CHUNGKING MANSIONS: A CENTER OF “LOW-END GLOBALIZATION”

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In Chungking Mansions, a dilapidated building in the heart of Hong Kong’s tourist district, thousands of traders, illegal workers, and asylum seekers from sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and other areas of the world seek their fortunes through temporary employment and low-budget transnational trade. This article depicts them, and the tourists who frequent the building, and applies macroscopic anthropological theories of globalization to the microscopies of ethnic interactions at Chungking Mansions, viewing Appadurai’s five scapes through a prism of Goffman to consider low-end globalization on a human-to-human scale.

(Hong Kong, low-end globalization, traders, ethnic interactions)

Globalization has been difficult for anthropologists to analyze because it is hard to ethnographically grasp. Anthropological writings may offer theoretically sophisticated discussions largely removed from detailed ethnography (Appadurai 1990, Hannerz 1996, Gupta and Ferguson 2002) or may offer wonderfully detailed ethnographic portraits that can allow for only a limited degree of global theoretical understanding because they portray a single place, a single piece of the jigsaw puzzle (like many recent ethnographic volumes), or perhaps, in multisited ethnography, two or three such places (Marcus 1998:79–104, Hannerz 2003). The anthropological analysis of globalization has suffered because of this gap between theory and ethnography.

However, there are certain sites in the world that, because they are so globalized, enable an understanding of a range of globalization processes from the analysis of a single place. These sites are not hotels and airports, which, although globalized, contain people whose interactions are ephemeral. Rather, they are those sites in which people from places around the world interact for business and pleasure: sites that embody and exemplify “the intensification of global interconnectedness” (Inda and Rosaldo 2002:2) on a person-to-person scale. Such a site is Chungking Mansions, Hong Kong.

Chungking Mansions is a dilapidated building of cheap guesthouses, restaurants, and retail and wholesale businesses. It is where people from sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and other areas throughout the world seek their fortunes through temporary employment and low-budget transnational trade, and where tourists and asylum seekers make their temporary or extended visits. There are some 90 guesthouses and 380 businesses in the building, including food stands, sellers of mobile phones, watches, electronic items, clothing, and many other goods sold retail and wholesale. Approximately 4,000 people on any
given night stay in the building, a cramped area of 100 meters square, rising seventeen stories. Probably 10,000 people pass through Chungking Mansions each day from over a hundred countries (124 by count of guesthouse logs).

Chungking Mansions serves as a world center for low-end globalization (defined immediately below) because of the lure of China as a powerhouse of low-end manufacturing, because of Hong Kong’s relatively relaxed visa policies, and because of Chungking Mansions’ own rock-bottom prices. “Low-end globalization” is the transnational flow of people and goods involving relatively small amounts of capital and informal, sometimes quasi-legal or illegal transactions, commonly associated within the developing world. This article, an ethnography of Chungking Mansions, describes the place and its types of people and their interactions, and shows how such an ethnography contributes to the anthropological examination of globalization.

Low-end globalization, as observed in its microscopic particulars at Chungking Mansions, can teach something of interest about globalization in its macroscopic generalities as used in the analysis of globalization. This is illustrated here by a focus on one argument that has been of pivotal importance in understanding globalization macroscopically, Appadurai’s (1990) paper, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy.”

CHUNGKING MANSIONS

Chungking Mansions was built in 1961, intended for the well-off by many accounts. But unlike most buildings in the area, each of its owners could do as he or she pleased, and the building rapidly deteriorated. By the early 1970s, Chungking Mansions was considered a blight on the landscape of Tsim Sha Tsui, Hong Kong’s main tourist district. In the 1970s and 1980s, Chungking Mansions became a center for South Asian merchants in Hong Kong, who opened restaurants and other businesses catering to Western and South Asian clientele. In 1988, a fire killed a Danish tourist. In 1993, Chungking Mansions lost power for ten full days. Africans began coming in the 1990s, and by the early 2000s they made up over half of those staying at Chungking Mansions. In 2005, closed-circuit TV cameras were installed throughout the building, making it safer, although it remains infamous (McDonald 2005, Greenfield 2007, Fitzpatrick 2007). Most Hong Kong people are terrified of the place, seeing it as a den of every vice, although young people patronize a few of the more plush upstairs Indian restaurants, which have become fashionable.

