

## people

In this chapter, I discuss the different groups of people in Chungking Mansions: traders, largely from Africa; owners, largely from China; managers, often from South Asia; and tourists, from the world over. I consider each of these groups in turn, along with the various other groups, including sex workers and heroin addicts, who frequent the building.

**Traders**

In chapter 3, I focus on goods and those who trade in them, but let me now briefly outline who these traders are and what they do. For most of the year, traders make up the majority of the people one sees in Chungking Mansions. At their peak—during the trade fairs of October and April in Hong Kong and Guangzhou—they occupy almost every available bed in the building. Most traders at most times of year—except in January and February, the Chinese New Year season during which south China factories are closed—are from sub-Saharan Africa. Over the past decade there has been a massive increase in the number of African traders traveling to south China. They buy goods

in Hong Kong or in China and sell them, typically, in their home countries, dealing in a vast range of products: mobile phones and clothing are most prominent, but also watches, electronic goods, computers, TV game consoles, building materials, and used cars and car parts, among innumerable other products. A small minority trade in the other direction, bringing gemstones from their homes to Hong Kong and China to sell. Hong Kong prices are more expensive, but goods obtained in Hong Kong, especially electronic goods and mobile phones, are often perceived to be more reliable—although this has been changing bit by bit, as Chinese goods and business practices become better and more traders go to China. Almost all the goods sold in Chungking Mansions—with the exception of many of the mobile phones—are made in China, even if their labels may sometimes indicate they were made elsewhere.

These traders sometimes come to Hong Kong on business visas obtained in their home countries—necessary for those countries that have been denied visa-free access to Hong Kong—but more often they are admitted at the airport in Hong Kong. They may be admitted for fourteen-day, thirty-day, or ninety-day visa-free access, as discussed in chapter 1, depending on their country of origin and their cash on hand, as well as the extent of their previous experience in Hong Kong. Those who have previously come to Hong Kong and not overstayed the permitted limits of their stay are often treated in a more relaxed way by Immigration than are first timers. Some traders stay in Hong Kong and in Chungking Mansions for the period that their business requires—a buyer of mobile phones might hardly leave the building for a week. Other traders stay in Hong Kong only long enough to get a visa into China, after which they may take a train from directly outside Chungking Mansions to the Chinese border. Some traders come to Hong Kong or China just a few times every year or less, while others seem to be in constant motion, bouncing between Hong Kong, China, and their home countries every week or two.

The lure for the traders is China, with its cornucopia of cheap manufactured goods. These traders buy China-made goods to transport back to their home countries because their home countries do not make these goods, at least not at competitive prices. Some of the goods these traders buy, such as mobile phones, are carried back home in the trader's own luggage, often 32 kilos per bag allowed by such airlines as Ethiopian and Emirates, with extra kilos permitted if the trader belongs to a frequent flyer program, as many do. Bigger traders also pay the extra costs of air freight for additional bags. These traders are bringing back mobile phones or electronics, particularly delicate, or else clothing, particularly light, especially when vacuum packed. Other

traders rent or share containers, expensive but necessary for goods such as tiles or car parts.

These traders must decide whether to venture into China, potentially lucrative but risky, or to do their business in Hong Kong, perceived to be safer and more reliable. But the entrepreneurial activities of these traders carry high risk, not only in China but throughout their global circuits. One risk is that they will get cheated in China or in Hong Kong, buying goods that have been misrepresented to them that they cannot sell back home. Alternatively, they may simply miscalculate, buying goods that won't sell at home. Another risk is that the copy goods traders buy in China (many goods traders buy are genuine, but many are not) may be confiscated by authorities in China or in Hong Kong. An even greater risk is in the customs of their own countries, which may be a huge barrier, one that they can traverse through legal payments, luck, or bribery. A Nigerian trader told me that he can make 60 percent gross profit on the goods he brings back with him, but must give half of that back as bribes to various government officials. This varies from country to country, but since corruption is common and customs regulations are often unclear to traders, their transitions back into their home countries are fraught with peril.

Because many African and South Asian countries' banks do not offer letters of credit or other financial instruments accepted in Hong Kong or Chinese banks, many traders carry tens of thousands of dollars in cash—up to US\$50,000 or even US\$100,000. As an East African trader told me, "These traders are all carrying cash—of course! Hong Kong is the safest place in Asia to do business. I've never known a person who was robbed." Some of the African traders I have encountered hold more cash in their hands at one time than some Americans may have held in their entire lifetimes and feel secure doing so in what they perceive to be the safety of Chungking Mansions and Hong Kong (although as of 2009, more traders were wiring money or sending remittances).

It is not uncommon to see traders leave thousands of dollars in cash on a Chungking Mansions counter. Although they may get cheated in more subtle ways, their money is in this sense safe, except in unguarded moments. A popular story making the rounds in Chungking Mansions (perhaps true, although I've yet to find anyone admitting to being a victim) is of the African trader hiding US\$50,000 in his underwear, who goes with a Chinese sex worker back to his room. He showers and she, finding a fortune in his drawers that might support her family for a decade, flees on the train departing every five minutes to the Chinese border. He sees his loss and follows in hot pursuit, but never sees her or his money again.

Overwhelmingly these traders are men, although there are some women dealing in garments. These traders tend to be among the wealthy in their home societies. As earlier noted, not all the entrepreneurs are African, although the large majority are. Many are Indian, often involved in the garment trade, and still others are Eastern European or Russian, often involved in mobile phones or electronics. There are also Yemenis, Filipinos, Saudis, and French—I've met people from an array of different countries involved in a mind-boggling assortment of trade. But African entrepreneurs are the most prominent in Chungking Mansions and, for that matter, in south China as well.

I occasionally have met with African traders who have come to Hong Kong for the first time. I conducted an informal evening tour of Hong Kong for two female Tanzanian traders, who expressed amazement at the tall buildings and the trains. One said, "I've never been in a train that ran through electricity before. Where I come from, trains are run by oil." She also spoke with amazement at all the "sliding stairs"—escalators—which she had seen only once before at the airport in her home country. But these traders were by no means removed from the contemporary world's technology. Throughout much of our tour, they were on their mobile phones calling their friends back in Dar es Salaam. As one of them explained to me, "Yes, I was telling my friends back home about what I was seeing, about the sliding stairs and the malls. But how can there be so many malls? Why do Hong Kong people buy so many things?"—a wise question I couldn't begin to answer, after which we had an animated discussion about the nature of capitalism.

A story I've heard from several people concerns China's National Day in Hong Kong, which features a fireworks exhibition over Hong Kong harbor to thrill the crowds of tens of thousands. Apparently a number of African traders heard the booms, saw all the people outside, and ran to the elevators for shelter, thinking that a war had started and Hong Kong was being bombed.

These African entrepreneurs have little linkage to Hong Kong, for the most part, except, perhaps, for their business forays into Sham Shui Po or other Hong Kong neighborhoods where wholesale goods are sold. Subtle racism is sometimes apparent in the 7-Eleven around the corner from Chungking Mansions. I have seen Hong Kong people enter the 7-Eleven to simply stand and stare at the Africans for thirty seconds before walking out, buying nothing. Many younger traders have tried to pick up Hong Kong women, but with little success. Some have come to know from bitter experience that, aside from simple racism, the way they are used to accosting women in Af-

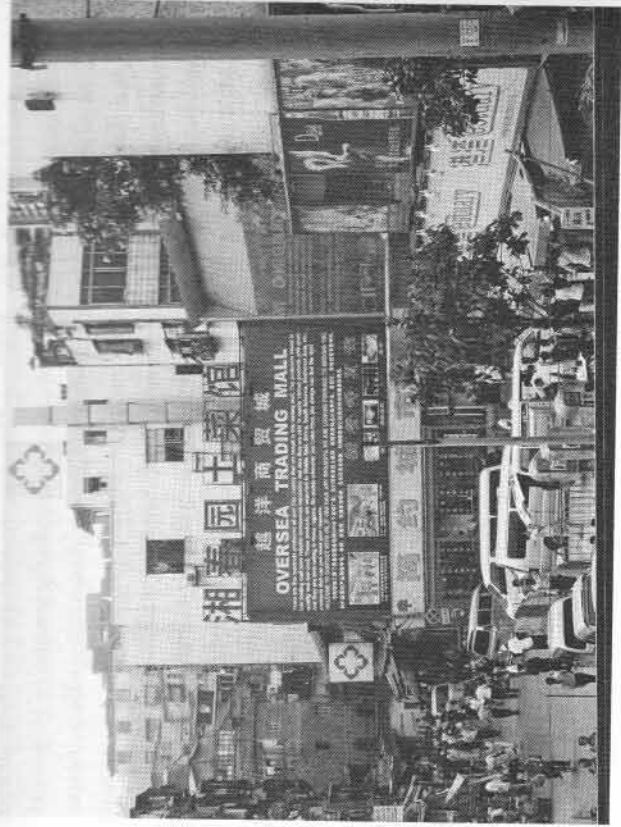
rica is considered aggressive in Hong Kong, perhaps adding to the fear with which these traders are regarded by many Hong Kong people.

All in all, it is difficult for African traders in Hong Kong. They inevitably stand out in a city that is 95 percent Chinese and are, if not necessarily victims of racial discrimination, certainly the strange and feared "other" in a Hong Kong context. This is why Africans tend to stick together in Chungking Mansions and in places like the nearby 7-Eleven. Only in these places can they gain security in numbers, and in being with people like themselves. Some of these African traders are naive in not knowing quite what they are getting into, but all are brave in leaving their homes to seek their fortunes in a foreign land. Many will lose their shirts and never come back. Some will make tidy profits and become regular traders, passing through Chungking Mansions a half dozen or a dozen times a year. A smart, lucky few will make fortunes.

The African traders I have met in Hong Kong have global links that spread far beyond Hong Kong—these traders often follow a long and complex path, ranging from their home and neighboring countries in Africa, to Dubai, to Bangkok and other southeast Asian destinations, to Hong Kong, to south China, and back again. As discussed in the previous chapter, my research assistants and I accompanied traders on parts of their global rounds out of Chungking Mansions.

Many of the African traders staying in Chungking Mansions go to Guangdong Province, the south Chinese industrial area most immediately accessible to Hong Kong, as well as to other cities in China, such as Yiwu.<sup>1</sup> African traders in Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong Province, are present in several different neighborhoods. There is the Tianxiu Building and its environs, a high rise devoted entirely to goods for sale to African and Middle Eastern merchants, an area where many Muslim traders go. There is also the Sanyuanli area, the haunt of Nigerian Igbo among others, who have regular Catholic services in Igbo at Guangzhou's Sacred Heart Cathedral. In Guangzhou, unlike Chungking Mansions, traders of different backgrounds tend to go to different areas of the city to do their business and typically sleep in apartments or hotels in the city's outskirts—there is no common place where all live and intermingle, such as Chungking Mansions. Unlike Chungking Mansions, many traders in Guangzhou do not speak English. They get by with their knowledge of a few words of Mandarin, or by hiring one of the dozens of young Chinese women—college students, I am told—offering their services as interpreters in Guangzhou trading marts (such as the one depicted on p. 62).





In Guangzhou, more than in Hong Kong, there are extremes of poverty and wealth and a division of legality and illegality, among African traders. On the one hand, there are Nigerians and other Africans living illegally who are sometimes involved in the drug trade, whether transporting drugs from Africa to China or selling in Guangzhou at street level, but this is only rarely seen in Hong Kong. Because of the sheer number of Africans in Guangzhou—20,000 is one estimate, other estimates are far higher<sup>2</sup>—they may remain largely unnoticed if they overstay their visas. On the other hand, there are many established and wealthy African as well as Middle Eastern entrepreneurs in Guangzhou. Some have had the capital to bypass Chungking Mansions and order directly from factories in south China with which they have established relations, typically over years. They may have long-term work visas in China.

Others are agents, or “fixers,” some of whom speak fluent Mandarin, who negotiate deals for their fellow Africans. I have been in a high-end Brazilian barbeque restaurant in Guangzhou containing a hundred or more African entrepreneurs and agents in their expensive Saturday-night revels. I also stayed with a Congolese agent in his high-rise Guangzhou apartment, a place that in all its accoutrements would have been the envy of virtually

all the Chinese living in the city. Some of these people have managed to legally stay in China, through favorable visas or through marriage to a Chinese woman, but their visas still may require regular renewal. They often make a regular cycle of going back and forth between Guangzhou and Chungking Mansions in order to renew their visas every thirty days. Others, especially those with less to lose, take the more risky path of overstaying their visas, enabling them to stay in Guangzhou indefinitely, but subjecting them, if caught (and if unable to pay the requisite bribe, I am told) to jail terms and deportation.

Aside from Guangzhou, many of the African traders in Chungking Mansions speak of Dubai, and particularly the Dubai neighborhood of Deira, as a place of trade. The African traders I met in Dubai in 2009 were sometimes on a circuit from East Africa to Hong Kong and China and back. As a Zambian trader told me, he often meets fellow African traders he knows from Chungking Mansions on the streets of Deira, and vice versa. Each place has its advantages and disadvantages. As a Tanzanian trader said, “Usually goods are cheaper in China, since all the China-made goods have to be shipped from China to here [Dubai]. But occasionally you find bargains here, even though the hotels are really expensive compared to Chungking Mansions.” A Nigerian phone trader noted that while Dubai has many warehoused European-made phones sold at discount prices (known as fourteen-day phones), China-made phones are cheaper in Hong Kong and China.

African traders (such as the ones depicted on p. 64) choose Dubai for various reasons. Some come because of problems they encounter getting visas for China. Others are on no such global circuit, at least not yet. Hong Kong and China are places they dream of going to do business, but for now they have settled for the geographically closer and culturally more familiar world of Dubai, with its strong presence of Islam and its many Somali shopkeepers. “Yes, I want to go to China, but you can lose everything in China, I’ve heard,” one trader told me. “You have to be very careful there.”

I spent an afternoon in Dubai in an Internet café with a Zambian trader who sought to get to the Chinese source of the copy electronic goods he was buying, so that he could eliminate the middleman. He insisted that the company must have a website, but of course we only found the real European company’s website, not the company manufacturing copies using the real company’s name. It took me hours to convince him that a company making copy goods is unlikely to advertise itself on the Internet, and that rather than seek out this company’s shadowy source, he might do better to stay and buy in Dubai (although some of his suppliers in Dubai may know exactly where these goods come from), or perhaps go to Chungking Mansions





or to Guangzhou, as close as he is ever likely to come to the source of those goods.

My research assistant, Jose Rojas, traveled to Lagos, Nigeria, to experience the daily rounds of several Nigerian traders he had met in Chungking Mansions. He found that many of the shops in Lagos are dependent upon a constant flow of new shipments from China, shipments arriving every two days, generally through Hong Kong and Chungking Mansions. These China-made goods, often copies that are disdained by well-off Nigerians who seek Japanese or European goods, are sought after by the great mass of Nigerians who can afford nothing else (see the Lagos scene on p. 65).

The traders from Hong Kong he traveled with are admired by many young people in Lagos, who suffer from an astronomically high unemployment rate. But as these traders themselves are well aware, they make only a little money, and often the money with which they buy their goods is not their own money but that of their bosses in Nigeria, Hong Kong, or China. Jose went with traders along the potholed road from Lagos to the market town of Onitsha and experienced the frequent roadblocks of soldiers seeking payoffs for allowing contraband clothing past—he himself was shaken down. With constant electrical blackouts and endemic corruption, Nigeria



cannot make its own goods, from phones to clothes to electric generators. All must be imported from places like China, but many of these imported goods, not least clothing, are declared illegal by the Nigerian government.

Despite this illegality, China's presence lurks everywhere. Along many of the streets of the Lagos clothing market, goods are displayed on plastic bags bearing Chinese characters, the bags that most Chinese factories use to wrap their manufactured clothes. All in all, Jose found that however hard these traders' lives may be in Hong Kong, Nigeria is harder; this is why many Nigerian young people seek to leave and try their luck, not least for the far-off and foreign, yet also familiar, Chungking Mansions. These traders seek not to live in Hong Kong or China—Europe or the United States is much more the land of their dreams—but rather to see if they can make a fortune or at least a profit at trading, which may eventually enable them to leave Nigeria for good.

My research assistant Maggie Lin followed female Kenyan traders from Chungking Mansions back to Mombasa and Nairobi, through Bangkok. Some of these traders have made extensive profits from their clothing business and have started other businesses in Kenya, such as hair salons and minibus services; they too are looked up to by many of their fellow Kenyans,

especially with an unemployment rate of some 40 percent. Some are clearly of the middle class in the country, owning cars and employing many staff, but others now only aspire to that. Maggie was told by one struggling trader in Kenya that after a few more trips to China, she hoped to build a new house on her plot of land, where she can rent out the upper floors while she and her family live on the lower floor. After she has built the new house, she hopes to have the money to finance a container filled with everything from China, from tiles to sofas, a container that she hopes will help make her wealthy (see one up-and-coming Kenyan shop on p. 67).

Maggie found souvenir t-shirts, khaki pants, and *kikoyis* and *kbangas*, the traditional pieces of cloth women wrap around their bodies (a popular souvenir for tourists), as the only clothing items actually produced in Kenya. Despite the tax imposed on imported products, most clothing is brought from outside the country: the "made in China" label is omnipresent from more prestigious shops to street-market stalls. For the clothing made in China, her informants told her, the design is often trendy, but due to suspicions that customers may have about quality, they need to work to convince customers that these goods are worth buying. Not all China-made products are poor quality—some are superb—but these traders are buying the very cheapest items in China, and so customers in Kenya may tend to associate Chineseness with shoddiness.

These are some of the routes and stories of the traders one encounters in Chungking Mansions, linking these traders, beyond a single Hong Kong building, to sites across the globe.

### Owners and Managers

I now turn to Chinese and South Asian owners and managers in Chungking Mansions. The dominant class of owners today arrived in the 1970s and the 1980s from Shanghai or Fujian Province in mainland China, buying the cheapest property they could find—that of Chungking Mansions. Most are all but invisible in the multiethnic kaleidoscope that is Chungking Mansions; many come to the building only rarely. However, they and their children have been living out "the Hong Kong dream." Most came to Hong Kong and Chungking Mansions in more or less difficult financial straits, but through hard work over the years, they have become modestly affluent and have raised children who now have university degrees and are accountants or teachers, like Andy Mok whom we saw in chapter 1.

The children of these owners often want nothing to do with Chungking Mansions. As one university student who grew up in Chungking Mansions



told me, "If I were doing the Chungking Mansions story, I would describe how poor mainland immigrants used real estate and hard work to become wealthy over several decades. It would have little to do with Africans and South Asians. This is a classic mainland-Hong Kong success story." His emphasis is one wholly lacking in virtually all the descriptions of Chungking Mansions that one sees and hears, yet it too is clearly valid. However, this story stops with the children, who, like him or Andy Mok, leave the building that made their parents middle class. Today, many older Chinese owners are still holding on, but many eventually sell their property to the next generation of immigrants from mainland China, or to South Asians.

Many of these owners are closed off from Chungking Mansions at large, but a few have adapted remarkably well to the cultural panorama. One older man running a souvenir stand on the ground floor, carefully arranged with souvenirs for Western tourists (statues of the Buddha, jade dragons) on one side and souvenirs for Chinese (Swiss army knives, pendants) on the other, speaks six languages, all reasonably well. It is startling to be talking with him about our respective families in Japanese, then switch to Spanish to discuss his travels overseas, then watch him switch to Mandarin to deal with one set of tourists and then use French with another. Another Hong Kong Chi-

nese man runs an upstairs travel agency and, because of his ability to speak French, has a stream of African customers seeking visas and buying wholesale clothing from him as well. While English is Chungking Mansions' lingua franca, these merchants' going the extra mile to speak to their customers no doubt wins them additional business. I also know several Chinese store proprietors who lend money to their regular customers, not requiring full payment for traders' orders until the goods have been sold back in Africa. This is a risky practice, proprietors maintained, but does help ensure that one has regular customers.

Many business managers in Chungking Mansions are South Asians whose families have been in Hong Kong for generations, reflecting the long historical presence of South Asians in Hong Kong since the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> To take just one example, a Pakistani clothing-store proprietor in his sixties was born when Pakistan was still part of India and was granted British citizenship at that time. He moved to Hong Kong in 1985 to seek his fortune. At present, all four of his daughters live in Great Britain, while his only son lives in mainland China for business. As other clothing dealers in Chungking Mansions have also said, business has become much more difficult in recent years because customers can go to the mainland for goods at a lower price. At his age, he hangs on.

Many South Asian managers are fluent in Cantonese and yet feel that they are discriminated against in Hong Kong. Thus their relation to Hong Kong is distinctly ambivalent—few sense that Hong Kong, which they see as leaning more and more toward China, can be their home. Rather, between South Asia, an earlier homeland some now feel little attachment to, and Hong Kong, a temporary home in which to make a living for a few decades, they dream of eventual residence in the United Kingdom, Canada, or the United States. One manager told me that he does not want to be tied to Hong Kong and is thinking of moving to Canada for the sake of his children—"I still don't trust Hong Kong after the handover." A Sikh man, returning to Hong Kong and Chungking Mansions for the Diwali festival, exclaimed, "Thank God for Chris Patten [the last British governor of Hong Kong]. He enabled my family to leave Hong Kong and live in Great Britain."

This dream of leaving may be placed upon one's children. A young Indian man told me, "My father started his restaurant in Chungking Mansions twenty years ago and wants me to help him as long as I'm in Hong Kong. But he doesn't want me to stay in Hong Kong. He wants me to get an advanced business degree in America or Europe and make a better life there." As an older Pakistani man said, "I manage a guesthouse in Chungking Mansions, but my son is a doctor in London and my daughter is studying in the

United States"—making a better future for themselves not just away from Chungking Mansions but from Hong Kong.

These South Asian shopkeepers are not so different from some of their Hong Kong Chinese counterparts, up to a million or more of whom hold foreign passports as insurance for the future, keeping the option of emigration open "just in case."<sup>4</sup> However, unlike most Hong Kong Chinese, these South Asians may feel a distinct sense of alienation from Hong Kong because it is Chinese. In Chungking Mansions, many speak Hindi or Urdu or Nepali or Punjabi or Tamil; eat South Asian food; buy South Asian ingredients, videos, magazines, and saris for their wives and daughters; and spend their days watching the Indian, Pakistani, or Nepali TV channel and associating with their fellow South Asians. Many are devoutly Muslim: a half dozen times in the course of my research, Islamic shopkeepers have taken me aside to show me, on YouTube, videos of pilgrims circulating around the Kaaba in Mecca, accompanied by recited Qur'anic scriptures. Nonetheless, many feel that South Asia is no longer their home, a sense held all the more by their children. "I've never been to India. It's a foreign country! I'd be lost there!" said an Indian man in his twenties. "I've lived all my adult life in Hong Kong, and I will die here."

