

MAKING IT AT THE CHUNG-KING MANSIONS

Stories from the bottom end of globalization

Christian Lo

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Introduction

With its breathtaking skyline, gigantic harbor, numerous international financial institutions, and over a century old role as a main trading point between the Eastern and Western world, Hong Kong has for long been a place associated with international trade and economic globalization, involving movement of massive amounts of capital and commodities. In the midst of this cosmopolitan city lays the Chung-King Mansions, as perhaps one of the most profound expressions of globalization in the world today. In contrast however, to the general portrays the city offers of “high end” globalization performed by large international corporations in the city’s shining skyscrapers, the old and rundown Chung-King Mansions portrays a picture of the very “lowest end”, grass root level of globalization. It is a place where migrants, travelers, traders and workers from a number of developing countries in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa come to seek their fortune through trade and work. This, perhaps unique place in the world, is a place where globalization takes form in concrete and observable face-to-face encounters, and where money and goods from all over the world can literally be seen changing hands.

The main focus of this thesis are the stories and lives lived by a group of Indian and Ghanaian workers and dwellers, alongside a number of aspiring traders from a number of other developing countries, all of whom I met at the Chung-King Mansions.

In this thesis, in which I seek to comprehend both the transnational lives lived by these people, and the role played by the Chung-King Mansions in their lives, I will give an account of their own stories and experiences of migrating and surviving in both Hong Kong and elsewhere. In spite of the vast differences in the backgrounds of these people, I found a number of similarities in their stories concerning the choice of embarking on their journeys, and their strategies for creating and sustaining a livelihood through their mobile and transnational lives. With the help of comparative literature from the fields of modern migration and transnationalism, I will discuss these similarities in my findings, which, in turn, might contribute to a better general understanding and conceptualization of modern migration. During this thesis, I will

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also through reflections and discussion of my own study, bring attention to the anthropological challenges in studying mobile and transnational practices, and show how anthropological research, on such communities as the one found at the Chung-King Mansions, can contribute to a better understanding of mobile and transnational practices.

Questions of interest

When I first started my fieldwork, my knowledge of the Chung-King Mansions and its inhabitants was minimal. My approach was therefore simply to set up a few questions to be answered, and in turn move on to the new questions that revealed themselves in light of my initial questions.

My initial questions were simple: Who are these people, what are they doing, and how did they end up staying at the Chung-King Mansions. As my study progressed and my understanding of their life increased, the questions soon narrowed themselves into questions of why—why did they set out on these journeys, why did they come to the building, and why did they, despite obvious difficulties and seemingly little chance of economic advance, remain dwelling and working in the city.

What soon became apparent, was that most had left their homes in the hope of creating themselves a better life through creating a better livelihood based on the possibilities a mobile and transnational life entailed. Therefore, it soon became apparent that to answer my initial question, I needed to understand and further explore how these opportunities were conceived, and how they were acted upon through the individual strategies at play for creating a livelihood out of these possibilities.

In this respect, as will be elaborated in chapter two of this thesis, my enquiry became related to Sørensen and Olwig's (2002) suggestion of conceptualizing migration in relation to an analytical framework based on the concept of mobile livelihoods. By focusing on the strategies and practices involved in molding a livelihood out of their transnational lives, I hope to show both how the possibilities through migration were

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conceived and acted upon, and how the Chung-King Mansions played an crucial role in facilitating these strategies for my informants.

How this thesis works:

The course of this thesis will somewhat follow my initial approach, by digging deeper and deeper into the experience and realities lived by my informants as the readers' understanding of both the Chung-King Mansions and my informants' step-by-step increases.

In the first chapter, I start by giving a general description and introduction to the Chung-King Mansions and its place in Hong Kong. In order to provide the reader with background information about the site before moving further, the perspective applied in this chapter is much that of an outsider visiting the building.

The second chapter provides a theoretical point of departure for my enquiry with the help of comparative literature concerning modern migration and transnationalism. Simultaneously, I discuss the problems of fitting my informants' stories into any conventional concept of migration, and show how the concept of mobile livelihoods offered by Sørensen and Olwig (2002) might provide a more useful approach for my enquiry.

The third chapter concerns the methodology applied in my enquiry, and my relations to the people in question. The conditions of the field site are discussed in this chapter, along with the methodological concerns raised by doing fieldwork in such conditions.

Chapter four shifts the focus strongly over to the people in question, and their fascinating stories of how and why they came to the Chung-King Mansions. I attempt here to retell their own stories and experiences of traveling and coming to the Chung-King Mansions, and also discuss important similarities in their stories concerning both the decision to leave home, and the factors drawing them to Hong Kong and the Chung-King Mansions.

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Chapter five is probably the chapter where the reader is brought closest to the realities and experiences of living in the building. Particularly this chapter concerns the difficulties life in the building entailed for my informants, and how this led to a widespread ambivalent feeling of Hong Kong as a city of opportunity, but also an undesirable place to be.

In chapter six the point of view is slightly shifted back to that of the observer. Here I dig deeper into the nature of the social relations of my informants both within the building, and their transnational relations to their homes. I show how these relations were of vital importance for both surviving in the city, and for their strategies for molding a mobile and transnational livelihood.

Throughout this thesis, I give great emphasize to my informants' own stories and statements about their lives. As these statements and stories are a vital and crucial part of the thesis, I make an effort to quote them as accurate as possible, as they were written down on my notes during the fieldwork, and as they appear on my voice recorder used on some of the longer conversations during the fieldwork. This is done to minimize the risk of deriving the statements away from their original meanings.

On the request of my informants, personal names and specific names of businesses and some specific places have been altered. In the case of particularly sensitive information, I have also made an extra effort in making it impossible to connect sensitive information with specific persons.

Chapter 1

Facing the Chung-King Mansions

Situated on the southern tip of Kowloon's famous Nathan Road, which among both locals and foreigners is known as "the Golden Mile" because of its highly priced commercial properties, the Chung-King mansions seems amazingly misplaced.

The strange notion of leaving one world and entering another occurs even before you enter the building. Crossing Nathan Road from the east and heading towards the main entrance, you are leaving the world of top end hotels, Dunhill boutiques and Hagen Daz outlets, and entering a world that most of all brings your thoughts over to the "third part of the world". As soon as you take your first step on the sidewalk outside of the entrance you will be surrounded by an army of people trying to sell you everything from meals and guesthouse rooms, to tailor made suits and copy watches, and even some whispering into your ear asking if you would perhaps be more interested in sex or drugs. A British expatriate once described the situation to me in these words:

Within ten steps out of the [subway] exit, I had been offered copy watches, Indian food, guesthouse, hashish, sex, and a tailor made suit'!

(Personal conversation 3/6 2005)

The scenery is by Hong Kong (if not by all) standards chaotic. Mixing in to the bewildering display is the amazing diversity of human beings. People from all over the world, and of all ethnic variations seem to have in some amazing way, found their way into this little piece of earth, that is perhaps the most international location in a city that claims to be "Asia's world city".

There are the eight young Indians trying to convince you that each one of their restaurants is your best shot for authentic Indian food. The Chinese guesthouse owner convincingly explaining that you should pick one of his places to spend the night, since all of the Indian guesthouses are "very dangerous". There is the group of Nigerians a few meters away chatting vigorously about their day while sharing a

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cigarette. A Mongolian woman selling fake bottles of perfume while at the same time scouting nervously for police officers. Two Ghanaians, and one Congolese businessman shaking hands. The low voice from a slow passing tattooed and longhaired Nepalese, whispering; “Hashish, good stuff, best in Hong Kong.” The confused German backpacker wondering if this really is Hong Kong. A group of drunken Bangladeshi men sitting on the sidewalk, drinking and laughing at the whole display. And there is the Filipino, or sari wearing Indian prostitutes, coming over after you have finally managed to waded all the others off, wondering if perhaps some “jiggy jigging” was what you really were looking for.

Entering the building through the main gate, some of the initial stressful chaos wears off, while the confusing set of impressions peaks. For the first time you notice the rundown condition of the building, which is not to visible from the front side which is these days largely covered by a gigantic metropolitan style television displaying news and ads. The grey walls inside are covered with red spots from the spitting of pan, garbage in every corner, wires hanging from the ceiling, the smell of strong flavored food mixed with a scent of “old”, all adding to the manic set of impressions. Then there is the mix of people seemingly always running around in confusing patterns. The feeling of having in some strange way suddenly left the tidiness of Hong Kong strikes you again, but where have you arrived? No matter how many times I entered this place, I could never rid myself of asking the same question as I passed the entrance: “What is this Place”?

The Chung King Mansions

Built in 1962, (Hong Kong handbook, 1998) the Chung-King Mansions are made up of five seventeen-story blocks, connected together in two ground floors. According to descriptions found in older tourist guidebooks, the building quickly degenerated into a centre for gambling, drugs and prostitution, much with the help of US servicemen on leave. In the 1970s the building became a focal point for the Indian community in Hong Kong, and has since then remained a focal point for many new groups of people arriving to the territories.

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Today the Chung-King Mansions stand as a kind of international arcade for the poor new arrivals to the territory, and a haven for refugees and illegal workers from third world countries in south Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. The guesthouses in the building are considered the cheapest place to stay in an otherwise expensive Hong Kong.

These facts attract third world businessmen from south Asia and the sub-Saharan African continent, which come to Hong Kong in the hope of earning money by importing goods from China back to their home countries. The cheap guesthouses have also for a long time attracted budget travelers, and today enjoy a close to legendary status among hardened backpackers.

It is situated on the southern tip of Nathan Road (36-44), in the heart of the Tsim Sha Tsui area, which is otherwise known as a highly priced commercial district on the Kowloon side of the Hong Kong territory. In sharp contrast to the reputation of the Chung-King Mansions, the area is best known for its glittering hotels, shopping centres and giant nightclubs. However the Chung-King Mansions is not entirely misplaced, as Tsim Sha Tsui is also in many ways the communication central of the Kowloon side. It is within short distance of both buses and the metro system which can affordably carry people to all parts of the territory, and has recently been connected with a KCR (train) station, which makes both the New Territories and Mainland China easily accessible through short train trips. The area's wide offer of hotels has also made it an area where much of the city's growing number of tourists and travelers are concentrated, and it holds the widest number of foreigners on the Kowloon side of the harbor. The area also holds long traditions as a centre for the Indian community in Hong Kong. This is today best signified with the location of Hong Kong's biggest Mosque, the Kowloon Mosque, which lies next to what is now Kowloon park, but used to be the Whitfield barracks which up until 1967 was home to British and Indian troops serving in Hong Kong. Both are located only a short walking distance away from the Chung-King Mansions, heading north up Nathan Road.

The Chung-King Mansion's appearance today largely reflects both its history and its newer role as a centre for third world businessmen and traders. The old rundown building has virtually become a city of its own, where all the traders' and travelers' needs can be met. The two ground floors are a maze of Indian restaurants, wholesale

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electronics and clothing shops, souvenir shops, travel bureaus, money bureaus, shipping companies, and Indian import shops selling everything from Indian groceries to the newest Bollywood movies. Further up, the five different blocks are filled with even more Indian restaurants, African restaurants, various trading companies, two Christian missionary stations, a few brothels, private apartments, and close to a hundred guesthouses.

The two ground floors that connect the five blocks are filled with life throughout the day. Starting around 6AM, the first food stalls start serving breakfast. There are around nine food stalls spread around the two ground floors. Most of them have very limited kitchen space on the ground floors, but do most of the cooking in restaurants further up in the building, and thereby act only as “sale stalls” for the bigger restaurants further up. They mostly consist of small counters with a display of food, and, in most of the cases, a few tables and chairs spread around the hallway just in front of the desks. In the early morning the most popular dishes are oven fresh chapattis served with either a mild curry or an omelette, and a cup of Indian chai. The meals are usually enjoyed rather quickly, either standing in front of the desk or sitting for a few minutes by a table, before people run off to start their days. The morning hours bring a strange atmosphere to the building. Two of the food stalls play loud Arabic Koran verses through speakers which echo through the entire ground floors, a sound very unusual to Hong Kong. The ethnic mingle of people starting their day, dressed in everything from “hip hop” style clothing, to business suits, and even colorful ethnic outfits, also contributes to the feeling of being in some “indefinable” space.

At around noontime, most people are awake and have started their daily doings, all shops are now open, and the food stalls are serving warm lunch dishes. The ground floors are crowded with people who all seem to be hurrying off to one location or another; meeting business partners, bringing goods in and out of the building, pushing newly arrived customers into shops, guesthouses and restaurants, bargaining for merchandise, exchanging cash, and so on. The chaotic display for which the building is famous is also now starting to build up on the sidewalk in front of the building. Already the street is filled with guesthouse workers and others fighting over newly arrived visitors. Rumours have already circulated among them, telling about what

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flights are landing and leaving today, so that they all know at which times they should be prepared and what customers they can expect today. Some also spend their time guiding visitors around in the hope for big commissions, often bringing businessmen to distant places in Hong Kong where they can get the best deals for what they are looking for, or perhaps to visa bureaus where the visitors can get the Chinese Visa for their next step in their travel, often by train into Mainland China.

In the early evening, around 6PM, the sidewalk has turned into total chaos, with sellers, guesthouse workers, and restaurant workers trying to grab just about anyone struggling to walk past the entrance. On the inside things are no less hectic. The long, all day waiting lines in front of the elevators leading up to the blocks are now peeking. Hungry restaurant customers, tired guesthouse customers, workers, merchandisers with goods, businessmen and travelers finished with their daily tasks, are all now trying to climb into the crowded elevators. Further up in the blocks, the restaurants are having their peak hours, while the tiny corridors of the guesthouses are filled with people coming and going, stepping over piles of merchandise that are being packed into overfilled bags, ready to accompany eager trading travelers back to their home countries. There are close to a hundred of these small cramped guesthouses spread over the five blocks, many of them not consisting of more than 6-10 small rooms. Although most of them have different names, many of the owners own more than one guesthouse around the building, and employ managers (usually of Indian or Chinese origin) to take care of the daily running. These managers are, by necessity, usually HK ID cardholders with working permits, and take care of the daily management, often for several guesthouses. These again often hire illegal labour for work inside the guesthouses, and to grab potential customers off the street. Typically, Chinese (or Indian permanent resident) owners will hire an Indian with valid working license, and he will in turn hire close relatives and/or friends, often brought to Hong Kong specifically for the job, to work in the guesthouses. Also, there is a tendency for guesthouses, both Chinese and Indian managed ones, to hire an African traveler for the less desirable and lowest paid jobs, which are the cleaning and daily management of the guests. These jobs usually involve spending most of the day and night constantly inside the tiny corridors of the guesthouses, and all of the workers I spoke to described it as a “prison”, and a job accepted as a last resort. Because of immigration laws that allow up to two-month tourist and business visas to Ghanaians

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(if illegal work is not suspected), many of these jobs are in these days occupied by Ghanaians.

The standards and living conditions of these guesthouses vary greatly. The “Mandarin guesthouse”, in which I spent most of my days at the Chung-King Mansions, seemed pretty average both in clientele and condition. The Mandarin Guesthouse consisted of 7 rooms, all with tiny separated bathrooms with showers and toilet. 5 of the rooms were extremely cramped, with a large bed occupying most of the space. They would usually be fitted with an old noisy ready to explode color TV fitted above the bed, a window mounted A/C that probably exploded a long time ago, a small bedside shelf and a towel. The two (slightly) bigger rooms were also fitted with an extra bed. Most of the guesthouse gave the same “rundown” impression as the rest of the building. The walls and ceiling showed an obvious lack of care, and were filled with holes, which served as an entrance between the rooms and possibly a full eco-system of bugs inside the walls, ready to expand their territory as soon as the lights were switched off and the bug spray was out of sight. The Mandarin Guesthouse was also equipped with a tiny kitchen which mostly served as a store and washroom for the staff, there was however no toilet available for the staff which were forced to limit their “personal time” and showers in the guest rooms while the guests were out. The management of the Mandarin Guesthouse followed the typical account given above. A Chinese man whom nobody seemed to know much about owned it. An Indian manager named Mustafa, who also managed a number of other guesthouses spread around the blocks, managed it. Mustafa again would at any time employ a few Indians, most often bearing some connection to himself or his family, to find customers for all of his guesthouses. There would also at any time be one additional person hired for each guesthouse, responsible for cleaning the rooms and managing the guests.

