

REPORT FOR THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

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(all photos by the author)



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INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia lost more than 50% of its elephants between 1990 and 2000, mostly due to poaching for ivory. There are now fewer than 50,000 wild elephants in all of Asia (WWF 2002). The National Elephant Institute of Thailand estimates that there were 200,000 wild elephants in the country in 1782, 100,000 in 1900 and fewer than 4,000 in 2002. Habitat loss and the ivory trade were the main causes of this precipitous decline. Elephants are a keystone species and their numbers and distribution in an ecosystem have important ecological implications. A survey of the ivory trade in Thailand in 2001 found more than 88,000 worked ivory items for sale, the most of any country surveyed in Asia and Africa (Stiles and Martin 2001, 2002; Martin and Stiles 2002 and in press). Raw and worked ivory is smuggled in from Africa, Myanmar and China in contravention of CITES. The town of Phayuha Kiri is the ivory carving center.

This trade needs to be controlled to save elephants. The ivory carvers are the key. If ivory is not carved poaching pressure will be taken off of both Asian and African elephants. The 2001 trade survey was too brief to learn much about how the ivory industry operates in Thailand. In 2002, supported by the NGS, I spent almost 3 months learning the history of ivory carving and the details of how ivory enters and leaves the carvers' workshops in Mandalay, Myanmar (Stiles 2002) and in Hanoi, Vietnam. A similar period in 2003 was necessary to understand how the Thai system functions.

As a result of the Martin and Stiles (2002) report and the resultant media coverage, the Thai authorities unbeknownst to me confiscated all of the ivory in Phayuha Kiri only three weeks before I arrived in Thailand in late December 2002. When I visited Phayuha Kiri in January 2003 only wood and bone were being carved and most carvers were in quite a bad mood as a result of the financial losses the confiscations and ivory crackdown had caused. They blamed Westerners for creating the bad publicity that led to the ivory carving ban. My planned main informant, Pradit Bumrunsi, refused to cooperate, as did most other carvers and all retail shop owners. I managed to find one senior carver (Prasit Prayoonwong) with 28 years experience in Phayuha Kiri who cooperated fully, and informants in two

other places in the area where ivory carving was still continuing. One of these, luckily, was the home of Gong Yangthan (82), a first generation ivory carver who knew intimately the history of ivory carving in Phayuha Kiri.

In an attempt to learn more about the background of wild and domesticated elephants and potential sources of domestic raw ivory I also visited the Khao Yai Conservation Project and the Ayutthaya Elephant Palace & Royal Kraal. Thailand's history and culture are richly intertwined with elephant lore.



Sompast Meepan, director of the Ayutthaya Elephant Palace and Royal Kraal, acting as mahout for a princess of the Thai royal family at the annual elephant roundup. The Ayutthaya roundup featured in *National Geographic Magazine* in December 1906 – “The Greatest Hunt in the World”.

OBJECTIVES

1. To find out how many ivory carvers are active in Bangkok, Phayuha Kiri and Chiangmai.
2. To find out how much raw ivory is being used in carving, where it comes from, how it is obtained, what the prices are for the different qualities, what the retail prices are and the rates of turnover, who the buyers are and where the ivory is going.
3. To look at changing patterns in the types of items carved as the types of buyers have changed. Which kinds of buyers purchase what types of items.
4. With the master carvers, to document what tools are used for what purposes, what techniques are used to carve the different motifs, what the meaning of the carved symbols and subjects are, what the different styles or schools are, what the history is of the ivory carving families.
5. Determine the incomes of the carvers and shop owners from ivory.
6. Ascertain the attitudes of the carvers and shop owners towards elephant conservation.
7. Find out what strategies might work to stop carvers from working ivory.

RESULTS

The results will be presented in the order of the Objectives:

1. Only one active ivory carver could be found in Bangkok and none were in Chiang Mai. The one is a Chinese carver in the World Trade Center who specializes in name seals and miniature writing. Another one was active in 2001 working for the Hong Chua ivory shop in Chinatown, but the shop claimed when I visited it that he no longer carves. A Chinese-Thai ivory vendor in Chatuchak Market said there were no ivory carvers left in Bangkok, as did staff in several hotel ivory shops. No one contacted at the National Museum or Fine Arts Department knew of Bangkok ivory carvers. In 1989 seven carvers were active in Chiang Mai, up to ten were in 1996, but all ivory for Chiang Mai since 1997 has been carved in Phayuha Kiri. Up to December 2002 there were about 100 people involved in working ivory in Phayuha Kiri. In January-February 2003 none were. One man and his sister still carve ivory in their home near the village of Monorom and two others make ivory gun, sword and knife handles in a specialty shop in Tanbaol Nongpaiban, both within 30 km of Phayuha Kiri. One other young ivory carver, trained in woodcarving at

the Bang Sai Cultural Center near Ayutthaya, was found in Bang Sai who carves on command.



