 19). Boten on the Chinese border had been a place for the Chinese to buy worked ivory when the casino was open, but the town collapsed following the closure of the casino in 2011 and there were no ivory items on view during our survey in 2016. However, it is likely that Boten will soon rise from the ashes with the opening of the economic free trade zone on the Chinese border. This will lead to a resurgence in the trade in ivory and other endangered wildlife products, unless the situation is monitored and laws against this trade are strictly enforced. Often Chinese gamblers who come to the casinos in Laos, especially Kings Romans are attracted by the debauched and illicit activities that are openly on offer in these cut-off enclaves. This is unlike Macau, where the Chinese

gamblers do not have open access to wildlife products as there is more law enforcement, and are happy to go there for the casino activities alone (Martin and Vigne 2015/2016).

The reason for the sharp increase in Chinese retail outlets selling worked ivory to the Chinese from 2013 to 2016 was explained to us by the experienced Chinese and Vietnamese dealers in Laos. Growing quantities of ivory from poached African elephants stockpiled in Vietnam needed to be sold off and traders in Vietnam needed to find new outlets to increase their sales. The upsurge in trade in Laos was not the result of the proposed ban on ivory trade in China, which was announced later, but rather a consequence of China's economic slowdown, which caused government loans to dry up around 2014 and 2015. Prior to this time China's government had been generously funding investment by Chinese businesses in major projects such as hotel and road construction. Money was plentiful, allowing some traders with money to spare to buy ivory smuggled from Africa into Vietnam for trade in China. From 2015, large consignments of illegal African ivory that were reaching Vietnam mainly for this illegal China market were being stalled in Vietnam, due to the absence of Chinese buyers, and local businessmen took it upon themselves to smuggle mainly small items of worked ivory to Laos to sell in Chinese-owned retail outlets. Laos proved to be a good avenue for sales of ivory items, with the presence of large and growing numbers of Chinese workers and tourists in the country, and many more Chinese outlets sprung up as a result around 2014 and 2015.





*Jewellery smuggled from Thailand for sale in Laos sometimes combines ivory with elephant hair, or synthetic elephant hair, along with gold and gemstones. These items can be seen in some of the more expensive retail outlets.*

Some Thai ivory traders have also been offloading ivory items from Thailand into Laos recently. With the government requirement to register ivory now in place in Thailand and the general increase in law enforcement in the country, some Thai ivory dealers have not registered all their stock, but have been selling some and exporting some of it illegally. Thus, Laos has become a 'sinkhole' for a lot of ivory on the market.

Not only worked but also raw ivory is increasingly being smuggled into Laos, especially from Vietnam and Thailand, countries that sometimes also act as entrepôts for newer African ivory. Chinese traders in Laos have been buying some of the surplus raw ivory on the market in order to make simple ivory jewellery with computer-driven machines that have been brought into the country from China especially for this purpose. The computers are becoming more sophisticated, enabling the Chinese traders to make their own ivory items much more quickly and cheaply, without the added expense of paying artisans for carving.

Nobody in Laos mentioned education or public awareness campaigns about the elephant poaching crisis influencing traders or buyers to steer clear of ivory. Nobody mentioned law enforcement being a problem for trade in Laos either. Nobody talked of the possible domestic ivory ban in China as they do not feel influenced about it, according to those in Laos knowledgeable about the subject. There were no signs of Chinese dealers moving out of China to Laos in anticipation of a domestic ban on ivory trade in China.

Chinese vendors in Laos were aware that it was illegal

to import and export ivory, but as most items for sale are small, they said it was no problem. These small illegal ivory items cross the borders freely and are openly displayed for sale in Laos. The trade goes on unhindered. There is no fast and simple way to tell if an ivory item seen is indeed elephant ivory, and some vendors and smugglers pretend their items are bone or resin/plastic, and so do not feel threatened by the legislation. Most of the ivory items look identical to one another; they are mainly bangles, processed beaded bracelets and necklaces as well as the typical ivory jewellery pendants that we saw being produced prolifically in villages around Hanoi in Vietnam in 2015 (Vigne and Martin 2016).

Vendors commented that whether or not traders and customers buy ivory was purely a matter of economics. They suggested this was not a good time to buy more ivory as prices for both raw and some worked ivory had fallen and, regretfully in their view, may fall further due to the continued economic downturn in China. There was currently a glut in ivory in Laos, they said.