Around midnight, the building’s character changes yet again. Outside on the sidewalk only the few unlucky guesthouse workers, with stonehearted bosses and a few rooms still empty, are still present. Now they are however not scouting backpackers or traveling traders, but mostly couples, willing to pay a hefty hourly rate for some privacy. Prostitutes and drug dealers, approaching you in a slightly more discrete manner, have now replaced the hustling hordes of restaurant workers. Everywhere

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there are small groups of people joining together with a beer or cigarette in their hands, discussing and laughing about the day's events. Around the corner from the entrance, the 7/11 shop has turned into a sort of bar. With a crowd both inside and outside, drinking eating and smoking, the 7/11 shop probably offers both one of Hong Kong nightlife's most international clientele, and lowest prices. Inside, the building is now offering herself from a less attractive angle. With most of the shops and booths inside now closed with grey iron bars, the day's garbage scattered around the floors, the scenery is dark and dreadful. Stray cats and security guards now make up most of the crowd, while drug addicts are hiding in the darker corners and on the stairs. Far inside the ground floor, one of the shops brings a small element of life into the building, as it has turned into a tiny bar consisting of a few plastic stools in front of a fridge selling beer and liquors to a small crowd of cheerful people. The main entrance has now also been closed with iron bars, with only a small door open controlled by a security guard, trying to keep prostitutes and other "undesirables" out of the building.

The result is often a crowd of drunks, dope dealers and prostitutes hanging out just outside the entrance, as the security guards only mind what is actually inside the building, leaving the outside for police patrols to handle. On the other hand, the police seldom wander into the building without being called up by the security guards, or others inside the building. The exceptions are large-scale operations and raids, usually drug or immigration related. The drunken crowds both inside and outside the building do however, more often than not, lead to some sporadic outbreaks of short fistfights during the night, which makes the visit by the police, often followed by an ambulance, a nightly event.

A few hours after midnight, up inside the guesthouses, things are starting to settle. With most of the paying guests already turned into their rooms, and most of the day's tasks finished, the workers are now beginning to settle in the tight corridors of the guesthouses. Food is usually brought up to the guesthouse from one of the many restaurant kitchens up in the blocks still open. If there is still a room in the guesthouse not occupied, the workers might enjoy their meals on the bed of the room. If not, which is usually the case, they are left to the floor of the corridor to eat, chat, watch movies and eventually sleep. The crowd gathering at the small cramped corridors of the guesthouse at night is seldom a steady group of people. Most of the workers work

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only for a few weeks each time before disappearing for some reason, mainly because of expired immigration visas. Many do however work regularly for the same manager, and have been working the same guesthouses for years, coming and going. (Their cycle of work and trade will be described in detail in chapters 3, and 6).

Also, some of the workers working at the guesthouses on a more regular basis would often bring traveling and newly arrived friends or family with no other place to stay, up to share the guesthouse floors with them. These visitors would then usually run errands and do some amount of work around the guesthouses in return for a place to sleep. Some of them would regularly show up in their friends' guesthouse with a few weeks or months interval, and stay while they attempted to do some amount of trade or look for a job.

Hong Kong

For the purpose of this thesis, there will be no need for any elaborate outlay of Hong Kong's history and economy. There is however a need for a very short description of the special economic and historic conditions that have shaped Hong Kong, and thereby the Chung-King Mansions, into today's picture.

Seeking a secure base from which to conduct trade with China, the British formally occupied Hong Kong Island on 26th April 1841. Industrialized and highly competitive Britain, being the engine for free market trade in the 19th century, quickly announced Hong Kong as "free from tariffs", making it soon grow into a main trading point between the Eastern and Western world. This policy, which has made Hong Kong profit from being a "free harbor" between a closed Chinese Mainland economy and the rest of the world, largely still remains. Hong Kong is today considered to be the world's freest economy (Gwartney and Lawson, 2005). Being a textbook example, in good and bad, of a free market economy, Hong Kong today has (with a few exceptions for special goods) no sales tax, export tax, or import tax, making it a haven for shoppers and traders.

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When considering the Hong Kong Territory being no more than 1,092 sq km, and with a population of close to 6.9 million (2005), this has according to Bueno de Mesquita (1996) led to some impressive trading figures for the territories.

-The port of Hong Kong is the world's busiest container port. It handles more containers than the whole of Britain, and ranks third behind the United States and Japan in annual container throughput. Hong Kong exports more containers in one month than Australia in an entire year, and each year the port expands by building new capacity equal to a port the size of Oakland.

-Hong Kong is the world's eighth-largest trading entity in terms of the value of its merchandise trade, rising from tenth place in 1993. Total export and import exceed \$250 billion, twice as large as its gross domestic product. The territory is the world's eleventh largest exporter of services.

(Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1996: 25)

On the 1st of July 1997, The British formally handed over the political control of the Hong Kong territories back to China, and ended a 150 years of colonial rule. The continuation of Hong Kong's political and economic systems was supposed to be ensured by two documents, the "Joint Declaration Treaty", signed by China and Great Britain in 1984, and the "Basic Law", enacted in 1990 in Beijing and supposed to act as Hong Kong's "mini-constitution". Under the slogan "One Country, two systems", China promised Hong Kong a high degree of autonomy and continuation of its social, economic, and political systems for at least 50 years after the 1997 handover (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1996: 25). Although Hong Kong's economic system today remains based on free trade economy, the territories have in the recent years after 1997 experienced a certain degree of economic slowdown, by some degree caused by a general downfall of the world's economy around the millennium shift. But also adding is the exceptional growth and opening of Mainland China's giant economy, leading to much of the trading business and investment now going directly into Mainland China, instead of through Hong Kong.

Infamous Chung-King

Among local Hong Kong people, the mix of chaos, shady business and hassle is what comes to mind when the Chung-King Mansions are mentioned. Although it is a location which enjoys a close to legendary or infamous status also among the locals, most of them know very little about what is actually inside the building and what is occupying the people inside it.

Except from the relatively small, but fast growing number of local Chinese Hong Kong people that come inside for some of the great value Indian restaurants, and of course the local Chinese people working and/or living inside the building, a surprisingly large majority of Hong Kong people have never actually been inside the Chung-King Mansions, and are therefore confined to rumors, urban legends, and occasional newspaper articles for their knowledge of the place. These stories, some more true than others, are more often than not connected to the “darker side” of the Chung-King Mansions, often telling tales about violence, drug trafficking, dangerous foreign criminals in hiding, murders, and even ghosts!

On two occasions during my fieldwork I acted as a “tour guide” inside the building, and had the opportunity to closely observe local young people visiting the building. The first occasion was with a group from a local university consisting of a mix of Chinese and American college students, the other was with a youth group from a local Christian church. On both occasions it was notable that almost none of the local Hong Kong youths had ever been inside the building, and nobody seemed to know much about the people staying there, besides that they were of Indian and African origin, and probably poor. When asked why they never had gone there the answers ranged from; “I think it’s dangerous” to “there is nothing in there for us, only for people buying drugs.” There might be some truth to the fact that there might not be much in there for them, if they’re not fond of Indian food, Bollywood movies, or perhaps drugs. It is still striking that they had never gone inside the building, especially considering the building’s location at the “golden mile” in the heart of the central and lively Tsim Sha Tsui area, but also considering the legendary and infamous status the building enjoys, in good and bad. Most of them had heard stories about the building and things happening inside, which should at least trigger some curiosity. But as

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mentioned above, many of these stories are stigmatizing, and enforcing the image of Chung-King Mansions as a dangerous place. It did not take too much effort to observe that many of the local students did not feel too comfortable while visiting the building.

This public image of the building is also reflected in many newspaper articles, and other sources referring to the building. An archetypical example is this quote from the 1999 edition of a popular Hong Kong guidebook:

Chunking Mansions is like a medieval town that has been under permanent siege since the 1600's, surrounded by a netherworld of sleaze and horrifying odors. Don't seek sanctuary in the lifts unless you have to; these are like steel coffins on cables.... For real-life vision of hell, take a look down the light wells of Chunking Mansions' D block.

(Lonely Planet Hong Kong, 1999:184).

The by far most famous reference to the building is however Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar Wai's international acclaimed movie "Chunking express" from 1994. In the movie, where some of the scenes actually were shot inside the building, the Chung-King mansions is captured as a sleazy, chaotic and confusing place, where one of the characters, a Chinese lady, is trying to smuggle drugs out of Hong Kong with the help of a group of Indians from inside the mansions. In the movie, the Chung-King Mansions seem to symbolize loneliness and a disconnection from the rest of the city.

Although the building management has done considerable work attempting to "clean up" the building in the recent years, celebrating the completion of a five year renewal plan last April, and installing Closed-Circuit TV surveillance along with tightened security, the public picture of Chung-King Mansions as a dangerous place filled with prostitution, crime, gambling, drugs and other "sleazy business", is still today not totally unjustified. All of the people that I spoke to which had been staying in Chung-King Mansions for a couple of years or more, agreed that the place was far worse, and far more dangerous only a few years ago. Even though much of the visible drug dealing and prostitution has now been pushed out of the ground floors, it is still not

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further away than the sidewalk outside or a couple of floors up in the building. Much of it is still based inside the Chung-King Mansions, and is most certainly a part of it. Violence is also still present, and there is barely a night that goes by without a short drunken fist fight in the ground floor or just outside the main entrance, and policemen walking fast through the entrance responding to a call from somewhere inside the building. The cleanup has not been as effective as an article in a local English language newspaper claims in its description of the building's recent facelift:

Now prostitutes, drug dealers and gangsters who used to ply their various wares amid the warren of guesthouses are gone, replaced with closed-circuit televisions, security guards and a fresher cleaner image.

(SCMP 28.04.2005)

However the most common crime inside the Chung-King Mansions is neither violent or drug related, but by far illegal working and people overstaying their visas. Two times during my fieldwork period the Hong Kong Police carried out large-scale operations inside the building in the middle of the night in the hope of uncovering illegal immigrants and illegal working. One of the raids must have involved (by my own estimates) over 200 police officers and around 100 immigration officers, sealing off every possible exit of the building around 04.AM before checking every restaurant and guesthouse room in the building, but resulting in the arrest of no more than eight persons of African origin overstaying their tourist visa.

During my fieldwork, I curiously followed a small debate in a local newspaper discussing a concern raised by some people worrying that the Chung-King Mansions unique character might be at risk of fading due to the clean up. The debate revealed that at least a small number of people in Hong Kong viewed the building to be an important landmark. Because, as a later edition of the guidebook previously mentioned claimed:

“There is probably no other place in the world like Chungking Mansions”.

(Lonely Planet Hong Kong, 2002:198)

Chapter 2

New forms of migration

“**immigrate**... 1 intr. come as a permanent resident to a country other than one’s native land...

travel... 1 intr. go from one place to another; make a journey esp. of some length or abroad...

transmigrant... -adj. passing through esp. a country on the way to another.

-n. a migrant or alien passing through a country etc. “

(The OXFORD Encyclopedic English Dictionary, 1991)

The popular image of immigrants, as cited above, is often focused around a century-old picture of poor immigrants leaving their home countries and villages to escape from poverty and seek their luck in richer countries, often with a dream of settling there permanently and experiencing some form of upward economic and social mobility. Popular descriptions also tend to describe migration as a one-way movement from a prior location to a permanent new location, despite modern immigrants’ tendencies towards mobility and flux. K.F Olwig and N.N Sørensen (2002) claim that the assumption of migration implicating a “rupture and brake” from prior life streams out of the socio-cultural construction of the national state. Predicated by nationalist ideology, the borders of the modern nation-state are believed to correspond with the borders of special socio-cultural communities.

According to this way of thinking, therefore, international migration involves more than simply crossing a political border protected by a large legal and administrative apparatus – it also means leaving a native country and culture in order to settle in “foreign” lands with an “unknown” culture. Migration therefore comes to implicate a rupture and break with former modes of life, and, eventually, integration into new ways of living.

(Sørensen and Olwig, 2002: 8.)

In opposition to these traditional views of migration, recent literature from the fields of globalization, growth of transnational communities, and new immigrants, has challenged these traditional views of migration, because they tend to ignore modern

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migrants' tendencies to maintain a strong presence in more than one locality. With the help of modern communication technologies, there has been a tendency among modern migrants to engage in socio-economic relations that expand beyond a single location. (Kearney, 1995; Portes, 1997; Basch, 1994; Smith, 2006)

In this chapter I wish to support these challenges, and show how experiences from the Chung-king Mansions might contribute to this literature concerning the nature of a new more transnational and unstable form of migration caused by new communication technologies and forces of globalization. I will first attempt to describe the problems of fitting personal stories collected in my research into the conventional image of migration, and I will thereafter show how the concept of transnationalism and transmigration might shed further light on my findings. At the end of this chapter I will also discuss how the concept of mobile livelihoods can provide a useful framework for understanding my findings, which in turn might perhaps shed some further light on the understanding of the forms of migration I encountered.

Immigrants, traders and travelers at the Chung-King Mansions

During my own research, I early encountered the problem of fitting my informants into the conventional concepts of immigrants. Many could however neither with ease be fitted into categories of “travelers” or traders.

Among my informants at the Chung-King Mansions, many considered themselves traveling businessmen coming to Hong Kong only to meet business connections, buy their goods, and set off back to their home countries to sell them for a profit.

Indeed many of them also did so. All of the time I spent around the building I would meet people engaged in trade. Some were arriving for the first time with their life savings converted to USD in their pockets, asking everybody they met where the best place was to buy cell phones, clothing, watches, electronics, washing machines, microwave ovens and even cars. Some had arrived alone for the first time, with a hand written note explaining in detail how to find the way from the airport to Chung-

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King Mansions. Many, however, were more experienced traders. Flying in with their pockets filled with dollars earned from their last trip, and only spending a few days in Hong Kong, they would hastily buy what they needed before setting off again.

On the other end, there would be the more settled group of people living and working more or less regularly at the Chung-King Mansions. Some had been working in Hong Kong and the Chung-King Mansions for years, some just a few months, and some again both arrived, and left, while I was there. Among my informants, most worked in businesses related to the travelers and trade, usually guesthouses and restaurants, but also at a few smaller shipping companies in the area, which would sometimes hire extra hands.

Most of these workers did not hold any HK ID card, and would typically be staying on a tourist or business visa. Depending on their nationality and the ability to convince the immigration officers that they were serious business traders, these tourist or business visas would usually be valid for a period of time from one week to three months. They did however not give permission to engage in any wage-work within the territory, with the result that most of these workers were working illegally.

Among the Indian workers, many had at some point in time been brought to Hong Kong with the promises of a specific job, usually offered by friends or relatives already in Hong Kong. Many had also come to Hong Kong hoping to earn money by trade or finding a job after arrival, sometimes both. Among the Ghanaian workers and travelers this was usually the case. Often Hong Kong had not been their originally planned destination, and many had traveled for longer periods of time around in Asia in search for jobs. Typically, countries like Singapore, Thailand or Mainland China would be in the Ghanaians traveling repertoire. Some also told stories of leaving their home because of promises of jobs in Mainland China, often as English teachers-- jobs that seldom turned out to be as glamorous as promised. With a tourist visa close to expiring in other Asian countries, and not enough cash for a return ticket to Africa, a trip to Hong Kong and the Chung-King Mansion would often be their only choice.

Staying in guesthouses gave me a good opportunity to meet both the travelers, and the people working around the guesthouses and building. The latter group naturally

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became the group I was most familiar with, since they were the ones I could spend the most time with. With a lot of people coming and going all the time, the community at the Chung-King Mansions is both mobile and in a state of flux, both because of the mobility of trade and the visa regulations forcing people to exit and reenter the territories every time their visa expired. Usually the visa problem would be sorted out by a quick daytrip to the mainland. But for the long-time dwellers, it was necessary to frequently make longer trips out of the territory to convince immigration that they were tourists or business travelers, and not illegal workers as often suspected by the authorities. For the Indians, taking trips back to their homes in India when necessary, often after only a month in Hong Kong with one mainland trip in between, would usually solve this. Bringing trading goods in their baggage back home commonly financed these trips.¹

At the early stages of my fieldwork, I soon discovered that the line between being visitors to the building, and actually living there was often blurry. People would often introduce themselves to me as traveling businessmen, and I would later find out that they were earning a living by working more or less regularly in Hong Kong. On the other hand, I would also sometimes meet people claiming to live and work in Hong Kong, often in guesthouses I was staying at, who would then suddenly leave Hong Kong with a load of goods and disappear for weeks at a time back to their native countries. It soon became clear to me that my initial attempt to sort out who was actually living in Hong Kong, and who was only traveling, was an impossible task, and that the division would at best serve as ideal types for analytical purposes.

