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The imaginary ‘Asian Super Consumer’: A critique of demand reduction campaigns for the illegal wildlife trade

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ABSTRACT

There is increasing focus on altering consumer behavior within the conservation sector working to combat illegal wildlife trade (IWT). In this review we highlight how demand reduction campaigns can build on and reproduce problematic stereotypes that create and perpetuate a figure we characterize as the “Asian Super Consumer.” While there are numerous studies critiquing disturbing and racist narratives of particular actors engaged in the supply-side of IWT, the problematic ways in which racism can steer debates characterizing illegal wildlife product *consumers* remains generally under-explored. We focus on key examples of ivory demand reduction campaigns in China. We argue for more culturally-sensitive understandings of illegal wildlife product consumers and their motivations. Culturally-nuanced approaches in demand reduction campaigns are essential not just because they may be more effective, but because they move beyond on-going violent histories of cultural misrepresentation and racism.

1. Introduction

Among the many drivers of accelerating trends in species loss and biodiversity declines, illegal wildlife trade (IWT) has received significant attention from the media and powerful political actors. One reason for this is the emotional connection many people feel towards large charismatic animals, such as rhinos and elephants, impacted by IWT (Lorimer, 2007). These are species whose deaths and suffering are leveraged by governments and conservation organizations via graphic imagery and dramatic narratives to raise awareness about IWT, and galvanize public support to eliminate it (Marijnen and Verweijen, 2016). An important dimension of these campaigns relates to whom is perceived as *responsible* for IWT.

We argue that it is important cast light on the ease and facility with which those campaigns can place blame on people of color and communities in the Global South as key actors in driving IWT. To date there has been some engagement with how media and NGO reports accord blame to African communities without serious attention to the economic and structural reasons why people might enter the poaching economy (Mabele, 2016; Hübschle, 2017; Neumann, 2004). However, there has been little attention to how racism, classism, and neo-colonialist tropes shape approaches to demand management. The focus is on behavior change amongst consumers via new legal regulations to

restrict or ban the use or sale of illegal wildlife products; and via education, advertising, and marketing campaigns to persuade consumers to stop using wildlife products. These are loosely grouped together as *demand reduction strategies* to tackle IWT (Wallen and Daut, 2018). Demand reduction campaigns are defined “as outreach interventions to get people to voluntarily change their current or potential behavior as consumers of wildlife products or their derivatives” (Veríssimo and Wan, 2019: 625).

The problematic ways in which racism and classism steer debates characterizing illegal wildlife product *consumers* remains under-explored. Asian consumers are often mischaracterized by wildlife conservation actors and policymakers; we are not arguing that demand-management activities are being designed and implemented with the *intention* of furthering racist stereotypes. Rather, our aim is to highlight how a lack of attention to the reproduction of problematic historical stereotypes *reproduces and reinforces* these harmful stereotypes. In this review, we offer an initial critique of demand reduction campaigns via brief examples focusing on consumers in Asian countries, specifically ivory use in China. Our contention is that such campaigns can contribute to crafting what we refer to here as the “Asian super consumer” of illegal wildlife products. Below we first provide an overview of two illustrative examples of how the “Asian super consumer” as a catch-all caricature of IWT consumers in Asia works into demand reduction

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campaigns. We argue for more culturally-sensitive and nuanced understandings of wildlife product consumers and their motivations, specifically within the context of China. We conclude with a discussion of IWT demand reduction campaigns in the context of historical efforts by Western powers to represent diverse nationalities and ethnicities of people as a singular Asian threat to Western hegemony.

2. The Asian super consumer in demand reduction campaigns

Here we examine two NGO campaigns on demand reduction for ivory as illustrative examples of a wider set of concerns about how Asian identities and ethnicities are simplified and utilized to develop and promote particular messages. A thorough review of the range of campaigns including imagery, language and target audience is beyond the scope of a short critical review, so here we aim to highlight some key issues for future research.