Chungking Mansions exists for three reasons. First, there are some 920 owners, but the unified ownership has been remarkably weak; thus the building has steadily deteriorated. Largely because there has been no unified ownership, 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. Chungking Mansions, reflecting its more-or-less decrepit state, remains a draw as a cheap place to stay in the expensive city of Hong Kong.²

The second reason is Hong Kong’s visa regulations. In many countries, visitors from the developing world must obtain a visa prior to arrival. 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.³ 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, depending on the goods bought and the means of the entrepreneur. Because of a recent increase in asylum seekers in Hong Kong, there is pressure on the government to tighten visa restrictions, something which might transform or destroy Chungking Mansions.

The third reason for Chungking Mansions’ existence is the emergence of China as a world manufacturing center. Low-end entrepreneurs from throughout the developing world flock to Chungking Mansions to buy Chinese goods, whether in Hong Kong or across the border in China. These goods include mobile phones, garments, watches, building materials, car parts, furniture, and exotic products like whirlpool baths (bought by wealthy East African government ministers) and opals (mined in Australia, mounted in south China, and after passing through Chungking Mansions, returned to Australia to be sold largely to Chinese tourists).

The four major groups of people in Chungking Mansions are traders, owners/managers and their employees, asylum seekers, and tourists. There also are some 80 sex workers (mostly Chinese and Indian, but also from Nepal, Indonesia, Mongolia, Kenya, and elsewhere) plying their trade in and just outside Chungking Mansions, drawn by its heavily male transient population. There are also some 40 heroin addicts and petty drug dealers, largely Nepalese sons of Gurkhas who have Hong Kong residency. They sleep in the alleys in back of Chungking Mansions, and deal hashish to passing Europeans and Africans. An array of tailors and copy-watch salesmen from nearby stores regularly cluster in front and to the sides of Chungking Mansions.

Traders

Traders make up the majority of the people at Chungking Mansions. During the trade fairs of November and April in Hong Kong and Guangzhou, they occupy almost every available bed in the building. The majority of traders are
from sub-Saharan Africa, but others are from Bhutan, Yemen, the Maldives, France, Israel, and Jamaica, among many other places. They buy goods in Hong Kong and China to sell in their own countries, and deal in the products mentioned above. Hong Kong prices are more expensive, but its goods, especially electronic goods and mobile phones, are widely perceived to be more reliable. Clothing is cheaper in China, and occasionally a trader will buy a garment in Hong Kong, and have thousands of copies made in China to sell at home.4

Some traders carry goods in their luggage, up to 40 kilos allowed by airlines like Biman and Ethiopian; others pay for air freight. These traders usually are carrying fragile, delicate, or light items like mobile phones or electronics. Others rent or share containers, which are expensive but necessary for goods such as tiles or car parts. For most traders, there are considerable risks involved in buying goods from Hong Kong or China, where one might be cheated, and in going through customs at home (see Chalfin 2004). A West African trader related:

If I pay customs in my country, I lose everything. If you buy a hundred mobile phones, you must give up fifty. It’s better to give the customs person mobile phones as a present. You have to cheat: it’s the only possible way.

An East African trader said:

In my country, the problem is customs. It would be insane to leave the container open for a night, because you’ll never see anything again; by morning everything will be gone. I try to arrange everything in one day, even paying the customs officers overtime.

