Chinese organized crime and the illegal wildlife trade: diversification and outsourcing in the Golden Triangle

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Abstract

The illegal wildlife trade has increasingly been linked to organized crime in recent years. In particular, Chinese crime groups seem to be major players in more organized forms of this trade. This article examines the involvement of Chinese organized crime groups in the trade of wildlife in the borderlands of the Golden Triangle. We will discuss the representation of Chinese crime groups in the illegal wildlife trade by looking at: a) the diversification of these crime groups into wildlife crimes and b) the outsourcing of activities to local opportunistic crime groups in neighboring Laos and Myanmar. We conclude that the different representations of Chinese crime groups overseas involved in the illegal wildlife trade are important in order to understand the roles of diversification and outsourcing.

Keywords Illegal wildlife trade · Chinese organized crime · Diversification · Outsourcing · Criminal networks

Introduction

The illegal wildlife trade is estimated to be a multibillion-dollar business that attracts the attention of organized crime groups (UNODC 2019). For example, the U.S. Department of State offered a reward of up to \$1 million for information leading to the dismantling of the Xaysavang Network, a notorious international

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wildlife trafficking network that collaborated with local crime groups in South Africa, Mozambique, Thailand, Laos, Malaysia, Vietnam and China to smuggle ivory, rhino horns and pangolin scales.¹ One of the major debates surrounding the trade in wildlife is how organized crime groups became involved in the illegal wildlife business. It is evident that framing the entire wildlife trade as dominated by organized crime is inconsistent with the empirical reality, but the question of how organized crime groups diversify into specific parts of the wildlife trade and how they collaborate with opportunistic localized networks remains unanswered.

The relationship between global organized crime groups and local opportunistic crime groups is important; scholars have dismissed the ‘organized crime’ angle amongst wildlife traders by arguing that the idea is inaccurate. It has been argued that a poacher is an individual who operates independently of any organized crime group, for example in Peru, where local poachers have the resources and skills to poach parrots and sell their catch without the assistance of organized crime syndicates (Pires et al. 2015). However, there are also examples where organized crime groups are actively involved in the trafficking of items such as ivory, rhino horn and caviar (Van Uhm and Siegel 2016; Shelley and Kinnard 2018). Chinese crime groups seem to be major players in more organized forms of trade in illegal wildlife (Wong 2019; Van Uhm 2016a, b).

By combining ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the context of the illegal wildlife trade with analyses of legal judgements from Chinese courts, this article examines the involvement of Chinese organized crime groups in the illegal wildlife trade. We will discuss the different representations of Chinese crime groups overseas involved in the illegal wildlife trade by looking at: a) the *diversification* of crime groups and b) the *outsourcing* of activities to local opportunistic crime groups in neighboring Laos and Myanmar (Burma).

Chinese organized crime and the illegal trade in wildlife

If the Chinese economy can be viewed as a dragon roaring and blazing throughout the world, transnational criminal enterprises of Chinese origin are also thriving in its wake (Zhang and Chin 2008: 177).

In the past 30 years China has experienced rapid growth of global criminal markets. Gambling, human trafficking, drugs and wildlife smuggling provided fertile soil for criminal organizations (Chu 2005; Zhang 2008; Chin 2009; Lo and Kwok 2017; Wong 2019; Van Uhm 2019). China’s growing worldwide economic and political influence may facilitate legitimate activities, but also illegal activities by Chinese crime groups (Chin and Zhang 2015; Van Uhm and Moreto 2018). Chinese criminal networks have been branded as secret societies, but recent literature describes them as reliant, flexible and social networks that are entrepreneurially

¹ US Department of State (n.d.): <https://www.state.gov/transnational-organized-crime-rewards-program-2/xaysavang-network/>

oriented and involved in a wide range of licit and illicit businesses (Lintner 2004; Chin 2009; Lo 2010; Lo and Kwok 2012), including the trade in wildlife.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, several UN reports linked wildlife trafficking to Chinese organized crime, including Triads. It appeared to ‘more than justify suspicions that organized criminal gangs, including ... Chinese Triads, may well be involved in wildlife crime’ (Economic and Social Council United Nations 2003: 11). Chinese criminal organizations were believed to be involved in the trafficking of endangered species on a regular basis, partly because of the demand for products derived from those species. Chinese Triads, such as the Wo Shing Wo and 14K, were said to be involved in smuggling ivory, rhino horn and shark fin (Economic and Social Council United Nations 2002). Furthermore, South African police investigations revealed that the illegal abalone trade constituted a major component of the business of Chinese Triads in South Africa (Gastrow 2001). Europol (2011: 40–41) described how ‘Chinese organized crime groups, based mainly in Hong Kong, have specialised in the supply of traditional Chinese medicine products containing derivatives of endangered species to several companies across the EU.’

Remarkably, most of these examples refer to Chinese organized crime groups *outside* China. According to Varese (2020), organized crime groups might be ‘attracted to a locality to buy certain goods ... as part of a migration trend or to escape turf wars or the police’. As Campana noted, organized crime groups may open up branches abroad devoted to a specific set of activities (2013: 224). This diversification can occur in a relatively secure, anonymous setting where organized crime operatives can bring cash in and take goods away. It may encompass a wide variety of criminal activities conducted by crime groups outside their traditional territories, including money laundering, offshore creation of firms, buying and selling illegal goods and the production of illegal goods (Varese 2020). The rising global scarcity of endangered species may be increasingly attractive to overseas Chinese organized crime groups diversifying into the lucrative business of wildlife alongside their traditional activities (Van Uhm 2019; Van Uhm and Nijman 2020).