Nevertheless, many Chinese retail outlets were still openly displaying ivory items. With tourism booming in Laos, and with prosperity growing due to the increasing Chinese presence, the shop owners were generally optimistic. They are waiting for China's economic upturn for the ivory business to improve and in the meantime making the best of existing opportunities to sell their stock. Laos, with its proximity to China, vague domestic legislation on ivory and lax law enforcement, is still the best place for these ivory vendors to locate their businesses.



*This typical Chinese shop selling teas, woods and herbs along with ivory items in Vientiane's San Jiang market was visited in 2015. There had been a large increase in such shops since 2013, and they were still openly selling ivory items in 2016.*

## Price trends for raw and worked ivory over time and space in Laos

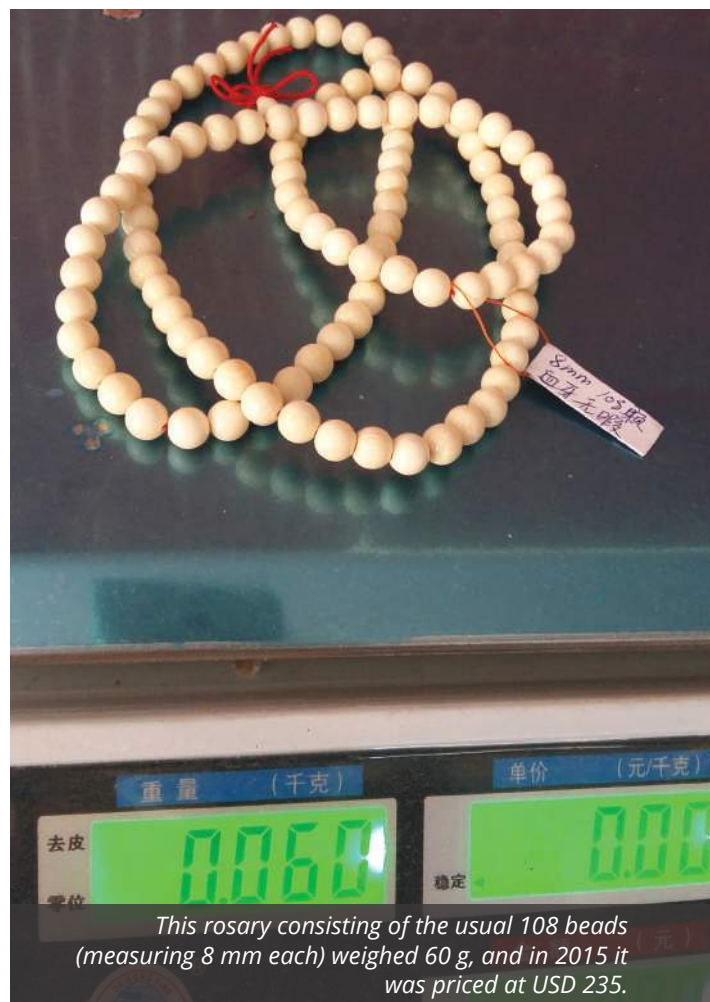
The price for raw ivory wholesale has fallen significantly in Laos. In early 2013 tusks were selling for at least USD 1,600/kg (Vigne 2013a,b) and the price had risen to USD 2,000 in late 2013, according to dealers in Laos (Table 1). By late 2016 traders were paying an average of only USD 714/kg, due to the recent glut of elephant tusks. Traders warned the price may fall further and that now is not a good time to be buying or investing in ivory. There was no difference in price for Asian or African raw ivory as the Chinese are not discerning in this regard, unlike Lao people in the past, who favoured native Lao tusks to keep uncarved and whole for worship on their altars (Vigne 2013a).