An array of low-end goods can be bought wholesale in Chungking Mansions, at different levels of quality and price. For mobile phones, for example, there are “14-day phones,” warehoused European models that have a 14-day guarantee; “refab phones” that have had their motherboards repaired or replaced in mainland China; used phones; new phones made by mainland Chinese companies; and fake phones at “A,” “B,” and “C” quality levels, made-in-China exact copies of European, Japanese, and Korean phones sold for a fraction of the cost and bearing a fraction of the life expectancy of the original model. The fake phones are generally smuggled into Hong Kong from China. The sale of fake phones is discreet but ubiquitous. As a Central African trader remarked, “Every buyer of mobile phones knows what a real phone is and what a fake phone is, but no seller can directly say that . . . .” Instead, “China-made” is the locution used. This is done through discreet price calculation, mutually understood by buyer and seller, although the retail buyers in Africa or South Asia can be taken for whatever price the market will bear. As a West African trader confided, “When I carry phones
back to my country, I mix them, real and fake. I sell the fakes to people off in villages, who don’t know any better. I sell the real ones to people I know.”

Many of these traders stay in Hong Kong only a few days, before and after their visits to factories in south China. Many African countries’ banks do not offer letters of credit or other financial instruments accepted in Hong Kong or Chinese banks. As an East African trader said,

Of course these traders carry cash, lots of it. Hong Kong is the safest place in Asia to do business; I’ve never known a person who was robbed. But in China, a lot of traders are threatened with knives, once they sense you’ve got money.

Hong Kong is safe, except in unguarded moments. An unverified story making the rounds, which seems plausible, is that of an African trader hiding US$50,000 in his underwear who brought a mainland Chinese sex worker to his room. While he was showering, she found the money, which amounted to a fortune that would support her family for years. When the trader became aware of his loss, he surmised that the woman had fled for the train to the Chinese border, which departs every five minutes from a station around the corner from Chungking Mansions. He ran there to catch her, but never saw her.

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.

Owners/Managers/Workers

African traders are a large proportion of those staying in Chungking Mansions, but very few Africans own property in the building, or even manage property, because few have obtained Hong Kong residency. Most owners of Chungking Mansions property are Chinese, many of whom emigrated from the Chinese mainland 20 or more years ago and bought property in the one place in Hong Kong that they could afford. Some of these owners still live and work in Chungking Mansions, but many more have withdrawn from day-to-day management, and instead enter the premises once a month to pick up their rental checks from the South Asians they have hired as managers. These owners may embody “the Hong Kong dream” in working hard over the decades to create successful businesses, such as guesthouses, and raising children who became teachers, accountants, or corporate employees who want nothing to do with Chungking Mansions. As the son of a guesthouse owner explained, “My mom asked me why I work so hard being a teacher [when] I could make as much money running the guesthouse. . . . But she understands that Chungking Mansions is no place for someone like me.” Many of the aging parents instead
sell their businesses to South Asians with Hong Kong residency or let the latter serve as managers. At present, the owners of Chungking Mansions properties are 70 percent Chinese, but the majority of these owners do not live in Chungking Mansions and may only rarely appear there.

South Asian managers often hire their fellow countrymen (almost always men) to work for them. They sometimes have residency in Hong Kong, but more often they have tourist visas, which require returning home every two months. Because the managers generally have Hong Kong residency, they can expand their holdings. Some now manage or own guesthouses, restaurants, or other businesses. But their employees, who probably work illegally, are prohibited by immigration rules from staying in Hong Kong more than 180 days per year. Many of these employees come from the Muslim district of Khidderpore, in Kolkata, India. They are paid very little (generally around HK$3,000 [US$385] per month), but can finance 50 to 80 percent of their plane tickets to and from Kolkata by carrying goods for traders, often clothing from Hong Kong into India and foodstuffs such as dal (beans) or Indian rice from India into Hong Kong. At many of the South Asian restaurants in Chungking Mansions, the customer eats not Chinese rice but Indian rice brought by these temporary workers.

