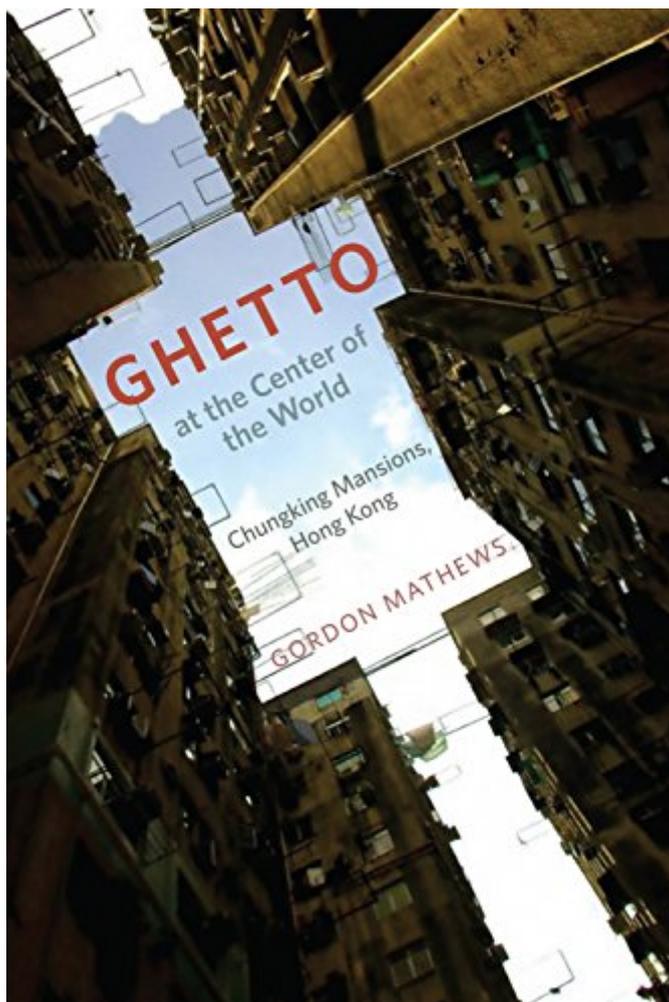


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# Ghetto At The Center Of The World: Chungking Mansions, Hong Kong



## Synopsis

There is nowhere else in the world quite like Chungking Mansions, a dilapidated seventeen-story commercial and residential structure in the heart of Hong Kong's tourist district. A remarkably motley group of people call the building home; Pakistani phone stall operators, Chinese guesthouse workers, Nepalese heroin addicts, Indonesian sex workers, and traders and asylum seekers from all over Asia and Africa live and work there—even backpacking tourists rent rooms. In short, it is possibly the most globalized spot on the planet. But as *Ghetto at the Center of the World* shows us, a trip to Chungking Mansions reveals a far less glamorous side of globalization. A world away from the gleaming headquarters of multinational corporations, Chungking Mansions is emblematic of the way globalization actually works for most of the world's people. Gordon Mathews's intimate portrayal of the building's polyethnic residents lays bare their intricate connections to the international circulation of goods, money, and ideas. We come to understand the day-to-day realities of globalization through the stories of entrepreneurs from Africa carting cell phones in their luggage to sell back home and temporary workers from South Asia struggling to earn money to bring to their families. And we see that this so-called ghetto—which inspires fear in many of Hong Kong's other residents, despite its low crime rate—is not a place of darkness and desperation but a beacon of hope. Gordon Mathews's compendium of riveting stories enthralls and instructs in equal measure, making *Ghetto at the Center of the World* not just a fascinating tour of a singular place but also a peek into the future of life on our shrinking planet.