One of the most active NGOs in demand reduction campaigns is San Francisco-based WildAid. Its approach is to leverage donated media placements for their “high impact media campaigns”; they work with key influencers, including actors, musicians, royalty, and sports stars to create short advertisements or public service announcements. The aim is to persuade consumers to change their behaviors – as their slogan, *When the Buying Stops, the Killing Can Too*, suggests, their mission is to tackle illegal wildlife trade by focusing on demand. For example, their short advertisement entitled ‘Fatherhood’ features HRH Prince William of the British Royal family, and Yao Ming, a basketball player, making a direct appeal in English and Chinese not to buy wildlife products and to ask friends and relatives not to buy rhino horn or sharks fin soup. In 2012, WildAid launched its ivory public awareness campaign with Yao Ming in China. The organisation claims that its campaign contributed to greater levels of public awareness, such that by 2016, the general public’s awareness of the elephant poaching crisis and impacts of the ivory trade had increased by over 50% and the price of ivory fell by 65%. The WildAid campaign on elephants focuses on persuading consumers not to buy ivory. The advertisements for the ivory campaign feature Yao Ming (basketball player), emphasising that it is illegal to buy or sell ivory in China; Li Bingbing (actress) portrayed as an elephant defending her children from poachers; Edward Norton (actor) as a narrator at a party in which ivory is for sale, in which Asian buyers mix with African officials and military figures, described as ‘corrupt officials’; and finally, Jay Chou (musician) urging people not to buy ivory interspersed with images of a white, blonde-haired girl patting an African elephant, images of ivory trinkets and sculptures, and elephants being shot by black poachers in Africa.¹ Across all of these advertisements, global elite actors (hyper-consumers with lavish lifestyles) urge the general Chinese ‘public’ to alter or reduce consumptive behaviors, a familiar (and paradoxical) practice in environmental advocacy campaigns (Brockington, 2008, 2013). The advertisements draw on the same imagery – celebrities concerned with conservation, African poachers, and Asian consumers. The narrative surrounding WildAid’s campaigning is very focused on presenting China, and an undifferentiated figure of the Chinese “Asian super consumer” as *the problem*. For example, WildAid states:

On December 31, 2017, China, once the world’s largest ivory market, banned all domestic ivory sales. WildAid was instrumental in supporting the government in this historic action..... Our surveys showed a 50% increase from 2012 to 2014 in the number of Chinese who believe that elephant poaching is a major problem.²

The ivory campaign by International Fund for Animal Welfare

¹ <https://wildaid.org/programs/elephants/> Further information about the celebrities and the campaigns they are involved in can be found on the WildAid website <https://wildaid.org>.

² <https://wildaid.org/programs/elephants/>.

(IFAW) also focuses on China and Chinese people as Asian super consumers who either do not know or do not care about the impact of their consumption on wildlife. IFAW’s ivory campaign promotes the message that *‘Trading ivory anywhere threatens elephants everywhere’*, but the campaign itself centers on Chinese ivory consumers as concerned with wealth and status, and as uninformed about the origins of ivory and the impact on elephant populations; for example, IFAW states that:

For generations, owning ivory carvings has symbolized wealth. And many didn’t even know the harm it was doing. An IFAW survey found seven out of 10 Chinese didn’t know ivory came from dead elephants. In Chinese, tusk is “elephant teeth.” People assumed elephants don’t die when they “shed their teeth.”³

China is a major market for legal and illegal of wildlife products – however a more nuanced understanding of profiles of consumption is required. The current focus on the Asian super consumer draws on and reinforces long standing and colonial-era stereotypes. Further, many of these demand reduction campaigns as evidenced above employ paternalistic approaches in which hyper-consuming global elites urge the everyday public to alter their consumptive practices (Richey and Ponte, 2011). As we show next, these efforts fail to recognize cultural, gendered, and classed differences in who utilizes illegal wildlife products and why.

