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Establishing Trust in the Illegal Wildlife Trade in China

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Abstract

This study focusses on the role of trust in the illegal distribution of protected wildlife in China. This research attempts to contribute to the literature by disentangling the establishment of trust within the illegal wildlife trade based on ethnographic fieldwork between 2011 and 2016. Both traders and consumers are resorting to mechanisms of trust to foster exchange and to increase credibility of their agreements. This study discusses the existence of such mechanisms of trust within wildlife trafficking networks that are rather characteristic of illegal wildlife trade in China.

Keywords Illegal wildlife trade · Trust · Green criminology · Wildlife crime · China

Introduction

The global illegal wildlife trade is driving many of the world's valuable species into extinction. As of 2017, the World Economic Forum estimated that the trade in illegal wildlife products had a value of US\$23 billion, making it the fourth most lucrative transnational crime industry, falling short of drugs, humans and arms trafficking. While gradually more scholars have been studying illegal wildlife trafficking (e.g. Zimmerman 2003; Pires and Moreto 2011; Sollund 2013; Wyatt 2013; Petrossian and Clark 2014), studies in the illegal wildlife hotspot, China,¹ are limited, with some exceptions (e.g. Wong, 2015a, b; Van Uhm 2016a).

¹China has been identified as a major player in the international illegal wildlife trade (e.g. Van Uhm 2016b; Petrossian et al. 2016).

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In this study, we highlight the extent of (mis)trust in the final stage of distributing illegal wildlife products in China.² The issue of trust in the underworld of the trade in endangered wildlife is worthy of a theoretical discussion for two reasons. First, it has clear theoretical implications since the issue of trust in the illegal wildlife trade has received little attention from scholars, whereas work has been done to study the issue of trust in other criminal networks (e.g. Lusthaus 2012; Von Lampe and Ole Johansen 2004). Second, it offers insights into the dynamics of criminal networks, wildlife trade networks specifically, and thus contributes to our theoretical understanding of illegal transactions and trafficking. As such, this study addresses the foundations of these unlawful purchases: how is trust established under such conditions of illegality?

The issues concerning trust are analysed based on interviews across three different illegal wildlife trade markets in Mainland China between 2011 and 2016: the illegal trade in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), including tiger parts, rhino horn, pangolin scales and saiga antelope horns; the illegal consumption of Chinese state-protected wildlife as food (e.g. pangolins, yellow-breasted buntings, different species of musk deer) and the illegal trade in ivory and tiger parts as luxury products. This study argues that trust in the illegal wildlife trade is low in China, resulting in both traders and consumers resorting to certain mechanisms to foster exchange and to increase the credibility of their agreements. In order to contextualise this article, we shall first explain the theoretical significance of trust in societies and highlight the level of mistrust within Mainland China and then discuss the role of establishing trust within wildlife trade networks. We will explain our methodological approach based on qualitative research methods and present our findings based on theoretical concepts that play a role in establishing trust in the illegal wildlife trade. How the theoretical insights can assist to decrease the illegal wildlife trade will be briefly examined in the discussion.

Trust and Crime

Trust is seen as an essential component of social life, including criminal relationships (e.g., see Gambetta 1988a; Von Lampe and Ole Johansen 2004). Criminal actors make deals that involve significant monetary value but also generate risks that make trust an important aspect of their illegal activities. 'It serves to overcome an element of uncertainty in the behaviour of other people which is experienced as the unpredictability of change in an object' (Luhmann 1979: 22). Since criminal groups operate 'against the state' (Paoli 2002: 65), they constantly face the risk of interference from law enforcement (Ayling 2009). Morselli (2009: 144) described this as 'the interplay between the need to act collectively and the need to assure trust and secrecy within these risky collaborative settings.' The lack of 'systemic trust' of national states that build upon the existence of laws and the public capability to enforce them (Luhmann 1979: 68–69) ensures that within the 'illegal arena', instead, trust has predominantly a personal basis (Paoli 2002: 84).

Trust between parties is important in all aspects of society, in particular for transactions to be carried out. Without trust, relationships and social bonds will decay and society will not

² Understanding the distribution of wildlife products is a timely issue influenced by the continuing growth of the Chinese economy and spending powers of the rising middle class. The extravagant consumption patterns of Chinese domestically and overseas are well documented (e.g. Guarin & Knorrninga 2014; Rocca 2017). Studies have revealed a positive correlation between the growing financial wealth and the consumption of illegal wildlife products (Zhang et al. 2008).

function efficiently and effectively, as emphasised by Tilly (2005) in his book *Trust and Rule*. Trust extends beyond social bonds and relationships and is also essential to a functioning economy; this is evident in commercial settings where trust plays an essential role in establishing and sustaining trade (Adler 2001). An example of mistrust arising in everyday lives would be our purchase and consumption of food. In China, the severity of the lack of trust on food production has led to the decline of broader social trust in society, resulting in social and political ramifications (Yan 2012: 707). As neatly summarised by Klein's study on the food market in Kunming (a first-tier city in Yunnan province):

Recent changes in the food supply were in fact a source of widespread discontent [...] despite developing ties of trust with vendors or shops, people would nevertheless carefully check vegetables and meat for signs of chemicals [...] [t]hese sentiments fed into a wider ambivalence in Kunming towards a modernisation project which had demolished the old city centre and its bustling street life, caused environmental degradation, and was giving rise to social distrust and polarization (Klein 2013: 390–391).