One Chungking Mansions electronics store has as its fixture a fifteen-year-old Pakistani boy (long the favorite of my research assistants Amy Fung and Ingrid Tang, from whom this description is taken) who migrated to Hong Kong with his father when he was three and who now comes to his father's shop whenever he is not in school. Raised in Hong Kong, he speaks conversational Cantonese: "All of my friends are Chinese." But he has not been taught to write and read Chinese, but only English. This reflects the peculiarities of the Hong Kong educational system vis-à-vis South Asians. Education in Hong Kong for South Asians has typically involved instruction in English, with classes in spoken Cantonese but little emphasis on written Chinese.\* This boy seeks to be a medical doctor or a police officer when he grows up, but without written Chinese that future will probably be denied him in a Hong Kong context.<sup>5</sup>

Another store is run by a 23-year-old Hong-Kong-born Pakistani, again speaking fluent Cantonese but not reading or writing Chinese. After graduating from local schools, he started working at a car showroom but soon quit:

\*In 2005, the Hong Kong government began to redirect South Asian children into Cantonese-medium schools, mainstreaming South Asians, to the consternation of some South Asian parents, who preferred English-language instruction for their children.



"I worked faster and better than the Chinese girl, but they still preferred her to me after the three-month probation." These stories reveal why so many South Asians make their home in Chungking Mansions. It is a place, unlike the rest of Hong Kong, where they can work with their fellow countrymen and not suffer discrimination for their non-Chinese ethnicity and lack of language ability (a lack that does not hinder white people in Hong Kong but that definitely hinders South Asians, given Hong Kong's ongoing racial hierarchy of "white as superior, brown as inferior"). Here are the accounts of two such South Asian men.

Johnny Singh

I started a store in Chungking Mansions in 2002; I'm now in my early forties. Business was better back then than it is now. Now you can make expenses, but you cannot save money. I have both a phone store and a watch store. My customers are African and Indian. I talk to everyone in a friendly way. If I talk to them nicely, they will buy something from me. I don't give a high price or a low price, but market price; I'm happy with that. I just came back from ten days in England and a few weeks in India to check conditions there, but business there is also not so good. It's better to do business in Hong Kong, better than India, better than the UK, better than all countries. Chungking Mansions—everybody wants to try to make money here. You can sell something because different countries' people all come here.

Before I was in Chungking, I had an office outside. I started that in 1997; I did that for five years. We sold everything. Every month I'd make HK\$50,000, HK\$100,000 profit. I supplied all the shopkeepers here in Chungking with what the factories made in China. At that time, Indians could not get visas to go into China, so they'd buy from me. It was very easy to make money. I had a BMW car. I had ten million dollars then! But then customers starting going to China themselves.

I bought property in my home country, a farm in north Punjab. I have lots of property there—I could retire. My mother and father tell me, "Stay in Punjab!" They didn't want me to come back to Hong Kong and said, "We are old. You stay here. We will give you a big house, a car." I said, "I cannot stay because of my son and my wife. Let me do five more years of business in Hong Kong. Then I will come." I had six stores a year ago, but now I have two. Business is down now. I've lost more than HK\$2,000,000. I try my best. I have an older brother who has been working for a company in Hong Kong for over twenty-five years, but the company closed down last month; he cannot find a job now.

I was born here in Hong Kong. I am a Hong Kong person—I've been more than thirty years here in Hong Kong. When I was a child, I spent ten years in India—when I was six, I was sent back to India and came back to Hong Kong when I was seventeen. My father was Hong Kong police; he retired in 1986 and went back to India. Yes, Hong Kong is Chinese; I feel like an outsider in Hong Kong. But when I enter this building, I don't feel like I'm an outsider; I feel like I'm home. Different people come here: Indonesian, Malaysian, Indian, Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi, African, European. All countries can enter here. Outside is difficult, but Chungking Mansions is home! I've decided that I'll bring my son back to India. He goes to English school now, but I want to teach him my mother language, Punjabi. I want him to know Indian culture. I don't want him to stay in Hong Kong. English is fine, but Cantonese? Nobody needs to learn Cantonese! My own school friends are in Punjab. They tell me that if I come back, they'll vote for me to be village president. Here in Hong Kong you can make money and live good, no problem. But I want to go back to India eventually. I'm Sikh, but I've taken off my turban and cut my hair, to be more acceptable to customers. My brother criticizes me for not wearing my turban.

There is discrimination in Hong Kong. I speak Cantonese, I grew up in Hong Kong, but I've been treated badly by suppliers who keep putting me off concerning delivery. I told them, "Look, I'm not a delivery boy driving this truck. I own these shops!" When you speak Cantonese, the Chinese get scared. If they think you don't speak Cantonese, they talk badly about you. I was in a dispute last year and was beaten. If I had been Chinese, the police would have done more to solve my case; because I'm not Chinese, they don't care. The police told me, "If you don't feel safe here, then go to the UK." They talked to me like that!

Chungking Mansions . . . after two or three years, more mainland China people will be here. They'll open up shops, and Pakistanis and Indians will all, one by one, leave Chungking. Even if there's no business, the rent will keep going up. Maybe African people will trust Chinese people more than Indians or Pakistanis, because they think they have factories. Yes, maybe the Indians and Pakistanis will vanish and only the Africans and Chinese will remain.

Fahad Ali

I've been coming to Chungking Mansions for almost twenty years because my brother has been here, but I've been working here at a phone stall only for eight months. I'm in my late twenties. I know the people here now, but

also the people before them, and the people before them, and the people before them! I think that Chungking Mansions is changing very fast and in a good way. The business is not getting better—the business was better twenty years ago—but now more people are coming in; more people know about Chungking. The impression of the place is getting better. In the 1990s, people were scared to come here. At that time there were drug problems going on and gangs. Now people are more peaceful here; no one bothers anyone.

At this phone store, I sell both wholesale and retail. I don't have big African traders as customers, but my brother does. Some of the African traders place their orders, and he sends the phones back to them. Those traders are serious businessmen; they're reliable. But many store managers here have had a bad experience doing business with Africans; some guys have lost millions. When you've done business for a long time with someone, you trust him, you give him credit and say, "Next time you can pay." That's when he takes a big order without paying and never comes back—you never see him again.

Yes, mainland Chinese merchants are moving into Chungking Mansions—they try but they fail. The Indians and Pakistanis are still holding on strong. Some people say I'm stupid for saying this, but I tell people, "Don't buy Chinese phones." I can't give any guarantee for them—they can die tomorrow! These kinds of things only happen with the black guys. You give them a price and they immediately cut it in half—"HK\$400," I say, and they say "HK\$200." So you give them China made.\*

I also work as a designer in advertising. I used to work in a big advertising company, but now the design market is not very good in Hong Kong, so I have a one-man design company in the morning and work here in the afternoons and evenings, seeing if I can do anything in the business. Trading is very good in Hong Kong; that's what I'm trying! Chungking Mansions right now, people say it's bad business, they're not making any money, but you don't see any empty shops. Chungking Mansions is making revenue for Hong Kong. Most of the shopkeepers I know here are rich!

I got married just two months ago, to a Hong Kong girl. My wife converted to Islam—she converted before we were married. But she didn't convert because of me but because of her. I can't push her to be a Muslim! If she's ready, she will do it. I've known four or five Chinese girls who have converted

to Islam—I'm happy for them. To my wife, I never told her to go and convert, never. It's not a matter of converting because someone wants you to, it's a matter of how you develop your own understanding.

Many of my friends are Chinese, but I don't speak Cantonese at all. I'm very bad at languages! But we are living here; Hong Kong is our home. My lack of Cantonese hasn't been a problem for me in getting jobs in Hong Kong. Yes, maybe my personality helps—I try to be friendly and good to people. There are stupid Hong Kong Chinese who practice discrimination, holding their noses when they see me, for example. But I just smile at them. There are good or bad people everywhere, in every country. Even some of my local Chinese friends are afraid to come to Chungking Mansions. They feel it's strange when they know I work here! Europeans are not afraid to come to Chungking Mansions; it's only local Chinese.

We are always hoping for a better Chungking. We want central air conditioning—when it's very hot, like today, business suffers. In many shopping centers, people come in because it's cool, but nobody will come into Chungking for that! The touts outside [handing out menus for Chungking Mansions restaurants to passersby on Nathan Road], I don't like that. They should not be there, because they're scaring customers. The management can't control them. If there are fifty Indians and Pakistanis standing outside, and they don't even know how to talk properly to people, do you think any Chinese will come in? It's a matter of this building and its reputation.

Why doesn't the management stop people from eating *paan* and spitting? I hate it! In India, they might do that, but this is not India! You see the red on that wall? That's from spitting! No sensible person would do that. Sometimes, I get pissed off at the temporary workers, the asylum seekers, because of the way they behave. They are destroying our reputation! Business is affected because of these people! A lot of these guys, they are stealing jobs from Hong Kong residents.

The police are here for our protection, but some of them are very bad. You're a white guy here; I'm a brown guy. The police, when they're talking to you, they'll have a smile on their face, but when they're talking to me, they will have anger on their face. At that time, I really want to kick their asses. At Immigration, at the airport, I told the guy, "Just now, you had your teeth out, smiling to that white guy. But now, with me, you're angry. Why? Can you explain this to me?" He said nothing.

\**Paan* is a betel leaf mixture commonly chewed in South Asia and sold in many stalls in Chungking Mansions.

\*"China made" in this context means China-made copies of European or Korean phones.

Chungking Mansions, it's my sitting room. I come here to talk to people and meet people. In the whole of Hong Kong, this is the only place where people of all different nations can get together. Without Chungking Mansions, where would the people here go? If it was torn down, maybe we'd all go into the Holiday Inn next door and take over that place!

### Temporary Workers

South Asians with Hong Kong residency can, of course, own property in Hong Kong. They often hire fellow South Asians who have no such opportunities—Indians who come to Hong Kong as tourists. These temporary workers are the backbone of the Chungking Mansions labor force. They work as clerks in stores; as touts, waiters, and dishwashers in restaurants; as touts, cleaners, and managers for guesthouses; or as goods transported. They come to Hong Kong on a fourteen-day visa-free entry obtained upon arrival at the Hong Kong airport, twice renewable for varying numbers of days, and are permitted to stay in Hong Kong for no more than 180 days a year. These temporary workers are paid considerably less than those with Hong Kong residence and a Hong Kong identity card, typically making only HK\$3,000 to HK\$3,500 per month. As I have sometimes heard from temporary workers, "Why does that guy make twice as much money as me? It's only because he has a Hong Kong ID card and I don't!" As business owners have maintained to me, the potential legal risks of hiring tourist workers, including heavy fines for their employers, justifies their lower wages.

Unlike the longer-term South Asian residents of Hong Kong, who come from Punjab as well as south India, Pakistan, and Nepal, a majority of these temporary workers come from a single neighborhood, Kidderpore, a Muslim enclave in Kolkata. People from Kolkata are at Chungking Mansions in large part because the ticket fare to Hong Kong is cheaper than any other destination that can provide work, whereas from western Indian cities such as Mumbai, it is cheaper to fly to Dubai to work. As for why Kidderpore in particular is the source of so many workers in Chungking Mansions, it's difficult to conclusively say (although the fact that Chungking Mansions has many Muslims, like Kidderpore, is no doubt one factor), but it seems clear that the power of individual connections is essential: "My cousin told me he'd help me find work in Chungking Mansions, so I came here." Temporary employees such as these come to Hong Kong because jobs that pay more than a pittance are hard to find in Kolkata. Some of the young Indian men I have interviewed are married to teachers and civil servants, but make far more money in Hong Kong than their spouses back home.

These workers have a precarious position in Hong Kong, in that if they are caught working, they can be prosecuted, jailed, and barred from returning to Hong Kong.<sup>6</sup> However, they are extremely difficult to catch. As soon as immigration police enter Chungking Mansions, mobile phones are set to use by friends and lookouts at the front of the building, and illegal workers vanish en masse from behind their counters or sinks to mingle with the crowds of tourists and traders. Because Hong Kong Chinese still stand out in Chungking Mansions, and because undercover police are so easy to recognize, the danger tends to be minimal, although incautious or unlucky workers do occasionally get caught.

Without these illegal workers, many of Chungking Mansions' businesses could no longer afford to exist. If phone stalls, food stalls, and guesthouses hired only legal workers, labor costs would double and prices would have to be very significantly raised. Many African and South Asian entrepreneurs, who already carefully count out every dollar in considering accommodations and food, could no longer afford to come, and Chungking Mansions as it now exists would die. Illegal workers are indeed exploited. As one angrily exclaimed to me, "My boss is paying me HK\$3,000 a month. Fifteen hours' work a day and only HK\$3,000 a month—not good!" He has nine people in his family he must support, he said. Nonetheless, Hong Kong offers better prospects than Kolkata, which is why he returns time after time, year after year.

These temporary workers are also entrepreneurs, in a limited sense—they carry goods in their luggage when they return to India, often clothing in parcels of up to 40 kilograms, and on their return trip often carry foodstuffs, such as *dal* and Indian rice, to sell at a discount to restaurants in Chungking Mansions. They usually fly Biman Bangladesh Airways, sometimes 24 to 48 hours late departing but worthwhile because a roundtrip flight from Hong Kong to Kolkata will cost them some HK\$3,000, cheaper than other airlines. At the airport in Hong Kong, these temporary workers receive vacuum-packed parcels of clothing to carry. They can pay for 50 to 80 percent of their flight between the clothing they take to India and the foodstuffs they bring back to Hong Kong. The clothes are sold throughout India, I am told.

The dream of many of these temporary workers is to go into business for themselves, but the minimum to really be able to make a start at being an entrepreneur is HK\$10,000, or better HK\$20,000. Given the familial obligations that many experience, this is more than most can ever scrape together. Some of these temporary employees have furtively approached me: "If you can just lend me HK\$6,000, I can buy enough mobile phones to make much



money for both of us. And I won't have to do this work any more." I refuse, not least because these workers generally seem to lack the business savvy to know how to proceed.

Others have approached me to ask about the pros and cons of becoming an asylum seeker, whom we will shortly discuss. Others ask, "Please tell me, is there any possible way I could get Hong Kong residency?" The answer, almost as a rule, is no, unless they can manage to find a Hong Kong girl to marry. I know of one charismatic young temporary worker who indeed had a Hong Kong girlfriend for several years, until he proposed marriage and she said, "Oh no, I like you, but I would never marry you!" With that, his chance at Hong Kong residency vanished. "She was only playing with me!" he recounts in anger.

Some of these temporary workers come to Hong Kong only once and never return, finding the pace of work too grueling or the morals of Chungking Mansions too questionable for their Islamic convictions. But most continue their migratory cycles month after month, year after year, slowly saving up the money they'll need to return home and start the business they've dreamed of during their long sojourns in Hong Kong, or else buying property at home at a rate they never could have if they had remained at home.

I had the chance to go to Kolkata for a week with a temporary worker from Chungking Mansions, to follow him on his business, meet his friends and family in Kidderpore, and better understand the thick linkages between Kidderpore and Chungking Mansions. One surprise was how hard it was for him and his fellow Chungking Mansions workers to get the parcels of clothing they carried through customs. Customs officials viewed them with disdain—as one exclaimed to me, "Indians can make clothes! We don't need clothes from China!"—and refused to deal with them except during a limited window of a few hours each afternoon, a window that evaporated if other flights' passengers came through. For three successive days, we had to take a taxi back to the airport, as my friend became progressively more despairing, seeing his slim profits vanish at our mounting expenses.

Another greater surprise was seeing how much Kidderpore, a neighborhood I had never seen before, seemed like a long-lost home: a dozen different times over the course of just a few days someone would call out, "Hello! I know you from Chungking Mansions! Remember me? Welcome to India!" It seemed that much of Chungking Mansions, on its home shift, paraded through the streets of Kidderpore—sometimes in the figure of a proud young returnee slowly riding his shiny motorcycle through the streets, followed by a retinue of a half dozen starry-eyed male teenagers.

A third surprise was how much my friend was his family's economic

mainstay. His wages of HK\$3,500 a month earned for just six months a year—less than a pittance by Hong Kong standards—financed his two sisters' weddings as well as his own, each attended by over a thousand people; paid for his own motorcycle, his prized possession; and would shortly fund the reconstruction of his extended family's home. Chungking Mansions really does enable him to become a "big man" back in Kolkata. He is not particularly well treated in Hong Kong—he is a restaurant tout—but he is indeed his family's hero, as was readily apparent when I talked with his elderly parents, who, beneath their modesty, were beaming at the success of their son. He provides the difference between bare subsistence and the luxuries of life for his family, such as a motorcycle, a stereo, a water purifier, and home refurbishing. Their other son went to Chungking Mansions once to work but had found it too hard. He now works at a call center in Kolkata, making good money by Indian standards and also helping out the family, but bringing in nowhere near the returns of his brother.

Here is the account of another temporary worker at Chungking Mansions.

Ahmed Aziz

I've come to Hong Kong more than one hundred times, back and forth between Hong Kong and Kolkata. I've been working in Chungking Mansions for a guesthouse owner for six years. Before that, I came to Hong Kong for trade, working with my partner. My father gave me 2 lakh (200,000) rupees (HK\$40,000/US\$5,100) to start the business. For two years it was very good, but then my partner stole my money. He took 5 lakh rupees from me and ran. I never saw my partner again; maybe he went to south India, to Madras, but Madras is so big. I have no relatives there; I couldn't find him. I went to the police, but my friend who is police told me I would never get my money back. So I came back to Hong Kong, this time to work.

Yes, coming back and forth as a tourist is difficult. Immigration in Hong Kong is not stupid. They know that some people come to Hong Kong for business and others for working. They give some people fourteen days, some seven days, some four days, some nothing. You can go to China and extend your stay twice, up to forty-two days, and then you must go home. I worry when I go to Immigration. You have to show money: sometimes HK\$5,000, sometimes HK\$10,000. I go to the boss when I need to get my stay renewed; he gives me money that I show Immigration at the China border. He trusts me—he knows I won't run away with the money he gives me! When I go back and forth between Hong Kong and India, I carry goods to help pay the expense: I carry saris from India to Hong Kong and elec-

tronic goods from Hong Kong to India. Sometimes I can make a big profit, US\$400 paying for almost my whole flight, and sometimes US\$250; it depends on price conditions.

I get paid HK\$3,000 a month, plus lodging. My work is to bring in customers for my boss's guesthouses. The police won't bother me because my passport is legal. They just think I'm a guest. I am outside from 11 a.m. to midnight or 2 a.m. trying to bring in customers—only six to seven hours sleeping each night. Sometimes I bring in four customers a day, sometimes five, sometimes six for my boss's guesthouses. I can tell by looking at customers: Mali and Benin people might want cheaper rooms. Nigerians are very dangerous; if the room costs HK\$100, he gives HK\$80 saying, "I don't have money! OK, call the police!" Japanese and Koreans, they like clean rooms.

My wife is a teacher back in Kidderpore in a nursery school; my four-year-old daughter also goes there. I want to make a good life for my children! My wife makes 3,000 Indian rupees a month, about HK\$600, only about a fifth of what I make in Hong Kong. I have four brothers and three sisters; I am the oldest. One brother is in California, working in water management. My second brother works in India, and another brother is in university. My brother in California makes most money, but I'm second. I give my wife HK\$220 and give my father HK\$2500 every month. I will work in Hong Kong only one more year and then go back to India. My father has a restaurant; he is old, and I will take over for him.

Most people in Kolkata have never been to school, but I graduated. Then I worked in a factory, but there was a lockout, a strike—India has so many political parties, so many problems. Still, I'd much rather have my family live in India than in Hong Kong. Hong Kong culture is not good. The Indonesian ladies, one boyfriend here, another there.\* I like Indians: they love only one person! Yes, many sex workers are Indian, but they are sex workers; that's different. I like my country—it's great! And so I want to go back to India in one year—it's very, very nice! Now many, many companies come to India and make business—it's not so poor anymore.

### Asylum Seekers

There are some 6,000 asylum seekers in Hong Kong as of 2009, mostly from South Asian and African countries; many of them congregate at Chungking

\*He is referring to the Indonesian domestic helpers who come to Chungking Mansions on Sundays, their day off.



Mansions. We will focus on asylum seekers in chapter 4, but let me briefly discuss them here. Hong Kong, as earlier noted, is unusual among societies in the developed world in that it has a largely open border. Except for a handful of countries for which visas must be obtained in advance, arrivals from most societies are given a landing permit at Hong Kong's airport for fourteen, thirty, or ninety days. This makes Hong Kong easy to travel to as a tourist destination for people from across the globe, but this is also a major reason why Hong Kong has served as a magnet for asylum seekers. Even those who come from countries requiring visas for entry into Hong Kong have a relatively easy time getting in to Hong Kong—very few are turned away at the airport, although this of course by no means indicates that their subsequent life in Hong Kong will be easy. As one Somali man told me, shaking his head at the stupidity of my question, "Why did I come to Hong Kong? Because I knew they would let me in!"

Many asylum seekers, either at Immigration or in the days and weeks after entry into Hong Kong, turn to the UNHCR, which has an office in Hong Kong, to officially declare themselves as asylum seekers. The UNHCR may take up to three or more years to hear a case, with appeals added to this. Many asylum seekers also turn to the Hong Kong government, which is a signatory of the Convention Against Torture (CAT). However, it is not a signatory to the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Ref-

ugees, which is why the UNHCR is involved. These claims also may take many years to evaluate.\* Only a tiny percentage of asylum seekers ever attain refugee status, enabling them to go to live in a third country, such as Canada or the United States; most asylum seekers, using one or both of these paths, indefinitely await their fates in Hong Kong.

In 2006 and 2007, asylum seekers lacked papers and could be arrested at any time by unsympathetic police, but by 2008, asylum seekers could obtain papers attesting to asylum seeker status—an asylum seeker still was jailed for several weeks, but after this was entitled to a minimal government welfare allotment of HK\$1,900 payment in kind per month. It is difficult to survive on such an allotment in Hong Kong, but from a developing-world standpoint it may seem generous. I have heard that unscrupulous recruiters on the South Asian subcontinent promise job applicants well-paid positions in Hong Kong, telling them, once they arrive, to become asylum seekers.

Some asylum seekers are fleeing religious, ethnic, or political persecution or torture in their home countries; others have come to Hong Kong to seek economic opportunities. The former are commonly considered to be “real,” and the latter “fake.” But in fact, the line between these two types of asylum seekers is unclear—I know a number of asylum seekers who have been threatened in various ways in their home countries and who have felt compelled to flee, but who do not meet the specific criteria required in order to obtain refugee status.