Somkit Yangthan, Monorom



Custom Knives, Tanbaol Nongpaiban

2. Prior to the crackdown, about 200 kg of raw ivory was being used a month in Phayuha Kiri. Not more than 20 kg a month would have been processed elsewhere. The vast majority of raw ivory originates in Africa. Informants said that African traders would bring the ivory themselves, 200 to 500 kg at a time, and sell it to Thai middlemen in Bangkok, who would then transport it to Phayuha Kiri to sell to the family workshops. Tusks from Myanmar are also smuggled in at Mae Sai and Mae Sot on the border. Poached Thai ivory also comes onto the market from time to time, but the tusks are small. Up until 2002 tips and whole tusks from tame elephants in camps were sold, but this practice has stopped due to the ivory trade crackdown and a greater awareness on the part of camp owners about conservation issues. Carvers never go looking for raw ivory. It is either brought to them by middlemen or by clients who order a particular piece(s) to be carved.

In late 2002 tusks/pieces of Asian ivory of 5-10 kg were ~\$285/kg while African ivory was ~\$214/kg. Tusks over 10 kg, almost always African, could fetch up to \$500/kg, as they were getting extremely rare. Prices within weight classes varies with smoothness and color factors. Uncracked, unblemished pure white ivory is the most desired. African ivory is thought to be harder than Asian, probably because most pieces are from the savanna elephant, which produces a drier, more brittle, but actually softer, ivory than the forest elephant that is prevalent in Southeast Asia. These prices are substantially higher than the early 2001 average price of \$159/kg for a 5 kg tusk/piece, probably reflecting scarcity caused by increasing seizures by African and Thai authorities of smuggled ivory.



Elephant camp potential ivory source



Raw Asian ivory from domesticated elephants

The main buyers of Phayuha Kiri ivory are Bangkok and Chiang Mai souvenir/antique shop owners, followed by Thai individuals and Asian tourists who travel to the town looking for a bargain. About a dozen souvenir shops sold ivory until recently in the town. The main buyers of retail ivory in urban tourist outlets are ethnic Chinese from various countries, Americans, Japanese and Europeans (French, German, Italian in order of importance). The main buyers of the ivory gun and knife handles are American specialty shop owners. Most ivory is carried by buyers to their home countries in luggage, though the elephant ivory handles and specialty knives and swords are shipped to buyers in the USA and Japan marked as walrus or hippo ivory or deer antler.



Ivory belt buckle and handles.

3. The first users of Thai carved ivory were the royal family, specifically Rama V (of “The King and I” fame) starting in the late 19th century. Main items were various types of containers, sword and knife handles, parts for musical instruments in ceremonial orchestras, official seals, chess pieces, jewelry, buttons, dolls and even small howdahs. Distribution was very limited. Rama V popularized the use of ivory and in the early 20th century the aristocracy and upper classes began patronizing the royal carvers as well and ivory utensil handles and combs became popular. Religious ivory sculpture was also important early on and the National Museum contains elaborately carved tusks with Buddhas, Buddha figurines, Thepanom (deities that are worshipped) and stupas. The long, curved tusks of royal “white” elephants were often used for these.



Royal containers and snuff boxes



Musical instruments



Buddha royal carved tusks, 19th century





Royal howdah

In the early 1930s an artistically gifted Buddhist monk named Boonrod Lohartrakool began carving Buddhas in Monrom near Nakhon Sawan in central Thailand at the request of Luang Paw Derm, a revered monk, who possessed many tusks from deceased temple elephants. The main buyers were other monks who used them to decorate temples or resell to worshippers.