Clearly, not all agreements will be upheld and not all parties will be honest and responsible in their dealings. In such cases, actors can go to law enforcement or the courts to legally enforce their agreements or to seek redress for their losses.

This is evidently lacking in the underworld. Issues of mistrust can arise at various points, and there is no legal enforcement from which to seek redress (e.g. Morselli 2009). Furthermore, mistrust between parties can potentially lead to enforcement, prosecution and violence. In the underworld, there are no legal contracts to guarantee the delivery of illegally traded products and criminal groups use their own internal system to solve conflicts or disputes in illegal activities; they create internal systems of rules and codes of behaviour to run illegal businesses (Siegel 2008; Gambetta 2009). Since the late nineteenth century, Chinese entrepreneurs are said to have carried out business drawing upon customs of reciprocity and systems of payment based entirely on trust (Tyler 1986).

Relevant to the topic of this paper is the extent of mistrust in the illegal distribution of wildlife products. During the final stage of distribution, the issue of mistrust certainly arises when the product is delivered to the customer. At this stage, consumers risk being cheated of their money if the seller does not deliver, or if there has been a delay in the delivery. Consumers are worried about being sold fake wildlife products or the wildlife being sold is in fact another similar-looking animal. Documented fake wildlife products include ivory (Martin and Vigne 2011), yellow-breasted bunting parts (Guangzhou Daily 2014; Zheng 2017), tiger bones, tiger penises (Nowell, 2010) and tiger paws (Gbtimes 2015); shark fins (Li 2013), Totoaba fish maws (Environmental Investigation Agency 2016a, 2016b), rhino horn (Van Uhm 2016a) and bear bile extract (Mills and Servheen 1994; Park 2017).

Establishing Trust in Illegal Wildlife Trade Networks

Considered to be a key element in the organisation of the illegal wildlife trade, *establishing trust* is still an understudied topic in the wildlife trade literature. Recent PhD research by Annette Hübschle into the illegal rhino horn trade is one of the few examples where the role of trust within the criminal networks has been extensively discussed. She highlights how trusted members of one's social network, such as family members or friends, may introduce a

potential buyer to the dealer of the network. Other key factors include the ‘reputation’ and ‘status’ of the dealer and whether during the initial introduction ‘expectations and cultural norms’ are followed (Hübschle 2016: 355).

Other studies include the report by Lancaster and Cakaj (2013) who have discussed how establishing trust would be important in the ivory trade in Central Africa by the alleged involvement of rebel groups such as the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). They show how ivory has been used by the LRA leader Joseph Kony to ‘establish trust among rival poachers and in exchange for safe haven as provided by Sudan Armed Forces’ in the Central African Republic (Lawson and Vines 2014). Moyle (2009: 140–141) highlights the importance of the role of the Chinese culture of *guanxi* in the illegal tiger trade, where relationships between actors are developed using ‘trust-enhancing mechanisms’ to create an effective insider–outsider system. Wong (2017) explains how reputation in the purchase of protected wildlife is a key component in enhancing trust, and Van Uhm and Siegel (2016) how trustful long-term relations are established between poachers and officials in the republic of Dagestan in Russia to facilitate the illegal trade in caviar.

However, a critical analysis of the underlying mechanisms of gaining trust in wildlife trade networks is lacking. Ayling (2013: 75) highlights in her article that one of the first concerns experienced by rhino horn traffickers is ‘how network participants locate each other and establish trusting relationships’. Furthermore, Hübschle (2016: 30) questions ‘whether these relationships are necessarily reliant on trust; or whether a healthy dose of distrust’, as Gambetta (1988b: 166) suggested in his analysis of the Sicilian mafia, ‘accompanied by secrecy, duplicity, intelligence sharing and betrayal, characterize such relationships’. Therefore, this article will build on previous identified concepts that influence trust in the illegal wildlife trade markets by analysing the illegal distribution of protected wildlife products in China.

Methodology

To understand the mechanisms of trust behind the social world of Chinese actors in the distribution of illegal wildlife products, empirical data have been used based on several qualitative studies across China. This article draws upon the findings of studies on illegal tiger parts networks across three Chinese cities (Kunming, Lhasa and Xining), networks that are involved in the illegal trade in products for TCM in multiple cities (e.g. Beijing, Chengdu, Daluo, Guangzhou, Harbin, Hong Kong, Kunming, Xining), networks that supply endangered wildlife as food in Guangzhou and Zhuhai and ivory trading networks in Hong Kong and Guangzhou. We have synthesised these qualitative data to examine trust crosscutting various settings in China. The illegal wildlife markets, the fieldwork sites and the informants accessed are summarised in Table 1.