It is commonly observed in Chungking Mansions that economic asylum seekers work and make money, for if they are caught and deported they have little to lose, while political asylum seekers do not work, for if they are caught and deported they face jail, torture, or death in their home countries. But this distinction too is unclear. Some economic asylum seekers choose not to work, finding it easier to live on the bare-bones assistance they can obtain and spending their time writing or simply hanging out. On the other hand, some political asylum seekers do work, despite the danger of deportation this places them in, because they feel that they must send money to their families in their home countries.

It has been surprising to me how many times an employee I come to know in Chungking Mansions admits to me, often after months of conversa-

\*Lawyers tell me that only claimants to the UNHCR can be considered asylum seekers, in that they seek to be recognized as refugees and resettled elsewhere; claimants through CAT are not eligible for such resettlement. However, because asylum seekers themselves don't recognize this distinction, I use the term “asylum seekers” to refer to all such claimants.

tion, that “really, I'm an asylum seeker.” Those who work engage in a variety of jobs of varying degrees of danger of being caught by Immigration. Some, especially South Asians, are employed by stalls on the ground and first floors, since by face they are indistinguishable from their somewhat more legal tourist-permit brethren, or from those fortunate South Asian employees with Hong Kong permanent residency. A number of South Asian sex workers are also asylum seekers, since this enables them to stay in Hong Kong indefinitely to work. African asylum seekers must be more careful: several I know work in guesthouses where they cannot easily be caught, since their employers can always say, “I just wanted to help a poor asylum seeker by giving him a place to sleep; I never pay him any money” (which is ironically apt, at least figuratively speaking—their pay tends to be extremely low, as little as HK\$2,000 or HK\$2,500 per month).

Still others pass their days working among the copy-watch and tailor salesmen outside Chungking Mansions. This is particularly dangerous, but these workers are usually experts at recognizing undercover police, fleeing before they ever approach too closely. Early in 2009, a court decision in Hong Kong gave asylum seekers the provisional right to work, leading to a marked increase in the number of asylum seekers coming to Hong Kong. Later in 2009, the law was changed, and police swooped down on Chungking Mansions, arresting a dozen illegal workers. This had the effect of emptying the ground and first floors of Chungking Mansions of illegal workers for a week or two, until they deemed it safe to resume their jobs and the situation returned to its old status quo.

Those asylum seekers who do not work tend to spend more time at Christian-based NGOs in Chungking Mansions and, sometimes, helping at other volunteer organizations in Hong Kong. All—but particularly those asylum seekers who do not work and only wait—face the agony of waiting for years with no clear future. I have taught a small class of asylum seekers at Christian Action in Chungking Mansions for the past four years, a class that is ostensibly Advanced English but is really a discussion of current events and life philosophy. I have been surprised by how famous some of my students have been in their home countries (several have prominent Internet presences and one has appeared on CNN in his earlier incarnation as a political campaign spokesman before fleeing his home country one step ahead of the police), how intelligent and assertive many are (to quote one student, “Professor, there are five things wrong with your opinion on this matter. Let me explain each of these things to you.”), and how unhappy many are.

The reason for their unhappiness lies largely in the boredom and uncertainty of their present lives, entirely at the mercy of bureaucratic processes



they cannot control, and also the sense that their lives are now in limbo. In one man's words, "I am in my thirties, a person of talent. I can work. But in Hong Kong, I cannot. In Hong Kong I am useless. I am only a beggar." This sense of unhappiness is also due to the sufferings and guilt they may bear from their home country: How can one overcome torture? Alternately, how can one justify leaving one's country for Hong Kong for reasons that may be murky, even to oneself? How can one justify leaving one's family behind?

The asylum seekers I know are desperate to prove that their claims are legitimate. This is most obviously the case for those who are apparently genuine, for whom their entire lives are at the mercy of the bureaucratic judgment that will decide their fate. But this is also true for those who are frankly in Hong Kong for economic reasons, who must work hard to find ways in which their cases can be rendered impervious to doubt. Veteran asylum seekers I know can recite a litany of people who have received asylum despite being "fake" ("He's just a good storyteller, that's all!") and a longer list of people who have not received asylum despite being "real" ("How could they deny him? Those UN people are crazy! They're just like the mafia!"). Their lives are staked on judgments whose validity they doubt but whose ultimate implications are absolute—they are ticket-bearers in a lottery whose prize is a new life. As with most lotteries, their chances of winning are very small indeed.

I have visited the families of several asylum seekers I have come to know well, one in East Africa and the other in South Asia. My asylum seeker friend from South Asia is a man of enormous, stubborn principle, whose reasons for doing what he did may be hard to fathom, but who has the absolute integrity of his convictions. I saw his family—his mother, father, and sisters—in the home of his relatives and brought his private letters to them. This family was very much from the country and said little, although they were clearly overjoyed to see an emissary from their son. Through an interpreter, I heard his story from his father, a man in his sixties. "My son's problem was that he refused to join the army. Lots of people did that and paid off the authorities, but he refused to pay off anyone—he was doing this out of principle. . . . I have lost several jobs because he refused to serve, but I respect what he's doing."

His son had been arrested, imprisoned, and tortured by authorities, using electric shocks and other devices. The father told me that the son's secondary school teacher said, "He is so smart. Why are they doing this to him and not to other people?" He subsequently fled, three times in all, to different nearby countries, but each time the lure of his family and friends pulled him back—

whereby he would be arrested and tortured again. Finally he fled for good and traveled overland many thousands of miles to Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, the same principles that prevented him from joining the army prevent him from working, since it is against the law, and stop him from sleeping at night, as he stewed endlessly over his situation. His father died a year after I spoke with him; his son remains stuck in Hong Kong indefinitely.

I also visited an asylum seeker friend's family in East Africa. I stayed with his cousin, a young politician for the government party, who told me, "Yes, he was threatened; he was a member of the opposition. But you have to somehow cross the line to have them threaten to kill you. He must have crossed that line . . . but I don't know, because I can't really talk to him. My phone is tapped." Another relative is a prominent government minister, with whom I had a long dinner—a jovial and sensitive man who could not really voice support for the child he had raised into adulthood. It was as if my friend the asylum seeker in Hong Kong was a well-meaning eccentric who unaccountably and tragically had ventured down the wrong path in his life by opposing the government.

I later had the chance to meet his wife and children—almost unspoken and dressed in their Sunday best—to whom I brought the array of presents my asylum-seeker friend and I had bought them. I also met his brother, who had the most telling word. I mentioned that in reading the local newspapers I saw the harsh criticisms of the government by various prominent opposition figures. Couldn't my friend have spoken out as they did and been safe, as they apparently were? He said, "They're famous. The government can't jail or kill them—they're too well known. But my brother is not famous: the police could easily kill him." Indeed, the next day, a low-level opposition figure was murdered by police, an occurrence duly covered in the newspapers. The culprits, by the time I left, had not been found. It was against this backdrop that my asylum-seeking friend wound up in Chungking Mansions.

### Domestic Helpers

There are several dozen domestic helpers who work in Chungking Mansions: Filipina maids hired by families who live in Chungking Mansions or elsewhere who work in or manage guesthouses in the building. But I want to discuss more particularly the hundreds of Filipina and Indonesian domestic helpers who come to Chungking Mansions on their day off. On Sundays, tens of thousands of domestic helpers from throughout Hong Kong make their way to Central, Hong Kong's business district across the harbor, to eat,

sing, relax, and congregate.<sup>7</sup> Some come to Chungking Mansions as well. They are drawn to Chungking Mansions by the food—the South Asian fare available is closer to their palates than the Chinese food that most must daily prepare for the families they work for—and also by shopping, since the goods in Chungking Mansions are among the cheapest in Hong Kong, especially mobile phones, electronics, and clothing. Also, some are drawn by the promise of male attention: many young women seek to be seen as feminine and desirable once a week, rather than merely as domestic helpers. Some of these women are dressed up in their slinky best; many have boyfriends among the South Asian and African men at Chungking Mansions.

One of my more memorable conversations was with three Indonesian domestic helpers one Sunday morning in Chungking Mansions, one of a number of such conversations I've had over the years. All three had male friends they were waiting for: one Saudi Arabian, another Pakistani, and the third Indian. These women gaily chatted about these "contract boyfriends"—they are together only for as long as they are both in Hong Kong. Their boyfriends pay for everything, and they themselves provide companionship and sex.

But these relationships grow. One of these girls didn't want to meet her boyfriend because she'd had a fight with him; her friends kept saying, "Get him out of your mind! Forget about him!" but she was moping, and obviously couldn't. The woman with the Indian boyfriend got a phone call from him and found out he was in jail—he was an asylum seeker detained for not yet having papers. He had been picked up the day before and asked her not to come and visit him this week on her day off.

The woman who talked to me the most told me that in Indonesia now, coming to Hong Kong has a very bad reputation: "It means you're not a good woman at all." She lives on a farm in Indonesia, and her remittance pays for fuel and other necessities back home—but she said that she could never go back to live on the farm and would start her own business instead in the city. She had a (temporary) ring in her nose and bright dyed orange hair—it did seem difficult to imagine that she could go back and live in a conservative rural community again. The other two women showed me pictures of their boyfriends and themselves on their mobile phones, but she wouldn't show me her boyfriend. It turns out that she has two—one Indian and the other Chinese—and is also married back in Indonesia. These women said that the families they worked for knew nothing about their boyfriends. I asked these women what they would do if they got pregnant. They all giggled in embarrassment, but one said, "We all know of a powerful medicine we could take."

## Sex Workers

Some 85 to 90 percent of the people who work or stay in Chungking Mansions are male, and most of those are young and transient. Not surprisingly, Chungking Mansions has been a magnet for sex workers from an array of nationalities. Until recent years, an assumption often voiced within Chungking Mansions was that any young woman wearing fashionable clothes in the building was a sex worker. An attractive female student of mine did research in Chungking Mansions in the late 1990s and was, to her shock, frequently asked "How much?" by men who assumed without question her occupation. More recently, another student of mine wore a skirt to Chungking Mansions one afternoon and overheard Cantonese-speaking storekeepers (who assumed she was Filipina) saying, "Oh the girls are out early today, aren't they?"

Today, however, this assumption is no longer valid. This seems due largely to the increase in mainland Chinese tourists staying in Chungking Mansions guesthouses, many of whom are fashionably dressed young women who may know nothing about Chungking Mansions, having booked their reservations online. In order to protect these young tourists from being accosted, the guards at Chungking Mansions have become stricter, stopping women whom they recognize as sex workers at Chungking Mansions' entrance. This is particularly the case after midnight, when the front entrance to the building is partially shut, leaving only a single door. Sometimes, when I have returned late at night, a sex worker followed close behind me, trying to enter Chungking Mansions, only to be stopped by the guard, asking me, "Is she with you?"

There are indeed sex workers living in flats in Chungking Mansions—the most plausible estimates I've heard are that there are sixty to eighty in the building in all—but generally they do not approach strangers within Chungking Mansions seeking their business, as they often did in years past, except, very discreetly, around money exchange stalls. Instead, there are various stores in Chungking Mansions that as a side business dispatch sex workers to customers who seek them. My encounters with sex workers over the years have several times taken place in guesthouses, when I realized that the women staying in nearby rooms were professionals, but even in these encounters I sometimes have had no idea of this until being later informed. "Didn't you know what was going on next door?" I was asked by a guesthouse-proprietor friend of mine after my own solid night's sleep, to his great amusement.

Outside Chungking Mansions it is a different situation, with sex workers sometimes aggressively seeking customers. In front of Chungking Mansions, on Nathan Road, Chinese sex workers are sometimes found, coming in on temporary permits from mainland China. On the corner of Nathan and Mody Road there are often sex workers from various nationalities: I have spoken with women who claimed to be from Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Mongolia, as well as Tanzania and Kenya. On Mody Road, near the 7-Eleven, there are often half dozen or a dozen Indian sex workers, as noted in chapter 1, resplendent in their bright saris. These women are often from south India, particularly Kerala. Those I have spoken with are often older and claim to have come to Chungking Mansions because they were abandoned by their husbands and have children to feed. They tell their families that they are traveling to Chennai or Mumbai for secretarial work and instead fly to Hong Kong. Hong Kong law is such that unless they overstay, they cannot easily be apprehended by police. Nonetheless, sometimes they are arrested anyway.

These sex workers tend not to take their customers to Chungking Mansions, but instead, more often, to the nearby Mirador Mansions, Chungking Mansions' slightly more expensive, less crowded, and of late somewhat seedier twin, where the surveillance by guards is less intense.<sup>8</sup> The price of these women is generally HK\$100 per hour, extending to HK\$600 per night, but it varies according to the customer, with whites apparently charged far more, since they tend to be rich. I have heard that ordering a sex worker to one's guesthouse room is as simple as "ordering fast food takeout." "Choices," I am told, "range from young blonde Europeans (HK\$1,000) to Chinese office ladies' (HK\$500); the cheapest sex workers are Filipinas and Indonesians (HK\$250 for set services)."<sup>9</sup> For a typical Indian sex worker some half of her earnings for a transaction will go to the guesthouse and 25 percent to the older woman watching over her, so she makes only a little herself. These women are apparently not controlled by gangsters, who are not much to be found in Chungking Mansions today, as discussed in chapter 1. Sex workers, as just noted, do have older women looking after them — when I have interviewed sex workers, these older women phoned every hour, to make

<sup>8</sup>This price spectrum — uncomfortably reflecting the societal rankings of the nineteenth-century anthropologists Morgan and Tylor — mirrors Hong Kong as a whole. Sex workers from different societies are priced in a similar scale in various Hong Kong neighborhoods, although with overall prices higher than around Chungking Mansions.

sure that all is well — but from all I have been able to determine, this is not gang related.

It has been particularly difficult to interview sex workers around Chungking Mansions, for obvious reasons: most are to some extent ashamed of what they do and in any case see me as a potential customer. Even when I formally pay them — as I have in order to conduct interviews, as I have for no other interviews conducted in this research — it is difficult to find out much ("To quote from one interview, "I am not in this business; why do you ask me these questions? ... Yes, I like white men because they pay me more money"). This is the group in and around Chungking Mansions whom I least comprehend, but I do comprehend some fairly well. One East African woman living in Chungking Mansions has worked as a sex worker for two years, working not in Chungking Mansions but in the somewhat more upscale bar district of Wan Chai. She carefully sends money home every month and transports clothing back in her luggage whenever she returns home to renew her visa. Her plan is to finish sex work in three years' time and start her own business back in her own country — and by that time, she should have more than enough money to do so, achieving, with pluck and luck, her aspiring middle-class dreams.

### Heroin Addicts

The idea in the popular press has long been that Chungking Mansions is full of illegal drugs. Perhaps there was indeed widespread use of drugs twenty and thirty years ago, when Chungking Mansions was more of a backpacker haven, but today drug use — aside from alcohol and *paan*, the South Asian betel nut sold in food stalls — is not that frequent. Europeans and Africans occasionally smoke hashish, bought from the South Asian dealers discreetly offering their wares in various nooks of Chungking Mansions and on the streets outside, but drug use is mainly associated with Nepalese. There are some forty Nepalese heroin addicts around the building, many of whom sleep in homemade cardboard structures in the alleyways behind Chungking Mansions and shoot up in the stairwells of the building.

These men are sons of Gurkhas who served in the British Army in Hong Kong in the 1980s and 1990s and thus have Hong Kong residence rights. Many of these men — now often in their thirties or forties — have wives and children in Nepal, from marriages arranged by their parents, which they have forsaken. Apparently the expectations placed upon them when returning to Nepal after experiencing comparative wealth in Hong Kong were too great; they would rather be heroin addicts in Hong Kong, spending the wel-



fare payments they receive from the Hong Kong government not on housing but on heroin.

Other Nepalese and South Asians in Chungking Mansions may look upon them with scorn. In one young Indian man's words, "I work many hours each day and dream of being able to live in Hong Kong. They can live in Hong Kong but they waste it. They are spoiled rich boys!" Another said, "They grew up with a sense of privilege. . . . They won't take a lot of jobs, those that are 'beneath them,' and become drug addicts." Several Christian charity organizations have been involved in attempting to rehabilitate them, but as one social worker in such an organization told me, it is a very discouraging business:

The problem they have is that the family pressure they are under to succeed in Hong Kong is so great that they can't possibly make it. Their families are relatively well off in Nepal, but since they are in Hong Kong, they are expected to do much better here, and they can't. Their social world here is entirely the world of other addicts, and so they can never break out of it except through God. . . . Usually they relapse. All their friends are taking heroin, so that's what they always go back to.

With their Hong Kong ID cards, they can get monthly welfare from the government of HK\$4,000 per month or more and use the money for drink and drugs. One Saturday afternoon in back of Chungking Mansions, I peeked into one person's makeshift cardboard shelter and saw that the book he was reading was Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, a book I had assigned that year to my graduate anthropological theory class at Chinese University.

Merchants in Chungking Mansions often complain about these addicts, especially because some of them engage in pickpocketing and petty thievery in the building. They are tolerated in part because the walkways around Chungking Mansions are public property, unlike Chungking Mansions itself. I mentioned in chapter 1 how Nepalese were driven off the roof of Chungking Mansions in 1997 by the building's security guards, but walkways, unlike the roof, do not belong to Chungking Mansions. Beyond this, there seems to be a live and let live attitude toward these people, most of who are relatively harmless and tend to commit their thievery elsewhere.

For some who live in Chungking Mansions, heroin may represent a difficult temptation to resist. I know one Hong Kong Chinese who is a recovering addict as well as a convert to Islam; he told me that there is an advantage and a disadvantage to being in Chungking Mansions. The advantage for him

was that it brought him Islam and is an Islamic environment that helps his faith. The disadvantage is all the drug addicts and the overpowering temptation to return to heroin. Eventually the heroin won.

Here is the story of one of these men, as told to my research assistant, Ocean Chan.

#### Gurung

I was born in Hong Kong; my father was a Gurkha. I went back to Nepal from Hong Kong to study and began taking drugs like heroin—it was a good way to show off, being tough, rich, and cool. I was in prison in Nepal and in Hong Kong at different times for selling drugs. I like the prison in Nepal compared to the one in Hong Kong and sometimes I even miss that kind of life—I had good friends, good food, and even drugs every day there. But you know, I paid for it with a big price, my love, my family, even my whole life.

I've been married twice. My first wife was Nepalese, an arranged marriage. We had a big feast and wedding party, and then we went to my house and land, a good life in Nepal. But it didn't work out. I got bored and returned to drugs and was sent to jail for twenty-three months. My wife divorced me, a big disgrace for my family. I was sent by my parents to a rehab center, quit drugs, and found a job as a tourist guide because I spoke good English.

I could quit because I was in love with a beautiful girl twelve years younger than me. We got married, and my parents decided to send us back to Hong Kong to start a new life. I had a Hong Kong ID card, but I eventually realized that my wife married me only because she wanted to find a way out of Nepal. In Hong Kong I found a gardening job I liked—everything was setting down for me to start a new life. But then my wife asked me for a divorce. She had met a British guy and decided to go to England with him. I was just too naive to think a girl would love a guy who used to be a drug addict. Oh man, it hurts so much. I started to take drugs right away with my friends. Maybe I still loved her; maybe that was an excuse, but the drug really eased my pain. Maybe it was my karma; I must have done something wrong in a past life. . . . My parents asked me to go back to Nepal to start over again. But most of my friends were in Hong Kong. In the back alley here we are all from Nepal. It's tough to live here, especially when it's raining and water keeps dripping down, but I can live here for free.

I took up drugs again, but I got weak and lost my job. Eventually I found another job as a guard at a night club, but I needed more money. I began to steal electrical supplies from construction sites—see, I have a scar on my

foot from a dog bite. I started to sell hashish, marijuana, and cocaine to European and African customers. I've been sent to a rehab center twice, but as soon as I get out, I return to Chungking Mansions. There's no choice for me anymore; I have nowhere to go, and I can't work anymore after taking drugs for so many years.

I feel happy in Chungking Mansions; I have shelter and also can get free meals [from a Christian NGO], and I can talk to people in my own language. I feel at home. I tell young people to quit, because they still have a chance to start over, but not me. You know, I'm quite satisfied with my life now. I once went to the church because the missionaries who feed us for free had been asking us to go. The minister started to talk about quality of life: being simple and of course loving God. Our life is quite simple; we just sleep, get high, share hash, and sleep. I think I love God too. Yes, we are living a simple life; whenever we take drugs, we forget about pain, we feel contented. These are similar feelings of love, aren't they?

There's another reason I like Chungking Mansions: I can make friends with people from different countries. You know, there's no nationality when we smoke hash together. I just made a European friend a few days ago, a tourist. The guy came from Holland; it's legal to smoke hash in his country. I took him to the park to hang out and smoke hash together. It was nice.

### Tourists

In the midst of all this—the bustle of entrepreneurs seeking deals, the harangues of routs seeking customers, the enticements of sex workers, and the whispered offerings of hashish sellers—is one more group, the tourists, one of the largest in Chungking Mansions. They come primarily because it is so cheap. Chungking Mansions remains a backpacker haven, although less so than thirty years ago, as opposed, for example, to the Holiday Inn immediately next door, whose rooms are ten to twenty times more expensive. They also come for the adventurousness of the place, especially Japanese and Europeans, who may have long known about Chungking Mansions from their earlier backpacking days and from such book series as the *Lone Planet* guides, in English, and *Chikyū no arukikata* [‘how to walk the world’], in Japanese.

Today, the Internet directs many prospective tourists to Chungking Mansions (perhaps the largest website on Chungking Mansions is in Japanese, chock full of good advice for Japanese visitors, although there are comparatively few Japanese visitors staying in Chungking Mansions these days).<sup>9</sup>

These tourists include both those who seek out the cheapest rooms in Hong Kong and those who seek adventure of a particular kind (as one British man in his thirties told me, “The websites all warned me that I should never stay in Chungking Mansions, so I knew that I had to come here”). On the other hand, South Asians living in China and elsewhere come to Chungking Mansions for a taste of home—the television, the restaurants, and the video and magazine stalls offer them the sense of being back in India or Pakistan, as nowhere else in East Asia does.

Tourists are a less obvious part of Chungking Mansions than the groups we have already discussed, simply in that unlike workers or entrepreneurs, most do not remain in the building but depart in the morning and return at night. Nonetheless they play a pivotal role in occupying the majority of guesthouse beds on some nights, particularly during mainland holidays such as May Day and National Day (October 1). The number of tourists has been steadily increasing in the last several years, due to increasing numbers of tourists booking rooms on the Internet. I have given Argentines advice as to where to meet Hong Kong girls, commiserated with Americans over the follies of George W. Bush, discussed with Egyptian tourists the nature of Islam, talked with Bhuranes about their society's gross national happiness,<sup>10</sup> considered with Japanese whether they should leave their country and move overseas, talked with Englishmen about the glories and woes of their national rugby team, and commiserated with tourists from the Maldiv Islands as to their worries over whether global warming would submerge their country forever. Of the 129 different nationalities I have found in guesthouse logs in Chungking Mansions, the majority are tourists, arriving from everywhere on the planet.