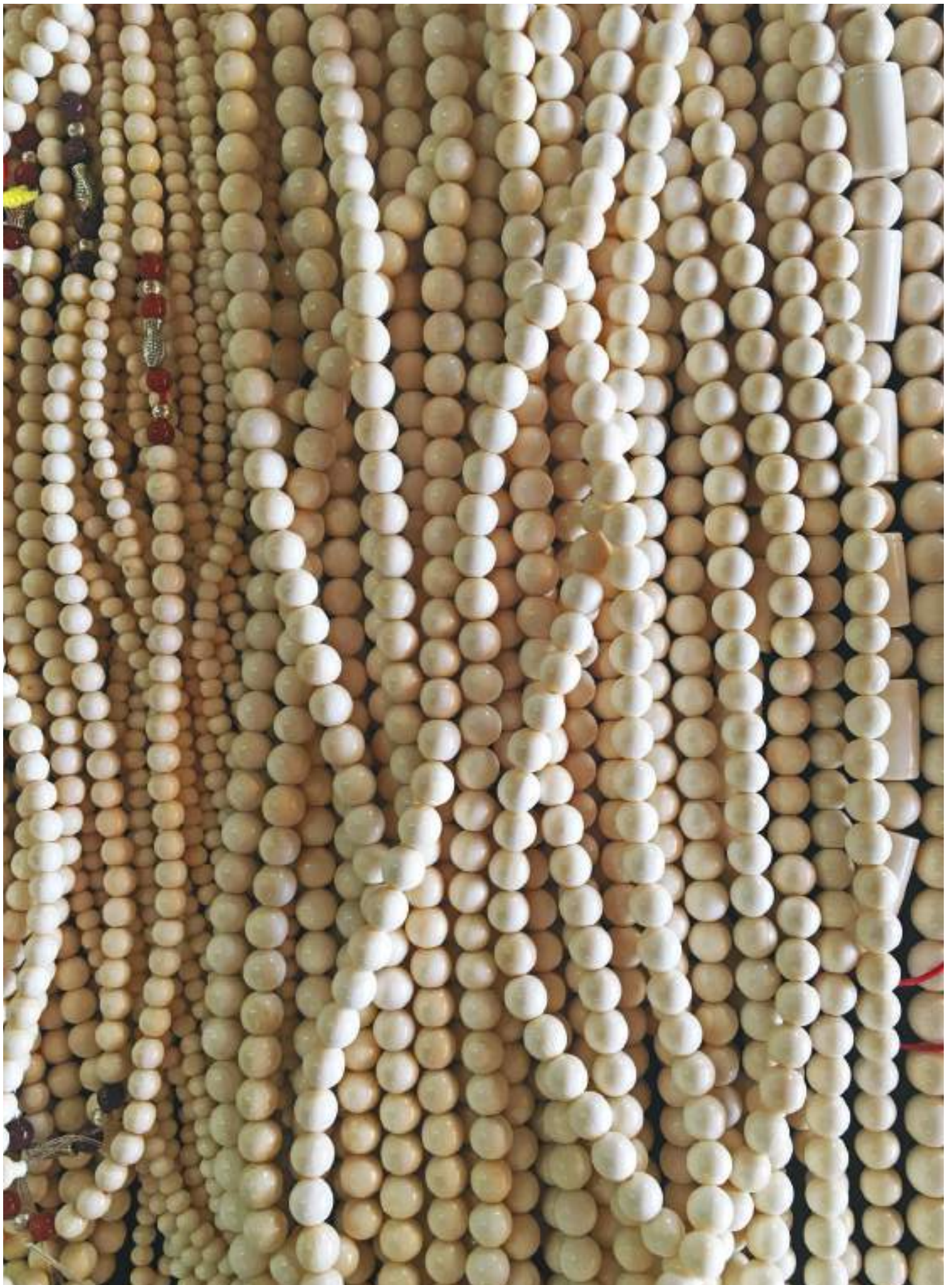
In Vientiane and Luang Prabang, there has been a huge increase in the prices of worked ivory since 2001 (Table 20). However, prices of ivory items for retail sale in certain shops revisited in Vientiane and Luang Prabang had been higher in early 2013 than they were in our late-2016 study. For example, in one shop in Luang Prabang, a pair of chopsticks was USD 480 in 2013, when they were seldom found (Vigne 2013a). The price fell to USD 350 during the boom time for sales to the Chinese, but now this same vendor was offering the same product for only USD 220. The smallest bead bracelet with elephant charms was for sale at USD 120 in 2013; in late 2015 the same item was on sale in two similar shops for USD 68 and USD 80, according to the labels. Two of these vendors complained that there was now too much competition in Luang Prabang and said they had reduced their prices; but other new vendors were optimistic and were trying to sell at higher prices to get more profit.