The primary research method was semi-structured interviews with more than 100 informants who are directly involved in the illegal trade in wildlife. All data collection occurred in China between 2011 and 2016. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the authors to probe for additional information, when necessary (Davies et al. 2011). Where possible, interviews were recorded by a recording device, but informants regularly asked not to have the interviews recorded by tape-recording equipment. In such cases, comprehensive note taking ensured the recording of the empirical data. This also resulted in more trustful situations where people were able to speak in more detail about the criminal aspects of their lives (Polsky 1967).

Table 1 Details of interviews

Type of illegal wildlife market	Role of interviewees in the market	Location and time period of interviews
Illegal trade in tiger parts products (e.g. tiger skins, tiger bones)	(a) Suppliers (b) Traders	Kunming, Lhasa, Xining (2011)
Illegal trade in traditional Chinese medicine (e.g. rhino horn, tiger bones, saiga antelope horns, pangolin scales)	(a) Traders (b) Smugglers (c) Shop owners (d) Consumers	Beijing, Chengdu, Daluo, Guangzhou, Harbin, Hong Kong, Kunming, Xining (2013–2016)
Consumption of protected wildlife (e.g. pangolins, fish)	(a) Consumers (b) Suppliers	Guangzhou, Zhuhai (2015–2016)
Illegal ivory trade (e.g. tusks, antiques)	(a) Traders (b) Shop owners (c) Employees (d) Consumers	Guangzhou, Hong Kong (2015–2016)

An important method for finding respondents was through snowball sampling: future participants were recruited from among their acquaintances and through the first point of access (Wong 2015b; Goodman 1961). This purposive sampling method is used to gain access to members of a population that is particularly difficult to approach (Davies et al. 2011). According to Polsky (1967), referrals are an effective strategy to recruit informants from the underworld. Moreover, it ‘ought to filter levels of risk as each point of contact will provide some form of verification for the trustworthiness of the interviewer’ (Rawlinson 2008: 14). However, given the sensitive nature of our study, it was necessary to make a very detailed consideration of all possible arguments from different sources to understand the underlying story.

Contact with *gatekeepers* was of great importance to gain access to the social world of the illegal entrepreneurs (Davies et al. 2011). Gatekeepers are persons who control access to others and include key persons in the organisations as well as small players in the trade; they are ‘people who can open doors to people or places, who are aware of certain risks’ (Boekhout van Solinge 2014: 40). In our research, gatekeepers included important middlemen and traders in the illegal wildlife trade as well as consumers. These gatekeepers were not necessarily occupying important positions in the illegal activities, but rather influenced other players through the ‘strength of their personality and character’ (Reeves 2010, 322). The conversations varied from in-depth interviews to informal chatting on street corners during observations. To conceal the identities of study participants, pseudonyms were used in this study. To underline the confidentiality and anonymity, it is important to defend our informants against adverse effects and criminal prosecution. Moreover, without this anonymity, fewer informants would provide useful information (Noaks and Wincup 2004).

Visiting local markets turned out to be highly relevant for our research (see also Van Uhm 2018a). Live animals or animal products are regularly sold at these local markets (e.g. Leberatto 2016), such as the Qingping market in Guangzhou or the Anguo market 200 km south of Beijing. By observing the process of the illegal trade, through direct, naturalistic observations, it was possible to gain a more in-depth understanding of the general context in which actors operate, as well as to corroborate or refute information deriving from respondents (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011).

Initial coding was performed on our empirical data. This coding method requires the careful examination of transcribed data and fieldnotes in order to identify discrepancies and

similarities (Saldana 2009). To uncover overarching theoretical concepts, pattern coding was conducted on the empirical data (Maxwell 2005). During our analyses, we refined first-order codes to connect the empirical data to theoretical concepts. In particular, we identified theoretical concepts that were associated to ‘establishing trust’ to develop theory further. Those concepts were the basis of the development of our four main themes that will be discussed in this study.

Findings

Based on our data, Chinese traders and consumers of illegal wildlife products resort to the following mechanisms to increase the credibility of their agreements.