The massive quantities of wildlife seized during the last few years along with what has been learned from arrests and prosecutions highlight the involvement of organized crime groups and their ability to source, process and transport illicit wildlife products on a remarkably large scale. Chinese crime groups are evidently more involved in the trading and smuggling of high-value wildlife than in poaching or distribution (Moreto and Van Uhm 2021; UNODC 2019). In this context, Chinese crime groups may not only diversify into new illegal markets outside their national territories but may also outsource illegal activities to local opportunistic crime groups. Outsourcing refers to a division of labour between actors, ‘where one party offers specialized services to the other. It can be a one-off or a continuous relationship between a client and a provider’ (Passas 2002: 22). For example, when a crime group orders poached animals from a local crime group, one can label this as outsourcing. This not only reflects the relationship between Chinese crime groups overseas and local groups of poachers, but also highlights the expertise needed to poach high-value endangered species.

Although sources refer to the involvement of Chinese organized crime in the trade in wildlife, it is unclear how these groups represent themselves in empirical

reality. This article examines the role of diversification and outsourcing by Chinese crime groups in order to understand how they are involved in the illegal wildlife trade in the notorious Golden Triangle in Southeast Asia.

Chinese organized crime groups overseas: socioeconomic and political context of the Golden Triangle

The Golden Triangle is the area where the borders of Laos, Myanmar and Thailand meet at the confluence of the Ruak and Mekong rivers in Southeast Asia. Although the geographical region of the Golden Triangle is framed as the region where the Mekong River flows through the three countries, when it comes to trade and trafficking activities, the territory refers to a much larger area, including border regions between North Thailand, East Myanmar, Northwest Laos and South China (Map 1) (Walker 1999; Chin 2009). The Golden Triangle gained notoriety in the 1920s as one of the world's most prolific opium producers. Originally a western designation applied to the region because of its wealth in jade, silver, rubies, teak, rare animal products, and above all, opium (Yang 1987; Forbes and Henley 1997).

Enabled by China's economic growth in the 1990s and 2000s, a new class of Chinese entrepreneurs looked across the borders to the Golden Triangle area in search of economic opportunity. They invested in major construction and infrastructure projects but also in trade—including illegal trade—in their neighboring countries, Laos and Myanmar. In Myanmar, the 1989 collapse of the Communist Party of Burma and ceasefire agreements with rebellious ethnic groups led to the domestic investment environment becoming more attractive for both legal and illegal activity. There has been a significant growth in trade and investment in Burmese districts bordering China, resulting in the emergence of lively commercial activity along the Myanmar–China border (Porter 1995; Walker 1999: 68). In Laos, a series of policy initiatives flowing from the New Economic Mechanism of 1980s encouraged a more open market-oriented economy that is intended to stimulate trade. Private traders were officially permitted to compete with state enterprises, and in north-western Laos, border trading conditions with China improved significantly. Consequently, the border crossing at Boten (opened in the 1980s) became the main land trading-point between China and Laos. Cross-border relationships with China also improved following agreement with Simao district in Yunnan province to provide facilities for trade along the Mekong river. This all strengthened China's longstanding connections with northern Laos and eastern Myanmar. However, it also facilitated cross-border trafficking of contraband and provided opportunities for crime groups to diversify into new illegal markets in the borderlands of the Golden Triangle (Walker 1999: 72–75).²

² The long border between Myanmar, Laos and China includes many trade hubs. Legal trade of food, electronics and basic supplies between China and Myanmar accounted for nearly 30% of China's trade (Hong Kong Trade Development Council 2016) and trade between the countries is expected to grow as a result of the Belt and Road Initiative. A report published by the China Economic Information Service (2018) described cooperation between China and Laos as 'already in the fast lane, which is sure to open bright prospects for multi-field cooperation between the two countries' (2018: 4).

Map 1 The Golden Triangle

In the new economic and political climate, with its many trade and investment opportunities, the opening of casinos by Chinese investors became lucrative ‘semi-legal’ businesses (Lo and Kwok 2017; Wang 2017). To gain access to land and local resources, some Chinese business networks, some of them linked to Triads, have partnered with local armed groups that made their lands available in return for a share of profits that will, in turn, strengthen their authority over what they consider their territory. This may contribute to the expansion of a dual economic system: ‘one part governed by civilian laws and regulations, and a second controlled by corrupt, militarized entities’ (Tower and Clapp 2020: 4). In exchange for concession rights or monopolies granted to Chinese businessmen, Burmese and Laotian elites receive an additional share of the profits (Evans 2002: 158–9). Moreover, it became a means for Chinese organized crime to launder illicit money into legal channels in the context of ‘converting the opium-oriented political economy of the region into a series of casinos, under the banner of the Greater Mekong Subregion Program’ (Tan 2015: 24). The strategy would be to attract Chinese citizens, since gambling is strictly forbidden in China, and stimulate a development dynamic by providing tax advantages. The areas are envisioned as the conversion of the drug enclaves into ‘regional paragons of economic modernity’ (Nyíri 2012: 562). However, the Golden Triangle areas is known for trafficking of illicit goods and money laundering by Chinese organized crime groups. Some casinos in Laos and Myanmar have become major gambling

centres identified as ‘key nodes in the illicit trade of drugs, precursors, and wild-life products’ (UNODC 2019: 16).

