

Understanding Globalization Through Chungking Mansions

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重慶大廈 CHUNGKING MANSIONS

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Chungking Mansions

- Where people from sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and other areas seek their fortunes through temporary employment and low-budget transnational trade.
- 90 guesthouses, 380 businesses in all: 4000-5000 people staying in a cramped area of 100 meters square, rising 17 stories.
- There is no other building in the world quite like Chungking Mansions, in the intensity of global interactions taking place under one roof.

- Chungking Mansions is “a ghetto at the center of the world”: a home for South Asians and Africans in Chinese Hong Kong, a node of the developing world in Hong Kong. Many Hong Kong people are afraid to enter the building
- Chungking Mansions is a world center of “low-end globalization”: the transnational flow of people and goods involving relatively small amounts of capital and informal, semi-legal or illegal transactions, commonly associated within the developing world. This is globalization as experienced by most of the world’s people



郵政局
Post Office



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重慶大廈
Chungking Mansions

遠東大廈
Far East Mansion
東企業廣場
Oterprise Square

喜來登酒店
Sheraton Hotel

金域假日酒店
Holiday Inn Golden Mile

帝國酒店
Imperial Hotel



出口Exit
L2

MIDDLE ROAD
中環道

行人專用
Subway

咀站 Tsim Sha Tsui Station

彩星中心
Prestige Tower

出口Exit
L3

九龍酒店
Kowloon Hotel



半島酒店
The Peninsula

樂道 LOCK ROAD

北京道
PEKING ROAD

出口Exit
L4

漢口道 HANKOW ROAD



漢口中心

香港基督教青年會



GOLDEN GUEST HOUSE

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CHUNGKING HOUSE
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CHUNGKING MANSIONS

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遊各賓館
Room
舒適客房
Welcome
歡迎光臨

CHUNGKING MANSIONS
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36-44 Nathan Road, Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon

外幣兌換 Exchange
成衣/雜貨 Garment Sund
珠寶/純金

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History of Chungking Mansions

- Built in 1961, intended for the well-off.
- From the start, it had no unified ownership; it rapidly deteriorated.
- In the late 1970s and 1980s, many Western backpackers and south Asians passed through CKM; by the 2000s, many African traders began to come
- Death from fires in 1988; in 1993, CKM lost power for 10 days; murders in early 2000s.
- In 2005, closed-circuit TV cameras were installed throughout the building, making it much safer.

Why is Chungking Mansions a center of low-end globalization?

- Chungking Mansions is an extraordinarily cheap place to stay (and is difficult to tear down).
- Hong Kong's ease of entry: tourist visa-free entry obtainable at the airport for residents of many countries.
- China's emergence as a center of manufacturing for the goods of "low-end globaliztion."

Doing Research at Chungking Mansions

- I stayed in Chungking Mansions 1-2 nights a week May 2006-Dec. 2009; now too I go every Saturday to teach a class of asylum seekers. From 2006-2009, I spent my every available minute in the building.
- Basic research method: hanging out, listening, asking questions, and then recording to myself all I had heard every hour or so.
- Chungking Mansions is not that dangerous; but many people are engaged in semi-legal or illegal activity. I was accused of being CID, CIA...

- I traveled to India and Africa with traders and temporary workers, and visited the families of asylum seekers.
- This research could only have been successful through long-term ethnographic fieldwork. Only through such fieldwork could I gain the trust of people in Chungking Mansions, and could find out the information culminating in my book, *Ghetto at the Center of the World: Chungking Mansions, Hong Kong*.

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INSTANT PASSPORT PHOTO

EXIT

ART NO. WCK-718
COLOUR: B.L. 24
SIZE: 29 24mm x 1.32



People in Chungking Mansions

Traders

- The majority are African, but traders come from all over the world
- They buy goods in Hong Kong/China and sell them in their home country
- They deal in mobile phones, clothing, watches, electronic goods, computers, building materials, furniture, used car parts...I have estimated that 20% of the phones used in sub-Saharan Africa have come via traders in Chungking Mansions.
- Some carry goods in their luggage, up to 32 kilos; others use air freight or rent or share containers

- Many travel into south China, on visas they obtain in Chungking Mansions; others do their buying and selling in Hong Kong
- Problems of customs and borders
- Transactions: most often cash
- These traders are the elite in their home countries, in that they have the money to come to Hong Kong and do business. But half fail, and never return.