The Social Role of Ethnic Ties and Family Relationships

For centuries, the Chinese came to neighbouring countries (e.g. Vietnam and Laos) to settle and to seek employment; some became workers for established Chinese businesses while others became involved in the trade in wildlife (Nooren and Claridge 2001). Several studies on wildlife trafficking highlight the cooperation between the Chinese in source and destination countries (e.g. Milliken and Shaw 2012). The ethnic ties would provide a trustful foundation for the illegal trade in endangered species. According to Bovenkerk et al. (2003), criminal organisations regularly follow such migration routes.³

A study in Malaysia on the illegal trade in pangolins identified seven out of eight traders being Malaysian Chinese, which illustrates that the middlemen involved are mainly ethnic Chinese (Pantel and Chin 2009). Xu (2008) revealed large numbers of ethnic Chinese in Mong La (Myanmar) trading in products such as pangolin scales, bear bile and tiger bones. Another study on rhino poaching referred to Chinese middlemen being involved in the illegal rhino horn trade in South Africa (Milliken and Shaw 2012; Milliken 2014). Our findings support the important role of ethnic ties as a mechanism of trust. According to a wildlife trader in Kunming:

Pangolin hunters in Myanmar and Indonesia, rhino poachers in South Africa or hunters of saiga antelopes in Kazakhstan and Mongolia all have contacts with the Chinese in those areas. Usually those ethnic Chinese persons own small shops as a cover for their illegal business. They deliver their valuable wildlife products and are paid by Chinese middlemen who have connections to my people. (Chao)

Although illegal trade between countries requires a degree of organisation within the criminal network, it may also be the case that traders consider the borders to be somewhat artificial. Ethnographically, borders between states can seem arbitrary by denying transnational or marginalised identities contextualised by Evans et al. (2000) in their book *Where China meets Southeast Asia: Social and cultural change in the border regions*. Indeed, in Daluo, a small border town in Southern China, smugglers explained that ethnic relatives live on both the Chinese and the Myanmar side of the border. For generations, traditional leaders had been

³ For instance, Italian Mafia migrants dominated the underworld in New York based on family ties (Bovenkerk et al. 2003).

involved in trafficking across this border. For instance, cultivating and trading opium became essential because it was ‘the only way to bring them cash, and cash was needed to support them throughout the year because of the rice deficiency’ (Chin 2009: 61). Since the growing restrictions on the opium trade, local communities use their social ties to smuggle illegal wildlife products across the border. One of the wildlife smugglers in Daluo highlights how trust and secrecy based on shared dialects or the same hometown allow these groups to exist:

My people have already lived for centuries in this area. Previously there was almost no control, but gradually the border has become more strictly guarded by the Chinese military. However, because of these social ties [between people from local communities] we know that it is less likely that we will be caught or cheated. (Dai)

Similar findings were also found among Tibetans involved in the supply of tiger skins in Lhasa; they only do business with their own ethnic groups and will not co-operate with other traders who are not Tibetans. In particular, they were outspoken in the way they perceive a competition network being run by a Muslim skin supplier.

I don’t trust them [referring to the Muslim tiger skin suppliers and traders], they do not sell the real stuff, they are lazy and dishonest. You shouldn’t do business with them. (Wai)

In addition to ethnic ties with Chinese persons abroad to reduce the possibility of infiltration and to increase reliability on the authenticity of the wildlife products, according to Ahlstrom et al. (2010), structure and decision-making in ethnic Chinese trading communities are strongly influenced by family relationships. Misztal (1996) refers to trust among family members that would be based on familiarity and shared norms and values. Illegal activities tend to take place within such pre-existing social networks because the trustworthiness of the actors can be guaranteed (Paoli 2002). Therefore, kinship would provide a fertile basis for trust in criminal networks (e.g. Kleemans and Van de Bunt 1999; Bovenkerk et al. 2003; Von Lampe and Ole Johansen 2004). For instance, Zhang and Chin (2008) revealed that many of those involved in transnational crimes, such as human smuggling and drug trafficking, were persons who work with family members whom they can trust.

Moyle (2009: 134) underlined that family links in Chinese wildlife networks ‘increase loyalty (reduce defections) and insulate the organization from infiltration’. Analyses of illegal TCM from China to the Netherlands confirm that they are regularly delivered by family members (Post 2013). The role of kinship ties is illustrated by the following quote from an illegal trader in Chengdu who underlined that his familial relations are crucial in his illegal trade in wildlife.

My uncle lives in the mountains and is the collector and my brother-in-law organises smuggling across the border. It is a family business, it is based on trust. [...] Of course, I know that I can trust them. As long as we do it this way, we can avoid problematic issues. (Wang)

To further exemplify the importance of kinship ties, we can draw on a tiger bone trading network in Kunming. This particular network was confined to only dealing with family members and close family friends following the high-profile arrest of a tiger bone supplier in the city. A traditional Chinese medicine wholesaler in Kunming believed that to confine their dealings within their family was a way to protect themselves from enforcement:

Don’t do it [buying tiger bones], it is not worth it. [points to the opposite road]. There is a shop operating down the road on the other side of the market. The shop was completely

seized after the owner was arrested for supplying tiger bone; he never came back. Now the other supplier will not deal with anyone but close friends and family. (Hong)

The organisation behind a criminal network involved in the supply of endangered wildlife as food in the southern region of Mainland China (in Zhuhai province) also demonstrated the importance of family ties in fostering trust and cooperation. The manager (Chung) of the restaurant in question was in his early 20s, while the owner of the restaurant was his uncle, and they got on relatively well. The uncle owned a speedboat and diving equipment, and they often went to sea to catch fresh state-protected fish for their customers.