Chinese organized crime groups diversifying their illegal activities in the Golden Triangle established new relationships with local entrepreneurs. Chinese middlemen already operated in the borderlands of Shan State in Myanmar and the Laotian provinces of Bokeo and Luang Namtha; in past centuries, mass Chinese emigration occurred, driven by wars, starvation and political corruption (McKewon 1999). Chinese people migrated to neighboring Laos and Myanmar, where they settled and sought employment; some became workers for established Chinese businesses while others became involved in the trade in wildlife (Yongge 2000; Nooren and Claridge 2001). Some early Chinese settlers in Myanmar and Laos enabled Chinese crime groups to outsource their activities. The historical role of Chinese settlers in Laos and Myanmar and the socioeconomic and political context of the region offer an essential foundation for understanding the symbiotic relationship between Chinese organized crime groups overseas and local crime groups involved in the illegal trade in wildlife.

Methodology

This article is based on empirical data from ethnographic fieldwork and analyses of Chinese court judgements pronounced on wildlife traders and smugglers arrested at the Chinese border of Yunnan province on arrival from Laos and Myanmar. The authors conducted fieldwork investigations across Laos, Myanmar and mainland China between 2011 and 2019 (Wong 2016, 2017, 2019; Van Uhm 2016a, b). We synthesized these qualitative data to examine the involvement of Chinese organized crime groups in the illegal wildlife trade and the relationship of these groups with local crime groups in Laos and Myanmar. For the present study, we sought to investigate respondents’ insights in the role of organized crime in the illegal wildlife trade, in particular in relation to diversification and outsourcing.

The authors’ primary research method was semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted with informants who were directly or indirectly involved in the illegal trade in wildlife, including poachers, traders, smugglers and consumers of wildlife products (Wong 2016; Van Uhm 2018). Where possible, the interviews were recorded by a recording device, but in other cases comprehensive note-taking was used. This also resulted in more trustful situations, allowing people to speak in detail about the criminal aspects of their lives (Van Uhm and Wong 2019). Furthermore, participant observation allowed the authors to obtain essential information by observing and interpreting behavior and everyday practices, such as identifying, observing, and understanding the group dynamics of people involved in the illegal wildlife trade (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011).

Finally, fieldwork data were supplemented with data consisting of legal judgements from Chinese courts. In particular, we focused on cases related to Chinese crime groups involved in illegal wildlife trade from northern Laos and eastern Myanmar to Yunnan province in South China. We collected 56 cases that occurred between mid-2010 and mid-2020 of wildlife smugglers arrested entering China from

Laos and Myanmar. In order to understand the organization of the different stages of the illegal wildlife trade, the cases were coded and analyzed according to the following variables: the source of the illegal wildlife, the place of seizure, the number of defendants, the value, the quantity and type of wildlife, the smuggling method used and the year of prosecution. The empirical data provided us with a glimpse of the working methods of the criminal groups involved.

Results: diversification and outsourcing

This section presents the empirical findings regarding the involvement of Chinese organized crime groups in the illegal wildlife trade in the Golden Triangle. The findings are based on our fieldwork interviews, observations and our analysis of 56 judgements from the Chinese courts. 80.4% of the judgements were from smuggling cases that occurred at the Myanmar–China border and 19.6% were from smuggling cases at the Laos–China border. In the reported cases from the Chinese courts, 53.6% of the defendants were tried alone, with no evidence of links to criminal networks. For instance, a number of offenders claimed that they were referred by a friend to a specific location in Laos and Myanmar to purchase or pick up wildlife products, while others crossed the border for a day trip and smuggled out wildlife products on their return. However, it turned out that many individuals collaborated with or received financial inducements from outsiders who were not included in the trial. The value of the smuggled wildlife in one-fifth (21.4%) of the cases was estimated to exceed 500,000 yuan (76,077 USD), which could be an indicator of more organized groups involved in the business. However, a minority of offenders (17.9%) were tried in groups of three or more people. The larger groups were often related to bigger or persistent smuggling operations, usually with high-value wildlife products such as tiger skins, tiger bones and rhino horns. The cases were sometimes connected to drug trafficking, in particular methamphetamine. Some of the larger cases are discussed in more detail in our findings in order to illustrate the involvement of more organized Chinese crime groups. An overview of the cases analyzed is presented in Appendix Table 1.

The different representations of Chinese crime groups involved in the illegal wildlife trade will be discussed by looking at the diversification of the crime groups and outsourcing of activities to local opportunistic groups. We consider organized crime groups to be well-organized, disciplined and rational; they may use violence or corruption to control illegal goods and/or services for profit (Wyatt et al. 2020).

Figure 1 illustrates how organized crime may diversify into new markets and outsource certain illegal activities to groups of local entrepreneurs. The big arrow on the left points to the diversification of organized crime group X into a new market Y, in this case the illegal wildlife trade. The organized crime group may then outsource certain illegal activities to local crime groups a, b, c, as illustrated by the three small arrows on the right. For example, a crime group involved in the trade of tiger skins may outsource the tasks of poaching, product promotion or product delivery to local crime groups (Wong 2016). The process of diversification and outsourcing will be further described in the two sections below.