Commentary

- West African trader: “If I pay customs in my country, I lose everything. If you buy a hundred mobile phones, you must give up fifty. You have to cheat instead: it’s the only possible way.”
- West African trader: “In Hong Kong customs, I was searched for drugs. I told the customs officer, ‘Do you think I’m stupid? If I wanted to smuggle drugs, I wouldn’t have them in my luggage. I’d get a Chinese girl to take them in!’”

- Central African trader: “As a rule, every buyer of mobile phones knows what a real phone and a copy phone is, but no seller can ever say that...”
- West African trader: “I mix them, real and copy. I sell the copies to people off in villages, who don’t know any better—I sell the real ones to people I know. I sell copies much cheaper—they work at first, but they break awfully quickly.”
- East African trader: “Nobody in my country can buy an original phone by a famous company. It’s too expensive!...My copies show them good things! We traders take the world to Africa...”



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Canada 500mins

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Bangladesh 45mins
India 50mins
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甘泉

FOUNTAIN 蒸餾水
Distilled Water

SAGOT mo na ang text!
dalo lang sa 1528 SMART

Sumali lang ka bahit among International Budget Text Parks

PCCW mobile

PHILIPPINES ONLINE 42 MINS
MOBILE 30 MINS

68

Restaurant, business and guesthouse owners/managers and employees.

- Owners are often from mainland China, with increasing numbers of South Asians; managers are typically South Asian.
- Some employees are Hong Kong residents; but more are on tourist visas they renew by returning home every two months; many are from Kolkata.
- These employees are paid very little (around HK\$3000 per month); trade pays for much of their air tickets.

- Why do these temporary employees come? They have no job prospects at home, and Hong Kong tolerates them. (They are virtually impossible to catch.)
- Without these tourist-permit employees, many of Chungking Mansions' businesses could no longer afford to exist.

Commentary

- Store employee: “Yes, I was surprised when I first got to Chungking Mansions. It was not like Hong Kong but like Kolkata.”
- Guesthouse manager: “Gangsters have never had the chance to penetrate Chungking Mansions. When you’re Chinese and walk into Chungking Mansions, you’re so obvious! You can never hide yourself.”
- Guesthouse manager: “Business is much harder than in the past. People don’t stay for a long time any more, because of the China lure: why stay in Hong Kong when they can buy in China?”

- Pakistani Muslim phone store manager, to African customer: “My friend, you are a Christian, and yet you are causing me all this trouble; I must rewrite all the invoices. Why do you do this to me if we are both men of God?”
- Hong Kong policeman to young Indian man: “You’re not doing anything bad, are you? Except for working illegally. If you’re not doing anything bad, you’ll be OK here.”
- Store employee, to me: “Please tell me: Is there any possible way I could get Hong Kong residency?”

WAKAS

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Asylum Seekers

- There are some 7000 asylum seekers in Hong Kong, mostly from South Asia and Africa; many congregate at Chungking Mansions. There are NGOs in Chungking Mansions serving them.
- They await recognition of refugee status from the UNHCR, which grants such status, often after years of waiting, to a small minority. Many are now turning, alternatively, to the Hong Kong government.
- Asylum seekers are not allowed to work, and must live on charity in Hong Kong. Many, however, do work. They too make Chungking Mansions' businesses economically possible.

- Many asylum seekers are “fake,” in the sense that they simply seek better economic opportunities for themselves; many others are quite real, fleeing torture or death threats. But the terms “real” and “fake” are misleading.
- It’s often assumed that “fake” asylum seekers work; “real” asylum seekers are afraid to work, because if they are caught, they will be deported back to their home countries and imprisoned or perhaps killed. But the situation is more complicated than this.

Commentary

- South Asian asylum seeker: “How can I prove I deserve refugee status? I have a bullet in my hip. Here’s the x-ray...”
- African asylum seeker: “My brother-in-law has tried to kill me several times. Shouldn’t I be able to get refugee status?”
- African asylum seeker: “The UNHCR teaches asylum seekers to become beggars.”

- African asylum seeker: “My mother gave me to a Christian sect that was going to castrate me on my 21st birthday, to give me to God....I escaped, went to the jungle and met two Australians, who saw the vial of diamonds my mother had given me....I remember being locked in the hold of a ship, drugged....I woke up in Hong Kong, with no money and no passport...”
- African asylum seeker: “My country’s government is terrible. They will kill me if I go back....But I love my country.”

Tourists

- Tourists come to Chungking Mansions for adventure (especially Japanese and Europeans), for a taste of home (especially South Asians in China and elsewhere), and for economic reasons (especially mainland Chinese, who may have no idea what Chungking Mansions is).