Those tourists who choose their lodgings through the Internet sometimes experience a rude shock. One mainland Chinese tourist said to me in Cantonese, “I didn't know there would be so many Africans here. It's horrible!” She had found her guesthouse on the Internet and had been attracted by its low prices, but the Internet page made no mention of the particular building her lodgings were in, which to her was beyond belief in its ethnic diversity and “otherness.” Another mainland Chinese tourist said plaintively to me, “I want to eat Chinese food, but there are no Chinese restaurants here. Why not? Isn't Hong Kong part of China?” To which I answered that Hong Kong is part of China, but Chungking Mansions is not part of Hong Kong

<sup>9</sup>There is in fact one Chinese restaurant on the first floor of Chungking Mansions.

but rather an island of the developing world in Hong Kong's heart. Why else would its prices be so cheap? She looked puzzled and asked me if there were any "disco bars" near Chungking Mansions to which she might go.

This bewilderment is by no means confined to mainland Chinese. I met a young Colombian woman who approached me at the door of the guesthouse where we were both staying, as if she were a little afraid to venture outside, to ask, "Is this place always like this?" I told her that it was, but that it was also perfectly safe to wander through; she seemed less than fully convinced. This fear seems partly gender specific: these young women may be stared at by many in the overwhelmingly male population of the building in a way that makes them uncomfortable. As one American woman fumed to me, "I've never been eyed like that in my whole life!"—although beyond the overly direct male gaze, young women are generally safe from male predation. I spoke with a couple of male Malaysian tourists, coming to Hong Kong for several days, shocked by what they beheld after expecting only a nondescript cheap hotel. I asked one of them what he would say about Chungking Mansions once he returned to Malaysia, and he said, "It's good, but I'd never, ever bring my girlfriend here. . . . For Muslim women, this would be a terrible place to be!"

Among the shell-shocked tourists I have met, mainland Chinese and Americans stand out. However, of late, more sophisticated Chinese tourists have been coming, seeking adventure like some of their European, American, and Japanese counterparts. A couple from Shanghai with whom I spoke was disappointed that they saw no "rats falling from the ceiling," as their guide-book had promised them. I explained that I myself have never beheld a rat inside Chungking Mansions (although I've seen a number in the alleys outside the building) and that unless they got very lucky, they might never see such a sight.

Let me describe a few of the more memorable tourists I've met. One Japanese man, utterly enthralled by what he called the "ethnic chaos" of Chungking Mansions, worked for a well-known brokerage in Tokyo and was in Hong Kong partly for vacation and partly for investment. In Japan, if one invests in hedge funds, the government charges 20 percent in taxes, but not in Hong Kong, he said, where there is no tax at all on these investments. He comes to Hong Kong early Friday afternoon and goes to a large Hong Kong bank and invests his money; then he spends two days immersed in the world of Chungking Mansions. "It costs me 60,000 yen to fly from Tokyo to Hong Kong and back, so if I have a million yen to invest, it's well worth doing this. Plus I get to spend my weekend in this amazing place."

He, just like the Indian temporary workers described earlier although on a

far larger financial scale, is a beneficiary of Hong Kong's laissez-faire governmental system and free economy. He is by no means the only entrepreneur tourist I have met. I know of Indonesians who visit Hong Kong for pleasure but take back made-in-China Islamic prayer shawls to finance their trip, just as I know Indian and Latin American tourists who do the same with electronic goods such as mobile phones. Twenty China-made iPhones surreptitiously carried home in one's luggage and sold to friends and acquaintances can make one's trip a very profitable journey.

There are also spiritual tourists. I have met several Europeans immediately after they had attended a ten-day Vipassana retreat in the country area of northern Hong Kong, which required them to be silent for ten days. The final day of the course extolled the spirituality of India, perhaps (along with their limited finances) leading these people to wind up in Chungking Mansions after the course ended. One concluded our conversation by folding his palms together and uttering *namaste*, a South Asian term quite out of place in the Islamic atmosphere of Chungking Mansions. Another spoke of the spiritual benefits of his silence and simply smiled in wonder at all he saw in Chungking Mansions—its bustle seeming to overwhelm him after so many days of silent contemplation.

There are also dreamers, who have wound up at Chungking Mansions because it is one of the cheapest places in the developed world in which to live, but who imagine a success that has yet eluded them. An elderly Algerian-Canadian writer sends me unreadable chapters of his spy novel to which I don't know how to respond, e-mails me intricate questions of English grammar, and occasionally borrows a few hundred Hong Kong dollars from me, sometimes to pay it back. He dreams of making millions from his spy novel; I can only tell him that because I don't read spy novels, I just don't know. Meanwhile, with his Hong Kong residence permission easily renewable every ninety days on his Canadian passport, he can make Hong Kong his home.

A New Zealander apparently in his sixties told me that he has been in Hong Kong a month and will stay a few weeks more. A good friend of his, he claimed, was the Philippine ambassador to China and in several days someone from the US Federal Reserve was coming to talk to him about how to raise funds—he is a financier, he said, staying, just for fun, in Chungking Mansions. He was ashamed of where his life has brought him, it seems, judging from his transparently tall tales.

A middle-aged Turkish man, looking like a Western hippie from the 1960s, described to me his travels across Asia and his plan of writing a book about Islam, while the staff of the food stall we were sitting in scoffed in Urdu, "Why is the professor talking to an idiot?" He was not an idiot but



a dreamer, as are so many in Chungking Mansions. Young people, like the scuffling entrepreneurs or temporary workers or asylum seekers, can hold these dreams more plausibly. Who, at present, can altogether dismiss their dreams? But older people have a harder time, since their dreams appear increasingly elusive. This is all the more true at Chungking Mansions, which, because it is so cheap, may be the last refuge for not a few international dreamers. They stay there for their remaining days because their remaining dollars will go farthest there.

Dreamers and last-chancers are of course not only tourists. I have sipped whiskey behind Chungking Mansions with a Tanzanian who told me that he had been fired from several jobs in Dar es Salaam for drunkenness. His affluent family, as a last resort, sent him to Hong Kong to see if he could succeed in trade despite his addiction. And I have met an ethnic Indian restaurant owner from Singapore, who had fled thinking that he had killed a fellow Indian in a brawl. He came to Hong Kong with much cash on hand and a dream of fleeing to Canada, but also a murder charge potentially hanging over his head. Both these men I met only once. They too and their ilk are part of Chungking Mansions' cavalcade.

### How These Different Groups Interact

We have briefly examined all of the different groups in Chungking Mansions. A key to understanding Chungking Mansions is to understand how these different groups, of different pursuits and ethnicities, interact.

Much of the occupational interaction is a matter of the roles people play. The restaurant tout flashes menus and makes his pitch to bring in customers. The mobile phone store salesman discusses the merits of different phones. The guesthouse proprietor shows rooms and bargains over prices. As we've seen, the majority of entrepreneurs and businesspeople coming to Chungking Mansions are African; the majority of tourists are mainland Chinese and European, along with Japanese and Australians and people from all over the world; and, with a number of exceptions, the shopkeepers and guesthouse and restaurant managers are either South Asian or Chinese, with a smattering of Filipinos. Thus, interactions between these different groups frequenting Chungking Mansions are almost inevitably a matter of interethnic interaction.

It is not impossible for a member of a given ethnic, linguistic, or national group to deal only with members of his or her own group. There are a few Chinese proprietors in their isolated shops dealing largely only with Chinese customers, some African traders who deal primarily only with their fel-



low countrymen, and some South Asian temporary workers who wash pots or pack phones or clean rooms who may lead their daily lives largely cut off from interethnic interaction. There are many tourists who, apart from a few words with the clerk in the guesthouse they stay in, may never be involved in Chungking Mansions' ethnic swirl. But these, other than perhaps the tourists, are the exceptions: interactions between different occupational and ethnic groups are more typical.

Much interethnic interaction is purely practical, consisting, for example, of Africans in the South Asian ground-floor food stalls attempting to order food that suits their palates. As noted in chapter 1, there are only a few African restaurants in Chungking Mansions. Thus, many Africans find themselves having to eat South Asian food, which they may find unpalatable unless they can make it clear that they desire no spiciness in their food. Many times I have seen Africans first question the proprietor whether or not a South Asian food stall really is *halal*, as its sign claims, and then ask which of all dishes proffered, they can actually eat. A food stall on the ground or first floor of Chungking Mansions, with nine chairs and four tables, may have patrons of five different nationalities seated by one another, not because they know each other, but because there is no room and because people have

to eat. Conversations sometimes start, leading to friends being made or arguments breaking out.

Beyond this is the negotiation between South Asian/Chinese proprietors and African wholesale customers on the ground and first floors. I will describe these complex negotiations at length in chapter 3, but suffice it to say that fortunes may be made or lost on the basis of these negotiations. If an African does not appear to have much knowledge about mobile phones, he will sometimes be cheated; a Pakistani proprietor cackled to me, "That guy is so stupid! I sold him some fourteen-day phones" as if they were new and made HK\$4,000 just like that!" The calculating African phone buyer will carefully plan how to show himself as knowledgeable and sophisticated before the Pakistani or Indian or Chinese phone dealer, so that he can get the best possible deal, knowing when to wheedle, when to joke, when to get angry, and when to compromise, as well as when, precisely, to insist on "Lowest! Lowest!"—the absolute lowest possible price the dealer can offer. The savvy African entrepreneur knows exactly the rules of self-presentation before the foreign phone dealer he is faced with—he'd better know these rules if he wants to avoid losing his money.<sup>10</sup>

These interactions are generally in English, the lingua franca of Chungking Mansions. Language usage is fascinatingly nested in Chungking Mansions, with different speakers finding the closest and most intimate language in which they can speak. Speakers of African ethnic languages delight when they find one another, as I have seen, for example, with two speakers of Hausa or Luo. They speak a language that their fellow Africans cannot understand, just as speakers of Punjabi and Bengali communicate while to some extent ignoring their fellow South Asians. At a more generalized level, speakers of Hindi-Urdu can communicate with their fellows from across the South Asian subcontinent, as speakers of Swahili or of French can communicate with some of their fellow East or West Africans. At a general level above this is English. Those Africans who don't speak English tend to congregate not at Chungking Mansions, but in Guangzhou's Tianxiu Building, among other areas, where French as well as Mandarin prevail.

Occasionally other common languages emerge in Chungking Mansions. I had dinner one night in a food stall at which a Bangladeshi, a Cameroonian, and I all wound up conversing in Japanese. The Bangladeshi lives in Japan and goes to university there, and the Cameroonian sitting next to us,

<sup>10</sup>Fourteen-day phones" are warehoused European models returned by their original buyers, typically selling for 50 to 60 percent of the price of new phones.

who had spent several years in Japan, joined in. We drew quite a crowd, the Bangladeshi, Cameroonian, and American animatedly conversing in a language none of our onlookers could make any sense of. I also once spoke with two businesspeople, one from Somalia, the other from Iraq, who, once they found out they both had lived in Sweden for the past ten years, began conversing with one another in Swedish, ignoring me.

I have also seen Japanese tourists communicating with Chinese merchants and guesthouse proprietors by writing in the Chinese characters that they share. And there are the various business proprietors, such as the souvenir stand operator described above, who operate in multiple languages. French is especially useful for several Chinese and Pakistani proprietors I know who are able to negotiate with West and Central African customers in their own language. Nonetheless, despite the use of these occasional alternative languages, English is the common language of Chungking Mansions—coupled with price negotiations taking place through the ubiquitous calculator.

I have seen or heard of, over the years, some remarkable interethnic interactions in Chungking Mansions. A West African prospective phone buyer once fled wide-eyed and in terror when a Pakistani phone dealer introduced himself as "Hussein"; he apparently mistook the dealer for the former Iraqi dictator or his ghost. 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."

I have seen a dozen Africans from different countries transfixed before a televised Manchester United soccer match, bursting into delirium before the stoic indifference of the Indian shopkeeper when an African scored the winning goal. I have seen a Hong Kong Chinese phone dealer bullied by Nepalese heroin addicts into giving them "beer money": they approached him with smiles but also with a degree of menace, whether heroin fueled or feigned, knowing that he was an easy mark. He is an alcoholic and was quite drunk by this late in the evening, but not so drunk as to have lost his instinct for self-preservation. He gave them HK\$10 each and later told me, "They are my friends, so of course I give them money."

One way in which ethnic relations can readily be apprehended is in employment patterns. Often managers hire primarily people of their own ethnicity or nationality: a Nepalese guesthouse owner I know, for example, hires only Nepalese. As his employee told me, "My boss used to hire Indians, but the Indians cheated him." I asked, "Don't Nepalis ever cheat your boss?" "Oh no, we would never do that!" he exclaimed, with what seemed to be horror.

Other managers hire across national bounds: Indians are commonly hired by Pakistanis and vice versa, a simple matter since Hindi and Urdu are virtually the same spoken language, even though members of the two societies often disdain each other. Still other managers hire on the basis of religion. An African restaurant proprietor I know makes a point of hiring Indian Muslims as his staff, since they and he share their Islamic faith, the most important basis of commonality, he maintained. Often hiring is dictated less by ethnicity than by practical circumstance: as earlier noted, a number of South Asian asylum seekers are employed in stalls on the ground and first floors, since South Asians are less likely to be stopped by police and asked for ID. Chinese-run guesthouses, on the other hand, may hire African asylum seekers to work for them at low wages, simply because the police can't easily catch them, and they may bring in African customers. This has nothing to do with interethnic sympathy and everything to do with business practicality.

Long-term interethnic interactions take place typically between merchant and customer or between managers of neighboring or nearby stalls. Many of the Pakistani phone dealers, for example, have several dozen African clients whom they may see six or more times a year, selling them hundreds of phones at a time. These clients and dealers rarely know each other beyond business dealings, but they have developed a relation of trust, essential for their business—although as we saw in Fahad Ali's account, this does not rule out the possibility of being cheated.

As for the relation of neighboring stalls, a Chinese electronics stall owner may be next to an Indian grocery or a Pakistani phone dealer, and interaction is inevitable. When these stalls are in direct competition, serious tension may develop, but mutual interrelations may develop as well. I know of one South Asian wholesale clothing merchant who goes to the nearby Kowloon Mosque five times a day to pray—whenever he goes, he does not shut his store but asks the Chinese wholesale clothing merchant across the corridor to keep an eye out on his shop, and she obligingly does so. He repays in kind when she takes leave of her shop. On the other hand, I know of a longstanding simmering quarrel between an Indian Sikh phone dealer and his Pakistani Muslim rival in a stall just eight feet away that may be due more to business competition than to ethnic rivalry, but that will never overcome its undertones of ethnic disdain: "You worship a God with eight arms!" the Muslim is reported to have (inaccurately) sneered.

Sometimes, interethnic interactions can lead to love. I asked an asylum seeker from West Africa married to a Hong Kong Chinese woman how he met her. He told me that in Africa he had become a believer in the Japanese religion Sōka Gakkai. In Hong Kong, he went to a Sōka Gakkai temple, met

a fellow believer, and married her—a Japanese religion, scorned by many in Japan, enabling a West African to capture the holy grail of asylum seekers, marrying a local Hong Konger. I have heard many variations of this kind of story. In what passes for a lobby in a small Chungking Mansions guesthouse, I met a young woman from Japan and her prospective husband from Kenya. Her family was waiting at the expensive Peninsula Hotel to meet him (he could not obtain a visa to enter Japan), and the couple was nervously pacing back and forth before their agreed-upon meeting time. If the family approved, they would marry. (They did, and the couple subsequently married; a year later, she left him and returned to Japan.)

Interethnic interactions span the life course. My research assistant Maggie Lin saw an African woman enter a clothing store with her seven-month-old daughter in tow and leave her daughter with the Hong Kong Chinese proprietor for a few minutes. An array of nearby shopkeepers stopped by to play with her and cuddle her—they all knew her by name. The Chinese proprietor, knowing that the girl's mother had spent all of her money shipping goods back to Africa, prepared a plastic bag full of clothes for the little girl as a gift, since the weather was turning cold. My research assistant Jose Rojas observed two South Asian children playing in the back walkways surrounding Chungking Mansions, one with a scooter and the other one with a little bicycle. An African man, drinking at the whiskey stand, saw the scooter left unattended and as a joke hid it. The little boy looked puzzled, and the African man came from behind, lifted the child up in his arms, and took him to his scooter. They had never met before and did not exchange a word but laughed with each other for a long time before the children went back and continued their play.

More tragically, I myself went to the hospital with Ghanaian friends to visit a gravely ill Indonesian domestic helper in her twenties. The Ghanaians expressed puzzlement at what was wrong with her—she was paralyzed on one side of her body and blind—but since her Ghanaian boyfriend in Chungking Mansions had died of AIDS, the diagnosis seemed clear enough, although the Hong Kong Chinese doctor wouldn't confirm it when I tried to worm the information out of him. They visited her every day for several weeks until, medically stabilized, she was sent back to Indonesia to die. They did this partly because they knew her as an old friend ("She used to be so beautiful!") and partly from guilt: she had AIDS and a Ghanaian had infected her; they eventually could not help but realize.

These examples all depict warm human feeling across ethnic bounds. However, more often interethnic interactions may lead to disdain. We have seen how both Johnny Singh and Fahad Ali bristle at the racism they occa-



sionally encounter from Hong Kong Chinese. Indeed, I know several Hong Kong Chinese shopkeepers in Chungking Mansions whose largely unwitting racial prejudice makes me cringe. In a broader sense, most people in Chungking Mansions engage in ethnic stereotyping. Africans, South Asians tell me, are “of low intelligence” and “naïve.” South Asians, Africans tell me, “only scheme and think about business.” Pakistanis, Indians say, “always want to fight,” while Nigerians, East Africans say, are never to be trusted: “If you ever find that a Nigerian is staying in the room next to yours, change rooms. Otherwise the Nigerian will use witchcraft on you.”

Stereotypes based on business experience might perhaps be slightly more accurate. A Pakistani phone dealer said, “People from Mali are easy to cheat. But Nigerians — they are really clever. You’ll lose money on them.” The Chinese wife of a business owner said, “Americans, Canadians, and Europeans are polite, but not Indians and Africans!” A Hong Kong proprietor of a store said to me, “I don’t like dealing with Africans because they are so aggressive and demanding, though some are cheerful. I don’t like Indians because they want to bargain down my price. I like Europeans and Japanese because they will pay the price I ask for.” A West African trader with long experience in Chungking Mansions said, “Hong Kong people don’t like Africans. I don’t know what Hong Kong people are thinking. Maybe it’s always about money. Africans help each other, but we don’t talk much to Indians. They only think about business. Indian people are scared of black people. . . . I’m Christian. We are scared of Muslims because they are so quick to fight. Their thinking is very strict.”

Stereotypes are sometimes punctured. An African Muslim asylum seeker told me that a Pakistani Muslim had scolded him at the mosque: “You don’t know anything about Islam! You go to the mosque just for the free meal!” The African Muslim then recited various Qur’anic verses to the Pakistani: he clearly knew more about Islam than the Pakistani did, to the latter’s consternation. I had dinner with four Africans at an upper-floor Indian restaurant in Chungking Mansions, and when the owner gave out cards for his restaurant, they were given to me but not to the Africans, who very quickly and vociferously complained, until they too received cards — the owner will presumably never again make this mistake.

A mainland Chinese guesthouse keeper surprised me and, it seemed, herself when she said, “My favorite guests are West African Muslims. They’re so

\*During the month of Ramadan, the Kowloon Mosque, like many mosques, provides a free meal at its sundown service for those who are ending their daytime fast.



honest — they’ll never cheat you — and so nice! And Japanese too. But I really dislike some Chinese, so pushy!” Another mainland Chinese guesthouse owner spoke of how African traders keep the room clean but mainland Chinese with children were the worst in her experience, since they spoiled their children and let them do what they liked. Stereotypes, although widely held, do give way before experience in at least some cases.

Chungking Mansions’ interpersonal relations, if not always overtly friendly, are generally peaceful. People from more or less warring societies the world over come to Chungking Mansions (India versus Pakistan particularly come to mind) with competing creeds (Muslims and Christians are both richly represented in Chungking Mansions, as are Hindus and Sikhs). But they do not fight with each other, as they might in their home countries — or at least if they do occasionally quarrel, the quarrels are soon enough set aside in Chungking Mansions’ universal striving to make money. As a Pakistani said to me *vis-à-vis* Indians, “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.”

Chungking Mansions is no utopia, and fights do break out from time to time — between Sikhs and Muslims, between Muslims and Christians, between Pakistanis and Africans, between Pakistanis and Indians, and be-

tween Nigerians and East Africans, among other groups—but these fights are comparatively infrequent. All in all, compared to many of the societies from which its traders and workers come, Chungking Mansions is remarkably peaceful. The general attitude of Chungking Mansions is, as shown in the quotation above, that the pursuit of profit makes ethnic and religious discord no more than an unwelcome distraction.<sup>11</sup> One story I have occasionally heard in Chungking Mansions is of how an Indian and an African got in a fight on the way up the elevator, but by the time they came back down, they had their arms around one another as newfound friends. This may or may not have happened, but it seems at least plausible.

Just as interethnic tension is comparatively muted in Chungking Mansions, so too is class tension, the tension between rich and poor. The gap between the rich and the poor—between owners and temporary workers, between the large entrepreneurs and the small traders—is enormous in Chungking Mansions, but most view it as a fact of life rather than an injustice. One young illegal worker bitterly complained to me about his boss, the restaurant owner: "I make just HK\$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." But his dream, he told me, was to go into business and own a restaurant, just like his boss, exploiting future versions of his young self.

An asylum seeker I know illegally works for his relative in a phone stall, earning HK\$2,300 a month in a stall that nets HK\$100,000 a month, almost all going to his relative. His dream is to break free of this relative and cut his own deals, becoming a business magnate himself. "I know an asylum seeker who made HK\$100,000 last month on a big phone sale," he told me. "That's what I want to do!"

The system itself, in all its inequalities, is thus not questioned, but only one's place in the system *vis-à-vis* certain others. Why is this? One reason is that those who have come to Chungking Mansions, even if they have been persecuted and have fled in the case of asylum seekers, nonetheless have enough money to fly to Hong Kong, something that the vast majority of their compatriots cannot ever do. This reveals that they are among the elite of their home societies. Chungking Mansions is basically a "club of the third-world successful," including even those at its lowest stations, despite the downtrodden status they may suffer in Hong Kong.