The Cultural Practice of Guanxi on the Oligopoly Market

Another mechanism of trust within illegal wildlife networks includes the cultural practice of *guanxi* that plays a fundamental role in the establishment of strong trustful relationships between Chinese actors. *Guanxi* is commonly defined as the basic dynamic in Chinese personalised networks of influence and refers to favours gained from social connections (Zhang et al. 2009; Wang 2017).⁴ In many aspects of their lives, the Chinese rely on their *guanxi* or personal informal network. Particularly, there is an emphasis on implicit mutual obligations, reciprocity and trust, which are necessary to maintain one's *guanxi* (Myers 1995; Gold et al. 2002; Zhang et al. 2009). According to Jones (1994: 205), *guanxi* practice is 'geared towards the cultivation of long-term mutual trust and the strengthening of relationships' and it adds 'an element of humanity to otherwise cold transactions' (Li 2011: 3).

The role of *guanxi* in establishing trust would in particular be important as 'part of [the] cultural root' of corruption in China, according to several scholars (e.g. Gold et al. 2002; Wang 2017).⁵ The process of bribing officials starts with the *guanxi* practice of gifts: when the official accepts a gift, there is a strong possibility that the official is willing to repay the debt and the bribing process can be further developed (Van Uhm and Moreto 2017; Wang 2017). Several authors highlight that Chinese organised crime would use its 'protective umbrella' *baohusan* to give bribes to officials and, in return, they would provide protection in order to continue with the illegal activities (Zhang and Chin 2008; Wang 2013). They claim that it would be difficult to have a long-term contraband line without *guanxi* connections with government officials. The following quote illustrates how a middleman involved in illegal pangolins and saiga antelope horns in Anguo refers to his reciprocal relationship with the army based on *guanxi*:

My friend works as a soldier on the Guangxi border. Through this connection I can pass the orders across the border. We have gradually established our relationship. He arranges that these smuggled goods can cross the border and I provide him with other services [...] You see, this relationship has mutual benefits. (Zhen)

A representative of a well-known family-owned TCM trading company, who sold, besides legitimate TCM products, illegal rhino horns and tiger bones under the counter, outlined her collaborative *guanxi* relationship with police officials:

⁴ Our study found that *guanxi* networks include a small number of people. Even though the *guanxi* bases may be changed in the intergenerational transfer process due to the differences of values existing in two generations, *guanxi* can also be 'passed down' from one generation to another (see also Dou and Li 2013).

⁵ Note that other scholars highlight that *guanxi* is distinct from corruption (e.g. Steidlmeier 1999).

If smugglers from Myanmar and Laos are caught and the Chinese police seize a rhino horn, they resell it to us illegally. If the stuff (rhino horn) is confiscated by an international airline, they (government officials) burn it. [...] It is all about these social relationships with them. (Lihua)

The role of *guanxi* is equally important in the smuggling of wildlife products into China from source countries, as neatly summarised by a retired soldier in Kunming:

If they (customs and soldiers at the Chinese borders) want to stop a mosquito from flying in, they can but they choose not to. Being stationed at the border is one of the best jobs for soldiers, you earn a lot more. (Yan)

Moreover, the Chinese practice of *guanxi* is important in creating an effective culturally based insider–outsider system (Myers 1995; Zhang et al. 2009). On a regular basis, the networks operate under a particular oligopoly setting, with a small number of suppliers and with limited competition. Such settings are formed based on *guanxi* relations to foster exchange and credibility between suppliers and consumers of illegal wildlife products. Observations in several TCM markets all over China, including famous ones such as the *Qingping* and *Anguo* TCM markets, illustrate how trustful relations between TCM sellers are established; many know who are able to supply highly valuable illegal wildlife products and provide services as intermediaries. A seller of Ginseng at the TCM market in Kunming highlighted how parts of rhino horn can be arranged through informal relationships with other sellers at short notice:

Even though we do not specialize in rhino horn, of course we can arrange it for you. Wait five minutes because we cannot bring you to him [the seller] directly. Everyone knows that he is the one. [...] He always has it [rhino horn] in stock and guarantees good quality. We trust him. (Lixue)

After asking if she receives commission, she confirmed this, but she added that it also works the other way around: other traders sometimes refer to her in order to do business in particular for ginseng. Here, we see the strong role of reciprocity in *guanxi* networks with high levels of social control and trust. These informal relations provide opportunities for a familiar framework for illegal businesses and are therefore very useful to increase trust within Chinese criminal networks.