Commentary

- Japanese tourist: “I come to Chungking Mansions because it’s ‘ethnic chaos.’”
- American tourist: “It’s nicer now than in the 1980s. I’m disappointed.”
- Mainland tourist: “I didn’t know there would be so many Africans here. It’s horrible!”
- Mainland tourist: “I want to eat Chinese food, but I can’t buy any here. Why not? Isn’t Hong Kong part of China?”



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Theorizing Globalization Through Chungking Mansions

Macroscopics: World Systems Theory

- Chungking Mansions involves traders from the extreme periphery (Africa) traveling to the semi-periphery (China) to buy used or copied goods from the core (Japan, Western Europe).

- Traders take the simulacra of the real goods of the core--fakes manufactured in the semi-periphery--to sell to the desirous and impoverished consumers of the extreme periphery.
- To what extent do the traders in Chungking Mansions exploit their customers, and to what extent do they benefit their customers?
- “If we didn’t bring the phones, the people in my country wouldn’t have any phones.”

- The temporary workers in Chungking Mansions come to the core, Hong Kong from the periphery, Kolkata, for higher wages. Their Hong Kong work may be tedious and humiliating, but they are heroes back home in Kolkata
- The asylum seekers are treated badly in Hong Kong; but they come because they are provided at least minimal means by which to live.
- Tourists come to Chungking Mansions for a glimpse of the exotic periphery while still enjoying the safety of the core.

Macrosopics: Neoliberalism

- Neoliberalism is a philosophy emphasizing the market as the ultimate arbiter of value: Hong Kong epitomizes this.
- Hong Kong's largely open visa policy.
- Hong Kong's mostly open borders.
- Chungking Mansions' laissez faire law enforcement. What goes on at Chungking Mansions, except for overt robbery and violence, is tolerated by police: it's "business as usual."
- Chungking Mansions is a fairly peaceful place. Is this created by Hong Kong's neoliberalism?

■ Ethnic Tensions

There is generally not much ethnic tension in Chungking Mansions between South Asians and Africans, or Muslims and Christians, although occasionally outsiders arrange such tension.

■ Class Tensions

The gap between the well-off and the poor—between owners and temporary workers; between the large entrepreneurs and the small traders—is enormous in CKM, although most view it as a fact of life rather than an injustice.

- The underlying reason for the lack of class tension in Chungking Mansions, and the apparent success of neoliberalism in creating peace is that Chungking Mansions is a “club of the developing-world successful.”

Microscopics: Interactions

- Most globalization theory is macroscopic; but in Chungking Mansions, theory needs to be applied very close to the ground as well.
- This is what anthropology does best: to take abstract theories of globalization and other large processes, and to examine them within the lives of actual people.
- Arjun Appadurai's five scapes of globalization—ethnoscapes, mediascapes, ideoscapes, finanscapes, and technoscapes—as seen through a microscopic perspective.

- Ethnoscapes: Consider the careful strategies of self-presentation used by the new African buyer of phones from a Pakistani-run stall; consider Nathan Road late on a Saturday night.
- Technoscapes: The complex jockeying over phone model information.
- Financescapes: The prevalence of cash; change can be made in many different currencies, but credit cards are unused.
- Ideoscapes: Consider the changing attitudes of an Indian Muslim towards Russian sex workers.
- Mediascapes: Consider the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics.



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Microscopics: Identity

- How does Chungking Mansions change the people who stay there?
- For some, no apparent effect. East African trader: “I come here only to make money. I don’t have time to talk to people!” Others disdain Hong Kong and China for their racism: “Why do they hate Africans?”
- A few are transformed. East African trader: “I am a Chinese with black skin.”
- Two Africans arguing vociferously over Chinese versus Hong Kong identity.

- One temporary Indian worker proclaimed, “I love Chungking Mansions! I ate sushi with my boss last night! I could never do that in Kolkata!” Another said, “I hate Chungking Mansions! I will never come back! You can walk up to a girl and get her phone number! Hong Kong is immoral!”
- Why are some people eager to enter the “global cultural supermarket,” while others resist it? This is a matter of individual psychology, but also of anthropology.

Final Thoughts

- Chungking Mansions is unique, but there are sites throughout the world of intense global micro-interactions that demand investigation. This should be a major anthropological task.
- China is often derided in Chungking Mansions for making cheap goods; but China is the motor of low-end globalization: might this be China's major contribution to the 21st century, in bringing globalization to the world?
- Chungking Mansions will eventually be torn down, but all the world may become Chungking Mansions. Is Chungking Mansions the future of the world?

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