Most of the people I met at the Chung-King Mansions kept close relations with their home countries. Although living and working regularly in Hong Kong many had families, even wives and children, at home. The Indian workers I came to know, primarily from Calcutta, would (as mentioned) typically travel back to India frequently. Among my African informants, primarily Ghanaians, the distance back home was longer, and the trip too expensive for frequent travel. They did, however, communicate back home and around the world frequently through telephone and the Internet. The more frequent traveling business traders were also included in the

¹ The financing of their trips home will be elaborated in chapter 6.

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dwellers' social network at the Chung-King Mansions.² These business travelers would often be asked to carry small amounts of goods, money and messages back to the families of the dwellers back home. Among both the African and Indian groups I studied, they would usually in addition to their connections to their home countries have more widespread global social networks. All had relatives or friends that also "traveled" and worked in different places around the globe-- some of whom they knew from back home, and others they had met while traveling in Hong Kong, China or other places. These extended networks, in which there did not seem to be too much frequent physical contact, would seemingly only be utilized in times of necessity. For example a "brother" or friend in the US could be called upon to send capital to Hong Kong, needed to buy cell phones (in Hong Kong). These could then be carried by one of the frequent business travelers back home to Ghana, and there be received and sold through other relatives or trusted friends. The money from the sale would then ideally be sent back to Hong Kong through Western Union money transfer or another business traveler.

As illustrated above, most of the people I met at the Chung-King Mansions could neither be defined as purely visitors nor as permanent residents of the city. Although many had been staying for large parts of their lives in Hong Kong, kept regular jobs, and even in some cases possessed HK ID cards. They would as a rule stay firmly connected to their home countries and the transnational community of their countrymen at the Chung-King Mansions. The dwellers were neither purely visiting traders nor traditional immigrants. Although all my informants would always refer to themselves in terms of their nationality and native countries, the importance of being equipped with international useful "equipment" and "experience", was often communicated both to me and among themselves. Experience of travel, international social relations, knowledge of different countries immigration laws, and language were all considered important virtues. This also applied to many of the more settled and established immigrants I met at the Chung-King Mansions. Mustafa, a north Indian gentleman in his 50's who had been staying at the Chung-King Mansions for almost thirty years, had first found work in an Indian restaurant, but was now the manager of several guesthouses in the building. He was now a holder of a permanent

² A bond of mutual dependence exists between the Ghanaian dwellers and the frequent business travelers at the Chung-King Mansions, which will be elaborated in chapter 6.

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HK ID card, and was living in an apartment at the Chung-King Mansions together with his Indian wife and two children. I would often meet Mustafa down by the main entrance at night, where he liked to come down to keep an eye on his guesthouse workers struggling to find guests out on the sidewalk. Early in the fieldwork I found it hard to connect closely with him, and our talks would often be short and one-sided with me asking questions and him answering with concrete and short comments. Later I came to believe this might be because he might have been embarrassed by his lack of good English language skills that made it hard for him to communicate with me. Certainly knowledge of the international English language was considered an important virtue in this international community, where people often considered lack of language among new immigrants as a sign of being from the countryside of their native places, and not having any chance of making it in a big international city like Hong Kong. Mustafa would however speak eagerly and proudly whenever we talked about his children. He would then often proudly explain that they both attended an international school in Hong Kong, and already at the age of 6 and 11 spoke semi-fluent Cantonese, Urdu, Hindi, Arabic and English. He also announced that he was planning to provide them with private lessons so that they could also learn to speak French and Spanish. For Mustafa it seemed extremely important that his children would be equipped with the skills to be international citizens and live anywhere in the world. He told me that he did not want to spend the rest of his life in Hong Kong, and he did not want his children to spend their lives at the Chung-King Mansions either. Hong Kong was, in other words, only considered a temporary home; however, he emphasized that his children, that had grown up in Hong Kong, might not be interested in moving “back” to India, and should therefore be equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to live anywhere they wanted (Field notes 02.06.2005).

Transmigrants

Most of the literature concerning the transnational lives of new immigrants cited in the introduction to this chapter mainly concerns more established groups of immigrants, with transnational ties and relations built along stable “circles” of

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migration between home and host societies.³ I do however still find much of their findings comparable to my own findings in the less stable form of migrant society I studied. There are however also some important differences that need to be discussed.

In “Globalization from Below”, the sociologist Alejandro Portes (1997) attempts to provide a theoretical form to the concept of transnational communities. Portes definition of “transnationalism” adapted from Basch et al. (1994) makes his findings comparable to the community found at the Chung-King Mansions.

We define “transnationalism” as the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. We call these processes transnational to emphasize that many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders... An essential element is the multiplicity of involvements that transmigrants sustain both home and in host societies. We are still groping for a language to describe these social locations.

(Basch et al. 1994:6.)

In the case of the even more mobile community I studied at the Chung-King Mansions, I would also argue that the social fields created and maintained among the transmigrants between different “host societies” should also be emphasized, adding a further dimension to the analysis. Portes (1997) argues that primarily immigrants and friends and relatives of immigrants make up these communities. Further he claims that while the public image of immigrants in the advanced countries stems from the desperate quest of Third World peoples escaping poverty at home, the fact is that neither the poorest of the poor migrate nor is their move determined mainly by individualistic calculation.

³An overwhelming amount of the literature written about the subject of transnational lives among immigrants concerns the relationship between well-established immigrant communities in the US and their home societies. Examples are “Nations Unbound (Basch et al.,1994) which is by many considered a pioneering work on the subject, which is written out of research on the Caribbean and Filipino immigrant societies in New York, and their transnational relations to their home societies (Basch et al., 1994: 9). Another frequently cited example is R.C Smiths extensive research on the transnational lives of Mexicans in New York (Smith 2006).

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Instead contemporary immigration is driven by twin forces that have their roots in the dynamics of capitalist expansion itself. These are, first the needs of first world economies, in particular the need for fresh supplies of low-wage labor. Second, the penetration of peripheral countries by the productive investment, consumption standards, and popular culture of the advanced societies.

Contrary to widespread perceptions, immigrants come to wealthier nations less because they want to than because they are needed.

(Portes, 1997:5)

I will argue that this analysis to a certain degree is also applicable to the immigrant workers I met at the Chung-King Mansions. As will be further supported empirically by the “narratives of travel” in chapter 4, the immigrants do not represent the “poorest of the poor” in their native countries, and neither did any, to my knowledge, leave their homes in order to escape from extreme poverty. This is not to say that social mobility and the hope for a materially better life is not a driving factor for their travels. But I would argue that the “poorest of the poor” in the immigrants’ home societies simply would not have the capital necessary to invest in such a journey.⁴ Among my informants, the capital necessary would usually be provided by loans from family members, savings and even by selling their homes. The will to risk these relatively large investments often came from a belief that profit from well-paid jobs or trade would easily pay back the costs. These beliefs came from a variety of sources. Some from rumors about the profits to be gained, and some also from concrete promises of jobs. The fact that many of my informants, particularly the Ghanaians, did not set off from their homes initially planning to go to Hong Kong, might seem to contradict this argument. However I would emphasize that they, by ending up and staying for longer periods of time in Hong Kong, still confirm that the need for low wage labor in the advanced capitalistic Hong Kong is a driving force for the immigration in to Hong Kong. Portes’s argument also applies to the Indian bulk of my informants at the Mansions. These would usually set off for the first time not only with Hong Kong in their minds, but often specifically the Chung-King Mansions. One of them, a Calcutta-born Indian man told me how he had grown up as a young boy in

⁴ I would not claim that this is true for all cases at the Chung-King Mansions, only among my informants. I did observe cases of human trafficking while doing fieldwork. In the cases I witnessed, I was told that they had paid large sums of money prior to leaving their homes; it is however not unimaginable that some out of desperation had borrowed large sums of money from the “agents” in order to make the journey.

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Calcutta, regularly hearing about the Chung-King Mansions and the opportunities there from friends and relatives, and finally left home in his late teenage years, after his sisters' husband, already in Hong Kong, had managed to provide him with a job at the restaurant he was employed in at the time. Another Indian worker told me about hearing of the trade opportunities, and begging his parents for a loan to cover his first trip. Although a large part of the working force at the Chung-King Mansions are illegally employed, they are connected to the dynamics of the highly capitalistic economy of Hong Kong which does have a major need for fresh supplies of low-wage workers for the jobs many in local Hong Kongers are not willing to perform. The need for imported low-wage workers in Hong Kong can easily be illustrated by the over 200,000 foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong mostly from the Philippines and Indonesia. There can be little doubt of the fact that the economic character of Hong Kong and the Chung-King Mansions was an important "pull" factor for the immigrants in question. However, as will become evident during this thesis, the notion of the opportunities the city had to offer for these migrants has to be understood in relation to their own transnational relations and mobile lives.

According to Portes (1997), following his claim that immigrants are driven primarily by the capitalist need for low wage labor, the immigrant worker, soon after arriving in the host society, discovers that the low wages paid and the working conditions are not sufficient for them to promote their own economic goals. To bypass the menial dead-end jobs offered by the host societies, and to achieve economic advancement, the immigrants must activate the economic possibilities in their networks of social relationships. Portes argues that the immigrant social networks display two characteristics that those linking domestic workers generally do not have:

First, they are simultaneously dense and extended over long physical distances.

Second, they tend to generate solidarity by virtue of generalized uncertainty.

Exchange under conditions of uncertainty creates stronger bonds among participants than that which takes place with full information and impartially enforced rules.

(Portes, 1997:8)

Portes claims that the uncertainty of the immigrants' economic transactions, both internally and with outsiders creates a need for trustworthy bonds between them. The

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small amount of available information about the trustworthiness of exchange partners and lack of state regulation in their transnational interest space, create the need to “stick together”, and to stay with the same partners regardless of tempting outside opportunities. Once the trustworthiness has been established, these geographical extended and dense social networks can be put into play for a number of economic initiatives. One of these is the informal sort of international trade found at the Chung-King Mansions.

Many of the workers that I came to know had heard rumors of the Chung-King Mansions and the trading possibilities of Hong Kong before arrival. Others quickly learned about the possibilities after arriving. Engaging in this kind of trade does however require a certain amount of cash both for buying goods and to survive in expensive Hong Kong, which create a need for some kind of income while in Hong Kong. Finding some sort of steady work would often provide them with a small but much needed salary and usually a place to sleep. The salary would seldom be far above a subsistence level, but kept them on their feet in what many considered a city of opportunity. For any real profit and advancement, it was however necessary to find some extra sources of income. The strategies for both accumulating the extra income, and for surviving in Hong Kong as long as needed were numerous, and will be elaborated further in chapters 4, 5 and 6. Portes assumes that the transnational networks are put to economic use by the immigrants to reach their economical goals after the immigrant discovers that the low paying jobs offered are not sufficient to meet these goals (Portes, 1997:8). It is however, in this instance, important to note that many were in fact aware of the possibilities of trade in Hong Kong through rumors in their native places and in other locations during their travels. Therefore, the fact that many actually came to Hong Kong initially hoping to start up transnational trade makes it hard to declare either work or trade as their initial driving force for coming to Hong Kong.

In the case of the social networks at the Chung-King Mansions, I was often surprised by the amount of trust and solidarity among immigrant groups that seemed fluctuating and unstable to me, and I certainly saw the importance of “sticking together” among the immigrants. Many being illegal workers, some with expired visas and some even carrying fake passports, drawing attention to themselves by turning to the Hong Kong

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authorities over disputes was seldom a good option. This uncertainty did create a need for strong and trustworthy social relations among mobile and fluctuating groups of travelers and immigrant workers. When in place, the geographical mobility of the group created a large, geographically extended, but dense, social network. The special economic conditions in Hong Kong, outlined in chapter one, made it ideal to utilize these networks in transnational informal trade. In the following chapters, however, I will show how the trust among fellow immigrants in many cases was misplaced and misused. Often the strong trust and solidarity seemed to degenerate as soon as the traveler returned home to safe surroundings.

Although my informants would usually refer to the material profits to be gained when I asked why they had set out on their journey, I do not believe that pointing out Hong Kong's needs for low-wage labor or the trading possibilities is sufficient to their decision for leaving their homes and coming to Hong Kong. During longer talks with trusted informants, other less economic motives would usually be brought up. These motives were often similar despite of difference between people and backgrounds. They would often emphasize the experience and adventure of travel itself, and a certain upward mobility in social status when returning. Often young "boys" would tell about being treated like "men" after returning from their first journey. Also, during my six months of fieldwork, I, in many incidents saw no actual correlation between immigrants staying in Hong Kong and reaching any actual economic upward movement.

In the concluding part of "Nations Unbound", Basch et al. (1994: 289-292) write that they by their insistence that transnationalism must be understood in relation to global capital, hope to contribute to a response that also moves beyond the boundaries and blinders of the nation state. On my own question of the individuals' decision to migrate and experience of being a transmigrants I would however rather focus my study on the individuals stories and experience of traveling across these "boundaries and blinders" of the nation state. Grand theories on "new" migration and transnational communities, that connect their characters to macro economic global conditions, might add an element of "economical rationality" to the nature of transnational communities and new immigrants. I do however believe that the individual choices

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involved are far more complex and need to be examined on a smaller and individual level.

The concept of mobile livelihoods

In “Work and migration”, Sørensen and Olwig (2002: 1-19) argue strongly for a shift of focus in the study of migration away from the narrow focus on international population movements and the concomitant emergence of cross-border networks of relations, calling instead for a broader investigation of mobile livelihoods and the fluid fields of social, economic and political relations and cultural values that these livelihoods imply. They thereby advocate shifting the analytical focus from place to mobility, and from “place of origin” and “place of destination” to the movements involved in sustaining a livelihood.

“Livelihood”, they write, has at least implicitly been a central concept in migration research, as researchers had tended to explain migration movements in terms of economical factors that imply a notion of livelihood. The unequal economic relations created by capitalism have been pointed out, and researchers have examined the push and pull factors leading to people in less developed areas migrating to developed centers. This has been facilitated by modern means of communication and transport that have escalated such movements in the recent decades. However, similar to my own findings at the Chung-King Mansions, Sørensen and Olwig emphasize that:

When asked why they migrate, migrants will often reply that they are moving for “better opportunities” elsewhere. Yet, there is often no clear correlation between economic changes and migration movements, and it is difficult to preserve the image of the migrant as a “homo oeconomicus” who is making decisions about migration on the basis of informed economical calculations.

(Sørensen and Olwig, 2002: 2-3)

As individual lives, motives and decisions can hardly be described solely with the help of economic diagrams and tables, of which the individuals are themselves often only remotely aware of, Sørensen and Olwig identify a need for further examination

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of the ways people view, and act upon, the ideas of “better (economic) opportunities” through migration movement. For this endeavor, they propose, the notion of mobile livelihoods might provide a useful concept. While the notion of livelihood has generally tended to be thought of in economic terms, Sørensen and Olwig lean on Gudeman’s (1986) arguments against the use of (economic) logical and mathematical schemes in Western models of livelihood. Gudeman argues that activities of livelihood are enacted through a symbolic scheme, which is drawn from known features in the social world. Thus knowledge of the social world becomes necessary to understand what is being modeled concerning the gaining of livelihoods (Sørensen and Olwig, 2002: 3). These social worlds, Sørensen and Olwig point out, are not necessarily confined to local communities, but may also be informed by global relations.

Also coinciding with my own findings at the Chung-King Mansions, Sørensen and Olwig acknowledge that:

Social and kinship networks become particularly important in facilitating and sustaining diversified livelihoods that involve a range of spatially extended social and economic activities. Any study of livelihood therefore requires an awareness of the wider spatial context of the unit of analysis (whether Individual, household, village or nation).

