

1: COMMUNITY

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Multicultural kaleidoscope

Despite a dated reputation for vice, peace is common among Chungking Mansions' diverse types and ethnic groups

Its five connected blocks were once described as a 'gigantic decaying tooth', but this is no longer an apt description for the newly renovated and neon lit Chungking Mansions on Nathan Road. However, despite its new lease of life, the 50,000 sq ft, 17-storey building of cheap guesthouses, restaurants and retail and wholesale businesses is still distinguishable from other nearby buildings such as the 31-storey iSQUARE and six-storey K11 malls. The uniqueness of the building has long grabbed it

attention, one example being that it served as one of the locations in Wong Kar-wai's film *Chungking Express* (1994). Thankfully, its face lift hasn't changed its inner workings or sense of community.

'The biggest nightmare would be for Chungking Mansions to become yet another third-rate Hong Kong mall,' says Gordon Mathews, professor at the department of Anthropology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, whose extensive research of the building culminated in *Ghetto at the centre of the world, Chungking Mansions, Hong Kong*, adding that Chungking Mansions was built in 1961 which makes it a historic building by Hong Kong standards, predating neighbours iSQUARE and K11 which opened in December 2009 by almost 50 years. Chungking Mansions 'was luxurious by Hong Kong Chinese standards because it was 17-storeys tall at a time when there were few skyscrapers in Hong Kong. Some sources say that Chinese celebrities lived there,' he says.

Whatever the truth, it wasn't long before the mansions deteriorated due to myriad ownership. In

the 1970s and 1980s, the Mansions became a centre for south Asian merchants who opened restaurants and other businesses catering to Western and south Asian clientele. Its reputation as a 'heart of darkness' in Kowloon gathered pace in 1988, when a fire killed a Danish tourist, and then in 1993, when the Mansions lost power for 10 days. Africans began coming in the 1990s and by the early 2000s they made up over half of the people staying at the mansions. Then, in 1995, Sushila Pandey, a 37-year-old Indian tourist was killed in the building by her Sri Lankan partner, and the same year about 1,750 people were questioned in a police swoop, and 45 men and seven women from various Asian and African countries were arrested. In 2006, 52 men and seven women from 14 countries were arrested for violating immigration regulations.

Despite the above, Dennis Cheung Ka-yuen, management trainee of the Incorporated Owners' Corporation of Chungking Mansions and resident in the building since the age of two, says that it is a safe place. 'Our present chairlady, Lam Wai-lung, supervised the building of a new transformer room, so that the electricity capacity increased which solved the problem of fires and blackouts. As of 1999, the building [introduced] a CCTV system to reduce crime. Today, 310 CCTV cameras are

monitored by the management office; they cover 60 per cent of the public areas of the building,' he says, though he admits that things were not always this way. 'Chungking Mansions used to be notorious. In those days, the Management Ordinance was not that structured and the owner's corporation was not in operation. There were all sorts of illegal activities.' Cheung adds that the reputation of the building was at its worst in the late 1980s, at which time 'the building had nicknames such as fire building, dark spot, unruly, and so on.'

According to Mathews, there are four major groups at Chungking Mansions: traders, owners or managers and their employees, asylum seekers, and sex workers; transient groups of tourists and business travellers – the latter which include some of the traders – and local Hong Kong Chinese and expatriates who go to eat at the many restaurants of the building.

Mathews says that the pursuit of profit makes ethnic and religious discord no more than an unwelcome distraction. He says, 'The degree of friendliness is something you don't typically find elsewhere in Hong Kong. So too is class tension muted. Each person wants to rise up the ladder – the system is not questioned, only one's place in the system compared to others. The poor are

unlikely to become rich.’ According to Mathews, the poor and rich buy into the basic assumptions of capitalism and, in this sense, Chungking Mansions is no different from anywhere else in Hong Kong or China or throughout most of the capitalist world. He says it differs only in being more visible, unlike exploitation by faceless corporations.