3. A call for nuanced understandings of consumption in demand reduction campaigns

It is inaccurate to think that there is a blanket demand for wildlife products in China. Not everyone from China wants or supports the use of wildlife products and within the small minority of customers, their interests are specific. Based on fieldwork investigation by the second author across China, consumer preferences are largely determined by their gender and purpose of their purchases.

First, the demand for wildlife products between men and women differs significantly. One of the most popular products sought by female consumers in China is dried fish maw, or swim bladder. Given the high levels of collagen in dried fish maw, consumers believe that it will improve their skin tone and complexion resulting in glowing skin. Of course, this is not to deny that there are also male consumers eager to consume fish maw, but most consumers are women in their early 20–40s. This demand for fish maw is already driving the Totoaba, a species endemic to the Gulf of California in Mexico, into extinction. The profit margins of this trade are so high that the Totoaba is now referred to as “aquatic cocaine” (Pasha-Robinson, 2016). On the other hand, wildlife products which are believed to serve a medicinal purpose are generally more popular amongst male consumers. In research conducted by the second author, male interviewees particularly sought tiger bones. They explained their consumer behavior as a result of beliefs passed on to them from their elders and family that products serve medicinal purposes to improve male virility.

Second, for campaigns to be effective, the *purpose and motivation* for undertaking risks of enforcement to purchase illegal wildlife products must be carefully distinguished. Reports from non-governmental organisations show that the motivation for purchasing wildlife products is for medicinal purposes and self-consumption (Ellis, 2013; Zhang and Yin, 2014; Hou et al., 2018). To a large extent, this is not the reality in the field. Interviewees revealed that they would eat endangered fish to celebrate profits they made from the stock market. An interviewee with experience of attending banquets in which endangered wildlife was served explained that he felt pressured to eat the dishes (unwillingly) to show his respect for the host (Wong, 2016). Further, some interviewees thought that tiger skins and tiger bone wine were suitable gifts to present to their superiors because the latest electronic gadgets or sports

³ <https://www.ifaw.org/uk/projects/wildlife-crime-prevention-china>.

cars had become increasingly accessible to wider society, while only those with status and connections can access products from endangered wildlife. This logic is also found amongst consumers of ivory products, who believed that owning ivory pieces was a way to flaunt their status and money (Wong, 2017).

Third, the *perceived value* of the wildlife products is crucial for successful campaigns. Given the implementation of the full ivory ban in China in 2017, the value of ivory has dropped from \$2100 to \$730 per kilogram (Vigne and Martin, 2017; Wong, in preparation). However, the price of ivory dropped *before* the 2017 ban. The demand for larger ivory pieces peaked in 2013 followed by a significant decrease, driven by two major campaigns launched in late 2012, Ecological Civilization (to include ecological considerations into all policies development) and the Eight Point Regulation of the Centre (to reduce bureaucratic extravagance and unwanted work habits) (Zhou et al., 2018).

The ivory price decline preceding the 2017 ban was corroborated by what ivory traders said in interviews—they perceived their ivory stock as a liability and wanted to sell these products as soon as possible. In fact, one trader stated that he regretted turning down an offer for a small elephant tusk from an American tourist in late 2015/2016 because he felt the price would eventually pick up again. During the second author's subsequent visits between August 2016–2019, the tusk remained hidden in the shelf of his shop. The reason for his concern was not the ivory ban per se, but instead because of a series of anti-corruption campaigns by President Xi; the traders believed that users did not want to attract attention by purchasing expensive wildlife products (Wong, in preparation).