(Sørensen and Olwig, 2002: 4)

Robert C. Smith (2006) has in his elaborate studies of the transnational lives lived by Mexican immigrants in New York described the emergence of remittance economies in the home villages of these immigrants in Mexico (Smith, 2006: 49-52). Such findings might suggest that the migration of individuals can, in some incidents, be understood as parts of communized livelihood strategies of larger networks of individuals. Concerning my own findings at the Chung-King Mansions, I will in the following chapters show how transnational family livelihood strategies played a vital importance in the transnational lives of the workers and dwellers I encountered.

I consider the concept of mobile livelihoods to be particularly useful in describing and understanding the social realities and experiences of transnational life I encountered at

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the Chung-King Mansions. Especially the concept encompasses the large degree of mobility in my informants' lives by focusing on mobility, rather than place of origin and place of destination. As will become evident during this thesis, the workers and dwellers I met in the building were not intending to pursue any permanent immigration to the city of Hong Kong, which was viewed only as a very temporary home. I will also show how mobility and transnational life itself was a strategy of livelihood, and not simply the possible opportunities offered by working and living in the city.

Sørensen and Olwig suggest that the conceptualization of migration should be related to an analytical framework concerning the practice of particular livelihoods. They write:

Based on the assumption that one of the basic features of human life is mobility, the concept of mobile livelihoods explores the various practices involved in “making a living”, as well as the social relations used to make living possible.

(Sørensen and Olwig, 2002: 9)

During this thesis, I will explore the strategies and practices, as well as the social relations, which make life at the Chung-King Mansions possible for the dwellers and workers in question, and show how their transnational lives are related to larger strategies of livelihood. As the molding of livelihoods is a complex and diverse matter, pointing out the unequal macro economic conditions between their homes and Hong Kong will not be sufficient for such a task. I will therefore rather focus my study on the workers' and dwellers' own accounts and experiences of travel and life in Hong Kong, and thereby give a detailed account of both how the opportunities of transnational lives are perceived, and the relations and practices involved in creating a livelihood from these opportunities.

Chapter 3

Finding the Chung-King Mansions

A foggy January day in 2005 I arrived at the Hong Kong international airport, Chek Lap Kok. In my black backpack I had a project description for my fieldwork called “Making a Home in the Hong Kong SAR”. The description in detail described how I was going to go about doing a fieldwork in Hong Kong and among its local population, and later write a thesis about Hong Kong Identity following the 8 years that had passed since the 1997 handover. It didn’t turn out that way.

This visit to Hong Kong for fieldwork was not my first encounter with the city. Being a Norwegian born and raised citizen of mixed decent, with a Norwegian mother and Hong Kong born Chinese father I had frequently visited family in Hong Kong ever since being a very young boy. During a number of recent visits to the city before my fieldwork, I had often passed the Chung-King Mansions while walking through Tsim Sha Tsui and on numerous occasions been struck with curiosity about the place and the bewildering crowd outside of it.

Two days later my original project was finally put to rest after a meeting with professor Gordon Mathews at the Anthropological Department at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). Initially I was there to present and seek advice on my original Hong Kong identity project, but as I mentioned my curiosity about the Chung-King Mansions during our meeting, I was made aware of the fact that there was close to no research done on the place. To me this seemed amazing considering the location’s unique character and ongoing function as a centre for a form of “international petty trade” that I was just starting to learn about. The decision to attempt fieldwork at the Chung-King Mansions was therefore easy, but I also realized that this would mean abandoning my Hong Kong Identity project which I had prepared myself for before traveling to Hong Kong. At the time I did not have any theme for a new project concerning the Chung-King Mansions. Finding any useful information or descriptions of the place seemed close to impossible, so I found myself engaged in a fieldwork without much knowledge of the field, or any exact theme for a thesis. Without any other goal than to find out as much as possible about the people

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living in the building, I was to explore the field myself, and then find a theme for an anthropology master degree thesis. The next two weeks were spent on a number of visits to the Chung-King Mansions to survey the building and surroundings, as well as searching for written information elsewhere. I then decided to move into the building after realizing that the guesthouses were probably the best place to meet people.

Moving In

I had not made any decision on a specific guesthouse to stay at, so I decided to simply approach the guesthouse workers outside the entrance and ask for a good deal. It had probably been a slow day outside the building, with all of the guesthouse workers hungering for guests, because the second one of them scouted me, I was instantly surrounded by a horde of men offering the very best, cleanest, and safest guesthouse in the whole Chung-King Mansions. In the middle of this pile of people, I met Amal, a man who was to become one of my closest friends during my months at the Chung-King Mansions. Amal was quick and persuasive, and was by no means a novice to the game of grabbing potential customers out of a crowd of competitors. In just a few seconds I was following Amal out of the crowd, actually moving away from the entrance and into a narrow and dark side alley that led to a small side entrance into the building. I later learned that bringing customers through the side entrance was often preferred in order to avoid losing the guest to competitors on the way through the main gate. At the time however, the only reply I got to my nervous questions about the chosen path was a quick and firm “fastest way” from Amal while moving through the scary looking alley, crowded with a magazine stand, mostly selling porn and a few sex toys, and a small group of heavily tattooed drug dealers. From the side entrance, we stepped quickly through the ground floor of the building with Amal constantly looking over his shoulder afraid somebody would grab his newly found customer at the last moment. Finally, with the elevator door securely closed, Amal took a deep breath and turned his attention to me with the standard questions about where I was from and how long I would be staying in Hong Kong. He quickly became more interested as I did my best to explain my intentions, and stated that I would be staying for a while. Amal clearly seemed willing to help me get started, if at first not for any

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other reason than to keep me staying in his guesthouse. He presented himself as an Indian Muslim, originally from Calcutta, that had now been working on and off at the Chung-King Mansions for around 7 years. He told me that he knew many people around the building that I could talk to, and would be happy to introduce me to his friends and fellow workers and tell me “stories” about what was happening around the building. Amal, not yet fully understanding the scope and length of my fieldwork from what I managed to explain during our quick elevator ride, told me that he unfortunately had to get back down to work after guiding me in to the guesthouse. He therefore told me I could start off by asking a guy working up in the guesthouse a few questions since he, as Amal explained, knew the building and the intentions of its visitors from his work cleaning for and taking care of the guesthouse customers. Finally reaching our destination far up the blocks of the Chung-King Mansions, the elevator door slid open, and we stepped into a small cramped, and dirty corridor with nothing but a few steel barrier gated doors visible from where we stood. To the right of us, a firmly shut steel door had a sticker with Arabic Koran verses stuck above it beside a small sign that displayed the name of the guesthouse. A few knocks, resulting in a rattling metallic sound from the old and worn down steel door, quickly led to somebody opening it from the inside. The man opening the door was a Ghanaian in his mid thirties named Muhammed, who turned out to be the possible informant Amal had just told me about. Inside the small corridor of the guesthouse, Amal showed me to a vacant room, before he explained my situation and purpose to Muhammed. Shortly after that, Amal went back down and I was left alone with Muhammed in my new home, wondering how a Ghanaian guy had ended up working in an Indian guesthouse, in Hong Kong.

Amal and Muhammed both became great friends and sources of information for me during my six months in Hong Kong. Through them I was introduced to the two communities at the Chung-King Mansions I was to focus my study on: A group of Indian guesthouse and restaurant workers, and a group of Ghanaian traveler’s and dwellers.

Methodology

As mentioned, finding information about the Chung-King Mansions before moving to the building, proved to be difficult. I found little useful written about the building in local libraries and elsewhere. I did however find a few scarce descriptions of the building in tourist guides and newspaper articles. Hong Kong locals with any useful knowledge about the site were few, and often gave contradicting accounts, frequently based on loose rumors. It therefore seemed impossible for me to outline any exact theme to investigate before starting the fieldwork. With the initial question being simply “who are these people and what are they doing”, I, as I progressed in my fieldwork and my knowledge of the site and the people increased, was to keep asking new questions as they rose and answering them throughout my study. In this way, the final theme for my thesis has mainly been molded out by my “findings” in the field, and therefore much predicated by the research methods applied.

Although early abandoning my initial project and “throwing myself” into a new project with only a minimum of preparations, I brought with me into the field some ideas of how a successful fieldwork could be carried out in this unique location. Since my field site was relatively limited geographical, and the communities seemed somewhat disconnected from the rest of Hong Kong, I believed the method of participant observation to be ideal for a study of the communities at the Chung-King Mansions. The manageable size of the community and Chung-Kings apparent geographical limitation as a “miniature city within the city”, has the methodological advantage of easing the gathering information by confining an area to carry out the observation, and by making it easy to retain contact with a number of individual persons simply by staying within the same confined location. With the building’s disconnected position from the rest of the city, the inhabitants I studied seemed to constitute what Ulf Hannerz has labeled an *encapsulated* mode of urban existence (Hannerz, 1980: 255-261).⁵ Hannerz describes the defining characteristics of encapsulation as a situation in which the “ego has one dense network sector, connected to one or more of his roles, in which he invests a very large proportion of

⁵ In *Exploring the City (1980)* Hannerz, in his attempt to conceptualize urban existence, tentatively identifies four broad modes of urban existence: Encapsulation, segregativity, integrativity, and solitude, which of course, real life crosses between.

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his time and interests” (Hannerz, 1980: 256). In their lives, while in Hong Kong, many of the dwellers I encountered in the building seemed to fit very well into Hannerz definition of encapsulation. Most had their entire social network (in Hong Kong) within the building, which thus for many constituted a social universe disconnected from the rest of the city-- an urban village ideal for participant observation. In summarizing his thoughts around the subject of fieldwork in urban environments, Hannerz states that although he does not see any strong reasons for evicting the central position of participant observation in anthropological methodology: “We must forever be aware of the difficulties of access, the limited range over which participation is possible, and the consequent problems of representativeness and macroscopic relevance” (Hannerz, 1980: 304). These limitations, some of which will be discussed further down, have been taken into account both in the fieldwork and in the writing of this thesis.⁶ Hannerz further concludes that participant observation is an “effective way of finding facts”, as it has a greater chance of getting beyond the façade of impression management in urban life (Hannerz, 1980: 309).

For me, participant observation meant taking part in the building’s inhabitants’ and visitors’ day-to-day lives and attempting, to a certain degree, to become a part of the community in question. The goal was to obtain an ideal social position from which to observe the peoples’ daily lives from an “inside perspective”, meet the people in question, and also to gain the trust necessary for them to share information with me. My main method of data collecting was more or less casual talks ranging from a few seconds and up to several hours, concerning anything the context demanded or what my informants or me found interesting to discuss. As the fieldwork progressed and I learned more about their life, I could more and more accurately bring up subjects of interest, and understand the significance of the stories and viewpoints told to me. This progression of understanding was what shaped the final theme of my project. By living closely and participating in the community I studied, I believe I was able to gain both the necessary trust from my informants, and the understanding of their lives necessary to comprehend the information given to me through conversations. Also,

⁶ While most of the limitations and difficulties I encountered in my fieldwork are discussed in this chapter, the problems of generalization and macro level relevance have been explored in chapter 2 of this thesis.

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the day-to-day participation and observation enabled me to ask the correct questions, and thereafter observe the subject of our talks from an analytical point of view, and, in turns, ask new question as they became apparent in light of my observations.

Meeting the people

Living in a guesthouse provided me with a valuable opportunity to apply these methods successfully. The guesthouse was usually the closest thing its workers had to a home in Hong Kong, and also a place where they would often bring their friends in need for a place to stay. It was therefore an ideal place for me to stay and take part of their day-to-day life and doings. The workers would usually be occupied during the day, and even though I often followed people around on their daily tasks, late nights would usually be more suitable for carrying out long conversations. The night would also be the time when they could spend time together and talk about the day's events, and thereby provide me with valuable insight into their experiences and viewpoints of life from a different setting than our one-to-one conversations. The somewhat stable flux of people moving in and out of the guesthouse also provided me with a good opportunity to meet people and potential informants with different backgrounds. As mentioned, the guesthouse employed both Indian and Ghanaian workers, giving me access to two quite different but also interconnected communities at the Chung-King Mansions. Through following my new friends around in the daytime and building on their existing social networks, I also gathered a wider base of informants outside of the specific guesthouse surroundings. Other guesthouse customers also provided me with a valuable source of informants. These were business traders, and some tourists, and many of them had been frequent visitors to Hong Kong and the Chung-King Mansions with established social networks in Hong Kong to which I could be introduced. In addition, some of the first time arrivals offered me a valuable insight into the life of first time visitors attempting to engage in transnational trade out of Hong Kong, or trying to find work at the Chung-King Mansions.

As time went on in the building, I came to know my newly found friends more closely, and as the relationship and trust between myself and my "informants" improved, so did the accuracy and honesty in the information they shared with me

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during our conversations. Although people were usually surprisingly forthcoming and helpful already early in the fieldwork, the information I received initially would often have to be revised and corrected later as the confidentiality in the relationship between me and my informants improved and they became more comfortable sharing sensitive considerations and information with me. For example the exact ways of dealing with visa restrictions, vital to the stories of many of my informants, as well as sensitive viewpoints concerning other groups and people in the community, were not passed on to me before the late stages of my fieldwork. Many were involved in some sort of illegal and criminally punishable affairs, usually concerning immigration and illegal work. There were also more serious affairs, making much of the information I collected sensitive, and potentially dangerous for my informants, if revealed to outsiders. The fact that I had relations with different communities and social layers within the Chung-King Mansions, that were often in some sort of tension added to the sensitivity of much of the information I collected. Their trust in that sensitive information concerning themselves and others would be kept confidential and made anonymous by me, was essential. The solution was to constantly remind my informants of my role as an anthropologist, and always respect their wishes of how the information they revealed would be treated. In most cases, a promise of not using their real names in connection to any sensitive information would be sufficient. But in some cases, I was also asked not to reveal exact details of their stories. These incidents mainly concern exact ways of conducting illegal affairs, usually connected to immigration processes.

Fitting in

I believe I was fairly able to develop such a trust in the relationship with many of my informants and thereby gather trustworthy information for a number of reasons.

Firstly, my own person and background eased the process of fitting in to the surroundings. I was in many ways identifiable with my informants, making it easier for them to relate to me, and to a certain degree let me participate in their community. At the age of 22, I was as most of them a young male, not a Hong Kong local, and a traveler far away from home spending a limited amount of time in the Chung-King

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Mansion with a purpose. Being of half Chinese decent, I also did not fit in to their categories of being a “westerner” or “Chinese”. Like them, I was also not quite a part of the local Hong Kong surrounding the building, and lived mostly disconnected from the Hong Kong society at large. A second reason concerns my informants and their disconnection to the city’s society at large. Above I have suggested that the communities at the Chung-King Mansions might very well fit into Hannerz’ conceptualization of an encapsulated mode of urban existence, for many of the recent arrivals in the building, Hannerz’ solitude mode of urban existence might however be an even more fitting description (Hannerz, 1980: 255-261). Although life in the building left little room for any privacy, and there would constantly be a flow of people around at all times; “one is not with other people merely by being among them“, as Hannerz puts it (1980: 260). Most of my friends and informants living at the Chung-King Mansions had a very limited number of close trusted friends in Hong Kong. Their lives as travelers and the fluctuating nature of their community meant that although they had social relations to other travelers and workers staying more or less regularly in Hong Kong, the number of friends physically present in Hong Kong would usually be limited. Friends came and left, and many suddenly found themselves working a 24-hour job alone or with people they had no real social relations with. Being so far from family and home, and staying without friends physically present for long periods of time made loneliness a widespread phenomenon. In this flux and solitary environment, I, even though only visiting myself, paradoxically became a relatively regular and stable part of the life of my closest friends and informants during the time I spent at the Chung-King Mansions. I could accompany them on the parts of the day when they would usually be left alone because of their own or others work, and I would often be the only one around when others had left for visa renewing trips, trading trips or even gone back home for good. I would usually be available whenever they had a few minutes of spare time for companionship and conversations.

Fieldwork in multiple communities

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The Chung-King Mansion's wide selection of people with various ethnic and social backgrounds provided an inexperienced field worker, as me, with concerns and challenges raised by doing fieldwork among different communities and social layers within the same confined space.

