

Lingnan University

Digital Commons @ Lingnan University

Staff Publications

Lingnan Staff Publication

2012

Book review : Gordon Mathews. Ghetto at the center of the world : Chungking mansions, Hong Kong

Leung-sea, Lucia SIU

Lingnan University, Hong Kong

Follow this and additional works at: https://commons.ln.edu.hk/sw_master



Part of the [Human Geography Commons](#), [Place and Environment Commons](#), [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#), [Urban, Community and Regional Planning Commons](#), [Urban Studies Commons](#), and the [Urban Studies and Planning Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Siu, L.-s. L. (2012). Book review : Gordon Mathews. Ghetto at the center of the world : Chungking mansions, Hong Kong. *Social Transformations in Chinese Societies*, 8(1), 87-89.

This Book review is brought to you for free and open access by the Lingnan Staff Publication at Digital Commons @ Lingnan University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Lingnan University.

Book Review

Gordon Mathews. *Ghetto at the Center of the World: Chungking Mansions, Hong Kong. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011. 241 pp.*

Globalization has its cliché images: jet-setting people running multinational conglomerates and high finance companies, versus people bound to toil on coffee plantations or sweat factories. The anthropologist Gordon Mathews is broadening our imagination by a lively account of “low-end globalization” in Chungking Mansions - the globalized flow of people, goods and money are not exclusive to the rich world. In terms of social, business and cultural connections, Chungking Mansions is closely linked with an array of nodes stretches “from Bangkok to Dubai to Kolkata, Kathmandu, Kampala, Lagos, and Nairobi” (p13). This is a melting pot for traders carrying their goods by suitcases, and people with complicated nationality statues fleeing their countries for all sorts of reasons. A comparable fictional narration on illegal migrants, asylum seekers and “mobile-fon men” on English strawberry fields can be found in Marina Lewycka’s novel *Two Caravans* (2007). It is Gordon Mathews who has given a proper name to this world, chosen an intensely hybridized urban site, and demonstrated how to study the phenomenon by ethnography.

For ethnographers Chungking Mansions is a fascinating research project. Buildings are usually not representative enough to become subjects of anthropology studies (p21), but with inhabitants from 129 nationalities (p7) Chungking Mansions has taken the whole world within its walls. Mathews is correct that Chungking Mansions often appears formidable to the general local Chinese population, and the building has attained an impression of exotic “otherness”. In the early 1990s when I worked as a young newspaper journalist, one day I received an order from an assignment editor to search for a particular informant by knocking on the doors of all backpacker hostels in Chungking Mansions, from the seventeenth floor downwards, all by myself. Contrary to normal daily news practices, the unusual order was intended to be a subtle torture to an unfavoured underling, and Chungking Mansions was used as a fearful symbol of threat. Yet the experience turned out to be an eye-opening experience and a lot of fun. Even the smell on backstairs was rich and interesting. Hardly anywhere else can one find the blended aroma of South Asian curry, Chinese salted fish and urine. Despite the complexity of Chungking Mansions, in Gordon Mathews’ book readers are given easy lines of walkthrough by the book’s five chapters: place, people, goods, laws, and future. The narration moves vertically along the building’s floors, across ethnic boundaries, around goods and trading practices, around the murky waters between legal and illegal practices, and along temporal lines. Academic readers may be interested in the fusions between various social boundaries and the methodology involved; general readers are likely to appreciate the vivid and deep venture into Chungking Mansions beyond the access of casual visitors.

Ethnographic accounts usually include reflexive notes on the ethnographer's role inside the target community. In this book Mathews describes how he is known as "the Professor" in Chungking Mansions, the possible effects of being a white male to his work, how he prepares himself for the potential risks of fire and diabetes, and the impact of induced media spotlight on people of Chungking Mansions (p50-55). It describes hilarious encounters such as a midnight raid in his room by Muslim informants to "check on his morals" (p52), how female research assistants get suitors' attention (p50, 52), and how a Pakistani informant nearly got the author arrested by entrusting him with HK\$12,000 to avoid confiscation by the police (p157).

Mathews predicts that the niche underworld of Chungking Mansions will disappear in a few decades' time, as the building is likely to be torn down eventually. Yet low-end globalization is likely to get into the open, expanding from the niche underworld of Chungking Mansions into the wide and open world (p218). His prediction is a realistic one. While police officers and property developers are likely to rejoice for different reasons, anthropologists and sociologists will certainly miss this vibrant and colorful place as a pilot showcase of low-end globalization.

Lucia Leung-sea Siu

Lingnan University