‘As the people here have to make a living through business, they put away all their national hatred and work together,’ says Cheung.

Of the groups that he names, Mathews says the traders are the majority. ‘During the trade fairs of Hong Kong and Guangzhou, they occupy almost every bed in the building. Traders are from sub-Saharan Africa but also Bhutan, Yemen, the Maldives, France, Israel, and Jamaica who buy goods to sell in their own countries,’ he says, adding that some carry goods of up to 40 kg in their luggage, while others pay for air freight or share containers. An array of low-end goods can be bought wholesale in the mansions at different quality and price levels.

The taping of boxes and zipping of bags is part of the soundtrack of the building, as is the sound of ringing phones. “China made” is the locution for a fake phone. No one ever mentions the word “fake”,’ says Mathews. But, what at first glance

appears to be a name-brand phone, turns out to be an almost identical design perched on a stand bearing the brand’s logo. ‘There are new European and Japanese phones. There are 14-day phones, which are warehoused European models – last year’s model with a 14-day guarantee. There are used phones, there are refab phones which have been redone by factories in China, often not as good because their motherboards have been replaced. There are A-grade fakes, B-grade fakes and C-grade fakes.’

Many of the traders stay in Hong Kong for just a few days before or after their visits to factories in south China. ‘African traders are often from wealthy families that provide them with the capital to fly to Hong Kong and make an initial investment in goods for resale at home. Only they have sufficient capital to finance such a step,’ says Mathews.

Sixty to 70 per cent of owners are Chinese, many of who emigrated from the Mainland decades ago and bought property in the one place in Hong Kong that they could afford. ‘Some of these owners still live and work in the mansions, but many have withdrawn from daily life there and just return once a month to pick up the rent from the managers they have appointed,’ says Mathews.

The Incorporated Owners of Chungking Mansions (the ‘OC’) was set up on 28th January 1972, and is currently in its 15th session making it one of the oldest owners’ corporations in Hong Kong. ‘The reason for setting up the corporation was to resolve disputes among the owners, and to make general decisions for the benefit of the whole building on subjects such as renovations, security and cleaning. All owners become general members of the OC when they own a unit, and are obliged to pay management fees, according to the Building Management Ordinance. Every year there is a general meeting, where all owners can take part and vote,’ says Cheung.

To encourage a sense of community and keep the peace, the OC holds events such as a dinner party at the end of the year. About 10 restaurants from Chungking Mansions enter their best dish in a competition which popular local food experts and the OC judge.

According to Mathews, South Asian managers often hire their countrymen to work for them. Sometimes they have residency; more often they have a tourist visa which requires returning home every two months. ‘Because the employees, who probably work illegally, are prohibited by immigration rules from staying in Hong Kong more

than 180 days per year it is virtually impossible for them to climb the ladder of success. Many come from Kolkata in India and are paid about HK\$3,000 a month, but can finance 50 to 80 per cent of their plane tickets to and from home by carrying goods for traders. Without these illegal workers many of the building’s businesses could not afford to exist and if prices were raised, many African entrepreneurs could no longer afford to come,’ says Mathews. This is just one example of the economic dynamics of the building.

Mathews holds a weekly class for asylum seekers and refugees on the premises of Christian Action, and says there are about 6,000 asylum seekers in Hong Kong, mostly from war-torn countries in South Asia and Africa such as Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Somalia, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Eritrea.

‘The term “asylum seeker” refers to all people who apply for refugee protection, whether or not they are officially determined to be refugees. According to the United Nations Convention and Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, a “refugee” is someone who is outside their own country and cannot return due to a well-founded fear of persecution because of their race, religion,

nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion,' says Mathews. Many asylum seekers congregate at Chungking Mansions. Most enter on a tourist visa and then just blend in. They live all over Hong Kong – in places where rent is typically very cheap,' says Mathews.