The Chinese in Laos know well what types of ivory items are in demand and will be bought by their Chinese customers. The relatively recently built (2013) Chinatown in Kings Romans has shops selling luxury goods, notably wildlife products, catering specifically to newly-rich Chinese, many in their 30s and 40s, with money to spare. The biggest and most expensive items were to be found at Kings Romans. Since Kings Romans is in an isolated area, away from other shops and competition, common items were also for sale here for higher prices than in Vientiane and Luang Prabang (Table 19).

In 2016 there was greater overall variety in prices for identical ivory items for sale in the main towns in Laos, partly no doubt reflecting the increased

number of outlets (Table 20). Prices not only depend on the location of the shop (some have much more expensive overheads), but also on how optimistic the vendor is about the prospects of making a sale, with new vendors generally being more optimistic. Items priced with labels by weight were generally the most reasonably priced, and prices were frequently shown in yuan for Chinese customers, who do not like to overpay and prefer to shop around carefully comparing prices before buying. Carved pendants were generally sold by weight, demonstrating that it was not the carving skill that was being paid for, as most items are now machine made, but simply the weight of the ivory. However even the price per gram for an identical looking ivory item varied considerably, sometimes in the same shop, with vendors explaining that it depended on the quality of the tusk. In most shops, vendors were prepared to bargain and offer discounts for bulk purchases. Quoted prices could be reduced in this way by at least 10% and sometimes up to 30%. Vendors remarked that overall, due to increased competition, 20% discounts were common in general.





*Processed ivory beads of uninspiring uniform shape as seen here dominate the newly made mass-produced jewellery for sale nowadays in China, Laos and Vietnam.*



*A plain pendant (weighing 18.2 g) for sale in Laos enables the customer to choose the design. If quickly computer-carved, the price may remain almost the same as for a plain pendant, in contrast to one produced by a master carver in China.*

## ***Prices in Laos compared with China, Vietnam and Sudan***

The wholesale raw ivory price in Laos has remained similar to those in China and Vietnam for illegal tusks since 2013. Overall prices of illegal African ivory are of course much higher in Asia than in Africa. The price quoted in Omdurman/Khartoum in Sudan in early 2017 was USD 279/kg (Vigne 2017), compared to USD 714/kg in late 2016 in Laos. This price differential is explained by the fact that Sudan is much closer to the source of illegal tusks, entailing lower transport costs, fewer bribes at borders and less risk of losses from seizures. However, Asian raw ivory sells for the same price as African raw ivory in Laos, since illegal traders in Laos are not interested in the source of the ivory. This includes some Asian raw ivory from old stocks in Thailand brought into Laos. There is much less ivory on the market from recently killed Asian elephants in Laos and the region as they are now so rare, due to the impact of poaching and increasing habitat destruction. The same trends are seriously threatening African elephants (Thouless et al. 2016).

Regarding retail ivory prices in the same four countries, there is marked variation, with prices for most items seen in the shops being highest in China, followed by Vietnam, then Laos and finally Sudan (Table 21). Comparing similar items, prices in China were by far the highest as most items seen are in government licensed shops that require expensive paperwork in order to display legal worked ivory, and an ID card for each item. Moreover these shops were often in luxury shopping malls (with very high overheads) catering to the newly wealthy (Vigne

and Martin 2014). Unlike in China, most worked ivory in retail outlets in Laos is illegal; on the rare occasions that illegal ivory is found on display in China, prices are more similar to those in Laos. Even with increasing discounts on many ivory items in licensed shops in China (by up to 30%, especially in Guangzhou, in late 2016 and early 2017) in order to encourage sales before the official closure of licensed shops by the end of 2017, prices in China remain much higher than in Laos. It is thus understandable that Chinese prefer to shop for ivory items in Laos. Prices in Vietnam, where the domestic trade is illegal, were a little higher than in Laos. The shops in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi have more expensive overheads than in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, and there is more risk in displaying ivory in some areas because of the greater police presence, so vendors set higher prices in order to maximise profit from individual sales. Ivory items were not so openly on display in Vietnamese cities, so Chinese tourists prefer to buy ivory objects in Laos, where they are readily on view.

Ivory items seen on view for retail sale in Khartoum/Omdurman were also far less expensive than in Laos. (Table 21). This is again because the raw tusks are more readily available in Sudan, being sourced from the nearby countries in Africa. There are still many shops selling worked ivory in Khartoum/Omdurman (Vigne 2017), competing to sell ivory items to Chinese workers, who are not usually highly paid, unlike the tourists and businessmen who purchase ivory in Laos, Vietnam and China.