Fig. 1 Organized crime, diversification and outsourcing

Diversification of organized crime into wildlife crime

In past decades, Chinese organized crime groups diversified into new illegal activities, including wildlife trafficking. The diversification of organized crime into the illegal wildlife trade is especially significant in jurisdictions in the Golden Triangle. The border region lacks regulatory oversight and enforcement capacity, which suffer from significant crime and armed insurgency problems. Examples of such areas include the Boten SEZ (Laos–China border) and the Golden Triangle SEZ (Laos–Thailand border) in Laos, and Mong La, Panghsang (Myanmar–China border) and Tachileik (Myanmar–Thailand border) in Myanmar.³ The 56 judgements analyzed reveal that in most cases Chinese citizens were involved in smuggling wildlife products from Laos and Myanmar into mainland China via these hotspots. Important identified smuggling points were Mong La–Daluo (21.4%), Boten–Mohan (16.1%) and Panghsang–Menglian Port (10.7%). All these areas are known for their casinos, illegal wildlife trade, prostitution and drugs. Interviewees confirmed that these border areas are crucial for racketeering, drug distribution, gambling, human trafficking, prostitution, money laundering and wildlife trafficking, forming part of the interlinked illicit political economy of the Golden Triangle. Dario, an undercover agent in Bangkok, explained the role of diversification, casinos and crime convergence in the area:

This is a clear case where Chinese organized crime is active. Different forms of crime converge and they have a lot of power in the region. They invest in the casino, which is a cover for drug trafficking, money laundering, and illegal trade in protected species. They can operate without intervention and various gangsters from China come to visit and invest in the place. I encountered a lot of meth that would be destined for the *** casino. Then there's demand for wildlife so they invest in it. At the same time, local government officials benefit from the business and the crime groups maintain good contacts with various militia groups. This makes intervention extremely complex.

³ Laos has set stimulating development in the Boten and Golden Triangle SEZs through the provision of tax advantages, offering long-term land concessions to Chinese investors (Tan 2017: 144). The casinos in Mong La and Panghsang are based in areas protected by non-government militias, the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) and United Wa State Army (UWSA) respectively.

A legal judgment published in 2019 demonstrates the increasing diversification along the China–Myanmar border. Two male Chinese nationals were sentenced to 19–20 years imprisonment and confiscation of 200,000 yuan. The two offenders worked with two collaborators in Myanmar to smuggle illegal commodities from Panghsang (Myanmar) into Menglian County (China). They checked in to a hotel in Panghsang and were each paid 2,000 yuan by a Chinese trader to smuggle nine tiger skins into China that evening. Having done so, they returned to Panghsang the next day and were asked to smuggle a bag of weapons and drugs into China. They successfully smuggled the goods into Menglian County but were stopped and searched by a highway patrol while driving to Jinghong city (Yunnan province). The patrol discovered nine tiger skins worth more than four million yuan, three shotguns, 225 bullets and 3.9 kilos of methamphetamine in the trunk. The case did not give details about the alleged leader of the crime group in Panghsang but confirmed that he was based in Myanmar and that the two offenders proved they were employed by him to smuggle the illegal commodities (case M35). This case may indicate that Chinese crime groups diversify into different forms of crime, since the illegal activities were committed by the same group; they were involved in drugs, wildlife and weapons simultaneously.

According to the UNODC (2019: 20), ‘the Golden Triangle region of Myanmar and Lao PDR have become major centers of the illicit wildlife trade’. A good example is the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone in Laos, home of the Kings Romans Casino complex, which is owned by a Hong Kong-registered company with a 99-year land lease (EIA 2015; UNODC 2019). In January 2018, the U.S. Department of the Treasury placed the organized crime group headed by the co-owner and director of the Kings Romans Casino on its organized crime sanctions blacklist, calling it a transnational criminal organization engaged in ‘human trafficking and child prostitution, drug trafficking, and wildlife trafficking’.⁴ Large consignments of methamphetamine seized in Thailand have been traced back to Kings Romans. According to informants directly involved in the illegal trade, they would be involved in the storage and distribution of methamphetamine, heroin and other drugs for trafficking networks, including the United Wa State Army. In addition to drugs, the groups are involved in trafficking of wildlife species including tigers, rhinos, pangolins and elephants.⁵

On several fieldwork trips, the first author visited Kings Romans Casino and observed critically endangered illegal wildlife parts and products such as rhino horn, tiger bone wine and ivory, openly for sale. Informants showed how the Chinese head of the organized crime network has a tiger zoo in front of his casino, where tigers are illegally offered for sale to make tiger bone wine. Around the casino, in a small Chinatown, parts and products from critically

⁴ U.S. Department of the Treasury, ‘Treasury Sanctions the Zhao Wei Transnational Criminal Organization’, press release, 30 January 2018. Accessed at: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm0272>.

⁵ Although located within the border of Laos, national police authorities report that ‘they are unable to gain access to the SEZ casino area’ (UNODC 2019: 21).

endangered species were openly for sale in shops, including tiger bone wine, rhino horn and pangolin scales. All shop premises are rented from the head of the alleged organized crime group. While Cuban cigars and tiger bone wines were served, two important tiger traders, Chia-Hao and Haoran, showed the first author that high quality tiger bone wine is produced in large aquariums with complete tiger skeletons where the wine has been aged for over three years. They sell large amounts of tiger bone wines each year and explained that they have close ties with the co-owner of the Golden Triangle SEZ in order to facilitate their illegal business. Other wildlife dealers explained how increasing media attention in recent years resulted in occasional inspections by Laos enforcers, but the dealers received advance warning of inspection, reflecting the political influence of the Chinese crime group. Moreover, Min and Lia, two employees of the Kings Romans Casino, explained that after the U.S. Department of the Treasury announcement, the casino owner warned employees not to talk about illegal activities, but drugs (e.g. methamphetamine) and illegal wildlife products (e.g. rhino horn and tiger bone wine) are still available for sale to known customers.