They come to Hong Kong attracted by the wages, even those for illegal workers. Some of the young Indian men interviewed are married to teachers and civil servants who remain in India, but it still pays for them to come to Hong Kong. If they are caught as illegal workers, the penalties are severe, but they are almost impossible to catch. Because Hong Kong Chinese still stand out in Chungking Mansions, undercover police are generally easy to detect. As soon as immigration police are seen, friends and lookouts use their mobile phones to alert the illegal workers, who scatter, morphing into customers and passers-by. Without these illegal workers, many of Chungking Mansions’ businesses could not afford to exist, and if prices were raised, many African entrepreneurs could no longer afford to come. Many of these illegal employees are desperate to escape their lot, hoping to become traders or start a business; but to start a business they will need Hong Kong residency, which is almost impossible for them to get.5

Asylum Seekers

There are some 2,500 asylum seekers in Hong Kong, mostly from South Asian and African countries, and many of them congregate at Chungking Mansions. Christian-based NGOs in Chungking Mansions serve them, but the majority of asylum seekers rarely use the NGOs. Unlike asylum seekers in other countries, most of them can enter Hong Kong on a tourist visa, and then proceed to Chungking Mansions, where they blend in. Most pursue refugee status through
the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), but this may involve a wait of several years in Hong Kong. Many who claim to be asylum seekers simply seek better economic opportunities for themselves. Many others are genuine, fleeing torture or death threats. Asylum seekers are not allowed to work, and some live on charity in Hong Kong, often from church groups. While many work, some are afraid to, because if they are caught, they will be deported to their countries to face imprisonment or death.

Asylum seekers claim to deserve refugee status with stories of persecution or narrowly escaping being killed, but a bullet lodged in the hip cannot prove political, ethnic, or religious persecution in a way that the UNHCR requires (see Daniel and Knudsen 1995). While one asylum seeker may tell a story redolent of bad adventure novels, another can be convincing. I witnessed a fireworks display over Hong Kong Island on China’s National Day, October 1, with a young Somali asylum seeker who began to cry because the fireworks brought back memories of the bombs bursting in Mogadishu that killed family members. These asylum seekers barely scrape by on subsidies from charities or the Hong Kong government, or from their own illegal work, and wait, often three or more years, for the decision by which their fates are decided.

Tourists

The many tourists who come to Chungking Mansions are among the less visible groups, as they use the building only for lodging and are gone during the day. Because it is so cheap, it is a backpacker haven, with rooms ranging during most of the year from HK$100–250 (US$13–32), as opposed to the Holiday Inn immediately next door, whose rooms run ten to fifteen times higher. They also are attracted for the adventurousness of the place. A French tourist saw Chungking Mansions as “very spiritual . . . Namaste.” A Japanese tourist called it “fascinating. It’s ethnic chaos.” English-speaking tourists come to Chungking Mansions partly influenced by the Lonely Planet travel guide which, until recently, prominently featured Chungking Mansions in its Hong Kong edition. Mainland Chinese tourists are drawn by guesthouses advertised on websites directed at Chinese visitors, which sometimes draw guests unaware of what they are getting into. One mainland tourist said, “I didn’t know there would be so many Africans here. I hate Africans! It’s horrible!” Another said, “I want to eat Chinese food, but there are no Chinese restaurants here. Why not? Isn’t Hong Kong part of China?” One might answer that Hong Kong is part of China, but Chungking Mansions is an island of the developing world in Hong Kong’s heart.
A key to understanding Chungking Mansions is seeing how its different ethnicities interact. The majority of businesspeople coming to Chungking Mansions are African and most shopkeepers and guesthouse and restaurant managers are either South Asian or Chinese, with a smattering of Filipinos. Thus, interaction between different ethnic groups is inevitable. A tiny food stall in Chungking Mansions of nine chairs and four tables may have patrons of five different nationalities seated side by side, not because they know each other but because there is no room. Conversations sometimes start, leading to friends being made or arguments breaking out. Much ethnic interaction is purely practical, consisting of ordering food or negotiating prices with mobile-phone and garment dealers. This interaction is generally in English, the interethnic lingua franca of Chungking Mansions, although price negotiations also take place through the ubiquitous calculator.

