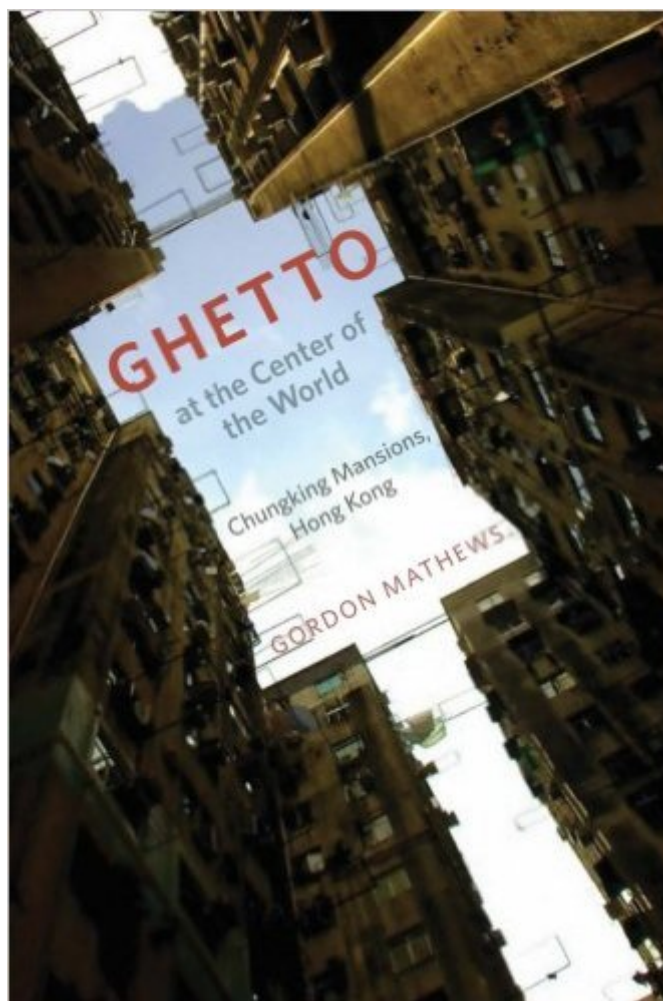


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# Ghetto At The Center Of The World: Chungking Mansions, Hong Kong



## 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 title of this book refers to a large apartment building in Hong Kong's expensive Tsim Sha Tsui district called Chungking Mansions. Although it sits on a prime piece of real estate, surrounded by luxury hotels and shops with names like Gucci and Prada, Chungking Mansions is most definitely not a luxury place. Rather, it is a microcosm of what author Gordon Mathews calls "low-end globalization." The building itself began as cooperative apartments and is still managed by an owner's association. But it is a remnant of another time, before the neighborhood around it became a tourist and shopping destination. Over time, owners of the apartments inside the Mansions began to convert their homes into unlicensed 'guest houses' where backpackers and others of modest means could stay while they experienced 'Asia's World City,' as Hong Kong now brands itself. From a physical standpoint, Chungking Mansions is a weird place. On one hand, it is a typical aging apartment building of 17 stories, with multiple elevator banks and commercial space on its ground floor. What is untypical is that this ground floor contains scores of tiny shops run by entrepreneurs from developing nations such as Nigeria, Pakistan, Ghana and India. Many sell mobile phones

wholesale, which traders purchase in bulk and take back home to sell at profits that can turn them into rich men in their own countries. If they get lucky. On the upper floors apartment owners quietly convert a two bedroom apartment into a warren of, say, 10 guest rooms, each of which is rented by the week, usually for cash in advance.

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, McDonalds, 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.

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