The Symbolic Reputation and the Status of Being Reliable

Our findings also refer to the importance of reputation and status in establishing trust. The literature shows that an honest and reliable reputation is a valuable asset in the underworld (Gambetta 1988a; Smith and Varese 2001). Dasgupta conceptualised the significance of gaining a positive reputation as a future-oriented investment since it will increase one's credibility and foster business in the future (1988). Therefore, it is wise for criminals to maintain a reputation of being reliable in order to attract and to sustain their business. As summarised by Denton and O'Malley in their study of the drugs market,

Equivalent to a stack of character references in the licit economy, but in addition, running an “ethical” business was a sound business proposition [...] their reputations for supplying a good product enabled them to maintain a regular clientele (1999: 520–521).

Similarly, the importance of a positive reputation is also evident in the illegal trade in tiger skins. One of the suppliers of tiger skins in Lhasa understands that the importance of a good reputation is essential in seeking employment in the underworld and utilises this as a way to foster trust and to minimise risks. The tiger skin supplier believes that his employees should appreciate the value of a good reputation and that their career would be ruined if they did anything to dishonour agreements, thus damaging their reputation. It was explained that ‘news like this [betrayal] will spread like wildfire in such a small place, it is very bad for the traders to cheat’ (Chen).

The response of another tiger skin supplier in Kunming echoes the significance of a well-kept reputation in this industry. He showed little concern for betrayal and defection in his network since there was a mutual understanding that ‘it is in the best interests of everyone not to screw up the transaction or else consequences will follow. [...] I make sure’ (Yang).

The reputation of the supplier is equally important to consumers. In the context of the illegal trade in Chinese state-protected wildlife as food, the consumer of endangered wildlife will not have had the opportunity to inspect the wildlife when it is alive and the serving restaurant could easily exchange the endangered wildlife paid for with other types of meat such as chicken or beef. Their concerns are summarised by the following remarks by an interviewee:

If someone promises me they are serving me protected wildlife and charging me a couple of thousand dollars for the dish, I will not be so stupid to trust him based on his words! We all know that these animals are expensive and difficult to catch; their promise will not give me my money back if they cheat me. (Soong)

In light of this, they felt that an essential element in aiding their trust in their food is via the culinary skills of the chef in the restaurant that supplies the dish. Referrals were made on the basis on the reputation of the culinary skills of the chef, and an interviewee in Zhuhai referred to a restaurant which sold endangered turtle:

You must go to X [name and address of restaurant], their chef is good. They will cook you anything you want to eat! Do you want me to call them for you now? I can send them a message to let them know you are going tonight, the food should be ready by dinner time if you call them now. (Chee)

Moreover, the social status of actors plays an important role in passing information to consumers in the illegal wildlife trade in China. For instance, in the supply of illegal ingredients for medicines, TCM practitioners and doctors may play an important role in promoting trust. It is often the case that the relationship established between a client and a TCM doctor is long-standing and secure. Several interviewed TCM doctors explained that they are able to prescribe or deliver illegal materials for TCM from endangered species. On the one hand, TCM doctors may advise their patients to purchase the ingredients on the (black) market. A customer described her relation as follows:

I used some pangolins against lumps in my breasts. [...] The doctor recommended me to use pangolin scales, but I could not afford it. He prescribed 5g or 10g for one week. Around 50g a month. The doctor told me that in a Western hospital they will cut a piece out of my breast, because I have a lot of lumps and perhaps it is cancer. [...] I was not

informed that these scales are from an endangered animal. [...] My doctor advised me to buy it on the local market. (Jia)

On the other hand, several TCM doctors can themselves arrange to have access to illegal ingredients, such as rhino horn. Although these ingredients have been banned since 1993,⁶ these TCM doctors still have a network to obtain those ingredients for their patients. Even hospitals and clinics buy their illegal raw materials for TCM through a middleman or directly from TCM markets, as was stated by several wildlife traders. A middleman in Anguo explained how companies disguise their illegal products and distribute them based on trust:

As a middleman I sell pangolins and saiga horns to hospitals, but people are afraid that they will be punished by the TCM administration office. They have a checklist. They put another name on the list of products which they buy. Once purchased, the hospitals and clinics state that they have these products in stock. [...] Of course, clients trust their suppliers because of their status. (Zhen)

The perceived expertise of antique collectors also aids the process of sourcing illegally worked ivory products in Hong Kong and in Mainland China. An experienced antique trader revealed that it was not uncommon for consumers to rely on the expertise of antique traders for purchases since they trust their hindsight.⁷

Repeated Encounters and Personal Experiences

In addition to social and cultural mechanisms to enhance trust in the sale and purchase of illegal wildlife products, *repeated encounters and personal experiences* play an important role on the wildlife market. The element of a long-standing nature in the context of continuity and resilience is important as for trust within criminal networks (Passas 1995). ‘For trust to be developed between individuals they must have repeated encounters, and they must have some memory of previous encounters’ (Dasgupta 1988: 59).