The poor in Chungking Mansions are highly unlikely to become rich, the illegal workers will probably never gain Hong Kong residency or enough capital to become entrepreneurs, and the asylum seekers will probably be rejected in their claims, as are well over 90 percent of asylum seekers in Hong

Kong. But, again, the poor and the rich alike buy into the basic assumptions of Chungking Mansions, those of capitalism. In this sense, Chungking Mansions is really no different from anywhere else in Hong Kong or in China or throughout most of the capitalist world today—it features the same vast gaps of rich and poor as elsewhere. It differs only in that it is more visible: instead of the exploitation of faceless corporations, Chungking Mansions enables exploitation by individual entrepreneurs whose faces those they exploit know very well. But the exploited seek, in general, not to rebel against their oppressors but to emulate them.

This, then, is the panorama of people in Chungking Mansions in their interactions. I examined in the first two chapters of this book Chungking Mansions as a place and the different groups of people within the building. In the following two chapters, I consider, in greater depth the goods that pass through Chungking Mansions and the webs of laws that constrain Chungking Mansions before turning, in this book's last chapter, to the larger meanings of the building and the people within it.

## goods

**The Passage of Goods in Chungking Mansions**

Chungking Mansions would not exist as a center of low-end globalization were it not for the passage of goods through its corridors; it functions today to enable the trading and transferring of goods from China to the developing world of Africa and South Asia and elsewhere. How do these goods circulate? Who are the merchants and traders who sell and buy these goods, and how do they do business?

The traders in Chungking Mansions embody low-end globalization, as we discussed in chapter 1, globalization that takes place not through the dealings of large corporations, but rather through individuals dealing with one another largely on the basis of trust and working with a high degree of risk, often carrying their goods themselves across the globe. This form of business migration is neither new nor unprecedented—consider, for example, the “informal commercial importers” in Haiti and elsewhere in the Caribbean and the street entrepreneurs in Ciudad del Este in Paraguay, as well as the Congolese traders in Paris and African street vendors in New York.<sup>1</sup> But what may be unprecedented is the sheer scale of their activity in such a concentrated place.





It is impossible to know for certain the scale of trade in Chungking Mansions. My rough estimate is that some 20 percent of the mobile phones recently in use in sub-Saharan Africa have been sold in Chungking Mansions, judging from sales in 2007 and 2008. Phone stalls sold an average of 15,000 to 20,000 phones a month, I am told, averaging out the wide variations from month to month over the year, with established phone stalls selling 20,000 to 30,000 a month and smaller stalls selling 5,000 to 10,000 per month. These are whispered figures given to me by store employees—sales figures are secret information, given the intense competition between phone stalls in Chungking Mansions—but seem reasonable. There were approximately ninety phone stores in Chungking Mansions in 2007 to 2008. If we assume 18,000 to be an average sales figure, then 1,620,000 phones were sold per month, or 19.4 million phone sales per year, in Chungking Mansions. There were 126 million mobile phone subscriptions in sub-Saharan Africa in 2007, with many individuals having multiple subscriptions.<sup>2</sup> This makes the assumption of 20 percent seem broadly plausible.

Phone traders have told me that, if anything, this percentage is too low. Beyond this, there is a stream of phones that transit through Chungking Mansions, on the path from south China to Africa and elsewhere, and are

stored in warehouses in and around Chungking Mansions while traders organize transport. If we include these phones as well, then the number of phones bound for sub-Saharan Africa that pass through Chungking Mansions would be much higher. All in all, the phone trade through Chungking Mansions is a significant chunk of the global economy of mobile phones in the developing world.\*

For other goods, such as clothing and watches, the percentage of goods passing directly through Chungking Mansions is no doubt smaller, although by no means insignificant. However, sales information for clothing, watches, and electronic goods seems to be even harder to acquire than that for mobile phones. Given the variety of sources for these goods, including small south China factories with highly hidden records, there is simply no way this information can be known. Chungking Mansions is a significant node in the developing world economy, but exactly how much of a node is anyone's guess.

Throughout the world, the passage of goods takes place to an extraordinary degree beyond governmental control; less than five percent of the goods passing through the world's ports are ever inspected.<sup>3</sup> In the developing world, this lack of government control over the passage of goods happens because governments lack the capability to fully control the economy. The state seeks to exert control but cannot—its reach exceeds its grasp, because its citizens can easily evade it. In Hong Kong, this happens in part not simply because the state can't control it, but because it won't.

Hong Kong has consistently been rated as the world's freest economy, the economy most unbound by the strictures of state bureaucracy, by the Heritage Foundation and the *Wall Street Journal*.<sup>4</sup> The freedom of the Hong Kong economy is to some extent mythical: property developers and other magnates in fact have inordinate influence on government policy.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, economic freedom has long been the dominant ideology of Hong Kong.<sup>6</sup> While the state does in part control the economy in many areas—for example, in its regulation of street hawkers<sup>7</sup> as well as its clampdown on large-scale production of copy goods—it is fair to say that by and large the

\*Because of the dire state of landlines in most of sub-Saharan Africa, phone cards don't tend to be used with landlines but with mobile phones instead. Many Africans still go to local phone stalls when they need to use the telephone, but these places' high rates makes owning a mobile phone far more economical in the long run, which is one reason why mobile phones are so keenly desired in Africa. In 2009, due to the global economic downturn, the figure I've given for monthly sales in Chungking Mansions phone stalls is substantially lower. I have heard that in late 2009 the average phone stall sold under 10,000 phones per month.

Hong Kong government is the embodiment of *laissez-faire* and of neoliberalism, the doctrine that the government should get out of the way and let the market have free rein.

To use an earlier era's parlance, Hong Kong is a first-world island between two third-world economic blocks: China, which is rapidly developing but still lacks full rule of law in its economic activities, and Africa. Chungking Mansions, in turn, embodies a third-world informal economy that is made possible by the first-world neoliberalism of the society in which it is located.

### Selling Goods

In chapter 1, I discussed how businesses such as guesthouses and restaurants are run in Chungking Mansions; let me in this section specifically consider businesses selling goods. The shops in Chungking Mansions sell many different kinds of goods, and each has its own particular way of doing business. The souvenir shop on the ground floor must sell goods every few minutes or hours, as is also true for retail electronics shops and luggage shops—they depend on a steady flow of customers. The wholesale phone and clothing stores, on the other hand, depend on far fewer customers—a dozen customers each buying a few hundred suits or phones each week may be more than enough to pay the rent and make a profit—but if those customers don't show up for a few weeks, it may mean ruin. As one wholesale phone-stall proprietor told me, "I might get 25 or 30 customers a day coming in to ask about prices and models, but if I can make just one sale a day, I'll do well." I focus here on stores selling goods wholesale, because this is Chungking Mansions' major significance as a node of developing-world trade.

Why do these proprietors set up stores in Chungking Mansions? For some, particularly South Asians, as discussed in chapter 2, Chungking Mansions may seem to be one of the few places in Hong Kong where they can comfortably live and work. A Pakistani with Hong Kong residence rights can set up a phone stall on the first floor of Chungking Mansions and feel at home with his fellow Pakistanis, who are competitors but also may be friends or acquaintances, as he could not feel at home in any other business environment in Hong Kong. Pakistanis, partly for this reason, overwhelmingly dominate the trade in mobile phones, managing, as of 2008, some 80 percent of phone stalls in Chungking Mansions—although this percentage has been declining somewhat in subsequent years, with the influx of mainland Chinese.

Others wind up in Chungking Mansions because it makes sense given

their business interests. Some mainland clothing shop proprietors own clothing factories in China, while others have familial links to mainland factories making the kind of low-end clothing that African buyers prefer: relatively cheap products that are not popular in the Euro-American market. These merchants came to Chungking Mansions because of the higher degree of status and trust that buyers may give to shops in Hong Kong, as opposed to those on the mainland, and the stream of developing-world potential customers passing through the building, as nowhere else in Hong Kong.

Still others wind up in Chungking Mansions simply because rents are cheap, as compared to elsewhere in Hong Kong. In some cases, these businesses have little to do with the dominant business current of Chungking Mansions. I interviewed an opal dealer whose office is in the upper floors of Chungking Mansions. He receives opals from Australia, which are then sent to Shenzhen, China, where they are ground and placed in various settings. They are then sent back to Hong Kong, to his office, and shipped to Australia to be bought by tourists. These tourists, most typically mainland Chinese, come to Australia and want to buy finished opals, since opals are Australian. However, since Australian labor costs are high and Chinese labor costs are low, these tourists, ironically, buy Chinese-processed opals in Australia, courtesy of this man's business (and the businesses of many others like him, at least a few of which are also in Chungking Mansions). He has been in Chungking Mansions twenty-four years in all; his business could be located anywhere in Hong Kong, except for his consideration of rental prices. His Australian wholesale buyers may have no idea what Chungking Mansions represents, and he sends an employee to their nearby fancy hotels to guide them through the throngs to his Chungking Mansions office.

Stores selling different types of wholesale goods have different business models. There are some fifteen watch stores selling distinctly low-end watches, often running as little as one US dollar each when bought wholesale. There are many watch sellers outside Chungking Mansions murmuring "Copy watch?" particularly to white passersby, who are seen as the most likely customers—copies of Rolexes, for example, at a small fraction of the price of an original, for sale at HK\$400 to HK\$800. But these sellers are not linked to Chungking Mansions, but instead to relatively secluded shops in nearby buildings; in Chungking Mansions, the bulk of business is in low-end wholesale watches, sold by the hundreds or thousands.

There are also some thirty clothing stores. As noted above, many of these stores have close links to mainland factories. This is also often true for watches and mobile phones, but seems particularly true for clothing. For clothing dealers, those who deal in brand-name goods tend to sell factory



rejects, with bad stitching or other defects, or warehoused clothes of earlier seasons, or else samples, leftovers, or items that didn't pass other countries' importing regulations. Sometimes the path of these goods is extraordinary. An item of clothing, for example, may begin with an order placed by a large American or British department store. The fabric and material come from countries such as Bangladesh and the item is manufactured in China or Malaysia. The finished product is shipped to the United States or Great Britain where it is then rejected or remaindered only to be sold back to Hong Kong where it is then bought by African traders.

The biggest problem that Hong Kong clothing sellers have is their competition over the border in south China. Unlike electronics and phones, the general perception in Chungking Mansions is that clothing made on the mainland can be trusted, as long as the buyer looks closely at how the goods are packed. Competition also comes from the working-class Hong Kong neighborhood of Sham Shui Po, some two miles north of Chungking Mansions, an area specializing in wholesale goods, where many clothes dealers with warehouses offer clothes specifically suited for the African market. Many of these are outlets for Chinese factories just over the border. The deals there are often better than those that can be obtained at Chungking Mansions, African entrepreneurs tell me—they stay in Chungking Mansions, but no longer buy much there. Clothing merchants at Chungking

Mansions whom I know are sometimes filled with gloom over the difficulty of making money in such a difficult environment.

The most common stores in Chungking Mansions are mobile phone stores, with some hundred in all at present, and these are also the most complicated in terms of the different types of merchandise they sell. Shops often have their particular specialties: China-made branded phones such as G-Tide or Orion; China-made no-brand phones; China-made knock-off phones such as "Sory-Ericsson"; China-made copies of European, Korean, or American brands exactly like the original<sup>1</sup>; fourteen-day phones, which are European-brand phones that have been returned by their original owners and have been warehoused and eventually sent to Hong Kong and Chungking Mansions to be sold to developing-world buyers; or used phones.<sup>1</sup>

Any given shop may have a diversity of phones. A ground-floor shop may typically have used phones at the very bottom of its glass case—phones with no original packaging—and fourteen-day phones, which could pass for new to the undiscerning buyer, a bit higher up and better presented in the glass cases. At its top display, it may have China-made new phones as well as China-made copies of European or Korean phones. All these different kinds of phones may be available within the store, but as we will shortly discuss, the buyer had better know exactly what he wants if he is to avoid getting taken advantage of.

All in all, what we see in Chungking Mansions are the castoffs or copies of developed-world prosperity sold to the developing world. The ultimate significance of this we will discuss later; for now, let me just indicate that wholesale sellers of goods in Chungking Mansions overwhelmingly maintained to me that they saw their role as providing what their customers wanted, no more and no less. If their customers wanted flashy goods that looked new, they would provide them; if their customers wanted copies, they would provide them; if their customers wanted cheap, shoddy goods,

<sup>1</sup>Most commentators use the terms "copy" and "knock-off" as synonyms. In this book, I differentiate between these terms: a copy, in my usage, is manufactured to seem indistinguishable from the original, whereas a knock-off, in the effort to obtain a degree of legal protection, has small differentiations, such as a change of one letter in the brand name, to make it not exactly the same as the original.

<sup>2</sup>Why are these fourteen-day phones sent all the way to Hong Kong, rather than shipped directly to Africa, to be sold wholesale? I do not fully know; however, because many traders combine different kinds of phones in their purchases, mixing fourteen-day phones with China-made copies and China-made branded phones, Hong Kong remains an optimal place to buy phones for African traders.



they would provide them. They sought to satisfy the wholesale buyers who made their businesses possible, while charging them enough to make a tidy profit, and asked no larger questions, for they had enough to worry about in being able to keep up within the fast-changing market of Chungking Mansions. How many traders are buying phones in order to launder money made from the sale of drugs or weapons? This no doubt exists, to an extent, but the merchants I know don't ask, they simply sell. If "dirty money" is defined very broadly as money "generated outside of the formal economy," then much of the money changing hands in Chungking Mansions is "dirty," although buyers and sellers certainly do not see it as "dirty."<sup>8</sup>

These merchants are at the mercy of distinctly local forces—if a new stall opens next door that has a warehouse and a particularly good set of wholesalers, then one's stall may rapidly be driven out of business. These merchants are also at the mercy of global forces. If China tightens its entry policies toward certain African nations, it may lead to a flourishing of the market in Hong Kong, with some Chungking Mansions stalls making windfall profits, since if China is off-limits, entrepreneurs must buy in Hong Kong. If, on the other hand, Hong Kong tightens its entry policies, the reverse may happen. If exchange rates shift, as happened in 2008 when the yuan, which earlier was at 106 yuan per 100 Hong Kong dollars, sank to 96, this too may have a large effect. If US dollars stop flowing so readily through African countries, as happened in 2008 and 2009, then many traders may simply stay home, with local businesses shutting down. The fall of oil prices in 2008 greatly affected the Nigerian foreign hard currency flow and caused the national currency, the naira, to change in value from 118 per US dollar to 168 per US dollar in a single month. Nigerian traders stopped coming, and some Chungking Mansions merchants suffered greatly. In Chungking Mansions, the local is distinctly global, with distant events sometimes powerfully affecting business one way or another, at the same time that the global is distinctly local.

### Taking Advantage of Buyers

For the stores selling goods wholesale in Chungking Mansions, there are always competing impulses at work. To develop its customer base, a stall must be more or less honest in its dealings—a customer who knows that he has been taken advantage of will never come back. On the other hand, a particularly ignorant customer may be easy to cheat for a large profit, making the temptation irresistible. As an African buyer of phones told me,

The phones for sale in Chungking Mansions: the outsides look good, Sony and other brands, but the inside of many of them is rubbish. . . . You learn what the good stores and bad stores are—the bad stores, after you buy from them, your customers, after five or six months when their phones are broken, they come back to complain. . . . I think 80 percent of the mobile phone stores in Chungking Mansions cheat customers sometimes.

Several phone-stall proprietors vociferously refuted this comment when I showed it to them (this chapter has been read by several Chungking Mansions merchants for their critiques). In one's words,

Phone-sellers can't cheat customers; these traders know what they are buying. Nobody's cheating anyone! Africans are not stupid! If a trader buys 500 phones from me here in Hong Kong, we give guarantees—we will be responsible for the 500 phones. I will ask the trader to check each phone one by one. If there's any problem, we'll take it back.

These merchants suggested that the trader quoted above was naïve and perhaps lazy, in not adequately checking the phones he had bought.

Still, phone stalls do tend to be sly in various ways. As one Pakistani merchant told me in 2007, "We change the phone's housing. We refab it. Then we sell it to you as if it were a brand-new phone. You don't know this. But we know."\* How often are buyers cheated? In retail sales of phones in Chungking Mansions I am told that "probably 50 percent of sales involve deceiving the buyer by charging a higher price, but in wholesale, no more than 5 percent. They're smart. They know!" This phone dealer continued, "It depends on the country. Tanzanian people, for example, are still far behind, but Nigerian people are far ahead. We sell camera phones that we get for HK\$50 to Tanzanians for HK\$300. They don't know the technology that Nigerian people know." He is saying that the more technologically sophisticated a country's customers are, the less likely the entrepreneur will be cheated, for he will carry that sophistication to Hong Kong.

\*By 2008, refabbing—changing the fourteen-day phone's housing and beyond this, rewiring the phone's motherboard—had become more sophisticated, and so the cheating that this merchant described had become less egregious. More broadly, the phone market has been evolving with such rapidity that a strategy used by merchants in Chungking Mansions in one period may be entirely abandoned a year later; my discussion in these pages is thus necessarily dated.

When the proprietor owns the store, or rents the store from an absentee landlord, the motive for cheating may be clear, since the money earned will go directly into the proprietor's pocket, but cheating may also take place when only a clerk is present to mind the store. One young Pakistani man working in a store selling China-made new and copy phones told me that his boss had given him a list of phones with the minimum price they can be sold for. Anything above that price he pockets, and no one asks any questions. He said to me, "Look, I'm Muslim. I don't want to cheat anybody, because I am before God"; but still, he said that he would regularly charge customers a slightly higher price, so that he could pocket the extra profit.

He also noted that if he makes the price too high, the customers will all go to another shop instead. His moral from this was that "you can make money by cheating people, but you can only cheat people a little bit. If you charge too much, you'll have no customers." In the world of Chungking Mansions, mobile phones—unlike, for example, the stores in the building selling computers—bear no price stickers. This, I am told, is because the market is always changing. Also, no doubt, it is because this unmarked price enables prices to vary in accordance with the knowledge of the buyer.

### Copy Goods

The "cheating" discussed above is generally a matter of misrepresenting the price or the quality of goods, rather than of claiming that copy goods are genuine, but copies of many kinds of goods are widely available in the stalls of Chungking Mansions. To turn first to watches, there are original watches, copy watches, and knock-off watches—for example, the HK\$10 knock-off "Seciko" watch I bought at Chungking Mansions is some fifty times cheaper than the Seiko watch it was emulating. As a business columnist in East Africa wrote a decade ago, "How, for heaven's sake, can one distinguish a 'Citizen' watch from the high quality Citizen; 'Smatch' from the Swiss Swatch; and 'Sekico' from Seiko?"<sup>9</sup>

Several African traders told me that for close relatives, as well as for customs officials, they buy original watches. For their customers, however, it would make no sense to buy original watches, since almost none of their customers have remotely enough money to buy original brands such as Seiko or Citizen. All maintained that they do not represent these watches as original, but since their customers tend to have no idea of the distinction between original and copy goods, the argument is moot. Their customers may have never heard of the brands these copies are copying—they simply want cheap watches, and sellers sell these watches cheaply.

Clothing is a separate matter. I am told that any trader in Chungking Mansions can easily enough get copy clothes made. As one trader said, "If you want a thousand copies of an Armani jacket, they can provide it with no problem; they'll just get on the phone to their Chinese factory." Typically, the labels are copied but not the design and workmanship. Since the goods these stores sell are manifestly different from the goods sold by high-end brands even though their labels may be the same, the proprietors of these stores tend not to worry about prosecution. Despite this, many stores refuse to sell to white people, who are reputed to be particularly concerned about issues of intellectual property. Several West African traders I've met regularly wear the striking clothing designed by their Chinese clothing outlets as advertisements. The designs they wear may well be copies of other African clothing in the market, but not of global brands, and so the copying goes unprosecuted.

Copies are a more pivotal issue in the phone market. As with watches and clothing, it is almost never the case that a shopkeeper sells a trader copy phones claimed to be real. In discussions between a phone seller and a wholesale buyer, phones are never spoken of as "fake," and generally not even as "copies" when sold wholesale, but generally as "China-made"; when the phones in question are Nokia or Samsung or Sony-Ericsson, the connotation is obvious.\* Over and over again, I have heard phone dealers offer a model wholesale for a higher price, for example HK\$500 apiece, and then, when the buyer expresses no interest, say, "How about HK\$200 apiece?" This sudden downward leap reflects the shift between real and copy—buyer and seller generally say nothing explicit, but both know that with the drastic drop in price, this line has been crossed.

These copy phones are not necessarily garbage—some work for years and may possibly even last as long as the original phone, if they are A-grade counterfeits rather than B- or C-grade counterfeits, all of which may be sold by phone stalls. Phone stalls are well aware that when receipts are written for these particular copy phones cannot be traced back to their stall.

I have occasionally heard from stall keepers comments such as, "Oh no, my store would never sell copy phones. But that store over there—all they sell are copies!" However, in 2007, despite the fact that the display windows of many stores showed new China-made phones, many phones sold were

\*Ironically, Nokia, among other brands, manufactures phones in China. But in Chungking Mansions, "China-made Nokias" means copies.

Nokia, Samsung, and iPhone copies. One store clerk told me that his boss warned him not to sell to Chinese people, and some stores do not sell to white people either, unless they are obviously from Russia or Ukraine or other poorer countries on the market for copy mobile phones, for fear of undercover police (Hong Kong police are overwhelmingly of Chinese ethnicity, with a smattering of South Asians and British). "No one is directly afraid of police, because they don't come around much, but you still have to be careful," I was told.

In 2009, the Customs and Excise Police handed notes to many phone stalls in Chungking Mansions saying, in so many words, "Please don't sell copy goods." Whether this was prelude to an eventual large-scale police raid, or simply a gentle reminder, was unclear to the phone-stall proprietors (as I write these words, a year later, the latter seems to have been the case). Police and the courts have prosecuted at least two stalls selling primarily copy phones; the word in Chungking Mansions is that you can have copy phones on display and a few hundred in stock or otherwise available, but not so many as to be conspicuous. In late 2009, agents from Nokia began legal proceedings against twenty-one phone stalls in Chungking Mansions found by their undercover investigators to have been selling copy Nokia phones, but the word from several Chungking Mansions phone stalls was that their evidence was weak, since most phone stalls were suspicious of these investigators in their inquiries and told them little.

