



# Ghetto at the Center of the World: Chungking Mansions, Hong Kong

By Gordon Mathews

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**Ghetto at the Center of the World: Chungking Mansions, Hong Kong** By Gordon Mathews

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 entrails 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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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Hong Kong's Chungking Mansions is the most notorious flophouse in Asia. . . . The shabby tenement is today as much about global commerce as tourism. What the building should be renowned for, argues Gordon Mathews in his fluid and enjoyable field study "Ghetto at the Center of the World", is the ingenious way 'low-end globalists' eke out profits from petit arbitrage. . . . It reads like a first-rate business book."--Wall Street Journal

"In this wonderful book Gordon Mathews takes on an intriguing project: daily life as it is lived, articulated, dreamed, denied, regretted, and defended in a rather rundown but very public building in Hong Kong. The residents of Chungking Mansions are economically blocked from the rest of the city and often racially discriminated against, so how do such marginalized people survive, much less prosper? This is the conundrum at the heart of "Ghetto at the Center of the World". Mathews tackles it by providing a vivid description of the people who live their lives in the building's dimly lit hallways, restaurants, and shops, and by analyzing the larger material and political forces at work. The resulting account is as informative and revealing as it is entertaining."

--William Jankowiak, author of *Sex, Death, and Hierarchy in a Chinese City*

#### About the Author

**Gordon Mathews** is professor of anthropology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He is the author of *Global Culture/Individual Identity: Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket* and *What Makes Life Worth Living? How Japanese and Americans Make Sense of Their Worlds*, coauthor of *Hong Kong, China: Learning to Belong to a Nation*, and coeditor of several books.

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**Stacia Cobb:**

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