Indeed, informants explained that repeated encounters increase reliability and trust between partners. During the first transaction traders contact the middleman, the deal will take place outside public scrutiny; the price, quality and quantity will be discussed. After a trader has successfully built up his or her business network based on a number of small deals, he or she can then start with structural large-scale trading in illegal animal products. According to an illegal rhino horn trader in Kunming:

We sell around three rhino horns a year. I buy them from a middleman who is a real investor. We have been doing business for quite some time [...] He knows that the prices for these products are on the rise and therefore he has got a lot of them in stock. Before it was cheap to buy them, but now it has become expensive. It is an investment. Prices have risen rapidly from 2,000 to 3,000 to 150,000 yuan per kilo for rhino horn. Nowadays, we also sell rhino horn in limited quantities of 100 g, because of the high prices. I am willing to pay such a high amount of money because I trust my supplier after our multiple dealings. (Lihua)

⁶ Article 22 of the Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Wildlife Law.

⁷ However, this is no longer the trend because the Hong Kong government has adopted a (comparatively) tougher stance concerning the city’s illegal ivory trade (Cheung et al. 2017).

This illustrates that the long-standing secure relationship between traders and middlemen is very much influenced by trust through their successful encounters. In the above example, prices rise and the trader continues to buy expensive small quantities from the middleman. Several middlemen highlighted that for trust to develop between individuals, repeated encounters are required: the frequency of successful business transactions increases the level of trust (Paoli 2002). One of the key traders in pangolin scales in Guangzhou explained how trust was gradually established through past dealings with a particular wildlife smuggler:

Chang introduced himself via another contact as a new guy and it took a while before I trusted him. He indicated that he could deliver high quality products, not only pangolin scales. However, as he lived up to our agreement on each occasion, my trust in him progressively increased. Now that we have completed many deals, he has become close and I ask him for other services as well. (Chao)

Equally for consumers, repeated encounters increase the level of trust and enhance agreements and, in the consumption of protected wildlife as food, interviewees commented that they will only visit certain restaurants to make sure that they are not being cheated and in order to get the best value for their money.

The restaurant is the one I always go to, do not expect it to be fancy like a five-star hotel, it is a basic small place but they know how to cook the dishes well so I always go to them. (Po)

For suppliers, having an established client base is not only a sense of pride but ensures a steady and trusted source of income. A tiger skin supplier in Lhasa had the names of his client written across the walls of his warehouse where he kept wildlife skins.

See here (points to the wall), I even have clients all the way from Beijing and even from Guangzhou, they do not need to come back here (Lhasa) again, a simple phone call and I deliver. (Chen)

Repeated encounters enhance trust and foster credibility in both illegal trade and distribution via the consumer's personal experience. In the words of an experienced customer (who enjoys and regularly eats Chinese state-protected fish), he revealed that:

It is like choosing a lobster from the tanks of a seafood restaurants, you pick the lobster you like and the chef will cook it in the kitchen. Yet, how do you know you are being served the fresh lobster you picked but not a dying one? (Yeung)

Their concern is reasonable given that the flavours of Chinese state-protected wildlife could be easily mistaken for daily meat (i.e. beef, chicken, pork etc.). This is supported by the experience of two interviewees when they once mistook a Hairy Fronted Muntja (Chinese state protected) for beef and an owl (also Chinese state protected) for chicken. Further, there is no way of telling which dish is being served since 'they look the same as any ordinary meat dish' (Chee). In this context, a rhino horn trader in Anguo explained how he found out that he was being betrayed by a new partner and then refused to pay:

The colour, smell, taste and softness all play a role in defining the authenticity and type of the horn [...] a while ago I ordered two Siam horns [Asian rhino horns] from a new

potential business partner. When they arrived, I looked at the horn and noticed that it was an African horn. They tried to betray me! (Zhen)

Consequently, this middleman involved in the rhino horn trade refused to pay the high price for Asian rhino horn and made a new agreement. This illustrates that in order to solve this issue of mistrust, consumers resort to their own experiences, taste buds and expertise to distinguish the ‘original’ from the fake products. They believe that they have accumulated enough experience in consuming and inspecting Chinese state-protected wildlife to tell the difference.⁸

Discussion and Conclusion

In the underworld, the cost of trusting someone is high and the consequences of betrayal may result in violence or even death. Yet without trust, dealings and agreements would fail; thus, illegal actors often resort to mechanisms of trust to enhance the credibility of their agreements and dealings. In light of such uncertainties, this paper has examined the mechanisms of trust used by actors involved in the illegal wildlife trade in China. Drawing on first-hand interviews with traders, suppliers and consumers of protected wildlife products and on field observations collected from 2011 to 2016, we have identified important mechanisms that are relied upon by suppliers, traders and consumers in order to enhance trust and cooperation in their dealings. While some mechanisms of trust were previously identified within other criminal networks and other forms of crime (e.g. kinship ties; ethnic ties; continuity), this study confirms the existence of such mechanisms within wildlife trafficking and introduces new mechanisms that are rather characteristic of this specific form of crime in China.