Luang Paw Derm's memorial



Shrine to Luang Paw Derm

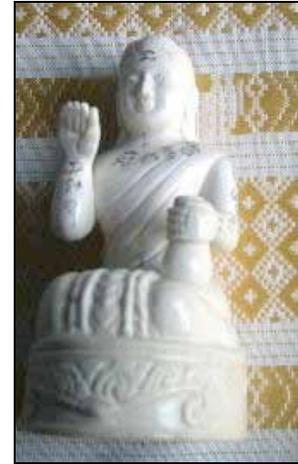
As demand for ivory grew monks began ordering rosaries, Buddha amulets, singhas (lions) and Nanggwak (Thai angel believed to attract customers to a business). These items would be blessed by the monks and sold to Buddhists for protection/good luck. The proceeds were used to support the temple monks and improve the beauty of the temples. Later, ivory knife and sword handles began to be made by a family of knife-makers in the area.



Buddha amulet



Singha



Nanggwak

Boonrod left the monkhood, moved to Phayuha Kiri and trained other people to carve in the late 1930s and early 1940s as demand grew. People began ordering figurines of Rama V, revered monks and other religious subjects as well. These ivory items spread to Bangkok and elsewhere. Ivory carving started up in Bangkok fine arts schools in the 1940s to satisfy demand. King Rama V, Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), is a favored subject because he is credited with bringing modernization to Thailand and for introducing many popular reforms such as the abolition of slavery and the education of women.



Statue of Rama V on far right



Revered monk

When tourism grew in the 1970s mass-market jewelry became a main item along with elephants, elephant bridge tusks, lions, dragons, name seals, Thai dancers, erotic figures (mainly phallic), ear picks, chopsticks and cigarette holders.



Mass-market jewelry, chopsticks, etc.



Name seals



Erotic piece

With the economic boom in Asia in the 1980s Chinese subjects such as Kwan Yin, Laughing Buddha and Long Life became popular. Buddhas of various Thai styles remained common throughout. Chinese subjects, including Taoist figures, netsukes, animals, fruits and pagodas are now imported from China in great quantities. Fine arts schools stopped carving ivory in the late 1980s when prices of the raw material became too expensive and, after the CITES trade ban in 1990, became too difficult to obtain.



Laughing Buddha



Imported Chinese subjects

4. Up to about the late 1970s only hand tools were used for carving (hand saws, files, chisels, gauges, firmers, awls, drills). With increased income and the need for mass production, workshops purchased electric tools (ban saws, grinders, lathes, buffers) in the 1980s, though hand tools are still used for the fine carving of sculptures. Three subjects are rated for skilled master carvers in Phayuha Kiri: Buddhas, animals and King Rama V. Each has a known master. There are no recognized “schools” of ivory carving, though the Buddhas are represented in the Ratanakosin (or Bangkok) School style of the 18th-20th century. Most craftsmen/ women specialize in certain tasks and/or subjects, though the most skilled carvers can craft a variety of subjects. The best raw ivory is reserved for the larger figurines, carved tusks and name seals (though some ready-made name seal blanks are smuggled in from Central Africa). The poorest ivory is used for pendants, amulets and necklace/rosary beads. Good raw ivory must be used for the bangles and carved bracelets.



Electric tools replaced hand tools in the late 1970s and early 1980s

Buddha and other religious images have a great deal of symbolism involved in them that is too extensive to go into here in detail. It involves physical marks, clothing, *mudra* (gestures), *asanha* (postures), held objects and other things (trees, snakes, etc.) in the carving that communicate a known story or other meaning. Rare pieces include *yakshas*, figures with terrifying faces, that can be good (*dvarapala*, or door guardians) or bad.



Each posture and hand gesture of the Buddha conveys a meaning.

Hindu subjects are also carved occasionally in ivory such as Ganesha and Erawan, both elephant figures, which are culturally significant to Thais (there is an important Erawan shrine in downtown Bangkok), Nataraja (Shiva as Lord of the Dance) and heavenly creatures such as the kinnari (half-woman, half-bird), naga (serpent king of the underworld), devas (lower gods) and the garuda (half-man, half-bird, the vehicle of Vishnu).

Incised, filigreed or fretwork motifs decorate more elaborate pieces, with stylized variations on the lotus flower or trees, vines, branches and leaves being common, or simply ribbons (*ho motif*) or geometrical designs (*prachae chin*), which originated in China.