Some phones are knock-offs (in my usage of the term), bearing slightly different names from the original, such as "Nokla" or "Sory-Ericssen," providing a degree of protection from prosecution. As a phone-stall operator told me, "Yes, there is a Nokla N-95, made in China to avoid copyright issues. But that Nokla is an exact copy of Nokia N-95. Only the alphabet has changed." Others are copies in alphabet as well, and in name and appearance are all but indistinguishable from the original, except to the trained eye. A phone trader told me that he was never fooled:

You can see if a phone is a copy by its housing, its box, its accessories. If you show me a mobile, I can tell you within a microsecond whether or not it's a copy. You can tell by weight—copies are lighter than the originals. And the housing, the accessories, the manual—there's a certain amount of difference. The original, in the manual, provides a website to register; the copy phone doesn't do that. Original phones may have the website listed right on the box, but not copies. There's also the ID numbers. Copy phones may provide this too, but the number will be fake, as you can tell by dialing the manufacturer's number to check.

As the above indicates, one very easy way to tell the difference between real and copy is by weight—a copy Nokia, for example, has generally been 40 percent lighter than a real Nokia because of the materials used in its Chinese production. However, by 2009, some Chinese phone manufacturers were getting more sophisticated—now some make heavier phones, and in this sense these phones are indistinguishable from the European originals. Beyond weight, one can examine, above the SIM card, the company code and can generally tell whether the phone is a copy or not by the quality of the lettering. Beyond lettering, one can tell what is China-made and what is not by opening up the phone and looking at the motherboard, which shows distinctly different characteristics if it is China-made.

One cannot distinguish genuine from copy phones simply on the basis of price. It is not the case, for example, that HK\$2,000 phones are genuine and HK\$500 phones are copies, or HK\$450 phones are real and HK\$150 phones are copies; rather, there is a whole range of prices. Basically, China-made copy phones are far cheaper than European- or Korean- or Japanese-made phones, but there are genuine phones, very old models, that might go for as little as HK\$150, and there are copy phones that may go for a far higher price—it all depends on the model that is being copied, as well as the quality of the copy. Only to focus on genuine phones and copies is a bit distorting. Typically, phone stalls deal with a complex array of different kinds of phones, as we have seen.

By 2008, China-made phones under their own brand names were becoming more prominent—the market in copy phones, or in used phones, was diminishing compared to the market in China-branded phones, new phones made in China, which were increasing in quality. However, by 2009, another shift had taken place: China-brand new phones had to an extent given way to fourteen-day phones, due to ongoing problems in China-made phones durability, particularly in terms of their batteries. Merchants estimated to me in fall 2009 that 60 percent of the phones sold in Chungking Mansions were now fourteen-day phones, with most of the rest China-brand new phones. This has had the effect of making phone sellers more and more "legal," as the demand for copies goes down.\*

\*The only components of phones in which copies remain rampant are batteries; because the original batteries are so expensive, many phone stalls replace the batteries in fourteen-day phones with China-made copy batteries and sell the originals separately. With older models of phones, customers may never know, since the copy batteries may work as well as the original batteries, but with newer models of phones, with more demanding functions, the difference is apparent, I'm told.



## Manufacturers and Middlemen

The wholesale shops in Chungking Mansions are under the threat of being supplanted by manufacturers from China, who are coming in to Chungking Mansions to start their own stores, or of being forsaken by customers, who go into China themselves to buy goods at a cheaper price. Goods in China are reputed to be of low quality—particularly phones and electronics. But Chinese phones are getting better, as are too the facilities available on the mainland for traders. All in all, for stores in Chungking Mansions, China is both the source of goods and a distinct threat. Chungking Mansions' wholesalers represent nodes in between—most of what they sell is made in China and fans out across the globe. Chungking Mansions thus plays the same role that Hong Kong itself has long played—it is an entrepôt between China and the world—but many merchants have been complaining that business is becoming more and more difficult.

Merchants love to complain, but it seems that many of the stores selling wholesale goods in Chungking Mansions are indeed facing trying times because of the pressure of China. As one Hong Kong Chinese businesswoman in Chungking Mansions said, "There is no future for the small or middle-size export companies which only aim to earn the tiny price differences of goods between mainland China and the rest of the world. Only large companies will survive." The room for Chungking Mansions to be the middleman between mainland China and foreign businessmen is shrinking rapidly, she believed, just as would be the case for Hong Kong as a whole in coming years.

A Hong Kong Chinese clothing merchant said, "Because China has developed so much, there's almost no room for Hong Kong in the clothing industry any more. China's garment industry is already world-class." A Pakistani phone-stall proprietor, reflecting the view of Johnny Singh in chapter 2, suggested that Chungking Mansions itself would become more and more Chinese, because, with new visa regulations, Chinese who start businesses could remain in Hong Kong: "The Chinese can get phones directly from their factories and can sell more cheaply than we can. There will be no need for the Pakistani [middleman]."

On the other hand, other merchants in Chungking Mansions complain vociferously about mainland Chinese business practices and say that they will not succeed in Chungking Mansions. In one phone-stall proprietor's words, a man who had lived four years in China:

The problem with the Chinese is that they will agree to anything until they get your deposit. But once they have your money, they will deliver whatever

they want. You have a contract, but for them it has no meaning at all. It's like a piece of toilet tissue. . . . I moved to Hong Kong to get away from all the headaches in China. It's dangerous to do business in a country where you can't have any arbitration, any rule of law.

A shoe merchant in Chungking Mansions had a similar complaint. "The Chinese make small shoes and the Africans want big ones. The Africans make an order for large shoes, and the Chinese say yes; but then their actual shipment to Africa might have many shoes that are much smaller, not suiting the African market." From Hong Kong, he now has shoes made in factories run by Hong Kong entrepreneurs in Guangdong Province, so he can largely trust the sizes to be delivered to his African customers.

When one goes into Guangzhou, there are places remarkably like Chungking Mansions, such as the Tianxiu Building and the Canaan Export Clothes Wholesale Trading Centre. These places are often far more bustling with African traders than Chungking Mansions. The number of Africans based in Guangzhou, after a downturn in 2008 and 2009 due to the visa crackdown around the time of the Olympics, has shot up again. At the time of this writing, many more African entrepreneurs are in Guangzhou than in Hong Kong. If this remains the case, then Chungking Mansions' future as a center of low-end globalization may indeed be limited.

On the other hand, if some Chinese business practices continue to be as slipshod as Hong Kong merchants have described to me, then Chungking Mansions' role as a site for the business of low-end globalization will continue. As I review this chapter in May 2010, it appears that the number of African traders, and particularly phone buyers, in Chungking Mansions has gone down somewhat as compared to two years earlier—the traders are now more likely to be in China, although many have also been kept at home in Africa by the world economic downturn. As one phone-stall merchant told me, "Yes, a lot of Africans have moved to China—they want to establish themselves there. But most of them are there because they cannot get a visa in Hong Kong.\* If they can, they'll come back to Hong Kong, because they can trust the phones here."

\*I heard this statement from a number of Chungking Mansions' merchants and traders in late 2009—the word on the ground is that China is allowing in African traders and hampering them from entering Hong Kong, as is Hong Kong immigration itself in its greater degree of restrictiveness.

### Tricks and Travails of a Phone Stall

I spent many hours in a phone stall over a year-long period in 2007, at the end of which Mahmood, my prime informant, returned to Pakistan. Six months thereafter, the stall went out of business. The stall was the size of a bathroom, with two seats edged next to the glass counter. During the time I was there, four people were working at the shop: Mahmood's relative, the boss, who spent his working time scouting for sources for his wholesale phones; Mahmood, who managed the stall on a day-to-day basis; and two temporary workers from India, who spent their time unlocking the codes of foreign mobile phones as well as packing phones that had been sold. The two Indians were required to go back to Kolkata once every forty-two days. A job of these tourist-permit employees was bringing in copy phones from China. One told me that he tried to look very confident, and the customs people at the Hong Kong-China border never confiscated the goods he carried.

Some 90 percent of the customers in this stall were African, with another 10 percent from Europe, the Middle East, or India and Pakistan. The Europeans often sought very particular models, those models desired back in their home countries' specialty niches. Indians and Pakistanis were Mahmood's most difficult customers, he said: "If they know I buy a phone for HK\$250, they will seek a price of HK\$249." He said that consumers in Nigeria, as well as India and Pakistan, want the latest model—they might buy China-made phones, genuine or copy, that have all the latest accoutrements to impress their friends with. On the other hand, consumers from other African countries more often wanted anything that works—this is what their customers seek. All in all, Africans are easier to deal with than South Asians, Mahmood maintained; many are naïve, but some of them are "crazy," he said. Once, an African entrepreneur walked in while I was talking to Mahmood and typed into the calculator a model of Nokia he wanted that didn't exist. Mahmood said that the man was simply playing with him.

Let me describe some of the negotiations between Mahmood and his customers, first, some retail transactions. A potential customer, a West African woman, came in seeking a personal phone. Mahmood showed her first a HK\$450 phone, a fourteen-day Nokia model; then, when she said it was too expensive, he showed her a HK\$90 copy phone and then a HK\$190 phone, which was real but French in language and thus cheap. The potential customer was unable, both because of language and ignorance of the phone market, to say what she wanted, so Mahmood offered various choices: "Here is this phone for this price and that phone for that price. What do you want?"

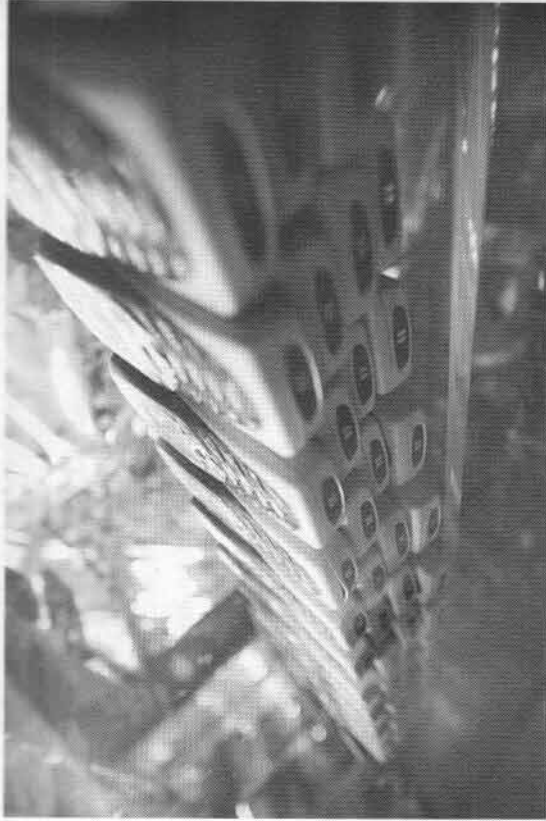
In another transaction, a Frenchman asked for three Siemens C62 phones. Mahmood immediately asked him about a different and comparable phone. The customer indicated he hadn't heard of it, and, as a result, Mahmood immediately knew that he didn't know much about phones and could charge accordingly. The customer bought the three phones without knowing that he had been taken for a price 30 percent higher than he otherwise would have paid.

In still another transaction, Mahmood offered an East African buyer a phone at HK\$280; the buyer wanted six pieces. The man said, "No, no, it should be HK\$200!" Mahmood said, "No, I bought it for HK\$249." The potential buyer was disgusted and left. Mahmood then said, "Actually I bought them for HK\$140. He'll be back tomorrow! It's all just the beginning of the game. Eventually I'll sell it to him for around HK\$180. But this guy just got off the plane from Africa today, so why not?" Mahmood said that if a buyer was very smart, his stall might be able to make only HK\$10 per phone in profit; if the buyer was ignorant, HK\$70 or HK\$80.

Wholesale trade involving far more money is more complex, but more elusive. I watched Mahmood at work trying to sell 3,000 phones to a Cameroonian buyer, from which his store could potentially make a profit of HK\$60,000, in a deal that eventually fell through. Just a few of these deals a month would bring his stall huge returns, but for every one deal that came through, a hundred more were never consummated.

The phone business is remarkably changeable, and Mahmood was continuously worried about catching the latest trend, and convincing his relative to follow that trend, or else his stall might go out of business. Mahmood told me in mid-2007 that the new trend was refab phones reworked in China (see footnote, p. 113). It is difficult to recognize these phones, but one way to check is to examine the phone's screws to see if they have been loosened; however, this is an imperfect means of detection. Mahmood told me that an old Nokia model might sell for HK\$150 as a fourteen-day but HK\$100 refab; thus the dealer can make considerable profit by selling these refabs as fourteen-day phones.

If a buyer did not know what refab phones were, then Mahmood felt free to mix them in with fourteen-day phones. He gave the example of putting water into milk. "If you mix two glasses of water into one glass of milk, it will be apparent, but if you put 20 percent water into milk, then most people won't know." Ethically, he said this is reasonable, since his stall too was sold many phones that, despite claims otherwise, were not fourteen-day but refab phones. Mahmood said that even very smart African traders sometimes could not recognize refab phones. One trader was fooled by Mah-



mood, in that Mahmood told the refab people to tighten the phone screws to an unusual degree, so that it would appear that the phones had never been opened. The buyer was Nigerian, where all the phones go into a big open market, according to Mahmood—thus, this buyer would suffer no negative consequences if, after several months, many of his phones stopped working. No one would complain, or know, he said.

Mahmood also worried greatly about the weekly and monthly flow of customers. January and February 2007 were slow months, because Chinese factories were closed for the Chinese New Year, as is the case every year. While the stall sold just 2,200 phones in February, in March it rapidly picked up, with 6,000 phones sold in the first ten days of March. One day in early March, a big customer stopped by, a Kenyan woman who regularly buys 1,500 to 2,000 units each month; one of the workers in the store was sent especially to China to pick up her order of China-made parts. On the other hand, a businessman from Ghana could not come to Hong Kong because of visa restrictions; the store had an order of 7,000 phones for him, representing HK\$175,000 in potential profits that they lost.

By mid-June, there was another downturn; Mahmood believed that it was because the store should be dealing primarily in China-made copy phones, but was not—not because of any fears of breaking the law, but because it was too much work for his relative to implement, and his relative, Mah-

mood told me, was too busy staying out all night with his mistresses to do proper work for the phone stall he owned. Mahmood became despondent because his relative had begun frequently shouting at him for being “lazy.” In the summer of 2007, instead of shifting to China-made phones, the stall shifted more to used phones, to meet customers’ demands. The used phones simply functioned as phones, but they tended to last longer than the China-made phones. In July, the stall sold 16,000 phones, selling to a few big customers but still making relatively low profits compared to many other phone stalls in Chungking Mansions.

By autumn, a new shift was beginning, one that would pick up steam over the next year. New China-made phones were becoming cheaper, and also better, so that a wholesaler could get a new China phone with a color screen for HK\$60 to HK\$70. This was bringing unease to many of the Pakistani-run phone stalls, not just Mahmood’s—the Pakistanis have had a monopoly on fourteen-day-phones in Chungking Mansions, but Chinese company representatives might begin to come in, selling their own new phones, offering better prices for buyers. But the question about these phones was this: How long would they last? After six months, will these new Chinese phones still be working? If so, then the business for which Mahmood worked, unless it rapidly changed course, would be severely jeopardized.

As it happened, however, Mahmood’s father suddenly became severely ill in Pakistan and then died, necessitating his return to the country, along with the not inconsiderable amount of money he’d saved while in Hong Kong. The stall he worked for, as earlier mentioned, did not long survive his departure.

### Varieties of Traders

I have met an extraordinary array of traders at Chungking Mansions. Here are some entries from my own and my research assistants’ notes from 2006 through 2009:

A phone trader from Tanzania comes to China once a month between May and December, the peak buying months in Africa, buying phones in Guangzhou and bringing them by train to Hong Kong and then by plane to Tanzania as extra luggage. He can pack in seven phones per kilogram, he said, carrying back an average of 700 phones per trip, by paying for an extra weight allowance. He can make an average profit, after flight, luggage, and accommodation costs, of US\$500 per trip, he claimed.



A Senegalese trader buys gems in the Congo, goes to Germany to sell them, then Bangkok and Hong Kong; he has been doing this for five years. He showed me photos on his cell phone of Goma, in the Congo, where he said it was incredibly dangerous—"you can get killed any time"—and said he'd been robbed at gunpoint there.

An Indian trader from Bangalore is in the business of buying classic Leica cameras and parts from various Indian cities and bringing them to camera dealers in Hong Kong. He tried to sell me a Leica M-6, "used but 99 percent perfect," for HK\$25,000; a dealer would have sold it for HK\$39,000, he said.

A trader from East Africa deals in knock-off Jacuzzi baths made in south China. He sells to business owners and also to government ministers, he said—people with enough money to buy Jacuzzi-like baths with televisions and CD players installed.

A Kenyan trader of garments now living in China comes to Hong Kong to renew her China visa every 30 days and also to buy single items of clothing that she thinks will sell well in East Africa. She then commissions a factory in south China to make up to 10,000 copies for her under her own label, which she hires fellow Kenyans to take back to East Africa.

A Ghanaian trader has visited Hong Kong five times since 2004. His business is selling hip-hop clothes. He's been visiting different places to buy goods—Dubai and Vietnam—but has found that made-in-China clothes sold by Hong Kong agents are of better quality. He has opened three retail shops in Accra on the basis of his earnings from his travels.

A trader from the Maldives imports DVD players. There are 300,000 people there, so he knows pretty much everybody on the islands, he said. There is a flat tax of 5 percent on all imports; he sends his goods air freight and charges 60 percent markup on the goods he brings back home.

Two female traders from Kenya travel from Bangkok to Hong Kong to south China to Dubai to Nairobi, spending two to three days in each location. They go to specific shops to place orders, get the goods, and then leave for the next country. They're in the garment business, they say, because "women have an eye for clothes." Hong Kong and China are best for suits, India for leather bags, and Dubai for shoes, although these shoes are made in China. They've been in this trade since 1997.

A trader from Jamaica: I didn't believe him at first, thinking that he was a Hong Kong asylum seeker telling me a story, but indeed he seems to be a trader. It's a simple flight—Hong Kong to London, London to Kingston. He gets electronics, mobile phones, and other goods from China and sells them not just in Jamaica but in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and other Central American countries (he speaks a little Spanish, but not much, as I found from questioning him). He said that Mexico used to be a prime source of these products, but no more: China has become the provider of choice.

An Arab-Indonesian trader—his father is Yemeni and his mother is Indonesian—originally tried to send mobile phones back to Indonesia by ship. He says that 15 percent of the phones weren't working by the time they arrived, because of the sea air; now he uses air freight. Among his other business activities, he imports American Verizon phones into Chungking Mansion—he gets the phones from the US and all the accessories from China and sends it all back to Indonesia.

A Frenchman is in Hong Kong for the trade fair. He buys MP4 players—if he wants to make a big order, he'll go into China to buy them. He said quality wasn't an issue—people in France buy all kinds of Chinese goods. "China is taking over the world. In twenty years, we'll all be speaking Chinese!"

A trader from Gambia buys wholesale cloth in south China. He shook his head in disgust when asked about his business: "They're bloodsuckers in Guangzhou, but it's better than working as a farmer in Gambia." He asked if I could help get him cheaper accommodations so that he could stay longer in Hong Kong—HK\$150 a night was too much for him.

A trader friend from Tanzania and another person from Congo Kinshasa began talking business—doing it in English as well as Swahili, for my benefit. The Tanzanian buys used cars in Hong Kong and sends them to Dar es Salaam; he suggested that the Congolese trader can then send the cars from Dar es Salaam to Matadi, around the Cape of Good Hope, to sell in the Congo. From Matadi, on the Atlantic Coast, they can be transported by road to Kinshasa—the only usable stretch of highway in the Congo. "I have three cars here that we can ship tomorrow, if you're ready." He said that including airfare and all expenses, he could guarantee a profit margin of 300 percent.

A trader from Zimbabwe once imported clothes but now imports tires from used Hong Kong vehicles. He trades in US dollars, and the Mugabe gov-

ernment is desperate for US dollars. They harass him in customs; he works through the UK since he has relatives there. Given the ridiculous Zimbabwe inflation rates, he must call Zimbabwe every morning to find out the exchange rate and reworks prices accordingly. But the container will take weeks to get to Zimbabwe, so renegotiations are always required. He carefully stays out of politics—"if you support one party and then another comes to power, you're dead!" He is in his thirties and supports eight people in his family.

These are only a few of hundreds of stories my research assistants and I have heard. These traders are distinguished by their different countries of origin and goods they deal in, and also by the direction in which their goods flow. The broadest pattern of this trade, followed by well over 90 percent of traders, is that of traders from poorer countries going to Hong Kong or China to bring back goods to their own countries. This is what we see in the traders of mobile phones, clothing, building tiles, furniture, and the whole panoply of goods traveling by luggage, air freight, or container to Africa and an array of other societies. But there are also traders going in the opposite direction. Gem traders and traders of gold from Africa fit this pattern—taking not finished goods from China back to Africa but rather raw materials from Africa into Hong Kong and China for finishing.

This fits dependency theory: raw materials coming from the extreme periphery, and finished goods being exported to that periphery, in the classic pattern of wealthier countries exploiting poorer ones.<sup>10</sup> Other traders, especially from India, do not quite fit this pattern—the trader in Leica cameras, for example, uses the fact that India is less developed technologically to exploit the fact that India may have older cameras that contemporary camera enthusiasts from the West or China may avidly seek out. The importer of Verizon phones too reveals the complexity of interactions: the designations of developed and developing world are more complex than is typically assumed. In any case, Chungking Mansions clearly serves as a clearing house for goods and information, just as does Hong Kong as a whole.

I've heard stories about Colombian drug dealers who have set up stock in Chungking Mansions in their efforts to move in on the Chinese cocaine trade. Chungking Mansions, the tale goes, is the only place in the Chinese-speaking world where, as white and brown people, they can blend in undetected to go about their business. Possibly the story is true, although I doubt it. I've also heard stories of arms dealers, in AK 47s, land mines, and other such goods, although I've seen little indication that these may be true. In 2008 Hong Kong police arrested an American staying in Chungking Man-

sions on suspicion of terrorism; eventually he was jailed as an errant hobbyist for his transgressions in owning several police batons and stun guns.<sup>11</sup>

Then there is the remarkable story of the Ghanaian gold trader told to me by my asylum-seeker friend. My friend relates, and swears as to the truth of this story, that he met a man at the entrance to Chungking Mansions who had a mouthful of gold teeth; the man wanted to eat, and so my friend led him to a Ghanaian restaurant in Chungking Mansions' unlicensed upper floors. My friend met him a day later and saw to his amazement that the man now had a set of ordinary white teeth.