One major concern was language. Although English was commonly used and understood at the Chung-King Mansions, people would often switch to their native languages or other shared languages when talking with equals, and thereby limit my knowledge of their conversations, to what could be explained to me in English after their actual conversations. However, English would more often than not be the only shared language in most contexts, and somebody would usually take the effort to explain to me what was going on when asked. On the other hand, my limitation to English during my fieldwork and not speaking any other more "group" specific language at the Chung-King Mansions might have had a positive effect on another concern raised by doing fieldwork and living among different groups of people. Although different groups interacted, and were often dependent on each other economically and social through jobs, trade and guidance, I often saw signs of deep mistrust and open conflict both between people belonging to different groups and social layers, and also on some occasions between people assumingly belonging to the same social group. The conflicts seemed to arise from all sorts of reasons, but most commonly in relation to the fierce competition for jobs and among the guesthouse and restaurant workers in the, sometimes violent, fight over potential customers. For me, as a student doing fieldwork among a wide selection of people, this meant that I had to struggle to remain "neutral" and avoid being identified solely with a single group of people with any special intentions or interests both economic and social. Without such an neutrality, it would be difficult to obtain accurate information from more than a small number of people within a specific group. Although I could never avoid being identified by others with the people I spent my time with, I believe that holding on to the "non-group specific" language of English, helped to confirm my status as a "guest" in these societies. A category that everybody was familiar with through the large number of short time visitors to the building, both on business, backpackers and other travelers. Within the circle of my closest friends and informants I was able to confirm my "neutrality" by clarifying my intentions and over time, assuring them that viewpoints and sensitive information given to me would be handled carefully. I was

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only on one occasion, involving a conflict between close friends of mine belonging to different social groups, told to by a third person to not ask questions since I was an outsider: “You are just guest, there are some things you don’t know, so you don’t think and don’t write anything” (field notes 08/05 2005)

In most situations involving conflict, my friends and informants would instead confirm the acceptance of my involvement and intentions of studying their community, by actively approaching me in order to tell me their views of the conflict. These situations would both involve small personal disputes with mutual friends and acquaintances, and larger disputes and feelings of injustice. As many of the people in my closest circle at the building had a somewhat troubled relation to Hong Kong immigration and authorities and with a limited protective social network to turn to in cases of injustice, I, as a fieldworker, would sometimes be considered as an alternative means for having their stories of injustice told. An example was when Amal, a trusted friend at the Chung-King Mansions approached me after being cheated for a larger sum of money by a traveler that disappeared without a trace after being handed money for what turned out to be fake visitors visa’s to the UK. Amal came straight to me, after returning from a trip to Mainland China where he had been brought to obtain the visa, and stated that he had a “story to tell me”. Although he urged me not to use his real name in anything I would write, he carefully told the whole story in detail, and took care to have me note down the full name and passport number of the scam artist. This was because, as he stated, although he was not able to turn the man into any authorities or have him punished in any way, he hoped that telling the story might help prevent anybody else being cheated by this man and other similar scams (field notes 28/04 2005).

Fieldwork in an urban environment

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Within urban anthropology, there has been directed some criticism against authors tending to exaggerate the isolation of the social worlds they studied, thereby neglecting their connection and overlapping into other social worlds of the city.⁷

Hannerz points out, that although:

It is true, as Oscar Lewis pointed out in his critique of Wirthian thinking, urban life in large measures take place within smaller universes—family, neighborhood, firm, sect, gang, or whatever—and that we need careful studies of these. But we must forever be aware of their openness to other areas of urban life, at least until we have convinced ourselves that they have in some way become closed. There should be full recognition of the fact that the arena momentarily of focus is, in most cases, only one of many for the individuals concern, a part-time engagement...., only encapsulation gives rise to well-bounded groups where people are members more or less as whole persons rather than by virtue of incumbency of particular roles. Even then, the group is in certain sense embedded in a wider urban system...

(Hannerz, 1980: 261)

In the case of my study at the Chung-King Mansions, I have already argued that my informants' lives, while in Hong Kong, were indeed very much confined and centered into the building and its surrounding area. This is not, however, to say that they were completely without presence in other areas of the city. Many engaged in trade and business that brought them to other areas of the city, and some even rented apartments elsewhere, thus only spending their daytime in the building. Also, the building is of course a part of its surrounding city and thereby embedded in its urban systems. For the purposes of this thesis, I have, however, rather focused my study on the transnational relations that stretched beyond the city, as these were the ones I found to be of greater significance in my informant's lives.

Fieldwork in a flux and transnational environment

Studying the flux of people, nationalities and backgrounds in the communities also led to a number of limitations for my study. The most obvious one, when dealing with

⁷ For further reading, see Hannerz, (1980: 54, 296-315)

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such a transnational community, was the limitation set by confining my research geographically to the Chung-King Mansions and Hong Kong. I never met any of my informants outside of the specific context of Hong Kong, which I argue was only one of many locations involved in my informants' lives. Despite my limitation to only one location, I have given their involvements and relations in other geographically separated societies a vital part of this thesis. Even though my research geographically mainly concerns the Chung-King Mansions and its surrounding area, the transnational aspects of my informants' lives and narratives and are so embedded in their daily activities and experiences of self that they are impossible to ignore in any accurate account of their life. Although I never visited their home societies or traveled with them on their journeys, the transnational elements of their lives were easily observable by simply observing their physical presence and activities in Hong Kong. Among my friends at the Chung-King Mansions, a single day would seldom go by without any activities concerning their transnational life and relations outside of Hong Kong. Be that the sending of goods or money, phone calls, E-mailing, meeting newly arrived friends, or even arriving or disembarking themselves. Also my informants would eagerly provide me with detailed and elaborated accounts of their life and relations outside of Hong Kong, both from before and after embarking on their narratives of travel.

Chapter 4

Stories from the bottom end of globalization

Essential to the understanding of both the Chung-King Mansions and its inhabitants are the stories the people had to tell. In despite of the amazing selection of people and backgrounds at the Chung-King Mansions, there were many striking similarities in their stories concerning their reasons for traveling and ending up at this location. The purpose of this chapter is two fold. First, I wish to re-tell a number of these typical personal accounts from the people I met at the Chung-King Mansions, and thereby display their uniqueness as well as their similarities. Second, I will through these accounts, bring attention to their reasons for leaving their homes and embarking on their journeys, as well as the factors drawing them to this unique location.

Narratives of travel:

As a young Indian Muslim, Baasim had grown up in the Northern Indian city of Calcutta. His father had been a government worker with a reasonably high salary by local standards, and he had grown up in a large family with 5 brothers and 2 sisters. Baasim had himself worked managing embroidery machines back home in India earning a salary of around 3500 Indian Rupees a month.⁸ While still being a young man in Calcutta, Baasim had been inspired by a number of friends that told him tempting stories of the lucrative possibilities of doing trade between Hong Kong and India. Some of his friends had even succeeded in earning profits by traveling to Hong Kong and bringing back goods themselves. As he explained to me:

Before [in India] I have so many friends go Hong Kong, my friend say to me; go to Hong Kong, Hong Kong is good for job and business... [in] Hong Kong, buy 1 dollar[US], sell for 80-90 Rupee here.⁹

(Field notes 9/6 2005)

⁸ Approx 79.2 USD by current (2006) rates.

⁹ Approx 2 USD by current (2006) rates, indicating the possibility of doubling the amount of money spent on goods in Hong Kong.

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At the age of 21, he had finally decided to travel to Hong Kong himself and attempt trade. The decision was also taken out of a wish to travel abroad and, for himself, see the Hong Kong he had heard so much about. At the time, one of his older brothers had also already left their home and traveled abroad to the US where he was now working. Although at first being reluctant because of his young age and him being the youngest of their children, his parents were finally convinced and lent him 1000 USD for the trip, money, which came partly from money sent home by his brother in the US. At the time, Baasim did not have any friends staying in Hong Kong, or planning to go in the near future, so he had decided to make the trip alone. A friend of his, with prior experience of traveling to Hong Kong, had however carefully explained to him how to go about in Hong Kong:

I go alone first time, my friend give me advice, he tell me to go to Chung-King, but [he told] “you don’t tell immigration you go to Chung-King”. Then he give me a note and show me how to go from airport to Chung-King. He tell me what way to walk in the airport, what number bus to take, and where to get off.

(Field notes 9/6 2005)

Despite his parents’ approval, and well-meant advices from his friends, Baasim’s first trip to Hong Kong did not turn out that well. Already a few days after arriving at the Chung-King Mansions, his money disappeared, most likely stolen from him at the guesthouse he was staying in. And after only five days in Hong Kong, he was forced to use his return ticket, and return empty handed back to India.

When I lost [the money], I too much cry. I call brother [in the US], and I call home. I could not sleep; just read all night [the Koran], I never forget those days. I went back home. My father and mother say [to me] “you lost all the money, that’s okay, we [are] happy you come back okay”.

(Field notes 9/6 2005)

Despite his less than successful attempt in earning profits from trade, the trip to Hong Kong had given Baasim a taste for travel and adventure, as well as a few new friends at the Chung-King Mansions. A few years later, Baasim returned to Hong Kong, but

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this time he did not expect to make any easy money by doing trade, and had instead contacted his friends from the last trip, and they had managed to provide him with a job in the building prior to his arrival. This time his trip had also been partly motivated by his father's recent retirement from work, and thereby a need for new sources of income to his family at home.

When I first met Baasim at the Chung-King Mansions, 7 years after his disastrous first visit to Hong Kong, he was working alongside one of his cousins in one of the guesthouses. Although still being a young man in his late 20's, he was now a far more experienced traveler, which he proudly confirmed to me by showing me his two most recent passports full of stamps; testifying 19 entries to Hong Kong within only the three last years. He was now earning most of his income from the low paying job of grabbing guesthouse customers of the street. This provided him with enough money to survive in Hong Kong as well as some additional money to support his family back home. The frequent trips back to India were however mainly financed through carrying goods for other more fortunate traders, with too much luggage to carry all their goods back to India by themselves. His years in Hong Kong had not paid off as well as he had hoped, and he was now hoping to move on to a new location, preferably England or some other place in Europe where he had heard from friends that the conditions for work and living might be better. He was actually granted a visitors' visa for the UK shortly after I finished my fieldwork, but it was unfortunately withdrawn after the terrorist attack on London, July 2005.

Baasim's story was not at all unique at the Chung-King Mansions. The dream of earning profits by trade had for many been an important reason for their first visit to Hong Kong. Many had also, like in Baasim's return, come for specific job offers usually from family or friends already in Hong Kong. The original intent with their visits had however seldom been any sort of permanent immigration to Hong Kong, but much more typically only temporary stays for work or trade. Many did however end up staying at the Chung-King Mansions much longer than originally intended.

Raakin, another Indian man I met in the building, had been staying there for 18 years when I first met him. He was now all by himself managing a small guesthouse owned by a wealthy Indian business man in Hong Kong, but had originally been brought to

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Hong Kong at the age of 17 to work at a restaurant then managed by his uncle. As he explained:

My uncle brought me to come here to work, now my uncle long time ago go to the cemetery, but I'm still here.

(Field notes 7/6 2005)

Raakin was now doing pretty well in Hong Kong, managing his own guesthouse even though he still did not hold any Hong Kong ID or working permit. However he still expressed that he did not wish to settle in Hong Kong permanently, and wanted to move on as soon as he had earned enough money for a good fresh new start elsewhere, possibly by importing goods from Hong Kong. When asked whether he wanted to move back to India, he quickly announced that India was not an option, but that he was thinking about Indonesia since he had a girlfriend there who had previously worked as a maid in Hong Kong.

Even though many of the workers I met in the building had been staying in Hong Kong for a long period of time, all of them expressed that they were not interested in immigrating to Hong Kong permanently. Most expressed a dislike for the city and its local population and held a feeling of being unwanted. This might well be because of the strict immigration policies of Hong Kong, and the denial of permanent residency and working permits that many encountered although staying for large parts of their lives there. But also, I believe, much because of the disconnected position the Chung-King Mansions holds from the rest of the city. As mentioned in chapter one, very few local residents ever wander into the building without any special interests inside, and equally, my informants seldom left the area without any special business to conduct elsewhere. Living at the Chung-King Mansions one seldom encounters any other parts of the local Hong Kong community, with the exceptions of the local Hong Kongese shopkeepers, security guards and occasional police patrols. There was in all no social arenas for contact between the Hong Kong society at large and the foreigners at the Chung-King Mansions, except in business and in dealing with authorities. This lack of contact led to a widespread stigma of the building's inhabitants in the local population, which was enforced by the negative portraits drawn by both the local media and locally circulating stories about the building. From

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the point of view of the population inside the buildings, it created a stereotypical picture of the Hong Kongese as “cold” and calculating since they only encountered them on occasions of business and when dealing with strict authorities.¹⁰ Fifi, a Ghanaian guesthouse worker expressed this view most clearly to me when asked about his views of and relations to the Hong Kong population:

If an Asian chose between money and human being, the Asian will take the money and leave the human being... [The] Chinese, [is] always after something if he contacts you.

(Field notes 19/6 and 3/7 2005)

Fifi also expressed a wish to leave Hong Kong as soon as possible, and when talking about the difficulties of work and stay in Hong Kong he declared that:

My happiness for Asia is gone, I don't like it any more... That is Hong Kong, it never gives a man any peace of mind, I always have to worry about things... For now I will try to keep my temper until I get what I need, then I'll quit this job and leave... I have to stay here some more time, and I'll see what God has for me.

(Field notes 28/6 2005)

Fifi had almost accidentally ended up in Hong Kong after a long period of time spent traveling around in south Asia in the search for a job. Although not knowing anything about Hong Kong before arriving (to the territories), he had like many others learned of the possibilities of trade and work after arriving. He therefore dwelled in Hong Kong hoping to find the money necessary to engage in the business of trade.

The decision to travel and dwell

Despite the obvious difficulties and hardships of dwelling, many chose to stay. An obvious explanation for this is the possibilities that Hong Kong had to offer concerning trade and work at the Chung-King Mansions. However, I like other

¹⁰ The local populations view of the Chung-King Mansions, and the buildings inhabitants view of the local population has been briefly explored in Wong and Mathews (1997).

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dwellers, soon after arriving observed that very few actually were able to successfully and profitably engage in any lucrative trade, and instead had to rely on low paying jobs that simply kept them on their feet while in Hong Kong. Also many did not know of the possibilities prior to departing. There is therefore a need to dig deeper into their stories of traveling, in order to shed light both on what inspired their decision to travel abroad, and their inspiration for dwelling in Hong Kong.

The dwellers had often encountered successful traders back in their home countries or on other locations during their journeys. If not, they were sure to meet successful traders soon after arriving at the Chung-King Mansions, who would inspire them to try for themselves. Another of these travelers that almost accidentally ended up in Hong Kong, and then soon learned of the trade possibilities, was my dear Ghanaian friend Tutu.

Tutu had grown up in the central region Agona Swedru in Ghana where his father was an Imam. Tutu was the youngest among the four children his father had with his first wife, but all together he had 14 siblings since his father had married four different wives. Among his siblings on the mother's side, he had not been the first to travel abroad. One of his brothers had earlier lived in Italy, but was now living and working in the US. Another of his brothers was living in Germany, while his older sister was married at home in Ghana. After finishing secondary school Tutu took courses in construction engineering, but with his elder brothers already gone abroad, he soon set his mind on traveling. In Ghana, Tutu had met an "agent" specializing in sending people abroad, who had offered to provide him with a trip to Dubai for 500 USD. Because he was the youngest of his siblings, and considered to be immature by his parents, Tutu knew that it would be hard to get his parents' approval and borrow the money needed from them. He therefore contacted his elder brother, then in Italy, who agreed to provide him with the necessary money. In this way, Tutu traveled to Dubai without his parents' approval and knowledge. In Dubai, he soon met fellow traveling Ghanaians, and was provided with a job in a laundry in the outskirts of the city. Although he only had a three-week visitors visa, he worked illegally there for 7 months under less than ideal conditions, before immigration caught him, and he was deported back to Ghana free of charge.

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Although his trip to Dubai left Tutu with some bad experiences of travel, concerning illegal work and his meeting with the immigration authorities, the experiences of returning home seems to be of a decisive manner in his decision to again travel a few years later:

I came back home, and the people are respecting me, because I also travel. When I come back home I went to a wedding, they get up and give me their chair to sit down, and everybody's trying to talk to me! ... When you are travel, you are getting more experience in your life, and they are respecting you in the society and family. They say that: "hey! You have traveled so you have more experience and more ideas" ... In our place, that is our, what do you call it, culture.

