

Hong Kong ivory trade faces uncertain future as bans loom

By Kelvin Chan
AP Business Writer

HONG KONG — Wong Lai-ngan hunches over a battered workbench, his electric rotary tool whining as he carves two phoenixes facing each other into a smooth white tusk. Decades ago, Wong's canvas would have been elephant ivory. But since a 1990 ban on international trading, Hong Kong's dwindling tribe of ivory carvers has switched to the tusks of extinct woolly mammoths.

The decline of the city's once-flourishing ivory business is set to speed up after the Hong Kong and mainland Chinese governments announced in December plans to restrict local ivory trading. Wildlife activists hailed the news, saying domestic markets must be phased out to reduce the demand for tusks driving an epidemic of poaching that is decimating Africa's elephants.

It also signals the end for Hong Kong's ivory craftsmen and traders.

"It's pretty much all dead now," said Wong, 77, who started carving ivory more than 50 years ago. "The government has pretty much killed it all. There are no more ivory imports and there's no business going out," he said, working in flip-flops and wearing a flimsy face mask to guard against the fine white dust spewed out by his drill, coating his jeans.

Beijing plans to start shutting China's ivory carving factories and shops by March and ban local sales by the end of 2017. Hong Kong's blueprint would end local trading by 2021. Those moves are raising pressure on European countries to do the same.

Researchers say Hong Kong is the world's biggest retail ivory market. It's also a hub for illicit trading of all sorts of endangered wildlife. Customs officers make regular busts of illegal shipments of ivory, rhino horns, and pangolin scales destined for the Chinese mainland.

The crackdown on ivory is driven by concern over the mass slaughter of Africa's



elephants to meet demand from China, the world's biggest ivory consumer. According to one recent study from 2007 to 2014, the continent's savannah elephant population fell 30 percent, to 352,000.

Chinese traditionally have prized ivory carved into bracelets, chopsticks, and figurines. Rising demand from the country's growing middle class has driven up prices, earning it the nickname "white gold." A one-off auction of African ivory to Japan and China in 2008 also unintentionally helped fuel demand.

Hong Kong has 72 shops whose licenses to sell ivory were obtained before the 1990 ban, according to a 2015 survey by Save the Elephants. Most buyers are mainland Chinese, who smuggle it back home, it found.

There are also 386 legally registered ivory traders in the city, according to government data. Activists suspect some traders use their legal stockpiles to "launder" illegal ivory. They worry that the four-year gap between the enforcement of China's ban and Hong Kong's could encourage this.

The problem "will be even more serious because as China is squeezing out their domestic trade, Hong Kong is still having

an open market," said Cheryl Lo, a wildlife crime officer at the World Wildlife Fund. Traders in mainland China could use Hong Kong to liquidate their stock or to ship it to other markets such as Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand, which have fewer restrictions, she said.

The time lag "will become a severe enforcement headache for Chinese customs officials along Hong Kong's border," said Alex Hofford, a campaigner with WildAid. "So it's up to the Hong Kong government to decide if they want to align with Beijing, or risk undermining mainland environmental policy from 2018 onwards."

Hong Kong's traders say five years is not enough time to sell off their inventory. They want compensation if they have to give up their 75-ton stockpile of legally registered ivory worth billions of dollars. Officials have indicated that's not an option.

Wong's employer, Daniel Chan, managing director of Lise Carving and Jewellery, says he doesn't know anything about illegal ivory. Chan's workshop is filled with hundreds of unsold shrink-wrapped ivory carvings of dragons and Buddha figurines.

Department stores stopped selling

DYING ART. An ivory sculpture of the Chinese goddess Guanyin is displayed at Lise Carving and Jewellery workshop in Hong Kong. The decline of the city's once-flourishing ivory business is set to accelerate further after the Hong Kong and mainland Chinese governments unveiled plans to restrict local ivory trading. Wildlife activists hailed the news, saying that phasing out domestic markets is a key step in reducing demand for tusks fuelling illegal poaching of Africa's elephants. (AP Photo/Vincent Yu)

Chan's ivory on consignment after protests by conservation groups, he complains. He denies the ivory industry is responsible for elephant deaths in Africa, despite clear evidence that poaching is the main factor.

The ebbing ivory trade mirrors the decline of other crafts that once helped define Hong Kong's identity but have been pushed out by changing tastes, rising rents, and new technology. Cheap and efficient LED lights have replaced the skyline's dazzling handmade neon signs; modern vessels have taken the place of iconic wooden sailing junks; and production of aromatic bamboo dim sum steamers has moved to mainland China.