*Nearly all the Chinese outlets selling ivory in Laos displayed similar small recently-made items to meet Chinese tastes. Most of these are smuggled into the country from Vietnam.*

# Conclusion

In recent years, the ivory trade in Laos has expanded more rapidly than in any other country surveyed, for one major reason: effective law enforcement and control of the illegal international ivory trade are practically non-existent in Laos. The domestic ivory trade prohibitions are not clear, nor are penalties well publicized. Laos has remained a backwater, keeping a low profile at international conferences, and has not been held sufficiently accountable on the international stage for its significant role in the ivory trade and in commerce in other endangered wildlife products. This is despite a number of articles, online reports and other major publications

that have highlighted the country's role in the ivory trade and exposed the activities of some of the country's major ivory traders. With a lack of strong and continuing international pressure to curtail the trade in ivory in Laos, and a lack of interest by the Laotian government, there has been a significant and relatively sudden growth in the ivory trade in the country. This has been fuelled by a substantial growth in the numbers of Chinese shops selling ivory items primarily to Chinese visitors to Laos since 2013. Laos urgently needs to take steps to tackle this growing problem.



*Chinese men often like to buy ivory bangles for themselves in Laos.*

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Chinese market. We also appreciate Rufus and Hector Camm's help with data input. Special thanks go to Daniel Stiles for his detailed comments on the manuscript. Thanks also go to Andrew Halliday, Pilipili Creative Ltd. and Digital Hub for editing, layout and printing respectively.



*Ivory items in Vientiane are on open display in Chinese shopping areas, including in the more expensive Chinese hotel gift shops.*

# Tables

**Table 1. Laos: Past and present wholesale raw ivory prices**

Date	Price/kg (USD)	Source
1988	100	Martin 1992a
1990	200	Martin 1992a
1991	240	Srikosamatara et al. 1992
2001	275	Martin and Stiles 2002
Early 2013	1,600	Vigne 2013a
Late 2013	2,000	This study
Late 2016	714	This study

NB: Prices shown are for a 1–3-kg piece of ivory and are not adjusted for inflation.

**Table 2. Vientiane: Main ivory items for retail sale seen, late 2015**

Item	Percentage
Pendant	24
Earrings, pair	23
Necklace	21
Cigarette holder	7
Bracelet	7
Bangle	5
Ring	5
Rosary	5
Figurine/figure	1
Chopsticks, pair	1
Miscellaneous	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

NB: These ivory items were in the Sang Jiang Chinese market, all recently made, on view in 13 outlets (shops selling jewellery, Chinese herbal teas, wood carvings, alcohol/leather/travel agents). Miscellaneous items included: name seal, charm, container, pipe, ear pick.

**Table 3. Laos: Numbers of retail outlets and ivory items on display for sale, late 2016**

Location	No. of outlets	No. of ivory items	Average no. per outlet
Vientiane	40	7,014	175
Dansavanh Nam Ngum Resort	2	291	146
Pakse	3	13	4
Luang Prabang	21	4,807	229
Oudom Xay	5	93	19
Luang Nam Tha	2	16	8
Kings Romans	8	1,014	127
<b>Total</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>13,248</b>	<b>164</b>

**Table 4. Vientiane: Types of retail outlets and number of ivory items on display, late 2016**

Outlets	No. of outlets	% of total outlets	No. of items	No. of items per outlet
Chinese tea	9	23	1,395	155
Jewellery	4	10	1,678	420
Antique	6	15	387	65
Hotel gift	10	25	1,988	199
Wood carving	4	13	220	55
Mall gift	3	8	159	53
Imported alcohol	2	5	161	81
Specialist ivory	1	2	980	980
Souvenir	1	2	53	53
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>7,014</b>	<b>175</b>

**Table 5. Vientiane: Main ivory items for retail sale seen, late 2016**

Item	Percentage
Pendant	31
Necklace	21
Bangle	12
Bracelet	9
Ring	6
Charm	4
Earrings, pair	4
Cigarette holder	3
Figurine/figure	2
Rosary	2
Chopsticks, pair	1
Name seal	1
Knife (old)	1
Tusk items	1
Container/paintbrush holder	1
Miscellaneous	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

NB: Miscellaneous items included: comb, pipe, hairclip, screen, earlobe plug.