(Field notes 17/3 2005)

According to Tutu, it was as if he had left as a young boy, and returned as an adult man. Other adults would offer their chair when he entered a room, a gesture that signified a feeling of being equal. Some even stated that he physically looked older. He would often be a center of attention among his friends, and he even spoke of a girl that had priory rejected his proposals, now suddenly providing him with new attention when he returned from his journey. Traveling had obviously had an effect on his image at home, and on his self-image.

Upon returning to Ghana, a cousin living in Germany contacted Tutu and offered to send a car back to Ghana, which could then be used to make a living. Tutu therefore worked two years as a driver in Ghana, but as his heart was set on traveling he continued to look for ways to travel abroad again. Through rumors he then heard of possibilities of teaching English in China. The rumors told that teaching jobs were easy to find, did not require much prior experience, and paid 6000 Chinese RMB monthly.¹¹ According to Tutu, this was a large sum of money compared to the around 150 USD he estimated he could earn as an uneducated laborer in Ghana. However he again emphasized that money was not the whole reason for again choosing to travel:

Traveling outside, you learn a lot of things. People in Ghana, who haven't left, will respect your experience... You travel, maybe you bring [back] money, you get

¹¹ Approx 744 USD by current (2006) rates.

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experience... Maybe you can teach those who have not traveled before... and the girls will like you...[they say] “he looks handsome, he looks very smart, he seen many things”.

(Field notes 19/04 2005)

Through the Internet Tutu managed to get in touch with an elementary school in Mainland China searching for teachers. He was promised a job through e-mail, but was told that he had to buy the air tickets to China himself, and that they would not help him obtaining any stay or working permit before he had started the job. Tutu was able to convince his sister to give him the necessary money for air tickets. Unfortunately, obtaining the necessary visa for China was an expensive affair and took almost two months, and when Tutu finally went to China and visited the school, he was told that somebody else had already filled the vacant position. After a month of unsuccessfully searching for another job in China, Tutu, in his bad situation, with little money and no return ticket, called home to his sister in Ghana. His sister informed him that she had recently received word that their cousin, also traveling, was now working in Hong Kong. He therefore contacted his cousin, who was then working in a guesthouse at the Chung-King Mansions, and was told that he could come there and stay until something turned up.

I just come, no plan, I just come to see how God will do his miracle... I did not know anything about this place [Hong Kong], but I had heard sometimes that this Hong Kong and Singapore is business country.

(Field notes 17/03 2005)

When I first met Tutu, he had been staying at the Chung-King mansions, sleeping on the floor of the guesthouse alongside his cousin and the other workers, for around two months. Soon after arriving in Hong Kong, and meeting the other Ghanaian dwellers, Tutu had become interested in doing trade. He had therefore contacted his brother in the US, who agreed to send him 300 USD to get started buying cell-phones and shipping them to another brother in Ghana. The trade had however not turned out as well as he had hoped, and he was now surviving by doing small jobs for the guesthouse and a small Ghanaian owned shipping company nearby. His strategy was to stay until he could somehow find the money to buy a larger amount of goods to

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send home, as well as an air ticket home for himself. If he profited enough from this, he even hoped to later return to Hong Kong and do trade again, this time with the necessary money already at hand.

I promise myself to get some little money. When I get US dollar 4000, 5000, I'll just go and buy things and send it home, and buy ticket [home]... there is money in this country [Hong Kong], believe me... [if] I can stay in this country only one year, I can rule my life. It's a strategy... Better to fight here and get a little money and take it to your country. Establish you business and rule your life.

(Field notes 19/4 2005)

Despite of his unsuccessful attempts he remained focused on trying to start up profitable trade, and viewed his stay in Hong Kong as a unique opportunity to learn and earn enough to make himself a better future.

Tutu's story displays a number of common characteristics of the stories and experiences I found at the Chung-King Mansions. Firstly, most would already before embarking on their travels have close family or friends that had or were already traveling. They would therefore commonly have heard first hand accounts of the possibilities of traveling abroad, and in many incidents also about the specific possibilities of the Chung-King Mansions. They would therefore also often have seen for themselves the profits from traveling through money and goods brought or sent home by the travelers they knew. Connected to the first characteristic, there would secondly often be, in their home societies, some sort of social status gain or other social benefits of traveling. These social gains were more an inspiration for traveling abroad in itself, than a specific drawing factor to the Chung-King Mansions. Often they would be fuelled by the success of other travelers returning to their homes with exiting stories of traveling, bringing or sending goods to family back home, handing out fashionable foreign bought clothing to be worn with pride, and so on. As will be elaborated later, these expectations from home were often hard to fulfill, and the fear of coming home empty handed was often a reason for dwelling.

Among the dwellers, the view of Hong Kong as a city of opportunity was also a widespread reason for staying despite of the difficulties. In Tutu's case he had first, as

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many of the Ghanaians I met, been forced to dwell in Hong Kong because of the lack of money for a return ticket. He could however have used the money sent to him for a ticket, but instead he chose to stay behind and invest the money in trade. As in the case of the inspiring stories of success they heard at home, the decision to stay behind would often be inspired by stories they heard, and saw, from people they met at the Chung-King Mansions. The building was full of more successful traders coming and going, but usually mixing in with the dwellers, and doubtlessly inspired the dwellers to do their own attempts. Some of these were more professional traders flying in with pockets already filled with US dollars making it easy to benefit from the flow of cheap Chinese merchandizes and the special economic conditions in Hong Kong. But there was also a number of stories circulating about people coming in with nothing, and after years spent working and trading in Hong Kong earning fortunes, now often owning their own shops in the building, or perhaps in their home countries selling of imported goods.

The experienced travelers and traders doubtlessly inspired both people at the Chung-King mansions and in their home societies to attempt trade. The result was a large number of people staying at the building that often had little or no prior experience and knowledge about doing international trade. As seen in case the of Tutu, many did not even have the necessary money at hand to make it and therefore ended up dwelling and working for long periods of time. On the other hand, there was also a large number of inexperienced traders coming in for shorter periods with money already at hand. These had also often been convinced through rumors from friends that this was an easy way to profit from their life savings. One of these inexperienced traders was Hamir, a Sri Lankan man in his early forties.

Hamir had grown up in Colombo, but had immigrated to Japan where he had now worked for 7 years at a factory outside of Tokyo. Through a childhood friend, also Sri Lankan, he had been convinced of stopping in Hong Kong on his way from Japan for a month's vacation at home where his friend, experienced in trade, would meet him. His friend had explained him that the trip to Hong Kong would be well worth the effort, and that easy profits could be made by buying cell-phones at the Chung-King Mansions and bringing them home to Sri Lanka for sale. When I first met Hamir, he had been staying in the building for a few days, and was still waiting for his friend to

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arrive, so that the business could be conducted. Hamir seemed very unsure when I met him, and openly admitted that he had never been to Hong Kong before nor ever conducted in any sort of trading business.

Actually, I'm not a businessperson. Just my friend tell me to come to Hong Kong and we can do somethings together, and at the same time travel and see Hong Kong... My friend tell me to go to Chung-King Mansions, and when I came, I just wondered; what is this place?

(Field notes 8/6 2005)

Although he was inexperienced in this sort of trade, Hamir was willing to invest quite a large sum of money, and planned to along with his friend buy close to 200 cell-phones depending on price. He spent most of the days waiting for his friend to arrive only sightseeing Hong Kong and not conducting in the cell phone buying since, as he explained, wanted to wait for his experienced friend to take care of it. Many other first time traders were not as lucky as to have experienced friends in Hong Kong, and therefore had to rely on the knowledge and advices from the dwellers they met on arrival. As will be elaborated in the following chapters, knowledge about how to conduct trade was a valuable commodity at the Chung-King Mansions, and often a means of survival and income for the poorer long time dwellers.

Conclusions

The stories and considerations outlined in this chapter were, although all unique, very widespread and typical at the Chung-King Mansions and the people I studied. Most had at some time arrived in Hong Kong in the search for both adventure and the possibility of earning money. Although most had been inspired to come to Hong Kong, or inspired to dwell in Hong Kong, by the possibilities of trade and work, it is not sufficient to point out the special economic conditions in Hong Kong as a factor for them traveling to, and deciding to dwell at the Chung-King Mansions. As shown through this selection of typical stories, both the decision to travel and the decision to dwell in Hong Kong was usually inspired by encounters with other travelers and traders both at home and while traveling in Hong Kong and elsewhere. Also the social

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status gained at home, even if returning with nothing else than new experience and exiting stories to tell, has to be taken in to account. It is also important to note that most of the people I studied had geographically widespread social relations and networks even before embarking from their homes. These acquaintances with other travelers and traders where therefore not only a result of their travels and time spent abroad, but also a inspiration for embarking in the first place.

Most of the dwellers I met at the Chung-King Mansions had originally not intended to emigrate permanently, or even stay for any prolonged period of time. And even for those who had now stayed for several years, Hong Kong was still perceived as an only temporary home. Most even expressed a dislike for the city and their life in it. However, Hong Kong was seen as a city if opportunity, both to gain the money, and the experience, needed to create a better life at home or elsewhere. This widespread view, and for some the wish not to come home empty handedly, is what inspired the travelers to dwell. Despite everyday seeing examples of the opposite, the belief that Hong Kong was a city of opportunity remained strong enough to endure the difficulties and hardships of the Chung-King Mansions. However, as I will explain in the following two chapters, the idea of Hong Kong as a city of opportunity has to be understood in relation to the transnational and mobile life my informants lived, and not solely by the particular conditions the city could offer them by migrating to it. As the next chapter will show, my informants had a deeply ambivalent impression of life in the city itself, and many considered it a less than desirable place to be.

“Hong Kong is no love, only jiggy jiggy”

Chapter 5

“Hong Kong is no love, only jiggy jiggy.”¹²

The quote that has given name to this chapter was given to me by a friend and informant attempting to explain me the relationships that many of my informants had with their girlfriends in Hong Kong. Many of the people I met that were dwelling and/or working at the Chung-King Mansions had engaged in sexual relationships with some of the many Filipino and Indonesian women working as maids in Hong Kong. Although often having wife and family at home, it was quite usual to also have a (or in some incidences, several) “girlfriend” in Hong Kong. The maids working for local Hong Kongese families would typically only be allowed a single day of every week, usually Sundays, providing them with little time to spend with their friends and boyfriends. The social interaction between my informants and their girlfriends would therefore be limited to a few hours every Sunday when the guesthouse workers would usually be sure to keep a room in their guesthouse vacant for visiting girlfriends. Although one should not underestimate the comfort these relationships provided in both the maids’ and the guesthouse workers’ lonely and solitary lives, the limited time spent together, and the fact that many had families at home, left little room for any enduring love relationships developing. These are the specific conditions and relations my friend was referring to. I do however believe that the quote might also be used metaphorically to describe something more general about my informants’ life and experience of Hong Kong.

In this chapter I will give an account of life at the Chung-King Mansions based on my informants’, but also my own, experiences from living in the building. I thereby wish to explore the opportunities, difficulties, dangers and hassles that daily life in the Chung-King Mansions had to offer-- all which contributed to the ambivalent feeling so many of my informants expressed, of Hong Kong being a city of opportunity but also an undesirable place to be. A place where you go to get what you need, and then leave; a city of no love, only jiggy jiggy.

¹² “Jiggy jiggy” was common slang for sex at the Chung-King Mansions. The origin of the expression is unclear, but most likely it refers to the sound that would echo through the thin walls of the guesthouses any time a couple was engaged in such activity.

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Finding Work

As shown in the stories outlined in the previous chapters of this thesis, many of the people I met in the building were hoping to earn money from trade. Even though many had been brought to the Chung-King Mansions specifically for work, many of the workers were also hoping that their stay in Hong Kong would offer some possibilities of engaging in the potentially more lucrative business of trade. We have also seen, as in Baasim's case, that the initial attempt to do trade could often result in longer stays of working in the building. For most of the dwellers I met while living in the building, work would remain the main means of survival.

There was a number of reasons to why the dream of easy money through trade did not work out as well as had been hoped. Most common was the lack of money necessary to engage in the trade, resulting in the need to engage in illegal work or to find other sources for providing them with the necessary capital. In the case of Baasim we have also seen how those who had the necessary money could simply lose it overnight, and thereby had to engage in work before again gaining the money to move on. As we have seen, there were also a number of people that came to Hong Kong with empty pockets and no return ticket, and who therefore had to find a source of income not only to engage in trade, but also for sheer survival.

One of these travelers, who came with nothing during the time I spent in the building, was Fifi, the young Ghanaian quoted in the previous chapter. After several months of traveling in South-East Asia, exhausting both stay permits and money sources without any luck of finding a job, Fifi arrived in Hong Kong together with a fellow Ghanaian friend he had met while traveling in Singapore. Arriving in the middle of the winter, and with no more than 95 Euros between them, they were forced to spend three cold weeks sleeping on a ferry pier close to the building. “By the grace of God”, as he put it, he was lucky enough to accidentally encounter a Ghanaian woman, that he actually knew from his home in Ghana, on the sidewalk nearby the Chung-King Mansions during his third week in the city. The woman, whom he actually did not know was in

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Hong Kong, did not have any place for them to stay, but helped them get situated in a Ghanaian warehouse close to the Chung-King Mansions together with six other Ghanaian travelers. After a few days of searching, she was fortunately able to find Fifi a temporary job at a Chung-King Mansion guesthouse since another Ghanaian who usually held the job had to travel outside Hong Kong for visa renewal. Fifi first moved into the guesthouse and took the job only for a few days, but after the fellow Ghanaian worker came back with renewed visa, they soon become close friends and decided to share the job, and salary, until they could find another more permanent job for Fifi in Hong Kong. A month or so later, he found a job at an Indian managed guesthouse where he was situated when I first met him. When I met him, he was working the solitary around the clock job of cleaning the guesthouse and managing the guests. Like many of the dwellers, his plan was now to stay with the job until he could save up enough money to buy a small number of cell-phones, which he could then send back home to Ghana and retrieve profits from. These he would again use to buy a return ticket to Ghana, and hopefully some more profitable goods to bring with him. Unfortunately the guesthouse job paid him a monthly salary of only 2000HKD¹³, which, although he slept on the guesthouse floor for free, left little room for accumulating the necessary money (Field notes 19/06 2004).

There was a number of people in Fifi’s situation spread around the building and its nearby surroundings. A number of the people I met had no return tickets and little available cash. Many also held expired return tickets, and had stayed behind hoping that work and trade in Hong Kong would eventually provide them with money to buy new tickets, or in some cases pay the hefty fines air companies charged for letting them use their expired tickets. In these circumstances, with a number of people desperately needing a source of income, competition was fierce even over the most undesirable and low paid jobs to be found in the building. For many of the newcomers, as well as the more experienced dwellers, the rescue usually came from the help offered from old and new friends they found in the building. Both for finding jobs, and for finding other sources of income, most had to rely on other commoners in the building. As will be argued in the following chapter, this led to the building of strong bonds among different groups of dwellers and travelers based on mutual

¹³ Approx 257.7 USD by current (2006) rates.

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interdependence. Although finding a job would at least provide some income, and in many cases a place to stay, finding low paid and illegal work in the building would usually not mean the end of their problems, and would in some cases even feel like a worsening of their situation.