Lam King-leung, who sells name seals, or chops, in the Sheung Wan neighborhood, had a few dozen ivory ones next to plastic and stone versions in his alleyway stall's display case. But he said they weren't hot sellers. The smallest ivory chop cost 700 Hong Kong dollars (\$90), while plastic ones were HK\$100 (\$13), he said, warning that ivory could not be taken out of Hong Kong.

"No one's buying," he said. "In a year we only sell three or four."

In the ivory carving industry's 1970s heyday, Hong Kong factories employed as many as 3,500 carvers. Only a half-dozen part-time carvers are left, along with 10 to 20 full-time mammoth tusk carvers, according to Save the Elephants. The trade is about to disappear, Chan said.

"Young people, none of them want to come into this industry," said Chan. The existing master carvers "have pretty much all retired; there are very few of them left. Even if they produce something, which owner or company would buy it? There's no way out."

North Korea says it will reject Malaysia autopsy of Kim half brother

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arrest, describing her as a polite and quiet young mother.

Between 2008 and 2011, she and her then-husband lived in a home with flaking red paint in a narrow alley of Tambora, a densely populated neighborhood in western Jakarta.

Her former father-in-law, Tjia Liang Kiong, who lives in a nearby middle-class neighborhood and last saw Aisyah on January 28, described her as respectful.

"I was shocked to hear that she was arrested for murdering someone," he said. "I don't believe that she would commit such a crime or what the media says — that she is an intelligence agent."

Aisyah's mother, Benah, said by telephone that the family comes from a humble village background and has no ability to help her.

"Since we heard that from the television, I could not sleep and eat. Same as her father, he just prays and reads the holy Qur'an. He even does not want to speak," said Benah. "As villagers, we could only pray."

According to Kiong, Aisyah only completed junior high school and moved to Malaysia with her husband in 2011 to seek a better life after the garment-making shop they ran from their home went out of business. The couple left their nearly two-year-old son in Jakarta under the care of Kiong and his wife.

She and her husband divorced in 2012. Malaysia, which is approaching developed-nation income levels, is a

magnet for millions of Indonesians, who typically find work there as bar hostesses, maids, and construction and plantation workers.

The three suspects were arrested separately.

The women were identified using surveillance videos from the airport, police said. Police took them back to the crime scene at the budget terminal of the airport "for further investigations," Abdul Samah said. Local media reported that police wanted to re-create the crime scene to establish new leads.

Associated Press writers Niniek Karmini and Ali Kotarumalos in Jakarta, Mari Yamaguchi in Tokyo, and Tim Sullivan in New Delhi contributed to this report.

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Yuna Kim reveals Olympic torch in countdown to 2018

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international broadcasting center, and a pentagonal stadium that will host the opening and closing ceremonies are expected to be finished by September.

The political turmoil surrounding President Park has been a massive distraction that slowed the efforts of the organizers to stoke lukewarm public interest, and also rattled the country's ministry of culture and sports, which oversees Olympic preparations.

Lee said the recent political situation "to a degree" negatively affected preparations for the games, but said such impact could be overcome with more help from government organizations and the business community.

2016 Exemplary Community Volunteer Award Recipient: FAAV



AR Photo/Jan Landis

The Filipino-American Association of Vancouver, Washington (FAAV) — formerly known as the Filipino American Association of Clark County and Vicinity (FAACCV) — was founded in the early 1980s to preserve the Filipino culture and promote camaraderie among Filipino Americans in the Vancouver, Washington area. The organization, led by 18 officers and board members, maintains a list of *barkadas* (friends) from Vancouver, Portland, and other areas of the Pacific Northwest to aid in its mission to engage in humanitarian, civic, educational, cultural, and charitable activities that preserve, promote, and share the customs, values, and heritage of the Filipino culture. In the past year, FAAV's activities have included sponsoring Philippine Consular outreach in Portland, the Fil-Am Vancouver basketball team, and Filipino cultural events; awarding a college scholarship to a Filipino-American student; supporting a social business conference; and more. The organization also maintains a newsletter listing Filipino-American community events in the Pacific Northwest.

The Asian Reporter Foundation is accepting nominations for its 2017 "Exemplary Community Volunteer" awards.

The recognition banquet will be held Thursday, April 20, 2017 at northeast Portland's TAO Event Center. Nomination forms and award guidelines are available for download at <www.ARFoundation.net>.

The nomination deadline is Wednesday, March 15, 2017 at 5:00pm.

The Asian Reporter Foundation's 19th Annual Scholarship & Awards Banquet features:

Most Honored Elder Awards	Cultural entertainment
Exemplary Community Volunteer Awards	Ethnic dinner
College Scholarship Awards	Silent auction