My friend asked him how that could be, and after much hesitation, the trader told his story:

I smuggle gold from my country. I am the last born in a family of ten. Both my parents died when I was young. We grew up in poverty and then one day my brother suggested that we start a gold business. We began by buying gold from poor illegal miners and selling it to middlemen. Soon we realized that we were struggling for nothing, only making these middlemen richer. My brother told me that we would make more money if I would travel to Hong Kong and sell our gold there; he knew a customer who buys for a good price. . . . My brother told me that the only way to be rich is for me to lose my teeth. I went to a clinic where my teeth were removed; after one month I was fitted with the teeth you see here. That is how it started. Usually my brother and his friend craft gold teeth into my mouth, one by one up to thirty-two. I then come straight to Chungking Mansions. I get my room first, and then I call my customer in mainland China. It takes him less than two hours to get here. We go and get my teeth all taken out. . . . You know, brother, we Africans must do everything to fight poverty; if not, we will die of hunger.

This is an extraordinary story, one of many swirling around Chungking Mansions. One reason why this trader might have felt compelled to replace his teeth with gold was that it is illegal in Hong Kong to deal in gold without going through licensed dealers. Customs in Hong Kong might have investigated if he had had gold ingots, but not if the gold was locked away in his mouth.

But let us now move back from these stories to ask, who, generally speaking, are these traders? One point to remember is that despite the occasional accounts of shady goings-on such as the stories related above, most of this trade is largely legal. This is why these traders are so accessible. Over the years I have approached countless strangers in Chungking Mansions at food stalls and

in corridors to ask, "Where are you from? What business do you do?" Only a very few times have they not been willing to answer (or more frequently, cannot answer because of language difficulties). Far more often, they talk for minutes or sometimes hours about their work and travels—the problems they encounter, the pleasures and perils of their work, and the profits they can make. The popular imagination in Hong Kong, and perhaps in the Western world as a whole, is that these developing-world traders are surreptitious and in the shadows, but this is not generally the case in Chungking Mansions. Most are quite open about what they do and proud of what they do.

### The Generation Gap among Traders

All the traders in Chungking Mansions are more or less wealthy by the standards of their home countries, if not of Hong Kong. This is easy to lose sight of in Chungking Mansions, where one often sees Africans haggling over food and room prices—even Chungking Mansions, in all its cheapness, represents developed-world prices for these developing-world travelers. Some older African traders and merchants I have spoken with bemoan how uncouth younger African traders are, but in fact, these younger traders resent the upper classes in their countries in being able to buy a plane ticket to Hong Kong, something most of their compatriots could not dream of.

One Tanzanian trader told me, "It's hard for an ordinary person in my country to buy a ticket to Hong Kong—US\$1,300. For many of these Africans, especially those from West Africa—in one way or another, they'll tell you, 'My uncle is the governor,' my nephew is a colonel in the army—it's connections." As two young Central African traders related to me:

Trader 1: I first came to HK in 2004.

Trader 2: I first came in 2003.

Trader 1: My uncle owns the company I work for.

Trader 2: My father owns the company I work for. Of course they taught us what to do.

Trader 1: My father was asking me what I would like to do with my life. He said, "I'll give you money, but what's your plan?" My friend suggested that we go to Hong Kong and China. He said, "If you give me money, I can show you the business. If you have US\$10,000, you can go to Dubai, then to Hong Kong and buy mobile phones."

Trader 2: If there is a problem in my home country, all I have to do is call my father, who will get on the phone to someone else—everything is done through connections.

Indeed, I have met a number of traders who tell me, for example, that their uncle was Idi Amin's Agricultural Minister, or the Ghanaian Commissioner of Prisons; some of these traders are no doubt embellishing their connections but some probably are not. Many of these traders are the scions of the African upper and upper-middle class, with the capital and the connections to put them on the path to Hong Kong. But this does not mean that they necessarily make money—often they fail.

Many of my interviews with traders have been conducted with men in their thirties, forties, and fifties who have been in the trading business for decades, although all only came to Hong Kong and China in recent years; they have, in large part, mastered the business of customs and other uncertainties. These people often have extended China connections and seem to know exactly what they are doing. They also tend to be largely legal in their dealings with customs in China and in their home countries, often eschewing bribes for more methodical procedures, if they are able. Several have told me that the key is to not seek windfall profits, but rather a relatively small but steady gain trip after trip. Many of these traders have made a hundred or more trips between Hong Kong and their home countries.

Elder, experienced African traders often feel scorn for younger traders, who they see as generally incompetent; there is a distinct generation gap among traders. For young Ghanaian traders, coming to Hong Kong has served as a rite of passage, a way of gaining status at home.<sup>12</sup> Among Igbo traders from Nigeria, a young man who has come to Hong Kong and succeeded has in a way "graduated" by becoming, in some senses if not others, a full-fledged entrepreneur, able to make a profit not just at home but in the world at large.<sup>13</sup> "Now that I have made some money in China, people look at me differently back home," a Nigerian trader told me. "They respect me; they look up to me." A young Tanzanian trader said to me, "I must succeed here. My family is totally depending on me. To be a man, I cannot fail."

It seems clear that there is a considerable price to pay for failure, as Christian Lo has outlined in his discussion of unsuccessful Ghanaian traders who stray in Hong Kong to work illegally.<sup>14</sup> A Tanzanian trader in his thirties whom I interviewed discussed young traders at length:

Why do these small traders even come to Hong Kong? This is a question that for a long time I've been asking myself. Most of them, you'll see them today and then you'll never see them again. They don't last for more than six months; some only come once. It's like a style: 'Business is in Hong Kong; someone's going to Hong Kong. So the day I get money, I'll travel to Hong Kong.' If their families sell property in one of Dar es Salaam's up-and-coming



neighborhoods, they may get US\$15,000, US\$20,000, and they come to Hong Kong. They really think they can get rich. I know two of these traders who have each lost US\$15,000. They got this money from family inheritance, family donations—it's given to them with all the family hopes. They go home only with a few hundred dollars. What are they going to say?

They sometimes come to me for advice. I tell them, 'Don't go to China. Just buy in Chungking Mansions and go straight back home.' They don't know what a copy is—that if you buy an Armani suit in China, it's not original. Hong Kong customs officers won't allow that. Some African traders really don't know this.

Another older Nigerian trader remarked to me, "Some of these young traders are so ignorant. I remember one guy who got into Guangzhou telling me he wanted to take the metro to Japan. Did he think it was the next street over? They're just desperate to get out of Nigeria but don't know what they're getting into. If you fail to make money overseas, it's very, very shameful." These older traders often tend to see themselves as having learned the ropes on their own; in one's words, "Even from the start, when I came to Hong Kong, I knew what I was doing." But their juniors may well be wiped out before ever gaining such experience, they are saying.

The young traders I have spoken with seem unwittingly to confirm this view. A Kenyan trader in his early twenties insisted to me that he would have no problem getting his 600 copy Boss suits over the border between China and Hong Kong because "Hong Kong is now part of China. China is the parent and Hong Kong is the child. The child will never hurt the parent. So Hong Kong must let all copies through customs; otherwise, it will hurt the Chinese economy." I suggested to him that he had been lucky so far in getting through Hong Kong customs without having his goods confiscated, but he didn't believe me.\*

Some, perhaps most, of these younger traders will be wiped out—I've heard one estimate that only 40 percent of first-time African traders make it back a second time—but others will no doubt eventually be successful, succeeding their elders. Several times I have met elder African fathers and their young adult sons—and once, a mother and her son—in Chungking Man-

\*He is partially correct in his analysis: only a very small percentage of copy goods are confiscated at the border. However, this has less to do with Hong Kong's fealty to China than with its own neoliberalism, as well as the fact that the Hong Kong-China border crossings at Lo Wu and Lok Ma Chau are among the busiest in the world and most goods pass unimpeded.

sions, the former teaching the latter the tricks of their trade before handing over their business and retiring.

### Techniques of Traders

It is remarkable how easily and quickly deals can be accomplished in Chungking Mansions. I once met an Indian man coming to Hong Kong to trade for the first time. I chanced upon him as soon as he entered Chungking Mansions and joined him once he had found a room and returned to the ground floor of the building for business.

The first thing he did was to look around in Chungking Mansions at all the things that are sold—particularly mobile phones and electronics—and then immediately called his financial backers in India to find out the latest comparative prices on a range of goods. He then talked to the Chungking Mansions sellers he found most suitable about where they got their goods and found out where in China the goods came from. These sellers served as outlets for Chinese factories, so they had no compunction about providing him with this information. He then scheduled a visit to Shenzhen, in southern China, to a factory making the goods he sought to buy. The day after that, he returned to India.



Because he could use his mobile phone, in the visit I witnessed he could get started remarkably easily—he came to Chungking Mansions knowing no one and was able to set up business in just a few hours' time. Indeed, although the possibility of getting cheated certainly exists, this is a primer in how to do business—fly in and immediately start checking prices at Chungking Mansions; immediately phone back to one's home country and work out the comparative prices; and then make the factory connections where the price differential is greatest. This would have been difficult twenty years ago, but it's perfectly plausible now: cheap mobile phone communication, along with cheap intercontinental transportation, is what makes Chungking Mansions' low-end globalization possible.

There are wide variations in how traders work, so let me provide just a few typical patterns, first for mobile phones and then for clothing. A small trader in phones will typically buy a few hundred or thousand phones at different stalls in Chungking Mansions, depending on the orders of buyers or anticipated desires of customers back home. Typically it will be a mix of different kinds of phones, some fourteen-day, some used, and some China-made new phones, knock-offs, refabs, or copies, although some traders specialize in one particular type among these phones.

All traders say they check very carefully; as a Ghanaian phone trader explained to me, "I check all the phones, every phone. I open up to check the battery and the model. No, I don't look deeper, to check the wiring—we can't get to that." He, like other phone buyers, will return every phone he is not satisfied with—when he returns phones, the phone stalls, as a rule, tell him that they themselves were misled, cheated by their wholesalers. He is given a ninety-day guarantee on phones by his Chungking Mansions dealer, a standard guarantee, but he must check closely anyway, because he does not know for certain that he will be able to return to Chungking Mansions over the next several months.

After this examination, he, like other traders, has his phones packed and wrapped in a particular fashion so that the baggage screening machines will not pick up the fact that the phones have batteries in them, which is against some airlines' rules. Traders generally calculate that they can carry seven to eight mobile phones per kilogram, or ten to eleven if they are carrying China-made phones. Thus, they can carry some 250 to 300 phones within their weight allowance—often thirty kilograms with a degree of flexibility allowed for a few extra kilograms—400 to 500 more within the additional allowance they must pay for, and as many hundreds more as they can pay extra air freight or bargain for from the unused baggage quotas of their fellow traders.



These traders get to the airport by taking one of the regular buses ferrying passengers to the airport, which stops just across the street from Chungking Mansions. But the drivers of these buses often refuse to allow traders who are carrying excess luggage to board. Traders with excess luggage may instead use one of the array of South Asian-run vans parked in the lane just behind Chungking Mansions, which charge less than do taxis and which, as a bonus, help traders transport their boxes from the upper or lower floors of Chungking Mansions.

This depiction does not, of course, hold true for those who buy their phones in south China—in Shenzhen, Guangzhou, or any number of Chinese cities and towns within two hours of Hong Kong. That, by most accounts is riskier business, both because phones in China, especially copy phones, are less trustworthy and also because customs at the China-Hong Kong border can always confiscate fake goods. This only very rarely happens, particularly if goods are brought into Hong Kong in individuals' personal baggage. But it can happen, and the potential of it happening always casts a shadow. Hong Kong customs does not examine goods leaving the territory by airplane, so a trader leaving Hong Kong with mobile phones in his luggage generally need not worry, at least until he reaches customs in his own country.

Only a minority of the clothing traders staying in Chungking Mansions

actually buy their clothing in the building. More typically, they go to Sham Shui Po, as earlier mentioned, where there are a number of clothing wholesalers devoted to the African market. The reason why many of them prefer to buy goods in Sham Shui Po is that many wholesalers do not just sell clothes—in some stores, a trader cannot simply buy goods and take them away. Rather, everything is made after it is ordered; the Sham Shui Po wholesaler hears the African trader's requests and calls the factories in China immediately to confirm the design and estimate the costs.

In effect, these African traders are not simply buyers, but designers: they come to Sham Shui Po with a particular idea and they choose materials, prints, buttons, and any other details to ensure that what they buy is suited to the tastes of their end customers. Their orders, once samples are approved, generally take no more than a few days to fill. Those traders with particularly large orders may go into China themselves to buy, while those seeking only a few dozen or hundred items may stick to Sham Shui Po.

A notable technique of many traders in clothing is to find original clothes that grab one's eye and then get exact copies made. Others may change minor details, to Africanize the item to suit ever-changing local fashion trends. Some traders search for good designs in Hong Kong, or in other countries such as Malaysia, and then order the clothes they want and give sizes to the wholesale shop in Chungking Mansions. The shop then contacts a garment factory in mainland China, which sends the goods to Nigeria, Kenya, or wherever the trader is working from.

How much profit do traders typically make? The profits that several small traders have reported to me range from US\$400 to US\$1,300 per trip, including the extra frequent-flyer mileage they can obtain. Other traders, those with their own companies, may make substantially more. These traders report a profit margin all over the map: anywhere from 20 percent to 100 percent or more.

Given the great expenses of travel—for traders from East Africa, a minimum of US\$1,000 per trip is required, and for those from West Africa, substantially more—one may ask why these traders bother to come to Hong Kong. Couldn't they simply phone in their orders? A number of traders do indeed place their orders before they come to Hong Kong, so that they are ready once the trader arrives. Others, particularly those who have trusted, long-term relationships with their suppliers, stay back in their home countries, placing their orders with those who do come to Hong Kong. But overwhelmingly I am told that one must be there—in the informal economy, one cannot trust merchants that one cannot see face-to-face and cannot trust merchandise that one can't personally inspect piece by piece.

## The Lure of China

Most traders find Hong Kong an easier place to do business in than China, in large part because of the language issue: "Here in Chungking Mansions I can talk and people understand me. . . . I can negotiate prices. It's much harder to do these things in China," a Kenyan buyer of electronic goods told me, in a comment echoed by many others.

At the same time, however, there is the sense that to seek a really big profit, China is the place to go: "The big fish go to China. We little fish stay in Hong Kong. China is there for large scale, for the big fish, not the small fish. The small fish will stay in Hong Kong; they need Hong Kong," a Tanzanian clothing buyer said. A Nigerian businessman based in China echoed the marine metaphor: "China and the merchants who do business there represent the ocean, while Hong Kong is just a pond. . . . But those in the pond still can catch benefits from the ocean."

Many traders I have spoken with tell of difficulties in China in terms echoing those of the merchants earlier discussed. As a West African trader of phones told me,

I bought two hundred mobile phones in China, but one hundred weren't good. I went back to China and told them. They said they'd check and then told me they'd give me my money back in six months. Eventually they only paid me for fifty of the phones. I don't do business with that company any more. After that, I never buy mobiles in China; I'd prefer to buy them in Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, if a mobile is not good, I bring back that mobile and it's instantly changed, but not in China.

Smart traders are well aware of these problems and have ways of dealing with them. One East African merchant dealing in office supplies told me that the company he does business with in China shows him every step of the production process. When the goods are being packed in the container, he takes photographs, and the owner of the Chinese company—a young woman—makes a CD, giving one copy to him and keeping a copy, so that both sides have an exact record of what was packed. Another trader found out recently that the Chinese factory he buys from was giving him a foreigner's price, charging him more than they would an ethnic Chinese. He learned of this practice from a Singapore man on a flight in China. Rather than getting angry at the Chinese, he simply hired the Singapore man and gave him a commission for getting the business himself as a Mandarin speaker and ethnic Chinese.





The most successful traders I have interviewed are those traders in south China who speak Mandarin and intimately know Chinese society and culture, frequently as a result of having studied in China and lived there for a decade or more. Often they are not primarily traders, although they certainly engage in that, but also middlemen between Chinese manufacturers and African traders who come to them in search of connections. A problem is that in an African cultural context the broker cannot easily ask for payment for his services directly from the trader, especially if the trader is a friend of a family member. If there are commissions from Chinese factories for his services, as there generally are, and if the order is big enough, he will profit handsomely—although he also may bear responsibility for the goods shipped from the factories he recommends to the buyers back in Africa.

The visa situation for Africans in China has long been tenuous. I came to meet a number of long-term residents of China in Chungking Mansions, since they had to come to Hong Kong to renew their China visas. In summer 2008, in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics, the situation in China became more precarious, and many Africans who had previously been able to obtain long-term visas in China were now given only a few days, or even shut out of the country altogether. Although the situation improved for many

after the Olympics ended, some Africans remained shut out of their adopted country.

The most poignant case of this was that of a Kenyan man in his sixties who was a trader in agricultural machines between China and his home country. When I spoke with him in fall 2008, he had not returned to his apartment in Guangzhou for three months because he could not get a visa, and he did not have the money to return to Kenya, where, in any case, he had no home, his children having taken over his properties. He spent his days and months waiting in a tiny guesthouse room in Chungking Mansions, until either the Chinese immigration authorities relented or his friends in Kenya came through with an investment they had promised him. One day I went to visit him, and he was no longer there; I could not reach him in China. What happened to him I will probably never know.

One large pattern in trade is the competition between African traders and Chinese corporations—the latter have more capital and may squeeze the former, shaping traders' strategies. A gem trader from Madagascar said that he first dealt in clothing and then in seafood before turning to gems. He began with clothing because there was a high demand and little supply in Madagascar, but then Chinese clothes merchants migrated to Madagascar and forced many locals out of the industry by offering cheaper prices and larger quantities of lower-quality merchandise.

He then turned, at a customer's suggestion, to dried seafood (apparently shark's fin, considered an aphrodisiac) and was temporarily successful. However, as soon as the Chinese realized that locals had a taste for such products, they began to import them, and once again he had to find another product to trade. One of his friends introduced him to the stone business, sapphires brought from Africa to China, a market that the Chinese have yet to penetrate although sooner or later they probably will.

Another African trader told me, "The Chinese are very clever. If you send goods to some African address two or three times, they'll take note and send a Chinese company agent there who will sell their goods there more cheaply than you can." Ultimately the African traders in Chungking Mansions are in competition with Chinese merchants and companies; the Chinese will eventually win, but this hasn't happened yet.

### The Perils of Customs

A major problem faced by these traders once they return to their home, and the biggest barrier many traders face in their pursuit of profit, is that of customs officials in their home countries.<sup>15</sup>

Some bigger traders—those who deal with single types of goods whose value is officially given in the consignment paperwork—can pass through customs of various countries more or less legally, without paying bribes. But even these traders must sometimes take extraordinary measures, by developed-world standards. As one Tanzanian trader in machine products told me, “It would be absolutely insane to leave the container open for a night, because you’ll never see anything again. I try to arrange everything in one day, even paying the customs officers overtime. I just have to stand there until they’re finally done. And they take their time.” He pays a standard 12 percent duty on his goods.

Other traders, especially if they are dealing in an array of different goods, say they have no choice but to bribe. As a trader from West Africa said,

If I pay customs, I may lose everything. I can't pay it all. If you buy a hundred mobile phones, you must pay fifty as tax. It's better to give the customs person two mobile phones as a present instead. You have to be illegal; you have no choice. It's the only possible way. I have a friend, his father is a minister in the government. Everything he buys he pays no taxes. He can do that because his father works in the government. When someone is a minister's son, nobody can touch him. . . . Sometimes customs comes to my shop and says, “Oh, how much did this phone cost?” because they want money. You cannot stop them. If you don't give them money, they bother you. So you pay them off. The customs in Africa is not like Hong Kong or the US. When you come back, they want to check everything. They always want money. Better to give them a present.

He showed me the array of wallets and purses and mobile phones he had bought as gifts—some for his sisters, others for customs officials. This is the way everything works in his country, he said.

He indicated that corruption and connections worked hand-in-hand, in the sense that the better connected a trader was, the less he would be harassed by customs. If someone is seeking excess money from him in customs, he will go to his higher-up connection to alleviate it, he said. Another trader, from East Africa, spoke of how he must carry back in his own consignment of goods fifty kilos of gifts, because so many government ministers and officials want something from him. He brings back many suits—he took one look at me and told me my waist size; he was right.

There are different ways in which bribes are paid. In some places, like the Congo (Kinshasa), the trader simply forks over the money and goods, whether intended as customs payment or as bribes. In other places, it is sub-

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Goods

der. In Nigeria, it is common for the officials at the airport to signal the trader to leave their bribe at a designated place where they can easily retrieve it after the trader has left, so that it does not seem too suspicious. As law enforcement has been tightening, it is safer to proceed in this less direct way because it is less incriminating.

In some countries, including a number in Africa, traders are viewed simply as an easy source of gifts and cash with which to line one's pockets. The idea is that aside from the formal payments of customs, which go into the national tax coffers, the trader also owes the customs officials something more personal, a private gift for expediting customs. In other countries, traders may be treated badly for more nationalistic reasons: they are seen as bringing in goods that undermine the industries of their home countries.

This is the case in India and, at least rhetorically, in Nigeria. The temporary workers with whom I traveled back to India carry in their luggage China-made clothing and seem despised by customs. Customs in Kolkata only allows these traders to have their goods processed between two and five in the afternoon, with arriving passengers taking first priority. As I discussed in chapter 2, sometimes the traders must make their way back and forth between their homes and the airport day after day, waiting for the customs officials to finally deign to deal with them: they are at bureaucracy's mercy. This is true not just for clothing; an Indian trader of electronic goods said, “Anything electronic you bring in, they'll try and tax you on it, even though India doesn't really have an electronics industry to speak of. It's a hangover from the socialist, protectionist government of decades past.”

The Nigerian government has banned all clothing imports in order to encourage the local production of clothing, but the effect is simply that clothing in Nigeria is smuggled in, rendering all traders illegal. This is the argument over free trade versus protectionism that can be heard in countries across the globe and often decried in the pages of journals such as the *Economist*, advocating open markets above all else. In this case, this argument directly affects these small traders in their pursuit of a living.

Once traders arrive back in their home countries, there are a variety of different paths their goods take. It is hard to know these in detail, since the basis of my research has been people more than goods, and the people I know are often no more than one link on a complicated distribution chain. To my regret, I have never been able to follow an item from its manufacture in south China to its final destination in a consumer's home in Africa or South Asia. Many of the traders I know have no idea where their goods ultimately go. The Indian traders discussed above simply hand their parcels of clothing to waiting wholesalers in the Kolkata airport and receive their pay-

ments: "The clothes are sold in markets all over India," is as much as I have been able to find out. Nigerian phone dealers often sell their consignment to wholesalers in the central phone market in Lagos; more often than not, they never see the retail buyers of their phones, and inferior phones cannot be traced directly back to them. Many traders I know belong to larger entities, either informal groupings of traders, in which they buy goods for "the boss," or more formal companies. In these cases they are more or less protected from direct individual risk.