We are not allowed to talk about this, says Mr ***. He keeps a close eye on us [his employees] after all U.S. issues. However, little has changed [laughs]. It is a bit more shielded than it used to be, but yeah, tiger bone wine is still served, *yaba* [meth] is available and all kinds of sexual services are provided. There are different parts of the casino. Outsiders often see a certain part, do you understand? And all employees are now screened. We have to be careful what we say and talking to outsiders is actually prohibited, but the businesses continue.

According to illegal wildlife traders, Hong and Liang, in the Golden Triangle SEZ, the casino owner not only collaborates with local officials, they also have trade agreements. For example, there are agreements about percentage of profit to be paid to officials, what wildlife or drugs can be offered for sale in the casino and when government inspections will take place. Interestingly, similar activities in other border towns, such as Mong La in Myanmar and Boten in Laos, are linked to the same investors involved in illegal wildlife trade, drugs and prostitution.⁶ For example, the same structures and methods were observed in the casinos in Laos and Myanmar; even the same gambling coins were used. Also, according to informants, wildlife is being transferred between locations. If people do not function properly, there are

⁶ For instance, according to Tan (2017), the chairman of the NDAA and leader of Shan State special region 4 from Hainan, China, is the main investor in the Boten SEZ and one of the investors in the Golden Triangle SEZ. After smuggling timber into China and opium into Thailand, he began investing in the construction of casinos in the Sino-Myanmar bordertown of Mong La, using drug money as investment capital (NYÍRI 2012; Tan 2017). His wealth turned Mong La into a metropolis of hotels, shopping centres and casinos. Thousands of Chinese tourists flocked there to gamble and buy tiger skins and other parts of endangered species. The chairman reportedly moved his investment interests to the Boten SEZ after the closure of his Mong La casinos by Chinese authorities. Today, the chairman claims to earn all his income from such activities, not from drugs, and that drugs had disappeared from the region (Lintner 2019: 11). The owner of the Golden Triangle SEZ in Laos started as a timber trader, made his fortune in the casino business in Macau, and later opened one of the biggest Chinese casinos in Mong La. Then he invested in the Golden Triangle SEZ (NYÍRI 2012; Tan 2017).

consequences, according to respondents, who pointed to a connected tiger farm owner who was recently killed in a business dispute.

In addition, informants explained that in the 1990s many crime groups in the Myanmar border town of Mong La were involved in opium cultivation and trafficking. Under pressure from repressive drug policies, these smuggling networks diversified into wildlife trafficking. The diversification took place in several different crime groups, according to informants in Daluo, Mong La and Kengtung. First, young adults driving back and forth on their mopeds via shortcuts in the forest between Mong La and Daluo complained that their friends had been arrested for drug smuggling; many of these smugglers have now become active in trading elephant skins, ivory, pangolin scales and bear products. The informants explained that such wildlife products became ‘hot products’ on the market. Second, in Mong La there are smugglers who use vans to hide illicit items, including wildlife and drugs. Some trafficking networks know where the checkpoints are on the route to Mong La and use this knowledge for smuggling contraband hidden among fruit. Finally, some organized crime groups know how to profit from their political connections. For instance, Chang and Zen, two tiger traders, explained that cars belonging to officials are increasingly being used to cross from Mong La into China with illegal wildlife items in the trunk. According to Bing, a wildlife trader from Mong La who invested the money he made from the opium trade in his wildlife business, diplomatic relations help with smuggling wildlife across the border and can be traced back to the political ties between the local government and the militia group, the NDAA:

This is the way to avoid being checked with larger amounts of wildlife. As you know, there are many small-scale smugglers who bribe the officials or bypass the Chinese army, but for large quantities we use cars belonging to officials. Otherwise it is too difficult to transport large quantities of tiger bones or pangolin scales through the jungle. The small roads that little guys use are only passable by motor bike, you know.

Similarly, in Boten in Laos, illegal traders in wildlife indicated that they had a very good relationship with government officials. The first author observed that officials’ lunches were at the same place where traders sold their tiger bone wine, bear paws and pangolins. The mutual relationship between officials and illegal traders therefore caused few problems. Both opportunistic traders and more organized networks were able to run trade smoothly without enforcers across the border. According to Ming and Zha, tiger bone wine can be poured into another bottle. Then the wine is being smuggled separately so that it is unclear to customs officials what is in it. In addition, bribes allow smugglers to take pangolin scales or bear claws into China. However, informants in Boten explained that the illegal trade in rhino parts had become increasingly difficult in recent years. The difficulties surrounding rhino horn provide opportunities for diversification; according to Lin, one of the largest wildlife traders in town, drug smuggling networks are used for larger quantities nowadays:

Of course you can smuggle small amounts of rhino horn by hiding in your clothes or offer the officials a bribe, but for smuggling several rhino horns ...

Drug smuggling networks can do the job, they have become active in smuggling high-value wildlife across the border ... These are well organized guys, don't worry. They get everything delivered.

The connection with drug trafficking in Boten was also illustrated by the case of a group involved in smuggling rhino horn and ivory valued at 218,395 yuan (33,230 USD) across the border. The logistics company that was used for smuggling was also connected to the trade in methamphetamine. The group appeared to have been involved in many incidents of smuggling between March 2018 and January 2019 at the Boten–Mohan border; they distributed illegal wildlife to 61 cities in China, including the provinces of Hebei, Shandong, Guangdong and Jiangxi (case L06).