**Table 6. Vientiane: Retail prices for recently-made ivory items, late 2016**

Item	Size (cm)	Price range (USD)	Average price (USD)
<b>JEWELLERY</b>			
Bangle, plain	0.25-0.5	75-100	88
	1-3	230-1,200	437
Bracelet, bead	1-2	180-720	443
Earrings, pair	1	30-128	55
Necklace, bead	0.5-1	440	440
Pendant, small	2-3	31-118	57
Pendant, medium	3-4	70-110	93
Pendant, large	4-6	118-320	158
Ring, thin	0.25-0.5	10-93	46
Ring, wide	1-2	70-152	111
<b>FIGURINE/FIGURE</b>			
Dragon	5	90	90
Chinese man	10-20	1,517-2,376	1,197
<b>TUSK</b>			
Carved	30	9,500	9,500
Pair plain polished	45 each	25,000	25,000
<b>MISCELLANEOUS</b>			
Cigarette holder	10	440	440
Chopsticks, pair	20	100-300	178
Paint brush holder	20	7,800-8,900	8,350

USD 1 = 8,200 kip; 35 baht; 6.8 yuan

**Table 7. Dansavanh Nam Ngum Resort: Types of retail outlets and number of ivory items on view, late 2016**

Type	No. of outlets	% of total outlets	No. of items	No. of items per outlet
Jewellery	2	100	291	146

**Table 8. Dansavanh Nam Ngum Resort: Main ivory items for retail sale seen, late 2016**

Item	Percentage
Pendant	62
Bangle	24
Bracelet	5
Necklace	3
Chopsticks, pair	3
Ring	1
Rosary	1
Pen	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 9. Dansavanh Nam Ngum Resort: Retail prices for recently-made ivory items, late 2016**

Item	Size (cm)	Price range (USD)	Average price (USD)
<b>JEWELLERY</b>			
Bangle, plain	0.25–0.5	63–120	92
	1–3	220–700	375
Bracelet, bead	0.5–1	51–100	76
	1–2	216–600	447
Necklace, bead	0.5–1	66–650	339
Pendant, small	2–3	4–8	6
Pendant, medium	3–4	150	150
Pendant, large	4–6	105–141	123
Ring, wide	1–2	150	150
<b>MISCELLANEOUS</b>			
Chopsticks, pair	20	169–220	195
Pen	14	300	300

USD 1 = 6.8 yuan (some price labels in USD, others in yuan)

**Table 10. Luang Prabang: Types of retail outlets and number of ivory items on view, late 2016**

Outlet	No. of outlets	% of total outlets	No. of items	No. of items per outlet
Souvenir	13	62	4,470	344
Antique	6	29	120	20
Wood carving	1	5	209	209
Jewellery	1	5	8	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>4,807</b>	<b>229</b>

**Table 11. Luang Prabang: Main ivory items for retail sale seen, late 2016**

Item	Percentage
Pendant	47
Bangle	15
Necklace	11
Ring	9
Bracelet	8
Rosary	3
Earrings, pair	2
Figurine/figure	2
Knife (old)	2
Chopsticks, pair	1
Name seal	1
Cigarette holder	1
Miscellaneous	(<1)
<b>Total</b>	<b>102</b>

NB: Miscellaneous items included: pen, hairpin, container, earlobe plug.

**Table 12. Luang Prabang: Retail prices for recently-made ivory items, late 2016**

Item	Size (cm)	Price range (USD)	Average price (USD)
<b>JEWELLERY</b>			
Bangle, plain	0.25-0.5	40-100	70
	1-3	300-988	626
Bracelet, bead	1-2	233-324	254
Bracelet, charm	0.5-1	68-118	89
Necklace, bead	0.5-1	150-258	202
Necklace bead and pendant		288-720	467
Pendant, small	2-3	41-91	69
Pendant, medium	3-4	134-420	251
Pendant, large	4-6	136-740	386
Ring, thin	0.25-0.5	3-10	6
<b>FIGURINE/FIGURE</b>			
Animal	5	170-450	310
<b>MISCELLANEOUS</b>			
Chopsticks, pair	20	140-220	176
Cigarette holder	5-10	140-348	213
Name seal	6 × 2	119	119
Pen	14	130-150	140

USD 1 = 8,200 kip; 35 baht; 6.8 yuan

**Table 13. Kings Romans: Types of retail outlets and number of ivory items on view, late 2016**

Outlet	No. of outlets	% of total outlets	No. of items	No. of items per outlet
Chinese tea	4	50	948	237
Jewellery	2	25	13	7
Imported alcohol	1	13	37	37
Specialist ivory	1	13	16	16
<b>Total</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>1,014</b>	<b>127</b>