Hong Kong hasn't signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, so the situation for asylum seekers and refugees in Hong Kong is dire. Most asylum seekers pursue refugee status through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), but this may involve many years of waiting. 'The UNHCR definitions regarding asylum seekers are remarkably narrow. You can't easily draw the line between who is "real" and who is "fake",' says Mathews, adding that there certainly are people who are economic asylum seekers who are looking to make a living, and others who are political asylum seekers. 'But, there are also a lot who are in the middle who are fleeing for entirely legitimate reasons,' he says.

The concern of many countries is that asylum seekers would take away jobs. 'The Hong Kong government is terrified of having plane load after plane load of these people arriving in the country. But they could do a great job as native-speaking English teachers in schools, and be cultural ambassadors in that way,' says Mathews. Asylum

seekers in Hong Kong are not allowed to take up legal employment, but are given so little money by the Hong Kong government that they almost have to work. At Chungking Mansions, they play a central role because they can be paid HK\$3,000, while legal workers have to be paid \$5,000 to \$7,000, says Mathews.

Particularly vulnerable are women, their children, and unaccompanied minors seeking asylum. Some of the women, mostly Chinese and Indian – but also from Nepal, Indonesia, Mongolia, Kenya, and elsewhere – have turned to sex work to survive. They ply their trade in and just outside Chungking Mansions, though tourists and business travellers, locals and expatriates will see almost no evidence of this.

The building contains the largest number of guesthouses in one building in Hong Kong, and since it offers some of the cheapest rates in town, Chungking Mansions has become a haunt for backpackers and budget travellers. Some of Hong Kong's business travellers are in Hong Kong to do business in Chungking Mansions, and they may stay there too. Between the guesthouses and residences, approximately 4,000 people stay in the building on any given night and about 10,000 people pass through it each day from over 100

countries, attracted by the inexpensive goods, food, and guesthouses, and its location close to the Tsim Sha Tsui and the East Tsim Sha Tsui stations of the MTR; airport buses also run past the building.

‘There are five blocks A, B, C, D and E, though in reality there are really just three as B and C and then, D and E are connected. There are two lifts in each block, one of which serves even-numbered floors, the other odd-numbered floors,’ says Mathews.

‘A block is mostly guesthouses as it faces the street. Half of all of the 90 or so guesthouses are in block A. Guesthouses are segmented into those that are distinctly for tourists as they accept payment by credit card (although many tourist hotels don’t) and those that evidently cater to business people, which have measuring scales at their entrances,’ he says. A list of guesthouses by block is posted on the Chungking Mansions Owner’s Corporation website.

Mathews continues, ‘If tourists come in that’s what many guesthouses prefer because you can charge them and make them pay by credit card. Business travellers are coming from developing countries and typically don’t have much money to spend. They might pay about HK\$120 to \$140 a night.’ He adds that some, like the Chungking House Hotel established in A block in 1962, are

pricier. Rooms there start at HK\$200 in low season. April, September and October are busy because of trade shows in the territory.

‘There are guesthouses that deal in a particular clientele such as the Dragon Inn in block B which deals with tourists from Japan and Korea, and from the Mainland,’ says Mathews. According to him, due to the Internet and other media advertising, the number of Mainland Chinese tourists has risen dramatically, and ‘there has been an upsurge in Europeans and Australians due to the decline of the US dollar to which the Hong Kong dollar is pegged.’

Blocks BC and DE are more residential, while the ground and first floor and the upper floors in the towers are the domains of restaurateurs. Touts attempt to reel in customers to the small, sometimes family-run restaurants serving traditional Indian curry and Nepalese food such as the Taj Mahal Club in Block B, the Delhi Club in Block C, and the Everest Club in Block D. Although some members of Hong Kong’s Indian elite deem the food at Chungking Mansions merely ‘Indian fast food’, some of the restaurants cater to clubs, associations, businesses, and private parties outside the building.