Chinese immigration and Chinese investments certainly facilitated the illegal wildlife trade. A 2017 case heard in Yunnan province supports this assertion. In 2015, the first defendant (who had property investments in the Xang Jieng Chinese market in Laos, an area dominated by Chinese business ventures) and the second defendant actively recruited the third defendant (the owner of a courier company in Mengla County) to smuggle wildlife products. Using the third defendant's connections and professional knowledge of cross-border couriers, the trio ran a successful wildlife smuggling operation, delivering wildlife products to clients right across mainland China. In January 2017, the second defendant was arrested when he was driving to China in a lorry (case L10).

This section has shown how the local political economy and power dynamics between Chinese crime groups and government officials facilitate diversification across different crime groups in the borderlands of the Golden Triangle.

Outsourcing wildlife crimes by organized crime

The Chinese organized crime groups that diversified into the illegal wildlife trade in the Golden Triangle established new relationships with local entrepreneurs. Some long-standing Chinese settlers in Myanmar and Laos facilitated the activities of these Chinese crime groups. Informants explained that ethnic Chinese locals often develop relationships with crime group members in order to foster exchange and collaboration (see also Van Uhm and Wong 2019). This is seen, for example, in relation to poaching. Our empirical data shows that even though many wildlife poachers cannot be defined as members of organized crime groups,⁷ poaching is being outsourced as some groups of poachers are being 'hired' by Chinese crime groups. Poachers in Shan State (Myanmar) and Bokeo (Laos) explained that groups of poachers are paid in

⁷ The case study of wild boar poaching conducted by Wong & Lemieux (forthcoming) highlights the fact that such poachers are best described as opportunistic and independent; they do not operate as part of any organized crime group. The tools they use to poach wild boars are primitive and they poach for meat for personal consumption, not for profit. Similarly, Van Uhm's study (2016a, b) of the illegal poaching of Barbary macaques shows that opportunistic individuals living in small villages around the forests are responsible for the poaching of these monkeys, and that they usually work in groups of four to eight based on demand from outside groups (see also: Moreto and Lemieux 2015; Van Uhm 2020; Sollund 2019).

advance and provided with poaching equipment. Ban, a well-known trader from the Wa, near Kengtung in Myanmar, explained how he received his first financial injection from a Chinese network more than 15 years ago. The agreement was that Ban would target certain high-value animal species, including big cats, pangolins and bears, and sell the wildlife to the Chinese network in exchange for loans and equipment. Gradually, Ban outsourced the work to other poachers and established his own network of smugglers and corrupt officials. He explained that his network became quite sophisticated and had a good reputation:

When I started the wildlife business I was a poacher myself. I received equipment and some sort of salary every month from them. Over time, I have expanded my business with the Chinese and now poachers work for me. Moreover, my friend Shing [sitting next to him] arranges for the wildlife to be transported to Mong La. Of course, we know persons of the NDAA [militia] well and provide the wildlife to Huang, our business partner and trader in Mong La. Then Huang arranges cross-border smuggling to Daluo [in China]. ... Sure, we have to bribe and pay along the way, but if the profits are good and there is high demand ... This [Ban shows frozen wildlife species and bags full of big cat bones and pangolin scales] is stock ready for transport. They know that I have high quality products here.

Although Ban was initially a hired poacher, he now hires poachers himself. His business partner arranges transport from Kengtung to Mong La (Myanmar) in collaboration with border guards from a local militia group in Shan State, the NDAA. In Mong La the wildlife is handed over to a Chinese network that handles the smuggling across the border to Daluo, in southern China. These collaborative relationships were identified across the Golden Triangle area: low-value wildlife parts are regularly used by local communities as food or merchandise for local wildlife markets, but high-value wildlife products are provided directly to Chinese networks operating in the area. In practice, this means that a poached tiger or leopard or large consignments of wildlife will quickly end up in an organized trade of wildlife. Even though the link to organized crime groups is not always clear in the legal judgements, some cases reveal such a high level of organization that these cases may indicate ties to more organized networks. For example, one case from 2015 shows how three perpetrators smuggled wildlife worth 878,420 yuan (134,256 USD). The illegal wildlife was purchased in Myanmar and was approved by one Chinese defendant, who used WeChat videos to teach smugglers how to distinguish species. The Chinese defendant made bank transfers to the smugglers who then paid the Burmese poachers through an intermediary (case M56).

In addition, poachers may also be subject to extortion by non-state armed groups in their area which reflects another relationship between poachers and organized groups in the context of outsourcing. According to Chinese wildlife traders, since some non-state armies have long-standing relationships with Chinese criminal networks – they speak the same language, share cultural values and are ideal business partners – collaboration is easily established. However,

the relationship poachers may have with non-state armies is reflected by a visited Akha village in Shan state that depends economically on large-scale opium cultivation. The non-state armed group lives among the Akha and members were identified by their military uniforms and weaponry. Nok, the military chief, explained that they protect the Akha against repressive policies handed down by the Myanmar government. The militia group organizes the trade in opium but also profits from the sale of high-value wildlife species to Chinese crime groups. Not only is the opium cultivation outsourced to the Akha, but after the opium harvest in December, January and February, the poaching season starts. In particular, poaching pangolins and big cats is being outsourced by Chinese crime groups that pay ‘tax’ to the non-state armed group to obtain high-value wildlife products. This relationship is echoed by Zhang, a key big-cat trader in Kengtung who invests the profits from his methamphetamine business in his tiger business. After showing a shipment of more than 30 tiger skulls to the first author, Zhang explained that paying militia groups for allowing the big cat trade from the Chitwan region of Myanmar is required:

Whether you like it or not, we have to work with the militia groups that are active in the different regions. We pay them agreed prices, but they are subject to change. An essential part of the tiger trade is in the hands of Chinese. I am ethnic Chinese myself and speak the language. ... Otherwise you will quickly be treated as an outsider. [He looks at his friend, who is also involved in the tiger trade but does not speak Chinese] His business often runs via me. However, Chinese or not Chinese, if you have no contacts with the militia groups, you have a small chance that your business will be successful.