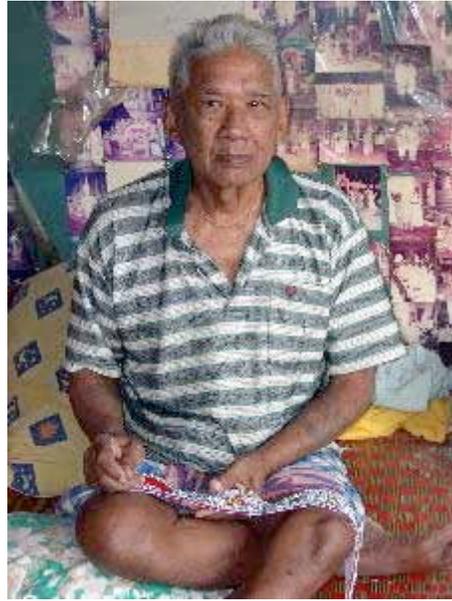


Syncretic piece displaying elements of Hindu gods and the Buddha, the lotus flower and floral incisions.

Carver families' summary:

All second generation Phayuha Kiri carvers were trained by Boonrod Lohartrakool (died 1999) or Gong Yangthan (2003 – 82 years old), his brother-in-law. Boonrod moved from Monorom to Phayuha Kiri in 1937 when he married Gong's sister to live with relatives there. Gong joined him in 1939 and learned to carve. The first second generation carvers were mainly Ramayana dancer students of Gong's in 1943. WW II spurred demand for ivory amulets that would protect soldiers from harm. Two brothers, Són and Chim, sons of sword and knife makers, also began to carve ivory during WW II. They first made miniature, ritual knives (*meadsan*) with ivory sheaths and handles that monks sold in temples, then branched out into Buddha and singha protective amulets. These types are all still sold today in temples.

Gong Yangthan



Boonyoung Hoonpah (65) learned to carve from Boonrod beginning in 1957. In the 1960s he sold ivory items only to monks and gold shops. Most tusks came from Burma or Laos then, a thousand at a time, up to two meters long. Chat Panthong (55), a third generation carver, is considered the best craftsman today; he specializes in Rama V. He taught Sangat Nokkrut (30s), who is considered to be the best Buddha carver. Prasit Prayoonwong (53) is the best animal carver. He learned from Chaiyong Janon (deceased) beginning in 1975. Somkit Yangthan (46), Gong's son, trains carvers today, as do many others. A complete history could not be done because most carvers refused to cooperate due to the recent ivory crackdown.

5. One successful figurine carver employing 6-7 workers said that income varied from \$400 to \$530 a month in the late 1990s. Today, with five workers (wife and other relatives) carving bone trinkets, income has dropped to about \$150/month. In 2001 an ivory bead necklace maker made \$230/ month and a female ivory polisher made about \$90/month. Income from ivory is substantially higher than from bone or wood.

6. Thai ivory carvers are very aware of elephant conservation issues and they are strongly anti-killing due to general Buddhist beliefs and specific Thai cultural values respecting the elephant. None questioned would knowingly buy ivory from a poached Asian elephant. They suspect that some African ivory they buy comes from poached elephants, but they have heard the publicity put out by southern Africa that there are too many elephants, therefore they do not believe that buying and working African ivory for commerce threatens the population. In short, carvers are quite willing, even eager, to buy African ivory, especially of the forest elephant.

7. A strategy to stop ivory carving has already been imposed by the Thai government. It consists of ivory confiscations and charges being leveled against carvers for Custom's and tax law violations. If convicted, the penalties can be severe. The government has also organized Phayuha Kiri carvers (former ivory and including the wood, bone and stone carvers) into an association with elected officers, etc. The government is supporting this association and has sponsored a trade exhibition of their products in Bangkok. It is technically not illegal to sell worked ivory in Thailand, but there is currently an "Elephant Bill" before parliament to, amongst other things, ban the sale of elephant products.

Experience elsewhere has shown that this approach will only drive the industry underground, as long as there is a demand for ivory products and an economic need to carve ivory by the craftsmen. These factors prevail currently. Phayuha Kiri carvers definitely want to continue with ivory.

An interim solution might be to interest the carvers in mammoth ivory. High quality mammoth ivory is very similar to the properties of elephant ivory and only costs \$200-220/kg (Hong Kong dealer price). There are quality problems (brittleness, cracks, color, smell) and wastage is higher than with elephant ivory, but as Chinese carvers have shown, very beautiful pieces can be produced. Another problem with mammoth ivory is that it can be used as a cover for elephant ivory smuggling, as worked pieces of either cannot always be distinguished.

The ideal solution to the ivory issue would be to match global demand to the supply available from legally acquired ivory (natural deaths, culling, cropping), but with constant overall elephant population declines this does not seem to be a near-term possibility.

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