The shopkeepers’ rent in the mall varies widely. ‘You can go anywhere from HK\$8,000 for a really small stall in a corner to \$50,000 to \$60,000 per

month for a good location. It's still comparatively cheaper than surrounding places, but it's not that cheap.' Many shops in the building are import or export businesses dealing in goods that are predominantly sold to Asian and African countries.

It's easy to get caught up in the atmosphere of the mansions. It's a heady experience with money changers lining both sides as you enter, multicultural faces and rows of shops crammed with mobile phones – according to one estimate, 20 per cent of the mobile phones now in use in sub-Saharan Africa have passed through the building – jewellery, and luggage. The South Asian men touting for customers to visit their shops and eateries and the heady aromas of food from some of these places make up more of the ambience – and this is just the first two floors of the building where visitors can wander around.

'You see scenes you never would find in other places in the world. In one elevator, there might be five people all with different skin colours, talking different languages, having different religions, and dressing differently, but they all belong to Chungking Mansions,' Cheung says, adding that New Year is another case in point. 'There are four New Year periods that people celebrate at Chungking Mansions: the Western, Chinese, Indian

and Pakistani New Years. They are at different times of year and are different in form, but we all respect each other, wish each other Happy New Year and celebrate together. For example, some of the South Asians will give out red *lai see* packets during the Chinese New Year. During the Muslim fast, others will not eat in front of them to show their respect,' he says.

These scenes are example of why *Time* magazine voted Chungking Mansions the 'Best Example of Globalisation in Action' in one of its annual 'The Best of Asia' features. According to Mathews, Flushing in Queens, New York, Roppongi in Tokyo, Yuexiu district of Guangzhou, and Willesdon in London are similar, however, the difference between these places and Chungking Mansions is that the former are neighbourhoods, and Chungking mansions is a single building. But, like Flushing for example, the ethnic majority of the host country is a minority at Chungking Mansions, while Cantonese is barely spoken in the building. 'At Chungking Mansions, most ethnic interaction is practical and the spoken language is English. Conversations tend to be civil regardless of whether parties are from antagonistic societies like India and Pakistan. Fights are infrequent,' says Mathews, adding that there are 16 TV channels available to

residents, including those from India, Pakistan and Nepal, the BBC, TV5 Monde, and a number of Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese stations. These have a significant effect on life at the mansions where, he writes, 'each nationality is immersed in life on its own particular screen.'

Mathews says that the mansions continues to exist for a couple of reasons – first, the divided ownership of the building. 'There are some 920 owners but the unified ownership has been remarkably weak and, because of this, property developers have not been able to buy the building and replace it with an expensive structure as has happened to numerous nearby buildings, but a recent change in Hong Kong property laws may result in its replacement,' he says.

He adds that a second reason is Hong Kong's visa regulations. 'Visitors from most developing countries can obtain their visas at the airport in Hong Kong: 14-day visas for most, although there are 30-day or 90-day visas for some. This enables entrepreneurs from most countries in Africa and Asia to enter Hong Kong without bureaucratic difficulty,' he says. 'Even on a 14-day visa, they can come to Chungking Mansions, inspect various goods, obtain a visa for China to visit the factory making such goods, come back to Hong Kong,

and depart with the goods in their luggage or as air freight or by container.' A tightening of visa restrictions could transform or destroy Chungking Mansions, he says.

The third reason for the continued existence of Chungking Mansions is the emergence of China as a world manufacturing centre. 'Jakarta was where traders used to go. Now it is Guangdong. They go to buy goods not found in their own countries, or manufactured there at such expense so as to make imports from many thousands of miles away preferable,' says Mathews.

'The planned renovation of the façade of the building should help make the building appear nicer and the ownership committee is concerned about property values, which is understandable though equally, most managers are not.' According to Mathews, major renovations will make the building more expensive resulting in it losing a lot of its business and becoming less international.