This shows how poachers have various direct and indirect relationships with Chinese crime groups and non-state armed groups in the Golden Triangle; both outsourcing of poaching and paying non-state armed groups remain important for organized crime groups to facilitate their business. Similar to the diversification seen elsewhere in organized crime groups, these groups may also outsource the trafficking of wildlife into China.

Next to the smuggling points identified in our cases: Mong La–Daluo, Boten–Mohan and Panghsang–Menglian Port, the Muse–Ruili border plays a critical role in the illegal wildlife trade. One of our fieldwork investigations shows that wildlife traders throw parcels of tiger skins across the border fence at certain times. Enforcement is lax and border guards can be bribed for trouble-free transactions. However, most smugglers operate in small groups or as individuals, as illustrated by the following extract from a case reported in 2018:

The first defendant arranged for the second defendant to visit Panghsang, Myanmar to bring gall bladders back into China. The second defendant drove an unlicensed vehicle to Panghsang to collect boxes of gall to bring back to China. The first defendant arranged to pick up the delivery in Menglian. At the time of the arrest, there were gall bladders (that of bison and black bear), one

tooth of a clouded leopard and wooden bracelets hidden under the passenger seat of the vehicle with a value of 892,000 yuan (case M16).

Based on our analyses of legal judgements, the vast majority of Chinese involved in the smuggling of wildlife do not belong to organized crime groups and are best described as local villagers who want to make fast money. This is in line with our empirical data on the tiger trade in Tibet, which link to opportunistic smugglers trading in tiger parts along the border with Zhangmu in Tibet and Kodari in Nepal. The tiger parts are driven by car from Nepal into Tibet, where they will be delivered to buyers all across mainland China (Wong 2016).⁸

However, the illegal wildlife in one-fifth of the smuggling wildlife cases was estimated to have a value above 500,000 yuan (76,077 USD), which could be an indicator of financial injections made by Chinese organized groups involved in the business. For example, two cases refer to wildlife worth around one million yuan (152,837 USD) being smuggled by crime groups: one group was involved in smuggling bear paws and pangolin scales into China, while another group smuggled ivory and tiger products. There were also cases involving larger consignments that may have been outsourced to local smuggler networks. For instance, one of the analyzed judgements concerned a smuggling ring involved in a total of 411 ivory products, 798 dead geckos, five packs of ivory shavings, six pieces of ivory, 13 animal products, 1.15 kg of pangolin pieces and five pieces of rhino horn, among other products, with a total value of 1.2 million yuan. Two main offenders discussed the logistics of the business with each other, revealing a clear division of labor. These two offenders had equal status and were the principal perpetrators, but a third player reached agreement with the other two in order to earn courier fees, which reflects the role of outsourcing. According to their agreement, after the two main perpetrators distributed the proceeds, they paid the third player a monthly fee of around 20,000 yuan (3,054 USD) (case L02). This illustrates how Chinese organized groups outsource certain activities to local opportunistic crime groups.

Conclusion

This article discussed the different representations of Chinese organized crime groups involved in wildlife trade in the borderlands of the Golden Triangle. Chinese crime groups are mainly involved in trading and smuggling wildlife rather than poaching or distribution. Based on empirical data from ethnographic fieldwork and an analysis of legal judgements from Chinese courts, we focused on two aspects of the involvement of Chinese organized crime in the wildlife trade: a) the diversification of Chinese organized crime into the illegal wildlife trade and b) the outsourcing of illegal activities to opportunistic crime groups in neighboring Laos and Myanmar.

⁸ Fieldwork findings show that enforcement is more relaxed when trade is coming from Nepal since the Chinese government devotes most of its border resources to combat human smuggling out of Tibet.

First, our empirical data show that the diversification of Chinese crime groups into the illegal trade in wildlife in Laos and Myanmar has been influenced by socioeconomic and political changes. Improved trading conditions and infrastructures as well as social relations between criminal entrepreneurs provided opportunities to diversify into new illegal markets and facilitated cross-border trafficking of contraband. The Golden Triangle where our empirical research took place is known for the embeddedness of drugs, especially opium and methamphetamine, in the local political economy. Some criminal entrepreneurs invested in casinos in border areas, which facilitated lucrative illegal wildlife trade deals alongside drug trafficking and prostitution. Another example of diversification is that highly professional smuggling gangs have become involved in both drugs and wildlife smuggling. Drug smuggling groups added wildlife trafficking to their criminal portfolios and used their drug-smuggling infrastructure to diversify due to repressive drug policies or the rising value of wildlife. Another example of diversification is when powerful people use their drug trafficking profits to invest in the illegal trade in wildlife.