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## Customer Reviews

Chungking Mansions is an infamous building in Hong Kong. It is a labyrinth of exotica, adventure, and otherness. In many ways it is a shadowy unknown place to many who live in Hong Kong and the countless travelers it attracts yearly. What is for sure is that we want to know more about it. Specifically more about the eclectic array of people that walk and work in its corridors each day. This fine work by Gordon Mathews satiates this curiosity quite fully. Exploring the history of the building, its many personalities, the goods and businesses that pass through, and the new transformations, Gordon Mathews produces a landmark text. This work is particularly compelling because it addresses some misconceptions about Chungking Mansions, namely its safety and criminality and redresses these issues. It shows us that the building is intricately placed in what Mathews terms 'low end globalization'. Millions of phones sold in this building sold by Pakistani tradesmen can be traced to the streets of Lagos. Illegal workers support their families in Calcutta by washing dishes or handing out flyers for the many restaurants in the building. Sex workers save money to start businesses back in their home countries. The most contemporary feature of the building is the rise in African traders passing through, this phenomenon is explored in detail and provides context for the transformations visible in the streets around Chungking Mansions. Another important contribution this text offers is that of acknowledging asylum seekers in Hong Kong and showing their particular struggles in the territory. Many of these asylum seekers who have fled torture or the threat of political assassination frequent Chungking Mansions and contribute to an understanding of the place as a bourgeois location. The truth being that whilst the building is populated with people from disparate parts of the world, they are often the middle class entrepreneurs of their countries, and many of the businesses in Chungking Mansions themselves can be comfortably profitable. Mathews is astute in pointing out that the fortunes and future of Chungking Mansions are tied to global caprices. Changes in visa regulations, the Olympics, and even 9/11 have changed the people and business practices that occupy Chungking Mansions. These factors reconfirm another important point that the author makes, whilst Chungking Mansions

is in Hong Kong, it is not 'of' Hong Kong. As such this book will tell you much about the building, much about trade with China, and much about low end globalization, it will tell you less however about Hong Kong. After all Chungking Mansions is an island of otherness in this city, a ghetto at the center of the world.

Ghetto at the Center of the World is an incredible book about an incredible place. Chungking Mansions is a 17-storied building in Hong Kong that has become an international trade hub because of its low prices and central location, gathering at any given time about 4 thousand people in its guest houses, stores and restaurants. It is one of the most cosmopolitan places on Earth, the author counted no less than 129 nationalities in the three years of research for the book. One of the central concepts of the book is the one of

low-end globalization, described thus by the author:

“Low-end globalization is very different from what most readers may associate with the term globalization—it is not the activities of Coca-Cola, Nokia, Sony, McDonald’s, and other huge corporations, with their high-rise offices, batteries of lawyers, and vast advertising budgets. Instead, it is traders carrying their goods by suitcase, container, or truck across continents and borders with minimal interference from legalities and copyrights, a world run by cash. It is also individuals seeking a better life by fleeing their home countries for opportunities elsewhere, whether as temporary workers, asylum seekers, or sex workers. This is the dominant form of globalization experienced in much of the developing world today.”

“It is amazing how much can be obtained in Chungking Mansions, from lodging to a haircut to halal barbecue, to whiskey of all price ranges, to sex, to computer repairs, to TV remotes, to spy cameras installed in pens and glasses, to stationery, to groceries, to laundry service, to medicines, to legal advice for asylum seekers, to spiritual sustenance for Christians and Muslims. As one well-read informant explained,

“There is a self-sufficient ecosystem in Chungking Mansions. One might never leave the building for weeks or months on end, since virtually all that one might need is in the building itself.”

The book brings a fascinating ethnography about how these different nationalities and cultures manage to live side by side. Racism exists and is rampant, specially from the Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese against South Asians and Africans, but grievances are largely put aside in the everyday struggle to make money. It is not a Disney-perfect relationship, but a human and imperfect one, with highs and lows. The book is very well researched and organized in chapters dedicated to the place, the people, the goods, the laws and the future. It

is one of the books that really made me feel like I have traveled to this fascinating place. Highly recommended.

Excellent study of a truly unique place such as Chungking Mansions, with an affectionate view of its inhabitants and their stories and great insight and analysis of the symbolic role of the Mansions as crossroads of the world. If you have visited the building and experience its unique atmosphere, this book will help to complete the picture and deepen your understanding.

Mathews' work is the product of the best kind of obsession. His ability to put life in CKM into a broader context, to build rapport with people, to notice detail, to run a team of student researchers (some of whom I imagine are now well equipped to go on to do their own work), and to report so clearly on what is happening makes the book a pleasure to read. Ethnography's often done these days, but rarely so well. And it's combined here with a kind of awareness of global issues that is really thought provoking. The chapters on cell phone trading, the vignettes of the traders and their businesses, and how his research has affected lives inside CKM are particularly interesting. As an aside: back in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, I spent a fair bit of time living in CKM, and can say the author really caught the spirit of the place.

I read this book several months ago, but found it so compelling I often continue to visualize the descriptions of life and business in one of the scrappiest, most marginal, and yet most optimistic places in the world. I heartily recommend this book as an antidote to both familiar developing-country tomes and weary first-world cynicism. L. A. Starks, Author of 13 Days: The Pythagoras Conspiracy

It's ok and an interesting read, although the book goes on a bit and could have done with a bit more careful editing!

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