A Muslim phone-store manager said to an African Christian 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?” The Christian held his tongue, but told me later, “His God is not my God.” Most often, ethnic interactions are a matter of economic gamesmanship, as when South Asian and Chinese phone dealers hone in on young, inexperienced African buyers to take advantage of them—asking them a few questions about phone models, and then judging on that basis what price to offer and how much profit to seek (see Lo 2006 for a detailed discussion of these young African traders).

These conversations tend to be civil. Whether people are from antagonistic societies, like India and Pakistan, or from those like Somalia and Sri Lanka having internal wars, or are Muslims and Christians (both richly represented in Chungking Mansions), they do not fight with each other. As an Indian said regarding Pakistanis, “I do not like them; they are not my friends. But I am here to make money, as they are here to make money. We cannot afford to fight.” Fights do break out from time to time, as between Sikhs and Muslims, Muslims and Christians, Chinese and South Asians, and among other groups, but these are infrequent. The general attitude of Chungking Mansions, as shown in the quotation above, is that the pursuit of profit makes ethnic and religious discord no more than an unwelcome distraction.

As ethnic tension is comparatively muted, so too is class tension. The gap between the well-off and the poor—between owners and temporary workers, and between the large entrepreneurs and the small traders—is enormous. One young illegal worker often complained about his boss, a restaurant owner: “I make just $3,000 a month... working from 7 a.m. to 2 a.m every day... He makes tens of thousands of dollars [actually, around HK$40,000 a month] and he only comes
here when he wants to . . . .” This young man’s dream was to go into business and own a restaurant, just like his boss, exploiting future versions of his young self. An asylum seeker illegally works for his relative, earning HK$3,000 a month in a phone stall that nets HK$100,000 a month, almost all going to his relative. His dream is to break free and cut his own deals, becoming a business magnate himself.

The system in all its inequalities is not questioned, but only one’s place in the system vis-à-vis certain others. One reason for this is that those who have come to Chungking Mansions have had enough money to fly to Hong Kong, something that the vast majority of their countrymen cannot ever do. Those who are poor in Chungking Mansions are unlikely to become rich. The illegal workers will never gain Hong Kong residency, and will probably never gain enough capital to become entrepreneurs. Asylum seekers will probably have their claims rejected, as do some 90 percent of asylum seekers in Hong Kong. But the poor and the rich alike buy into the basic assumptions of ruthless capitalism. In this sense, Chungking Mansions is no different from anywhere else in Hong Kong or China or throughout most of the capitalist world. It differs only in being more visible, unlike exploitation by faceless corporations. Exploitation is often by people who are acquaintances or relatives of the exploited.

The heterogeneity in Chungking Mansions does not much change the people who experience it. The differences in wealth may actually increase hopes of financial success. The ethnic interactions seem not to make people more cosmopolitan. African traders do not acquire a taste for Indian music or Chinese food, but tolerance of diversity does develop. A mainland Chinese guesthouse keeper remarked that his favorite guests are West African Muslims. “They’re so honest—they’ll never cheat you—and so nice! And Japanese too. But I really dislike some Chinese. So pushy!”

CHUNGKING MANSIONS AND GLOBALIZATION THEORY

The example of Chungking Mansions has relevance for globalization theories, which it both exemplifies and to some extent reworks. Time-space compression (Harvey 1989:240–307), such that “distance and time no longer appear to be major constraints on the organization of human activity” (Inda and Rosaldo 2002:6), is apparent in Chungking Mansions in a lopsided way, due to the gap between the instantaneity of mobile-phone communication and the comparative slowness of air travel. The clusters of Africans standing idly outside Chungking Mansions at 3 a.m. many nights suffer jet lag from the long sequence of flights that took them from African cities to Hong Kong. Many of them, in their sleeplessness, are relating their adventures in Hong Kong by mobile phone to friends and relatives back home; others are negotiating business deals and
getting price quotations from home-country customers and backers. Time-space compression is thus, in the milieu of Chungking Mansions, far more apparent in the realm of communication than of transportation.