On the other hand, some traders are directly involved in the sale of their goods to retail customers. I have spoken with a clothing dealer from Zambia who packed his clothes in several bags and took a bus off to villages to sell them. As he said, "The timing has to be right—it has to be after the harvest, when people have money." Sometimes he traded in kind, clothing for whatever foodstuffs he could obtain from their harvests. But now he has a store in Lusaka, so the wholesalers from the villagers come to him to buy clothing.

Indeed, many traders I have spoken with have stores in urban areas, in cities such as Nairobi, Accra, Dar es Salaam, or Kampala, and buy to stock their stores. The owner of an electronics store in Mauritius said that his customers all know full well when he makes his runs overseas to replenish his merchandise; they want his newest goods and so await his return. He told me that he had called his wife back in Mauritius the day before we spoke, and she had said, "Customers want to see you back here. Why don't you change your flight? Don't come back Thursday, come back tomorrow."

The general rule is that the more individual and the smaller the volume of trade, the greater the risk. This is both because customs in particular can more easily exploit those who lack connections and because the vicissitudes of an unpredictable global market at home and abroad can so easily destroy those traders who lack the backing of companies or patrons. I met a Nigerian trader who was blindsided by a fire on December 20, 2007, perhaps set by real-estate speculators, in which the largest clothing market in Lagos burned to the ground. Because his buyers were based in this market and lost most of their money as well as stock, he suddenly found that he had no customers for the clothing he had bought in Hong Kong and lost his shirt. I have mentioned traders blindsided by the Beijing Olympics, or by exchange-rate fluctuations in the wake of the economic downturn of late 2008. Their difficulties might have happened to the entrepreneurs of high-end globalization as well, but the risk is far higher for these vulnerable foot soldiers of low-end globalization.

Here are the accounts of several traders I've met in Chungking Mansions.

James Frimpong

I used to be engaged in importing mobile phones, but I stopped because the market was so crowded. Now I deal with electronic goods and particularly with computer accessories, things like hard drives and connecting cables. I'm Ghanaian. I had a large shoe factory in Ghana, but I got away from that. My wife is Ghanaian German and has been living in Germany for the past seventeen years. I wonder, still, if I should go to live in Germany; I've already begun to scout out opportunities.

I've been to Hong Kong four or five times; I've only been coming to Hong Kong for a year. I've long been a businessman—I was dealing in coffee and living in Nigeria for a few years, as well as dealing in the shoe business. As a businessman, there's always risk, but I can calculate it. I keep changing what I buy and sell based on the price. The last trip I made, I bought headkerchiefs for women, especially Muslims. The average price was 9 rmb [*renminbi*, the currency in mainland China], a little over one US dollar. I was able to sell them in my country for about five US dollars; there's a huge difference. In Ghana, I had gone around the market, asking for prices of certain goods, and saw that there was a huge demand for headkerchiefs and for scarves to tie around the waist. That's why I don't depend on one item only but keep changing, depending on where I see the demand. I don't sell to the market people; I sell directly to the consumer. This makes my goods go very, very fast. I have lost money on trips. On one trip, I found that they were doing a bonanza sale on some of the kinds of goods I bought; I was forced to sell at their price.

No, I don't know, usually, whether what I'm bringing in is copy or not, but I can tell by the price whether or not it's a copy. As for customs, the young traders often don't know the rules, they don't know how to play the game, and that's what gets them into trouble. You can go to the consular office in any place that Ghana has a consulate and look up the trade rules, what you get charged for in terms of imports and how much. But a lot of the young guys don't do that—they simply carry it back, without thinking through what they're going to have to pay. This is where problems come in—these guys then may offer bribes, or do various things to overcome the duties they're asked to pay. With me, it's clear: because I've got a clear list of what I'm carrying, and because I've checked the rules in advance, I know how much it's going to cost me.

When I come to Hong Kong I want to stay in Chungking Mansions, an area with lots of Africans. This is the heart of Hong Kong; this is where the action is. Here you meet people who are your type, and you can get lots of



information. If you deal with the Chinese, you can get ripped off. But here they can give you a note of caution: "Hey, watch out. . . ." China is worse than Hong Kong for racism. There are damned silly people there—I mean it! You sit on a bus, and no one will sit next to you sometimes. That happens a little in Hong Kong, but in China, it's like a vacuum. They have no regard for you there. But it's not a problem for me: I just do business and leave. I don't allow certain things to weigh me down.

My mother had nine kids, and my father had three from another marriage. Now there are two in Italy, one in South Africa, three in the US, and three in Ghana—yes, we're scattered all over the world. I don't see them very much, but we talk all the time on the phone. They're in the US legitimately—they have their green cards. One used to work for an oil company in New Jersey and has a degree in mechanical engineering—now he's a big person in Ghana. One of my brothers is trying to set up a radio station in Italy. We all manage. Yes, anywhere can be home, if we can make money there! My father lived in London in the late 1940s and 1950s. We inherited a taste for adventure from him! I left Ghana much later than anyone else. My grandfather was the first person to introduce modern shoe technology into Ghana. My grandfather helped my father to win a scholarship to learn leathery and tannery, and that's what I wound up doing.

Life changes like the shoreline of the sea. You could be up today and down tomorrow. I was exporting raw coffee to Europe—I was in big-time business. I took out a huge loan to expand the business, but that year we had the shock of our lives—coffee prices collapsed. That ended my reign. It took me four years to pay off the money; the bank wanted to auction off my holdings. I've led a very good life, and the credit goes to my father. In Ghana, I'm not particularly rich. There are people streets ahead of me. But I'm making a living. Business is a risk, just like life. All life is risk, but you have to do your homework too, investigate everything.

Ernest Msika

I'm from Tanzania and have been coming to Hong Kong and to China for the past five years. I trade in building materials—there's been a boom in my country in construction. The government in Tanzania had mismanaged factories; goods had less quality, and prices were high. Our economy started opening up in 1995 to 1996: that's when the government decided to let people do business. Roofing materials, cement for plastering walls, ceramic and porcelain tiles, gypsum board—I import all these from China.

In Tanzania, no, I don't really meet customs agents who ask for money

under the table. There is an inspection company that I use, owned by the Swiss; before I ship my goods from China, I invite one of their agents in China to inspect them and indicate the real value. The customs office in Dar es Salaam accepts this; the inspection company has proved the value, so there's no problem. Most of the time, it's traders who start the problem—they start cheating. If you cheat, and the customs officer finds out, he'll use that as an advantage to get some money from you. But if you declare your goods—3,000 square feet of tiles, and they look and see 3,000 square feet of tiles—it's clear, there's no problem about it.

In East Africa now—Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda—you can calculate the taxes from the goods in advance. But my friends in West Africa always tell me that they can't do that there—they can't calculate in advance. Last week, my friend was telling me that he went to Kinshasa, in the Congo and didn't pay any duties—he landed in the airport and there was no customs officer. On another occasion, though, he paid US\$4,000 in taxes for goods worth US\$2,000, so he can't ever calculate.

But you know, most traders in this world, they don't like to pay duties. They think it's their right to make more profit. Most traders who are complaining are small scale—they mix goods, maybe fifty mobile phones, twenty pairs of jeans. It's hard to calculate duties for them; it's a headache for the customs officer—he has to calculate each and every item. Most of the small-scale traders don't take the time to do research. It's like they are trading based on sheer luck: "If I can pass through customs, thank God! If I get stuck, it's a bad day." They don't know how much they're supposed to pay. There is much corruption going on between customs officers and these small-scale traders.

These small African traders now, the number is being reduced because the bigger traders control the market more and more. The big traders see this as a way to speculate: they don't have to worry about whether they can sell three or four phones. The bigger scale you are, the less you have to worry about fixed costs, like transportation. Also, these big guys are the ones who can evade taxes more than anybody else. They can, for example, get a container and buy a used car, cut out the petrol tank, and fill it with mobile phones; no one inspects it. What the customs officer sees is the car. A small trader has to carry his phones on the flight: the customs officer at the airport can easily see that. Yes, everything I do is legal. That's why I'm not scared to talk to you. Yesterday after we were talking, someone came up to me and said, "Do you know that guy? He was asking you lots of questions."

There is a language barrier in China. I took a two-month course in Chinese; I do speak Mandarin Chinese. I decided that China is going to be my second home in business for the coming ten to fifteen years. Still, I feel very

strongly that Tanzania is my real home. I want to contribute something to the society, change it. People worked hard in Hong Kong and look at what it is now! I'm always telling my fellow Africans, "If you run away from home, then who's going to build Africa?" They're always complaining. That's our problem. We complain a lot, but we don't contribute anything to build our home. I have friends in Great Britain and America—I tell them, "If we got together, we could create some changes. We could do something!" Yes, governments may be bad, but the governments are run by people.

In customs in Hong Kong, they keep taking Africans out of line and searching them. This happened to me last time I came to Hong Kong. I said to the customs officer, "Do you think I'm stupid? If I wanted to smuggle drugs, I wouldn't have them in my luggage. I'd just get a Chinese girl to take them in."

Kofi Nyame

I'm from Ghana; I've been to Hong Kong four times. Sometimes I can make as much as fifty percent profit, other times, no. I've always at least recovered my costs. But sometimes you can get bogged down in the harbor or the airport in Ghana waiting—your goods may lose value. Some people want to cheat the customs. If you want to cheat them, and you are caught, that's a problem. But if you go the legal way, the charges on the goods as customs fees are sometimes higher.

If I have my way, I would rather cheat them. Sometimes it's difficult, because there's not just one person—there may be two or three or four people there, so it's not easy paying them off. But sometimes it's possible. The laws are strict in Ghana, but there are some people who are willing to take bribes. If you have a container, it's very difficult to bypass customs. You can under-declare the value of the goods, but you can't dodge the whole container!

I deal with electrical items, fluorescent tubes and fittings. I don't necessarily have to come back to Hong Kong and China—I can hire an agent who can pay the balance. Yes, I can trust the agent—he's Chinese, but he works with Africans. Of course he's still an agent—if they want to manipulate you, they can! If I have liquid money, I buy mobile phones; they're quick, and in two or three weeks, they're sold and finished, so I can do other things. I sometimes sell to established stores, but also to small businesspeople selling in street markets. I'm trying to make a living, and I must look around to know what can help me to do that. I'm exploring all the avenues.

I completed school in 1994 and then went to Israel to do manual jobs and lived there for a number of years. But I didn't want to stay there—they

are not my people. I didn't like to stay in somebody else's country. Salaries were much higher in Israel—there I do a manual job and get my dollars, but in Ghana I do a decent job and don't get dollars. So I closed my eyes and worked in Israel. In Ghana, I could have had a much better job, but at that time, we were under military rule and there was such hardship—it's better now. I only travel now so that I can make money.

Yes, in Hong Kong I stay in Chungking Mansions. Guesthouses are very expensive—I must pay HK\$100 to HK\$120 per night, apart from food. So I spend five days, one week, and I have to go back. I see Hong Kong as a cosmopolitan area with many people from many places. But in Chungking Mansions, African people go to certain places, certain guesthouses, and Indian people go to other places—that's the situation.

Every time I come here, there's money on me. Typically, an African trader might carry from US\$5,000 to US\$20,000. But there are also very big businessmen, people who send lots of containers back—they pay through the bank. Sometimes people get a room in the guesthouse with two beds, for two people. But I don't like it—I get a room with one bed. If there are two people, you don't know if you can trust them. I've never had money stolen. They say in China, they snatch your bags on a motorbike—you're warned about that. I've heard that many times about China, but not about Hong Kong.

I've built a house in Ghana—I have two kids in school. Yes, Ghana is my home; there's no place like home. Being an African is like being a Jew—no matter where I am, I'm still an African. First I am a Ghanaian; secondly, I'm Ashanti. I see the Ashanti as my brother, but outside of Ghana I am Ghanaian, just like Scotch people outside of the United Kingdom. I'm proud that I am Ghanaian. If you come to Africa, Ghana is the first. Other Africans see us as a pacesetter. We Africans have to concentrate on developing our continent. There are so many stigmas, so many difficulties. Only we can do it. That's why, even though I've traveled so far, I want to go back. I'm proud of myself, my culture, and my country, as an African and a Ghanaian.

Abraham Idowu

I'm Nigerian; I spend half of my time in Guangzhou, half in Lagos, and come to Hong Kong for visa purposes. I've been to places all over the world, but there's no building like Chungking Mansions. It's such a mixture. Chungking Mansions is for everyone. When I first came to Chungking Mansions, my Hong Kong business connections said, "What are you doing in that place? That's a slum."

I first left Nigeria for trade in China in 2004. After I got my master's degree, I worked with a bank for eight months in Nigeria, but I was restless and didn't like doing the same thing every day. When I went to China, my folks, my friends said, "China? What are you going to do there?" I had information about cheap products; I went with my friend, who had more experience. Once I arrived, before I knew it, I fell in love with China; since then, I've never looked back. Because of the language, it was very difficult at first. I had an interpreter. The people I was buying from in China told me that I didn't need to use an interpreter; she was getting extra money. Now I have translation software I use—that's all I need. They laugh at me for the little Chinese I know, but that's enough.

I supply computers to the Nigerian government. As for accessories, yes of course, I get copies made. But the main business—computers—I don't compromise. If the computers don't work, if there's down time, they're going to get mad! That wouldn't be good for the business. I'm not the main provider of computers—I'm very small. Typically, in Nigeria, a big man gets the contract, and he sells small portions of it to other people—you've got to do it well so that he'll give you more next time. Am I doing well for someone my age? I'm trying my best. I was fortunate—I got some right information at the start. But if I got in trouble, I could make calls. The connection could even be someone you've never met, a friend's uncle, for example. Because your friend knows you, he can stand for you. Tribe helps too—it helps everywhere.

The new government in Nigeria is trying to end corruption. Instead of bribing someone, why not pay the right fees and give back to society? But corruption is inevitable. I send computers back to Nigeria for the government; for these, I pay 5 percent duties. But I can't take just one thing in the consignment; those other things will not be declared. What you declare you pay to the government. But what customs sees that you don't declare—that's where the corruption comes in. It might be stuff for my friends—people at customs might see my shirt, my suit and say, "I'd like three of those." If you declared this, it would be considered contraband; you couldn't get it in the country, so you've got to hide it in your consignment.

Customs is the hardest part of my business. Some customs guys will take US\$50, others US\$200, others US\$1,000; some need a suit, others shoes, to get the job done. They'll say, "I really like that wristwatch," or "I don't have a belt"—you know what they want. It's PR; it makes them know your name—when the government is clamping down, you can call them and they will help you. I call them in advance: "I'm going to be coming in this Saturday." If there's trouble, they'll say, "Don't fly this time." Yes, this is corruption, but they don't call it corruption—it's like you're returning a favor. Of thirty dol-

lars, the government gets ten dollars of tax; the officials get ten dollars for themselves, lining their own pockets, and I get ten dollars profit.

China has caused factories to close all over the world, because goods are made so cheaply there. To make goods in Nigeria is going to cost more than importing. In Nigeria, you have to buy diesel generators. The costs are so high—why waste your time and money? It's easier to go overseas; in China they can make your order in weeks. It's crazy to have to do this, but it's cheaper.

I'm not married yet. Maybe next year, I don't know who. But Chinese girls are too emotional—they don't trust their guys. If I get married, I have to marry a traveler. She doesn't have to be Nigerian—it could be anyone. I love my country. I want things to get better, the government to be responsible. But I call myself a black Chinese—I wouldn't mind living in China twenty years from now. I could adjust to anywhere!

In China, I'm always busy. All these phone calls of people who want something done. In Africa, we're family inclined. If someone wants something done, they get to you through someone you know: they come to you through your sister, or mother, or brother, or father. You have to do it. I really like Hong Kong because I don't have to deal with the people who call me in China; I tell them, "Sorry, I'm in Hong Kong. I really can't help you now." In Nigeria, there's so much to do—rushing around getting papers from different offices and so on. What takes the most time is traffic. I get so tired. It's only in Hong Kong that I don't get tired.

### The Significance of Goods and Traders

These traders exist because it is cheaper to buy goods such as building supplies, furniture, and clothing, as well as electrical goods and mobile phones, halfway around the world in China than in traders' own countries, even after adding in plane fare, shipping costs, and customs expenses. The traders I spoke with, such as Abraham Idowu, said that because electrical power was so unreliable, because taxation rates were so high in their home countries, and because "no one trusts things made in Africa, they have to be from overseas," it makes perfect sense for them to be able to do what they were doing. The comfortable livings they are often able to make, at least in their home countries, attest to this.

However, some of the traders I interviewed used this question to bemoan the state of Africa. As another Nigerian trader told me, "Why can't my country make anything for its own people? Why is the electricity so unreliable? Why is my country so poor even though it has so many natural resources?"



What's wrong with Africa?" he asked, with considerable anguish. His answer was colonialism's legacy, although he acknowledged that ended fifty years ago: "Why are our leaders so bad today? Why is there so much corruption?" He could not answer these questions.

I often asked African traders as well as officials whether the traders' role is positive or negative for their customers and their countries. Are they simply buying shoddy goods with which to cheat their customers? Some traders acknowledge exploitation: "I get good mobile phones for my family and friends in the city, but cheap copies for villagers. They don't know any better," one West African trader told me. An African business official said bluntly, "These traders are criminal. They're not helping the African people they sell goods to; basically they're cheating customers. All the hard currency goes out, to buy these products, and the products are of low quality." An East African legislator, knowledgeable about trade, spoke to me as follows:

My conservative estimate is that 65 percent of traders coming from China cheat. They are always trying to beat the system by avoiding customs, which is a major issue to the community. When they reach the market, they play on the ignorance of clients by not telling them that these are counterfeit goods, or used goods; they still try to sell them at the price of the original. A conscious consumer will know that a given Nokia phone is not original, but an ignorant consumer will go ahead and buy it. After two weeks the car piece is dead, and you fix it for US\$5; after another two weeks, the mouthpiece is dead, and that costs you another US\$10; a month later, the battery is worn out, and so you must pay US\$15. . . . In essence, you've bought the phone twice, which equals the cost of the original, good phone.

This is no doubt often true, but may be only one side of the story. Many traders indicated that whatever they themselves were doing to make money was dwarfed by the monumental corruption of the governments in their home countries. The products they brought home, even if copies, are not necessarily of low quality, although often they are. Most copy goods are functional for at least a while—definitely clothing and most mobile phones and electronic goods as well—and high-quality copies are often practically as good as the original at a fraction of the price.\* The prices charged to their

\*How do original manufacturers view copies? A Nokia employee once told me strictly off the record that Nokia may not much object to copies of their mobile phones. Since their buyers are those who cannot now afford the real model but aspire to it, their purchase of copies may lead to their eventual purchase of the genuine article if their

fellow countrymen for these goods reflect the costs incurred by these traders' global routes as well as their desire for profits, but the sheer number of traders means that competition keeps their prices down, at least in many areas.

Most traders I spoke with maintained that the role they played was a fundamentally positive one. This is hardly surprising, given the fact that they are defending their livelihoods, but their reasoning is nonetheless worth noting. A Ghanaian mobile phone trader said, "Of course we're helping our country in our trading. Before, only a very tiny number of Ghanaians had mobile phones, but now almost everyone does. That's because we bring them the phones." An intellectual Congolese trader said that traders like him are "expanding the imaginations" of the poor, by showing them what high-quality goods are like—giving them the chance to see good things will cause them to no longer take for granted that everything around them must be broken and shabby, he claimed. A reflective Kenyan trader told me, "Nobody in my country can buy an original brand of suit, or an original phone by a famous company. It's too expensive. But these copies can show them good things. The traders are bringing the world to Africa. They are bringing home goodness!"

It is indeed these traders and the goods they carry that bring, through China and Hong Kong, the world to Africa, for better or for worse. Chinese goods, according to these traders, however much disdained by some traders and customers, have an extraordinary impact. For all the shoddiness of many Chinese goods, they do bring to poor African societies a taste of the world beyond Africa. Even if this taste is copied, flawed, or used, it is nonetheless a real taste of the world beyond. This is the ultimate significance of these traders: they bring at least a facsimile of global goodness to the world's poorest continent.

incomes can ever match their aspirations. This is a complex matter. If copy phones are sold as originals, then companies such as Nokia and Samsung have every reason to object, since the copies downgrade the image of the originals. However, if copies are sold as copies, then there is less reason to object. Jose Rojas spoke to a genuine Nokia dealer in Lagos, Nigeria, asking him about the copies sold throughout the city; he was told that customers knew very clearly what they were buying and that copy phones were almost never confused with genuine phones. On the other hand, I myself spoke with a Nokia dealer in an East African city who was incensed at the number of customers who brought their copy phones to his shop for repair—they had no idea of the difference between copy phones and real phones, he said. In 2007, and more aggressively in 2009, Nokia initiated legal action against Chungking Mansions stores selling copy Nokia phones, indicating that at least officially, the company was unwilling to look the other way in the copying of its goods.



These traders may have a limited future. Chinese companies are moving into many African countries, as I've discussed, and may increasingly replace these traders over the next decade or two. Scholars have written extensively about China's growing trade and political relations with Africa.<sup>16</sup> This is increasingly becoming not just a matter of government or large corporate entities but of smaller Chinese companies and independent entrepreneurs as well. China's movement into Africa represents a shift of global significance, as China increasingly replaces the West, and particularly Africa's earlier European colonial masters, as sub-Saharan Africa's major trading partner and patron.

From a more particular standpoint, it seems likely that Chinese in Africa will increasingly be replacing the Africans who come to China, since they have money and the economics of scale on their side. Eventually, to the extent that Africa is able to fully enter the globalized world, African traders' migrations between Africa and China may no longer be necessary. For now, though, these traders, like the camel caravans or merchant ships of yore (but far more quickly) are bringing the goods of China back to their homes. They are, in a sense, the Marco Polos of developing-world globalization.

# FOUR

## laws

### The Omnipresent Shadow of the Law

Chungking Mansions would not exist as it is today if not for the flow of goods in and out its doors, as we have just seen. But these goods are traded against the backdrop of a matrix of laws, laws that can be transgressed only by taking a degree of risk. The backdrop of law is the case not just for traders. Whether it is the restaurant owner concerned about Chungking Mansions' lawless image, the temporary worker seeking to be seen only as a tourist, the trader with copy goods that just might get confiscated, the traveler concerned about the safety of his cash, or, a major focus of this chapter, the asylum seeker dreaming of a home in a new country, the law, as embodied by the police in Chungking Mansions, is ever present and inescapable.

Most people in Chungking Mansions need to worry about the law in at least some aspects of their livelihood. Many storekeepers understate sales on their annual income taxes (as is true throughout Hong Kong). Many stores sell copy goods that can always, at least in theory, be confiscated. Many businesses hire illegal workers, which, if found out, could subject them to severe legal penalties, and these workers themselves live an existence