Among the Ghanaians I studied, finding jobs in the guesthouses was common. There were close to a hundred small guesthouses spread around the building. As has been described in the first chapter, the Chinese and Indian management would often hire African travelers for the least desirable job of cleaning the guesthouse and managing the guests. Usually, the managers would hire relatives and friends from their own circles for work in their guesthouses, but since this specific job entailed both cleaning filthy rooms and staying within the cramped guesthouse walls at all times, they would usually be handed over to more desperate outsiders. Since the guests in many of the guesthouses were largely African traders, the managers also hoped that having an African working inside the guesthouse would help secure regular traders staying regularly in their guesthouses. The steady flow of travelers into the building in need of jobs also assured that salaries could be kept extremely low, as there would always be somebody willing to take up the job for an even smaller salary and place to sleep. The illegal jobs some of the travelers obtained was by no means secure, and guesthouse workers getting fired over minor arguments were a daily affair. The constant fierce competition over the jobs kept the workers on their toes at all times, and gave the managers a large amount of power over their workers who constantly knew that any wrong doings or minor mistakes could be an excuse for their bosses to hire the next traveler in line for a job. This applied both to the Indian and Ghanaian workers I spent my time with. However, as the Indian workers would commonly have closer relations to their managers, the risk of being fired would usually weigh heaviest for the Africans, who would usually remain “outsiders” in the guesthouse surroundings. In the cases where the managers were Indian themselves, the Indian workers had a communicative advantage over the Africans towards their boss, and it was not uncommon for an African worker to be fired after minor disputes with Indian workers, who had a communicative advantage in bringing complaints about fellow workers to their bosses. Well aware of their privileged position over their African workmates, it was not unusual for them to exploit their fellow workers. This created a hierarchy among the guesthouse workers where the workers with closest relation and

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easiest access to their managers could exercise a large amount of power over their less fortunate coworkers. For the unfortunate African traveler, this meant that, in addition to having to obey the wishes of his boss and guests, he would also be forced to obey commands from his fellow workers. The Ghanaian guesthouse workers I came to know often expressed a deep frustration over this situation. As a Ghanaian guesthouse worker told me about his Indian coworkers:

These Indians are very troublesome people. I have to keep my temper or else I do not know what will happen. Even if they do bad things or good things to me, I cannot say anything, but I struggle to keep quiet... They sometimes just go into rooms and take things, because the master key is always available, things like lotion, toothpaste and other things. And if the customers notice, I get problem because they know that I am the only one that is cleaning the rooms. Also, they take things like soft drinks from the refrigerator, things that guests have placed there for later... Sometimes I even have to go down and buy back the things myself. But I cannot say to them anything. I have to keep my temper, because they are so close to the boss. But they tell everything to the boss. I have to be careful and keep my temper towards them, or they will complain about me to him.

(Field notes 28/6 2005)

With most of them being lonely outsiders in their new environments, there was often a feeling that the Indian workers stuck together in a solidarity which they were not a part of, and that they always risked becoming scapegoats for any problems within the guesthouse that the other workers put forward to the boss. One of the Ghanaian guesthouse workers even expressed that he felt that his Indian coworkers were attempting to push him out of the work place, as they only wanted to work with their own people:

These Indians are very gossipers, they gossip so much. They want to take the foreigners out and only work with Indians. None of the guests have ever complained about me, but they [the Indians] still tell everything that is going on here to the boss. These people, anything they see me do, they quickly report to the boss. The little I know, I am serving the customers, not these Indian guys. But they think I am serving them. They are always asking me to get something, go somewhere and things like

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that. If they ever misplace something, I have to look for it... I don't have any Indian friends, and I don't want to take any Indian friends as my serious friends.

(Field notes 3/7 2005)

Max Gluckman has written that: “Gossip and even scandal unite a group, within a larger society, or against another group,..” (Gluckman, 1963: 313). He argues that gossip, and scandals, serves important social purposes, as it maintains the unity in groups by reaffirming and expressing the groups norms and morals, and by controlling tensions within the group. Onward he argues that: “Scandal when directed by members of a group against another group is unifying in another, and an obvious, way—it asserts the superiority of the scandalizing group.” (Gluckman, 1963: 314). Meanwhile, Robert Paine has offered another view of gossip where he emphasizes gossip as a genre of informal communication, and as a “device intended to forward and protect individual interests.” (Paine, 1967: 278). In the case of my findings, it seems as both interpretations of the social role of gossip might apply, as gossip among the Indians, from the view of the Ghanaians, was understood to both unite the Indian workers against them as outsiders, and to promote their own interests towards their managers conceived as being closest to their own group. It might however also be added that the Ghanaian workers also did their fare share of “gossiping” and group bounding during their own meetings, where gossip and tales of their “hopeless” Indian workmates was a frequently discussed theme, confirming their own solidarity as a group distinct from the Indians. On one of these meetings, during dinner with a number of Ghanaians, I pointed out that they seemed to stick together in much the same way as the Indian workers. This led to another Ghanaian guesthouse worker also expressing his frustration, and he stated that although it was a necessity to help each other out, he was frustrated over the Indians using their advantages of being large in numbers to promote their own interests over others:

People tend to stick together. The Indians are the worst. They always stick together everywhere. We [the Ghanaians] also help each other, but not against others like them.

(Field notes 3/7 2005)

It was indeed common for groups to stick together inside the building, and being a lonely newcomer in what seemed as a united Indian dominant group could

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understandably be a cause of frustration. For me however, who had the privilege to spend time with, and get to know both the Ghanaian and the Indian workers, it soon became apparent that neither of them were as united by nationality as it might have appeared from the other part. Although the Indian workers were a majority in numbers, and the fact that a large number of guesthouse and restaurant managers were also Indian gaining them an advantage in finding jobs, there was also fierce competition and frequent conflicts between the Indian workers. Even though they would often be related to, or had known their bosses for a long time, they were also pushed hard to keep their jobs and were forced to work at all times of the day. The managers kept them on a tight leash and demanded that all rooms should be filled every night, often causing them to spend large parts of the nights down on the street trying to grab potential customers from the surrounding area. In the morning hours, this mostly meant negotiating with drunk couples coming from the nearby bars in the search of privacy. Throughout the day, competition between both the guesthouse workers and the restaurant workers on grabbing guests was fierce, and the arguing over guests turning into outbursts of violence between the workers was not uncommon. On one occasion during my fieldwork, an argument over the division of space on the sidewalk to grab guests even turned into a violent fight between two different Indian managers both supported by their workers, a fight that did not end before one of the managers ended up in the hospital with a broken arm. According to the workers I spoke to, the other part's boss being jealous of their good business the recent days also fuelled the brawl: “He was jealous of us, as he wants to be us” (Field notes 25/06 2005). Although not as solitary as work inside the guesthouse, the conditions on the sidewalk provided the workers with a stress filled and hard working environment. In the nighttime their small working area was shared with a number of drug dealers, prostitutes and drunks. All through the day there was a strictly enforced geographical division of the few meters of sidewalk. Drifting over to territories held by others while chasing potential customers could therefore easily lead to conflicts with other guesthouse workers or street vendors from the surrounding area.¹⁴

Although the Indian workers situated within the building's different guesthouses often

¹⁴ In addition to the workers based inside the building, the nearby sidewalks were also filled with economic activity from other nearby buildings. These included a number of street sellers grabbing customers off the street and bringing them into shops spread around the buildings, but also a number of guesthouse workers from the nearby Mirador Mansions that competed directly against the Chung-King Mansions Guesthouses.

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knew each other well, and would often even cooperate in filling up each other's rooms, there was also a small number of local Hong Kongese guesthouse workers on the sidewalk. These had the advantage of being legal employees, and they also communicated better with the Hong Kongese security guards in the building who guarded the entrance area. This allowed them to easily push the Indian guesthouse workers away from potential customers since they were ensured friendly support from the security guards, and authorities, if there was to be any violent response from the Indian guesthouse workers working illegally. Both the Ghanaian and Indian workers expressed a feeling of working in a very hostile environment, and their status as illegal workers made it impossible complain to any authorities about mistreatment they encountered. On one occasion, one of the Indian workers I knew was even approached by a small gang of Pakistanis demanding protection fees if he was to hold his spot on the sidewalk:

The guy ask me whether I'm working for guesthouse, and I said yes. He say: “You know I'm the brother of Jimmy?¹⁵ So you have to pay me if you want to work here, everybody has to.” I tell him no, and he slapped me. I was very surprised, this has never happened before... After that I did not sleep that week.

(Field notes 25/06 2005).

According to the Indian worker, the person referred to was a well-known shop owner in the building, who was known to be involved in drug related business. “But he doesn't know what his boys are doing. They act alone, just using his name to earn money from us” (Field notes 25/06 2005). The matter was however sorted out after the guesthouse worker consulted his own boss, who assured that there was no need to pay any protection fees.

The bosses also demanded their Indian workers to work hard at all hours of the day. Although the jobs in the building's guesthouses and other facilities would usually offer a much higher salary than what would be imaginable for most of the dwellers in their home countries, they would still be very low by Hong Kong standards.¹⁶ Their

¹⁵ Fictive name used in the text.

¹⁶ Based on the numbers my informants gave to me, illegal employment in a guesthouse would usually pay a monthly salary of between 2000 and 4000 HKD, compared to an average

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bosses were however aware of the fact that work opportunities for illegal immigrant workers were scarce, and they still paid them more than what they could make by traveling back home. As one of the Indian workers explained, this was also a reason for the bosses to push them hard:

In India it's very hard for us to find jobs, some people will work for only 200 hkd a month.... Here in Hong Kong, the Indian boss knows this is big money for us, that's why he makes people work very hard. He give maybe 18000 Rupee a month, He [the boss] shouts: “who would give you 20000 rupee in India”... Every Indian boss here in Hong Kong is fucking [bad]boss.

(Field notes 17/07 2005)

Another of the Indian guesthouse workers also shared his frustration with me a late night down on the sidewalk outside the building and stated that: “Hong Kong boss have no heart, we work and work. He never lets us go up and sleep” (Field notes 09/07 2005).

Both the Indian and Ghanaian guesthouse workers I spoke to stressed a deep felt frustration about their jobs in Hong Kong. Many described their work in the building as being confined in a prison. With their bosses carefully watching over them at all times, they were often confined to staying in their designated work areas within the building at all hours of the day. Their status as illegal workers also contributed to this feeling, as they in addition to worrying about their work tasks and bosses, also constantly faced the possibility of police and immigration raids and risks of being arrested and deported. One of the Ghanaian guesthouse workers explained:

Even though I make a little more money here, I feel like I am in a prison. I must stay here and do what people say. At home [in Ghana] I don't have to worry about police and immigration, here [In Hong Kong] I am always worried.

(Field notes 19/06 2005)

monthly income level for wage work of around 11700 HKD (1508.8 USD) in the territories (Hong Kong Fact Sheets).

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Police and immigration raids were often conducted in the early morning hours while the workers and guests were still sleeping, and therefore remained a constant threat, making the illegal workers sleep uneasy. Shortly after one of these raids, another of the Ghanaian workers also expressed his concerns to me:

I have to be very careful and hide, last time I was lucky because there was a room not occupied, so I told them that it was my place. They [the police] have information about Africans working here, so they ask us to show our rooms and passports... They [the police] don't understand, [we have] many problems, and not too much money from sending things to Africa, we have to have the money from work: They don't want us to work, but how can we then survive?

(Field notes 14/04 2005)

A few weeks later he was arrested on the street, due to an expired tourist visa in a random passport check. He then spent several months in Hong Kong prisons before he was deported back to Ghana.

Random passport checks on the street were not uncommon, and also added to a further confinement of movement in the city for those who did not hold valid visas or stay permits. Although uniformed police and immigration officers seldom wandered into the building except in larger operations, there would often be a number of civilian dressed police officers patrolling the area mainly in the search for drug dealers. For the experienced workers, these were however easy to spot, but became a concern since they constantly had to stop grabbing potential customers from the street, since this action would reveal that they were in fact illegal workers of their guesthouses and restaurants. Many of the workers also expressed to me that the presence of civilian dressed police officers made them feel constantly suspected of dealing with drugs. On a few occasions while I was talking to the guesthouses workers outside the entrance, people the guesthouse workers identified as civilian dressed police officers would casually walk closely up to us, and attempt to listen in on our conversations. On one of these occasions, one of the Indian workers remarked to me that:

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The police is always here. They are looking for the Pakistanis and Nepalese selling drugs, but they make it hard for us... Because we are talking to white people, they think that we are selling drugs or something...

(Field notes 08/06 2005)

The suspicious police and strict immigration authorities along with their separation from the rest of the city, added up to a feeling among the workers of being unwanted by the rest of the city. This feeling of being unwanted was further confirmed by their inability to obtain any permanent stay and work permits, and the hour long questioning by immigration officers when obtaining new tourist visas.

The strict bosses, suspicious authorities and ruthless conditions of work in the building all contributed to making illegal work at the Chung-King Mansions a less than desirable life for both the Indian and Ghanaian workers in the building. Although illegal work would at least offer some much needed income for the dwellers, the salaries were seldom more than what was needed for sheer survival in the city. The workers therefore often felt that the work actually limited their possibilities of accomplishing any economical advancement as it confined them into a solitary and exhausting existence within the building. As one of the Ghanaian workers expressed:

You can never feel the same kind of happiness as in your own country... Like this work, just sitting here all of the time. I cannot do any business, and just get enough money to survive.

(Field notes 20/04 2005)

However, the difficulties of working in the building were far from the only factor leading up to the feeling of Hong Kong being an undesirable place to be among the dwellers.

The “scam” industry

Among the many rumors I heard about the Chung-King mansions from local Hong Kongese people with seemingly little exact knowledge about the building, many were

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about African scam artists with elaborate scams designed to lure people for money. Although many of the stories I heard from locals proved to have a rather loose connection to the realities of the building, the stories about scams turned out to contain an element of truth. Although perhaps hard to spot, there seemed to be a whole industry of various scam artists operating in the area. They were however not feeding on the local population, but mostly on the travelers, traders and dwellers staying in the building. In the methodological chapter, I have already mentioned one of the many forms of “agents” claiming to be able to deliver various ways of transporting people to western countries through shady processes, or by providing them with legal entry visa. Early in my fieldwork I also myself encountered and experienced another variant of the scam artists around the Chung-King Mansions.

A few weeks into the fieldwork, I was hanging around the 7/11 shop around the corner of the building, drinking beer along with a few newfound friends. At night time, the 7/11 shop doubles as a sort of “bar”, where people mainly from the Chung-King mansions hang around drinking the much cheaper beer offered in the 7/11 shop than in the nearby bars. As we were standing there talking, another man approached our little group and joined our conversation. The new man, who introduced himself as a businessman from Congo, named Armstrong, blended completely naturally into our conversation and stayed with us until the end of the night. The next day he called me up on my cell-phone and asked if I would join him for another beer the next night. Although the other friends I was with the night before told me that there was something suspicious with this man, and that I should be careful around him, I agreed to meet him, mostly out of my own curiosity about his motives. The next two weeks I kept meeting him on several occasions, usually around the 7/11 shop at night. He kept giving me the impression of himself being a well-educated businessman, but seemed to avoid my questions around exactly what business he was in. On one of the occasions he also introduced me to another man, whom he claimed was his boss. This man was a well-dressed African, who with his suit, gold watch and gold chain gave an impression of being a well off businessman. Then, two weeks after our first meeting, Armstrong called me up and told me that a “business associate” of him was in town, and that they had a lucrative business possibility that I had to hear about.

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When I met Armstrong the following night, he told me that since I had become a trusted friend of his, he would like to involve me in their business. He explained to me that the business was of an illegal nature but with guaranteed great profits. He then brought me to a nearby expensive hotel bar where he introduced me to his associate Co-Cou. Co-Cou also gave the impression of being a successful businessman, and even attempted to give off an impressive image by buying beer in the bar with a 100 US dollar note. He said that he had just arrived from a trip to Europe and was supposed to meet another associate in Hong Kong, who had unfortunately been delayed out of Australia. The business, he told me, was the printing of USD notes. He explained (in a confusing manner) that they had managed to get hold of real USD printing paper through corrupt American “officials” in Europe, and that he was now carrying, in his briefcase, enough blank printing papers for over a million USD! The problem was however, that the process of printing of these notes involved transferring ink from real dollar notes on to the paper. The real dollar notes were supposed to be provided by his associate, who was stuck in Australia. This was of course where I fitted into the picture. He explained me that he had bought the expensive chemicals needed for printing and was now strapped for cash. He therefore suggested that I could come up with the necessary USD notes, and we would share the great profits. To ensure me of his trustworthiness he brought me into the bar’s restroom and showed me the white printing paper. The printing process he explained was done in a few minutes, and could be done in a Chung-King Mansions guesthouse room as soon as I provided the cash. I could therefore easily borrow the money from other people I knew in the building and return it, with profits, within a few hours. At this point however, I decided that my curiosity had been satisfied, and left the two men with a simple: “I’ll think about it and call you back”. I never made that call.