Neoliberalism (see Harvey 2006, Bourdieu 1998, Saad-Filho and Johnston 2005) may be broadly defined as an ideology emphasizing the market as the ultimate arbiter of value, and advocating minimal restriction of the market by the state. Hong Kong has long been at the forefront of worldwide neoliberalization, having been named the freest economy in the world (*The Economist* 2005:31). Hong Kong laissez faire government policies shape Chungking Mansions in a number of ways. One is that Hong Kong can be easily entered by merchants and illegal workers coming to Chungking Mansions on tourist visas obtained at the airport. Borders are also porous in enabling the passage of goods, like fake phones, from China into Hong Kong. Benign law enforcement has the police ignoring illegal workers, prostitution, and other violations pervading Chungking Mansions to let its residents go about their business. The anthropological literature typically depicts neoliberalism as a profound evil, representing the forces of rampant global capitalism destroying all possibility of resistance. But in Chungking Mansions, the effects of neoliberalism seem hardly so. What may be the most globalized building in the world is generally non-violent due to the common pursuit of profit by all who sojourn there. Neoliberalism, there, is a creator of global peace.

Perhaps the most often cited anthropological theory of globalization is that of Appadurai (1990, 1996:27–47), which has introduced the concepts of scapes: ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, finansescapes, and ideoscapes in their disjunctures across the globe. Appadurai’s key point is that different scapes have different embodiments in and across different societies. Therefore cultural globalization cannot be viewed as an isomorphic process, but as multiple processes with different valences and trajectories. In his words, “People, machinery, money, images, and ideas now follow increasingly non-isomorphic paths... The sheer speed, scale, and volume of each of these flows is now so great that the disjunctures have become central to the politics of global culture” (Appadurai 1990:301). Appadurai uses these scapes to deal with macroscopic matters, with the interplay of states across the globe, and how different states and societies respond to different global flows and disjunctures in different ways. In Chungking Mansions, these macroscopic forces are at work in the context of low-end globalization. Beyond this, Appadurai’s scapes also are at work in a microscopic sense in terms of individuals, as applied through a prism of Goffman (1959, 1967). In Chungking Mansions individuals of different cultural backgrounds compete to make a profit vis-à-vis unfamiliar others. This is a disjuncture and difference of individuals from different societies fleeing, facing, or negotiating with individuals, customs, and laws of other societies.
The Chungking Mansions ethnoscape is in congruence with global financescapes, as merchants come from Africa seeking access to Chinese manufacturing. Many African traders come from countries that are not even on the periphery of international industrial capital, but rather altogether "off all kinds of maps" (Allen and Hamnett 1995:2). The low-end globalization of Chungking Mansions involves not rich countries sending their manufacturing to poor countries, as is the typical pattern (Santos 2004:297), but rather, very poor countries seeking manufactured goods from less poor countries; that is, the extreme periphery seeks the goods of the semi-periphery because they are cheap. As recently as ten years ago, Jakarta was where such traders went, I have been told; now it is Guangdong Province, in south China abutting Hong Kong. African traders in Hong Kong or south China buy goods such as used car-parts (sent to Tanzania, Kenya, and Cameroon, among other countries), building tiles (Mali), shirts and pants (Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Congo), and tires (Zimbabwe), as well as watches and mobile phones (throughout sub-Saharan Africa). These are goods that their own countries either do not manufacture or manufacture at such prohibitive costs and low quality as to make imports from many thousands of miles away preferable to those of their home countries.

Many of the illegal South Asian workers in Chungking Mansions are, as earlier noted, from the Kolkata area because of the availability of cheap flights to Hong Kong. Indians in Mumbai, I am told, go not to Hong Kong to work, but to Dubai, due to the comparative expense of flights. Hong Kong government visa changes have a direct effect on the Chungking Mansions ethnoscape with fewer Bangladeshis and Nigerians than five years ago because of new restrictions. Through internet advertising, the numbers of mainland Chinese tourists staying in Chungking Mansions have risen dramatically, to the extent that on mainland Chinese holidays some guesthouses are entirely filled with Chinese tourists. The recent decline of the U.S. dollar, to which the Hong Kong currency is pegged, has led to an upsurge in European and Australian tourists staying in Chungking Mansions, drawn by ever-lower prices. Visa regulations affect the different groups in Chungking Mansions (whether Hong Kong residents, asylum seekers, business people, or tourists), but even more than this, the global financescape (the flows of capital across the globe in all their unbalanced currents and eddies) shapes the range of people staying there.