Second, our empirical data show the importance of knowledge, risk calculation and criminal careers in the context of outsourcing illegal activities to local crime groups. Our research shows how organized crime groups operate in the local setting and collaborate with local crime networks. Multiple examples illustrate how Chinese crime groups pay local poachers in both money and equipment because local poachers have the hunting skills to find high-value wildlife species in the jungle. Interestingly, poachers can improve their position by investing in their own equipment and outsourcing the work of hunting to other poachers. Chinese crime groups are also outsourcing the smuggling part of the wildlife trade to local smuggling entrepreneurs. However, these local entrepreneurs only receive a fraction of the profits. Chinese crime groups are interested in these local entrepreneurs because they are willing to take risks to earn fast money and are easily replaceable. Many of the individuals convicted in the cases we examined are low-level and easily replaced, whereas key personnel in the trade chain manage to keep themselves out of sight. This is consistent with other typical forms of organized crime networks.

Our study investigated how Chinese crime groups diversify and outsource their operations to opportunistic criminal networks. The study goes beyond the discussions about local poaching and supply, but shows how criminal networks involved adapt and respond to opportunities to collaborate, even if they are in different countries. Further research into how these networks are socially embedded and how they resolve issues of risks and trust is important for improving our understanding of diversification and outsourcing.

Appendix

Table 1 Summary of cases

Case	Country	Year	Number of defendants	Profit > ¥ 500,000	Wildlife species
L01	Laos	2019	1	No	Monitor lizard (live)
L02	Laos	2018	≥ 3	Yes	Elephant ivory; pangolin scales; rhino horn; dead geckos
L03	Laos	2016	1	No	Tiger bones
L04	Laos	2019	1	No	Tortoiseshell; serow paws; serow meat
L05	Laos	2019	≥ 3	Yes	Elephant ivory; tiger bones
L06	Laos	2020	≥ 3	No	Rhino horn; elephant ivory; elephant skins; golden cat teeth
L07	Laos	2019	2	No	Turtles (live)
L08	Laos	2019	1	No	Dead geckos
L09	Laos	2016	2	No	Turtles (live)
L10	Laos	2017	≥ 3	Yes	Elephant ivory; pangolin scales; rhino horns; dead geckos
L11	Laos	2018	1	No	Lesser mouse deer
M12	Myanmar	2014	2	No	Turtles (live)
M13	Myanmar	2019	2	No	Leopard parts; tiger bones
M14	Myanmar	2019	≥ 3	Yes	Pangolin scales; bear paws
M15	Myanmar	2019	1	No	Pangolin scales; antelope meat; porcupine spines
M16	Myanmar	2018	2	Yes	Bear gall bladders; bison gall bladders; leopard parts
M17	Myanmar	2016	≥ 3	No	Turtles (live)
M18	Myanmar	2010	1	Yes	Elephant ivory; tiger skin; tiger bones
M19	Myanmar	2019	1	Yes	Tiger bones; pangolin parts
M20	Myanmar	2015	≥ 3	No	Tortoises (live)
M21	Myanmar	2015	2	No	Pangolins; deer
M22	Myanmar	2015	2	No	Leopard skin
M23	Myanmar	2016	1	No	Pangolins
M24	Myanmar	2016	1	No	Elephant skins; pangolin scales; monkey (live)
M25	Myanmar	2016	1	No	Pangolin (live)
M26	Myanmar	2016	2	No	Rhino horn; bear paws; pangolin (live)
M27	Myanmar	2019	1	No	Tortoises (live); pangolin (live)
M28	Myanmar	2016	2	No	Elephant skins; pangolin scales; porcupine spines
M29	Myanmar	2017	1	No	Tortoises (live)
M30	Myanmar	2018	1	No	Bear bones
M31	Myanmar	2015	1	No	Deer parts; antelope parts
M32	Myanmar	2015	1	No	Elephant skins; pangolin scales; pangolin (live)
M33	Myanmar	2019	1	No	Leopard skull
M34	Myanmar	2020	1	No	Bear head
M35	Myanmar	2019	≥ 3	Yes	Tiger skins
M36	Myanmar	2016	≥ 3	Yes	Tortoises (live)
M37	Myanmar	2019	1	No	Pangolin parts
M38	Myanmar	2016	2	No	Bear paws
M39	Myanmar	2018	1	No	Deer head

Table 1 (continued)

Case	Country	Year	Number of defendants	Profit > ¥ 500,000	Wildlife species
M40	Myanmar	2016	1	No	Pangolins (live); elephant skins; pangolin scales; cobras (live and dead); golden cat
M41	Myanmar	2011	2	No	Pangolins
M42	Myanmar	2016	2	No	Leopard skin
M43	Myanmar	2014	2	No	Pangolins; bear paws
M44	Myanmar	2015	2	No	Tiger skin; tiger products
M45	Myanmar	2014	1	Yes	Monkey skulls
M46	Myanmar	2015	1	No	Leopard skin; leopard claws; elephant skins
M47	Myanmar	2017	1	No	Elephant skins; lemur skins
M48	Myanmar	2018	2	Yes	Bear gall bladders; bison gall bladders; leopard teeth
M49	Myanmar	2019	2	No	Tortoises (live)
M50	Myanmar	2016	1	No	Deer parts
M51	Myanmar	2017	1	No	Silver pheasant
M52	Myanmar	2017	1	No	Golden cat
M53	Myanmar	2014	1	No	Tortoises (live)
M54	Myanmar	2017	1	No	Pangolin products; elephant skins
M55	Myanmar	2018	1	No	Pangolin products
M56	Myanmar	2015	≥ 3	Yes	Tortoises (live)

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