**Table 14. Kings Romans: Main ivory items for retail sale seen, late 2016**

Item	Percentage
Pendant	22
Necklace	17
Bracelet	14
Bangle	14
Ring	7
Rosary	5
Figurine/figure	4
Earrings, pair	4
Chopsticks, pair	4
Name seal	3
Cigarette holder	3
Netsuke	2
Miscellaneous	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>101</b>

NB: Miscellaneous items included: tusk, comb, composite, pen.

**Table 15. Kings Romans: Retail prices for recently-made ivory items, late 2016**

Item	Size (cm)	Price range (USD)	Average price (USD)
<b>JEWELLERY</b>			
Bangle, plain	1–3	513–809	640
Bracelet, bead	0.5–1	147–264	206
Bracelet, bead	1–2	516–706	594
Earrings, pair	1	44	44
Pendant, small	2–3	110–126	118
Pendant, medium	3–4	132 (17.8 g)	132
Pendant, large	4–6	353–482	424
Ring, thin	0.25–0.5	29	29
<b>MISCELLANEOUS</b>			
Cigarette holder	10	735	735
Chopsticks, pair	20	206–265	236
Comb	10	676–706	691
Name seal	6 × 2	882–900	891
Pen	14	588	588

USD 1 = 8,200 kip; 35 baht; 6.8 yuan



**Table 16. Laos: Types of retail outlets and number of ivory items on view, late 2016**

Outlet	Total counted	Total items counted	Average no. of items/outlet
Jewellery	15	2,021	135
Souvenir	14	4,523	323
Chinese tea	14	2,361	169
Antique	14	516	37
Hotel gift	11	2,052	187
Wood carving	5	422	84
Mall gift	3	159	53
Imported alcohol	3	198	66
Specialist ivory	2	996	498
<b>Total</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>13,248</b>	<b>164</b>

**Table 17. Laos: Types of retail outlets displaying worked ivory in locations surveyed in Laos, late 2016**

Outlet	Vientiane	Dansavanh Nam Ngum Resort	Pakse	Luang Prabang	Oudon Xai	Luang Nam Tha	Kings Romans	Total
Antique	6	-	1	6	1	-	-	14
Chinese tea	9	-	-	-	1	-	4	14
Hotel	10	-	-	-	1	-	-	11
Imported alcohol	2	-	-	-	-	-	1	3
Ivory specialist	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	2
Jewellery	4	2	2	1	2	2	2	15
Mall gift	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	3
Souvenir	1	-	-	13	-	-	-	14
Wood carving	4	-	-	1	-	-	-	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>81</b>

**Table 18. Laos: Percentage of main ivory items for retail sale seen in main locations, late 2016**

Item	Vientiane	Luang Prabang	Kings Romans
Pendant	32	47	22
Necklace	21	11	17
Bangle	12	15	14
Bracelet	9	8	14
Ring	5	9	7
Earrings, pair	4	2	4
Cigarette holder	3	-	2
Figurine/figure	3	2	4
Rosary	2	3	5
Chopsticks, pair	1	1	3

**Table 19. Laos: Retail USD prices of ivory items for sale in principal locations, late 2016**

Item	Vientiane	Luang Prabang	Kings Romans
Bangle, plain, 1–3 cm	437	626	640
Bracelet, 1–2-cm bead	443	254	595
Chopsticks, pair	178	176	236
Cigarette holder	440	213	735
Name seal	-	119	891
Necklace, 0.5–1-cm bead	440	202	-
Pendant, 2–3 cm	57	69	118
Pendant, 3–4 cm	93	251	132
Pendant, 4–6 cm	158	386	424
Ring, thin	46	6	29

**Table 20. Vientiane/Luang Prabang: Retail USD prices of ivory items seen, 2001–2016**

Item	2001	2013	2015	2016
Bangle, 1 cm	30	200	195	265
Bracelet, 1–2-cm bead	-	238	355	349
Cigarette holder	30	420	187	327
Chopsticks, pair	30	382	133	177
Name seal	43	-	247	119
Pendant, 4–6 cm	-	171	556	272
Ring, thin	-	90	12	26

NB: These figures are not adjusted for inflation.