The play of ethnoscapes is not only a matter of macroscopic forces, but can be seen in hundreds of individual interactions at every hour in Chungking Mansions. For example, there is the studied self-presentation of the calculating African phone-buyer before the Pakistani or Indian or Chinese phone dealer, showing himself as knowledgeable and sophisticated so that he can get the best possible deal. Another example is the Indonesian maid to a Hong Kong family, coming to Chungking Mansions on Sunday, her day off, as do some Indonesian
young women seeking cheap Indonesian food and perhaps male attention. Her Indian boyfriend calls and tells her that he is facing a month or more in jail for overstaying his visa. She oozes sympathy, but tells him in a tone of deep regret, that she can’t visit him until next week. Then she calls her Chinese boyfriend, letting him know that she is free for him and desires to see him. Finally, consider the Hong Kong phone dealer bullied by Nepalese heroin addicts into giving them “beer money.” He gives them HK$10 each, and explains, “They are my friends, so of course I give them money.” These personal ethnoscapes are replicated in a multitude of different ways throughout Chungking Mansions, with each individual living within his own particular “habitat of meaning” (Hannerz 1996:22-23). These personal ethnoscapes lend a fuller lived dimension to the abstractions of Appadurai’s formulations.

The macroscopics of mediascapes are apparent in the television programming available in Chungking Mansions, a configuration not generally available elsewhere in Hong Kong. Television in Chungking Mansions consists of 16 channels, including channels from India, Pakistan, and Nepal, the BBC, the French channel TV5 Monde, and a number of Hong Kong and mainland Chinese stations. One effect of this spectrum of channels is that the Indians watch the Indian channel, the Pakistanis the Pakistani, the Nepalese the Nepali, each in their own mediated reality (although some Pakistanis admit that they prefer Indian movies to the less revealing fare of their own country). This effect is conservative, retrenching cultural difference in a profoundly globalized and hybridized place. If ethnoscapes involve the “deterritorialization of culture” (Inda and Rosaldo 2002:12), as people must interact in Chungking Mansions with those coming from multiple elsewheres, mediascapes invoke the “reterritorialization of culture” (Inda and Rosaldo 2002:12) in that individuals from different societies are reinserted into their own societies through the mass media.

The microscopies of interaction through mediascapes are apparent in multiple ways. Sometimes individuals of different societies argue over which news channel to watch in a communal TV area of a guesthouse, whether Hindi, French, or English. When a dozen Africans from different countries watching a televised Manchester United soccer match burst into delirium when an African scored the winning goal, it was in contrast to the stoic indifference of the Nepalese shopkeeper. Every individual in Chungking Mansions and across the globe today has a complex personal mediascape. The array of sources through which the mediated knowledge of the world comes from and how one deals with that array are crucial matters that can only be touched upon here.

Technoscapes as well as financescapes are readily apparent in both the macroscopics and microscopies of Chungking Mansions. Macroscopically, the origin or purported national origin of mobile phones and electronic goods
(European, Japanese, Korean, Chinese) as well as the currencies used in exchange (largely American and Hong Kong dollars and Chinese yuan) provide a ready map of the core and periphery in these realms. The microscopies of Chungking Mansions reveal more subtlety, as when a customer mentions a new model to a dealer who did not know about it, sending the dealer into fits of consternation; and certain models bring out longing in the eyes of dealers. For example, in fall 2006, the Nokia 6310 was in great demand and European buyers wanted all the phones they could get. Every phone dealer in Chungking Mansions knew this. The constant discussions concerning real phones and "China-made" phones also combine technoscapes and finanescapes, in weighing and balancing the two scapes along with prospective consumer demand and the entrepreneur's own projected profits. Financescapes also apply to the many money-exchange stalls in Chungking Mansions, some giving better rates than others, and the constant concern of businesspeople and workers over exchange rates. In Chungking Mansions' "low-end globalization," financescapes are far below globalization's higher reaches. There are no electronic transfers of millions nor even such mundane items as credit cards, which are worthless in much of Chungking Mansions. Trade is most often by cash. Some African traders hold more cash in their hands at one time than some Americans have held in their entire lifetimes, and feel secure doing so in the safety of Chungking Mansions and Hong Kong.