4. Towards a critical race theory critique of representations of Asian wildlife consumers

Europe has a long history of representing Asian cultures in ways that eschew attention to difference, representing a diversity of Asian peoples as existential threats to European sovereignty, whiteness, and the 'civilizing project' of European imperialism. These fears were promulgated by a variety of Western powers, popularized as the "yellow peril" or "yellow terror" (Thompson, 1978; Wu, 1982). While these stereotypes date back as far as the thirteenth Century (Okihiro, 1994), yellow peril hysteria reached its peak in the 19th and 20th Centuries, when "the West feared the yellow race as a menace that would threaten the domination of the White race, which stemmed from the large population size of East Asia, China's potential military and economic power, and Japan's rise as an imperial power" (Kawai, 2005: 112). Fear-mongering and jingoist cartoons depicting the yellow peril as an imminent threat to European states and the US became popular at this time as a means to justify *Western imperialism* across East Asia.⁴

The racist legacies of the yellow peril persist to this day, reproduced in a variety of Orientalist formulations that work to erase difference and craft imagined ideas of the Asian Other (Cardozo and Subramaniam, 2013; Kim, 2015; Said, 1978). As Kawai (2005) writes, "racial stereotypes of the yellow race do not distinguish yellows here from yellows there—Asian Americans from Asians, Chinese from Japanese, or Koreans from Vietnamese" (111). Paying attention to difference, therefore, becomes a crucial means of remembering that violent colonial and racist history is an ongoing history. We argue it is important that IWT demand reduction campaigns pay greater attention to how they represent Asian identities and target Asian consumers of IWT products. This requires more nuanced and well-researched campaigns developed in collaboration with social scientists whose expertise could help develop more targeted—and hopefully, successful—interventions.

While IWT demand reduction campaigns are our principle focus

⁴ For a visual exploration of how the "yellow peril" was characterized amidst the imperial colonial era, see MIT's visualizing cultures (2016) interactive website: https://visualizingcultures.mit.edu/boxer_uprising/bx_essay02.html.

here, stereotypes about Asian cultures intersect with other matters of human-animal relations as well (e.g. Neo, 2012). Claire Jean Kim's (2015) research on the politics of animal rights and live animal markets in San Francisco shows how 'ethnic' Chinese food markets were targeted and represented differently by politicians, animal rights activists, and the media compared to Fisherman's Wharf, an upscale live animal food market popular with tourists in the 1990s. Lassiter et al. (2002) describe tendencies of collapsing cultural difference in their analysis of the racialization of Filipinos in Los Angeles in relation to the use of dogs as food animals. Treating dogs as food animals is specific both to particular sectors and classes of Filipino society, as well as geographic regions in the Philippines (2002). They describe how the Filipino community in LA experienced discrimination as a result of dog eating traditions because it was perceived, by the Anglo community, as an offensive cultural practice shared by all Filipinos (Lassiter et al., 2002). Academia is also of course not immune to such injurious stereotyping and prejudice: the second author (ethnically Chinese and born and raised in Hong Kong) was questioned by a European social science researcher about whether she eats dogs upon learning her research is based on studying the illegal wildlife trade.

IWT demand reduction campaigns are therefore not alone in ignoring Asian cultural specificity in matters of human-animal relations, or in asserting Anglo-European cultural hegemony as morally superior in relation to the treatment and welfare of animals. These examples sit at the difficult intersection of conflicts over biodiversity conservation, animal rights interventions, and debates over cultural relativism (Duffy et al., 2016; Kim, 2015). They also demonstrate the critical need for incorporating postcolonial and critical race studies perspectives into discussions of social practices involving animals (Jackson, 2013). Our aim in naming the "Asian super consumer" is to signal a disturbing trend in the IWT and conservation policy and advocacy sectors. However, we wish to make *absolutely clear* this archetypal figure does not exist, neither as a meaningful target for IWT demand reduction campaigns, nor as an accurate portrayal of those consumers who do utilize illegal wildlife products. Efforts to tackle IWT will likely fail when they build upon, and reproduce, racialized caricatures of consumers in Asian countries. Culturally-nuanced approaches that are attuned to matters of social difference and cultural specificity are essential not just because they may be more effective, but because they move beyond the ongoing violent colonial history of cultural misrepresentation and racism.

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