Sources: Martin and Stiles 2002; Vigne 2013a; Vigne unpublished 2015 data; this study.

**Table 21. Retail USD ivory prices in China, Vietnam, Laos and Sudan, 2015–2017**

	China		Vietnam		Laos		Sudan
	Beijing	Shanghai	HCMC	Hanoi	Vientiane	Luang Prabang	Khartoum/Omdurman
Bangle 1–3 cm	5,072	2,006	540	433	437	626	132
Bracelet, 1–2-cm bead	2,022	1,309	497	436	443	202	147
Chopsticks, pair	746	629	184	222	178	176	36
Cigarette holder	506	324	122	144	440	213	13
Earrings, pair	-	-	50	-	55	-	7
Pendant, 2–3 cm	723	564	121	72	57	69	5
Pendant, 4–6 cm	757	715	312	239	158	386	31
Ring, thin	84	97	36	96	46	6	3

Sources: Vigne and Martin 2016; Vigne and Martin 2017; Vigne 2017; this study.

# The authors

Lucy Vigne MA (Zoology, Oxford University) and Esmond Martin PhD (Geography, Liverpool University) have worked together on the ivory trade since 1983, when Esmond was the Vice Chair and Lucy the Executive Officer for the IUCN African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group in Nairobi, Kenya. Prior to this, Esmond and his wife Chryssee carried out the first detailed study on the rhino horn trade in eastern Asia in the late 1970s, and examined the world-wide trade in elephant ivory in the early 1980s. In 1980 Esmond carried out the first survey of Japan's ivory trade, at a time when this country was the main consumer of ivory in the world.

When Lucy came to Nairobi in 1983, she worked for Iain Douglas-Hamilton analysing elephant carcass data from aerial surveys. The aim was to estimate numbers of poached elephants based on the sighting of carcasses in various African countries.

Starting in the mid-1980s, Lucy and Esmond worked for WWF International to close down the booming rhino horn trade in North Yemen (and later Yemen), where African rhino horn was used for making *jambiya* (dagger) handles. This trade was responsible for the mass slaughter of eastern Africa's rhinos. Esmond and Lucy also worked together in India, drawing attention to the importance of Assam in protecting the largest population of rhinos in Asia, as well as learning more about how best to conserve rhinos in Africa and Asia. They continued to work to combat the trade in rhino horn from poached rhinos in Africa and Asia when Esmond was the UN Special Envoy for rhinos in 1992 and 1993. This work helped to bring attention to how rhino horn antiques (along with rhino horn offcuts from Yemen) were being pulverized in government factories in China to be made into traditional medicines. In 1993, the Chinese government banned the domestic trade in rhino horn, and these factories stopped producing medicines with rhino horn.

Meanwhile, Lucy and Esmond were also working on ivory trade studies. For example, they carried out a major survey of India's ivory trade in 1989, before the CITES ivory trade ban was introduced. At this time, India had one of the largest number of ivory carvers in the world. By 1990, India had stopped the international trade in ivory in accordance with CITES and, soon afterwards, the government also issued a domestic ivory trade ban. Ivory workshops collapsed and ivory items disappeared from retail outlets in India almost overnight.

From the late 1990s Esmond, Chryssee, Lucy and Daniel Stiles carried out ivory surveys and produced a series of monographs on the ivory trade in Africa (2000), South and Southeast Asia (2002), East Asia (2003), Europe (2005) and the USA (2008). Esmond and Lucy have continued to produce monographs since then on individual problem countries involved in the ivory trade, with publications on China (2011, 2014 and 2017), Hong Kong (2015) and Vietnam (2016). Save the Elephants has been the main supporter of nearly all these monographs, with help from other NGOs. Most recently, Lucy and Esmond's fieldwork in Asia has been funded generously by the Elephant Crisis Fund. This has been at a time when elephant poaching in Africa has been rife, with an alarming growth in the illegal ivory trade, due to an economic boom in Asia, especially in China, and the opening up of Africa through road construction and other developments. Corruption and the human population explosion have added to the pressures on the survival of elephants in Africa.

These recent ivory trade studies and the resulting monographs, along with additional articles and media coverage, are designed to bring attention to the public about the ivory trade. Most importantly, the monographs are also written to inform and advise governments and NGOs on where more action is needed to improve law enforcement against the illegal ivory markets, in order to protect elephant populations in Africa and Asia.



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