The interplay of ideoscapes is not as overt or as common as the play of ethnoscapes. Echoing a general attitude, an African trader said, "I came to Hong Kong to make money. I don't have time to make friends and talk with people." But it seems that Chungking Mansions does reveal to some who stay there new thoughts that they had never encountered in their home countries. Virtually everyone (with the partial exception of a few Islamic ideologues) totally accepts the validity of capitalism as the way of the world. With other ideoscapes, acceptance may be a more gradual process. A rural Indian Muslim newly arrived in Hong Kong was abashed upon first seeing the bare backs of blond Russian sex workers in summer 2006, exclaiming, "they are bad women!" Within a month he was accustomed to such sights, and had changed his attitude as well: "They must live, just like me."

Appadurai's scapes, when applied not to states but to individuals, reveal a new dimension, readily apparent in the multitude of complex human interactions within Chungking Mansions. The five macroscopic scapes set forth by Appadurai are given concrete reality within the microscopies of Chungking Mansions.
CONCLUSION

Certain sites are prime targets for the anthropological study of globalization, in enabling the juxtaposition and combination of theory and ethnography. One such site, Chungking Mansions, Hong Kong, is a world center of low-end globalization, partly because of the different kinds of people it accommodates: traders, largely African; South Asian managers and workers; asylum seekers; and tourists. The interactions of these different groups is instructive, and can reveal, through concrete examples, such concepts as time-space compression and neoliberalism. Appadurai’s “scapes” of globalization can be used in a new light in the context of places like Chungking Mansions. They serve not only as an analytical tool to examine the disjuncture and difference of national cultural economies, but also as a way to examine the interplay of individuals from different societies, in how they interact with one another in various fields. Globalization in this sense is microscopic, especially for understanding low-end globalization, based on particularistic, informal connections.

Chungking Mansions offers a particularly good vantage point for the microscopic observation of macroscopic processes of globalization, but there are other such sites; e.g., Flushing (Queens, New York City), Roppongi in Tokyo, the Yuexiu district of Guangzhou, and Willesdon, among other neighborhoods in London. These offer different yet parallel depictions of globalization (see Blommaert, Collins, and Slembrouck 2005 for a discussion of such a globalized neighborhood in Ghent, Belgium). Chungking Mansions may be unsurpassed in the world as a particular laboratory for globalization, but it is not unique. The study of more such locales, in the intimate portraits of globalization that they offer, can enable a fuller comprehension of what globalization means in individual interactions and lives.

NOTES

1. This research, involving my staying in Chungking Mansions several nights a week since May 2006, has been supported by a Direct Grant, Faculty of Arts, Chinese University of Hong Kong, and by a Competitive Earmarked Research Grant, Research Grants Council, Hong Kong.
2. Single guesthouse rooms in Chungking Mansions can be had for as little as HK$100 [US$12.80]. The exchange rate is roughly HK$7.8 = US$1.
3. Since 2005, Sri Lanka, Nepal, the Congo, and Bangladesh, among other countries, have had visa-free access to Hong Kong revoked; Nigeria and Pakistan had visa-free access revoked in earlier years (Connolly 2007, Immigration Dept. 2007).
4. There are some female African traders dealing in garments, but Chungking Mansions is overwhelmingly a male place, and most younger women there have been assumed to be sex workers.
5. Hong Kong residence was comparatively easy to obtain for South Asians before 1997, when Hong Kong returned to China, but has become extremely difficult to obtain since then.