For example, the reputation and social status of the suppliers of wildlife products appear to play a significant role in fostering exchange and trust. This is exemplified by three general observations resulting from the findings. First, most suppliers of wildlife products have a long-established history in this line of trade, and this information adds significant value to their reputation and social status. To illustrate this, one of the tiger skin suppliers in Lhasa revealed that his reputation and social status have been bolstered by his experience and history in the field, which is supported by his vast client pool across the whole of Mainland China. He also revealed that some of his business is from returning clients who simply call him to place an order (without viewing the skins because they trust him). Second, reputation and status are built because of the difficulties in accessing wildlife. Consumers who eat protected wildlife as food trust that the restaurants can gain access to protected wildlife because of their culinary skills. The logic is that, unless they have established access, they will not have had experience in cooking this particular form of wildlife. Finally, the social status of TCM doctors in Chinese society increases trust among potential buyers, thereby prompting consumers to purchase and to trust the product. TCM doctors do have the necessary contacts to obtain protected wildlife within their own social network, and they also gain additional income for such services as they are trusted by consumers because of their social status.

⁸ One powerful figure and the owner of several restaurants in Guangzhou revealed that she would often host banquets (serving dishes made from endangered wildlife) for senior government officials and business partners. She knows that she is being served the Chinese state-protected wildlife she ordered because she is in the catering industry and therefore knows what the dishes should taste like.

Clearly, there is a degree of risk in the illegal trade in wildlife products; both traders and consumers must strongly rely on mechanisms of trust in order to foster exchanges. From that perspective, we argue that trust may have a deeper and more complex meaning among Chinese actors involved in the illegal wildlife trade. The practice of *guanxi* illustrates that specific social mechanisms are linked to cultural behaviour in China. For example, our study confirms that Chinese have ‘a strong sense of reciprocity for developing friendship and saving face for themselves’ (Su and Littlefield 2001: 201). According to Wang (2017: 74) ‘a person will be viewed as untrustworthy if he/she violates the principle of reciprocity’. Moreover, Wang, (2017: 82) highlights that ‘feelings and emotional attachment among members of networks, [is] often an indicator of closeness of *guanxi*’. Such examples illustrate specific characteristics of Chinese crime networks involved in illegal wildlife trade.

The findings have both theoretical and policy implications. Theoretically, by conducting qualitative fieldwork in China and talking to people who are directly involved in illegal wildlife trafficking, we conceptualised the role of trust between Chinese actors in the illegal trade in products from endangered species. These insights contribute not only to understanding the (social) mechanisms behind wildlife trafficking specifically, but also to the organisation of criminal networks involved in illegal trade in general. For instance, the empirical data illustrates how actors in black markets may operate and use informal mechanisms to facilitate illegal trade. In particular, the link between illegal trade and oligopoly markets may help to understand the criminal organisation behind it, while the social role of ethnic ties and family relationships has been identified in line with other black markets (e.g. Kleemans and Van de Bunt 1999; Bovenkerk et al. 2003). Specifically, our findings may potentially provide insights to other forms of emerging yet understudied illegal markets, e.g. the illegal trade in antiques which bears similarities to the illegal wildlife trade since many of the cultural heritage objects are smuggled from developed countries and sold to consumers in neighbouring regions (Thomas et al. 2018; Collins et al. 2017; Benson and Fouché, 2014). Clearly, such transactions are unlawful and consumers have to rely on mechanisms of trust to foster exchange.

Policy wise, our findings show that the distribution of the illegal wildlife trade takes place under an oligopoly setting and actors are close-knit due to kinship and ethnic ties. As such, enforcement efforts could be localised, focusing on networks within local communities instead of overarching operations. The strong reliance on kinship ties also suggests that enforcement cannot overlook the significance of family and ethnic relationships in their investigations. Aside from looking into formal kinship ties, the role of corruption must be considered in the prevention of the illegal distribution of wildlife products. Similar to other studies, our data shows that suppliers of wildlife products are able to unlawfully access and obtain wildlife products via establishing strong *guanxi* with corrupted government officials. Such corrupted practices may hamper enforcement and potentially facilitate the growth of this black market. Therefore, enforcement measures should also be focused on corruption *within* governments. Furthermore, empirical data of this study provides better understanding of the entwined under- and upperworld (see also Van Uhm 2018b, c). A policy and law enforcement approach towards actors in the upperworld such as legitimate companies, officials and TCM doctors may assist to reduce illegal wildlife trade.

Finally, our discussions highlight the significance of having a reliable reputation and positive personal experience as methods to foster consumers’ trust and creditability towards the suppliers. These are subjective measures which are influenced by personal encounters and emotions which arguably is rather difficult to alter in the short run. We argue that in order to prevent more exploitation of wildlife in the future requires not only consistent and tough enforcement measures but educational campaigns must work in parallel to change the perception of potential users.

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Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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