At first, I figured that this was probably just another variation of the typical “tourist scams”, found in so many locations with tourists frequently passing by, and that Armstrong and his associates were a rare incident of traveling scam artists that would probably disappear from the scene as soon as they had managed to scam somebody out of a decent amount of money. However, over the next few months I kept observing Armstrong hanging around the 7/11 store mixing in with a variety of people from the building. When I later told this story to my other friends in the building, I

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was told that there existed a large number of these people operating around the building, and triggered by my story, I was told a number of “embarrassing” stories from my friends of how they had previously been fooled by these artists, some even on several occasions.¹⁷ The scams would usually involve rather large sums of money, often all the money that my informants had managed to save during their time in Hong Kong. Some had even ended up in debt after borrowing money from their workplaces, hoping to pay them quickly back with a profit for themselves. Although losing their hard earned money was a serious enough affair for them, some were also faced with even more serious consequences after being lured into elaborate scams. One of my most trusted informants and friends at the Chung-King mansions told me how on one of his first visits to Hong Kong several years back he had been tricked into serious difficulties after being scammed by a man he met in the building. My friend had been working illegally at one of the building’s guesthouses for a couple of months when another man from his home country came to stay at their guesthouse. After staying in Hong Kong for a few days, the guest approached my friend and explained him that he wanted to set up a steady business importing goods from Hong Kong to their home country, and therefore needed some help making the necessary arrangements in Hong Kong. My friend approached his guesthouse boss who had a permanent HK ID card, and could therefore help the guest get started by helping him rent an apartment in a next-door building that could be used for storing goods and as an office. After this was settled, the guest expressed great gratitude towards my friend, and told him that he would like to reward him by letting him work as his associate in Hong Kong. For a month or so, this worked out well. The guest made two rounds of buying large quantities of goods from different shops around Hong Kong, which he partly shipped back home, and partly brought with him on flights back home. While buying these large quantities of goods, he also quickly built a trusting relationship with the shops he dealt with in Hong Kong, by paying them correctly and on time. Meanwhile, my friend had left his job in the guesthouse, and was working full time out of their office handling the goods and sending them while the guest was traveling with goods to their home country. The guest also brought my friend to a bank and set up a bank account for my friend, which he explained would ease the business while he was away since he could then transfer money for goods to my

¹⁷One of the workers even admitted that he had lost all his money through such scams on five occasions!

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friend’s bank account that he could then keep buying goods for. On the third round of buying goods they had bought a particularly large stack of goods, and the guest told my friend that both of them would have to travel back home with these goods. On a taxi to the airport however, the guest suddenly explained to my friend that he would be traveling alone and that he should not come back to Hong Kong. My friend, obviously concerned, kept asking why, but did not get an answer before he was led to the departure gate and quickly told that the guest had bought the large stack of goods with checks from my friend’s bank account, checks that were now bouncing. He was told that the police would soon be looking for him in Hong Kong, and that he therefore should escape back to his home country where he would be given a sum of money equal to around 11000 USD, money that my friend never saw. Terrified over what could happen if the police caught him, he traveled back home and stayed there for six months attempting to contact the man. At home my friend learned that he was probably not the only victim of this “guest”, and that he had shortly after returned to this sort of shady business which he profited greatly from. Contacting the man, and obtaining the promised money, soon proved impossible for my friend. Having a hard time finding any reasonable paid job at home, he decided to go back to Hong Kong and start over. Since my friend was probably still facing charges in Hong Kong, he bribed himself on to a false passport at home before returning to Hong Kong under the cover of a different identity.¹⁸ Over the next six years he had spent at the Chung-King Mansions before I met him the first time, he had only encountered the “guest” once in Hong Kong, but the guest had managed to escape before he was able to get a hold of him.

Stories of people loosing their savings through such scams were many at the Chung-King Mansions, and it might even seem as if there was a number of scam artists in the area that had specialized on preying on the inhabitants of the building. From the stories I was told, and through my own experience, it seems typical that the scam

¹⁸ Although very few (for obvious reasons) openly admitted to me that they were living in Hong Kong with false passport and identity, the number of instances I know of indicates that there might be a large number of people living with false papers at the Chung-King Mansions. The need for false identity because of prior criminal charges in Hong Kong was one reason; another one was the immigration policies. After gaining a number of entrances to Hong Kong, on one identity, the immigration authorities’ would often suspect illegal work and therefore deny entrance. I also heard rumors of people having false passports with false nationalities because of the immigration authorities different policies to different nationalities.

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artist would spend some time gaining trust from their victims before striking. As mentioned, many of the people in the building had come alone to a place they did not know too well, and were therefore depending on meeting people in Hong Kong that had the “know how” and resources to help them get settled. They would therefore often be easy victims for people spending time with them and building up a friendly relationship to them. The scam artist would also often make an effort to impress their victims by painting a picture of themselves as wealthy and professional business men or visa agents. In the case (referred to in chapter three) of Amal getting scammed by the “agent” claiming to provide UK entry visas, the agent had spent over a week in the guesthouse first, showing off by spending money and displaying (probably false) business cards indicating that he held an UN job in Beijing. Before Amal was scammed, I even heard stories from the other guesthouse workers about this man being friendly and rich and, that he probably stayed in their cheap guesthouse only because he enjoyed their company. It was also common that the scam artists would do their best to relate to their victims. In my own experience with Armstrong, he told me that he held a Master degree in philosophy when I told him that I was myself a student. When explaining how he was tricked by the visa scam, Amal also emphasized that the “agent” had secured his trust by telling him that he was a fellow Muslim, only interested in helping out his equals.

By relating in this way to their victims, as equals in a privileged position to help out, they quickly built up a picture of themselves as a much needed friend in need for the less fortunate victims. But the workers, traders and dwellers at the Chung-King Mansions were also ideal victims because of their belief in Hong Kong as a city of opportunity. They had all heard stories of people being able to earn easy money and build a better life through their stay in Hong Kong. Now being faced with the harsh reality of life at the Chung-King Mansions, and not making it through the “conventional means” of trade and work, it was easy to believe that this was in fact the way of making it in the city. I also believe that they were targeted for such scams because of their vulnerable relation to Hong Kong authorities. As they were themselves often vulnerable of sanctions from authorities because of illegal work, visa overstaying or other punishable offenses, they could seldom bring attention to themselves through turning to the police after loosing their money.

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A long way from home

Life dwelling at the Chung-King Mansions was seldom without worries, and although most remained confident that Hong Kong was a city of opportunity, they soon realized that making it at the Chung-King Mansions would not be easy. Work was hard, and even if they were to somehow gather enough money to attempt trade, they would always be faced with the possibilities of losing their money through bad investments as in the numerous scams, or through the trade itself, which often failed to return any profits. Specifically, the dwellers attempting to start small-scale trade without enough money to travel with the goods themselves would often experience that receiving the profits from goods sent home was never a matter of course.

In addition to the difficulties they faced trying to make a living in Hong Kong, they were also faced with the consequences of staying long periods of time far away from home. Many of the dwellers had family and children back home, many of whom they had not visited for years. As we have seen, admiration from friends and family back home could often be the very reason of traveling. But with these admirations, there also came expectations from back home. A number of the dwellers I spoke to expressed that family and friends back home never understood the hardships they encountered while traveling in Hong Kong, and elsewhere. The people back home would often only see the fruits of their labor, in form of goods or money sent home, and it seemed impossible to explain them the hardships endured in the creations of these fruits. Raakin, one of the Indian workers with several long years of traveling and working at the Chung-King Mansions explained this about visiting his home:

I come home, and my friends and parents say: “Here is Raakin, living in Hong Kong and the Philippines, working he is.” But they don’t understand how hard we work here, and the life that we are living.

(Field notes 17/07 2005)

For the dwellers attempting small-scale trade, the lack of understanding of the hardships they faced in their life abroad, from those who stayed behind, would often

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also cause further difficulties for their life in Hong Kong. As they lacked the money to travel back home with their goods themselves, they would usually have to rely on family or friends back home to handle the receiving and selling of the goods they sent back home. On numerous occasions during my fieldwork, I witnessed that obtaining the money for goods sent back home by the dwellers proved a difficult matter, even when dealing with close family and trusted friends. For the unfortunate dwellers who had often invested all the money they had in these trade attempts, this could often have serious consequences, causing them to start over again and endure further long periods of work and dwelling. According to the attempting traders themselves, this was often due to a belief back home that they were much better off while traveling, and probably could survive without the money that was much more needed back home. After receiving word that his brother back home had spent all the money from his last shipment, one of the unfortunate Ghanaians told me: “I was crying, big problem! They don’t understand the problems that Man is facing here.”

In addition to the problem of communicating their situation in Hong Kong back to their homes, there was of course a number of other concerns involved in spending so much time away from family and friends back home. In the late hours up in the guesthouses, a frequent theme for conversations would be their families and homes, and how much they missed them. As we have seen, many were lonely and lived a solitary existence within the building. Many of the dwellers also expressed a concern that being alone far away from home, and in a place like the Chung-King Mansions, even involved a danger of themselves morally declining. I have already mentioned that some were involved in sexual relations in Hong Kong, despite being married back home. Although common, most considered this immoral, and people without such relationships would often express their discontent for such activities when speaking to me single handedly. Still, many considered this a result of their general situation living abroad, and some even suggested that having a girlfriend in Hong Kong could be a necessity for survival, as they would sometimes help support the dwellers financially in times of need. The sheer solitude of life in the building was also often accounted as a reason for moral decline, as one of the Ghanaian dwellers explained: “Here there is no one to tell me what I do bad or good, at home my family will tell me what is good or wrong” (Field notes 19/06 2005). He further told me that he felt he was morally declining while living in the building. A moral decline he

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linked to life in the building making it hard to “walk the narrow path”. Especially he was concerned with the fact that his Muslim boss would not give him time off to visit Church on Sundays:

Friday and Sundays are my favorite days. I was born on a Friday, and on Sundays at home, I wake up early and go to Church. When I say I miss home, I miss Sundays.

(19/06 2005)

There was a number of “temptations” and dangers for the dwellers inside the building. Prostitution and drugs sale were flourishing in the area, and many of the workers would often earn an extra income by receiving provisions for supplying guests at the guesthouses with prostitutes or drugs. Drunkenness was also a widespread problem among the workers themselves, and often a cause of conflict. Especially among the Indian Muslim workers, alcohol consumption was considered immoral. At nighttime, the sidewalk outside the building would be filled with groups of people drinking and chatting. When talking about the moral decline of a group of fellow workers known to often be drinking on the street and causing conflict, one of the Indian workers explained to me:

Me and my brother don’t want to join this gang. Mostly because it’s Haram, but also because of the way they are doing it [in the public]. We also like to sometimes drink beer, but we don’t show everybody like them. We bring it up to the guesthouse and we do it there sometimes. We talk nice and chat around with them, but we don’t like them, and we stay out of their group.

(Field notes 17/07 2005)

Although alcohol was widely accepted, observing fellow Muslims drinking in public would often be considered a sign of moral decline among the workers, moral decline that many attributed to living far from home and family, and to the necessities of surviving in the building.

A temporary home of hardships

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Although a city of opportunity, Hong Kong appeared as an hostile environment for the dwellers. Immigration and police officially deemed them unwelcome because of their illegal work. Both scam artists and their own bosses made life difficult for them, and seemed to only seek their own profits from exploiting their vulnerable position. This hostility, along with the feeling of a solitary existence far from home, made life in Hong Kong undesirable for the dwellers. In addition, there was a belief that the hardships of life in the building could, in the long run, lead them into the moral decline they observed around themselves in the building. The dwellers therefore viewed the city as a very temporary home of hardships. Hardships that had to be endured until they had what they needed and could move on.

Chapter 6

Survival, solidarity and transnational relations

In the previous chapters we have seen how the help and support from equals was essential for the survival of the dwellers and travelers in the building. We have also seen how transnational trade, or the hope of engaging in it, often played a crucial role in both the decision to come to, and to dwell in Hong Kong. In this chapter, I will address the nature of this trade further, and, with the help of comparative literature and theory, attempt to outline some general tendencies in the relations my informants held both within the building, and the transnational relations they held to their homes.

The Indian workers and the established Indian community

We have, in a number of incidents, seen how old and new friends found at the Chung-King Mansions could help the newly arrived traveler find a job, or had arranged for this prior to arrival. Among the Indian dwellers I met, most would usually engage in some sort of work at all times during their stay in the building. Since the Indian community in the building was large, and a large part of the shops, restaurants and guesthouses were run by Indian managers, they would usually be able to at least find some sort of part time arrangement, providing them with a little money and/or a place to sleep during their stay. The exceptions were those who came solely with the purpose of trade, and already had the necessary money at hand. But even among the regular traders, many would have arrangements with managers in the building, letting them sleep on the guesthouse floor with the workers in exchange for a few hours of work every day. It is worth to note that many of the dwellers already had relations, often through kinship, to managers and other workers in the building prior to arriving. The Indian owned businesses in the building were owned, and often managed, by Indian permanent residents to Hong Kong, who would thereby be parts of the large and established Indian community in the city.

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The established Indian communities in Hong Kong have long historical ties to the city dating back to colonial times when a number of Indians found their ways to the territories, many serving as protectors of the city, through the military, as private watchmen and then in the police. In recent times, the Indian population in Hong Kong has earned a reputation as successful traders and businessmen who, although they numbered only 20000 out of a total population of six million, controlled as much as 9 per cent of the territories international trade in the early 1990's (White 1994: 2).¹⁹

According to Whites study of the Indian communities in Hong Kong (White 1994), the Hong Kong Indian man sees himself as part of four communities with corresponding responsibilities:

The first is that of extended family and includes a responsibility to clothe, house and even find employment for every second cousins son or whoever may arrive on his doorstep in Hong Kong. Next, he is loyal to the Indian group of which he is a member, be it Sindhi, Sikh or Muslim. This implies special generosity to those needing help within the group or to the religious centre and its buildings. After that, he feels a part of the entire Indian community in Hong Kong and participates according to his abilities in its charities, organizations, and social bashes. Finally, he never forgets that he is Indian, still connected to his homeland, and is willing to contribute to those people and organizations which can use his aid and will appreciate his generosity.... In return, these intersecting communities applaud their largess and shower them with the respect they have earned.

(White, 1994: 2)

Regarding the Indian managers at the Chung-King Mansions, there seems to be a certain amount of truth to Whites analysis. The Hong Kong settled Indian managers would in many cases make sure to provide their newly arrived countrymen and relatives with jobs and a place to sleep, possibly out of a feeling of obligation. However, many of the managers would push even their own relatives into hard labor under difficult conditions, and among the workers there would often remain a feeling of being exploited by purely profit seeking bosses. A few of the guesthouse workers even expressed to me a feeling that their bosses prevented them the chance for social

¹⁹ White uses the word "Indian" in a broad sense, including people from the entire Indian subcontinent in her study (White 1994).

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and economic advance in Hong Kong, and hindered them settle down as parts of the established Indian community, because the bosses were depending on their cheap labor. This became apparent especially when discussing the subject of obtaining Hong Kong ID cards. Obtaining Hong Kong ID cards would provide the workers with stay and work permits, which was viewed by the experienced dwellers as a sure way to advancement within the city. Obtaining a HK ID card would have allowed the workers to legally obtain jobs in the entire territory, and also to manage guesthouses for themselves in the building. The workers told me that they believed that their bosses could help them obtain ID cards if they wanted to, as they were established in the city and often managed several businesses. Some also argued that their managers themselves obtained ID cards through help from former employers, and thereby knew that it could be done. However, as one of the Indian workers explained, the managers were not willing to let their own workers advance:

I've tried to ask him [the boss] even about a domestic servant ID card, but he won't help me.²⁰ Even for the worker that is his own cousin he won't do it! I think he [the boss] is thinking that if he give us ID card, maybe we won't work in his guesthouse anymore. But I believe it is easy for boss to do it if he wants, he has so many guesthouses.

(Field notes 13/7 2005)

Although many of the Indian workers and been working in the building for over a decade, very few had been able to obtain ID cards and achieve any legal status in the city. Little help seemed to come from the established Indian managers, who the workers felt kept them in their uncertain status to insure their own source of cheap labor. Solidarity between the settled Indian managers and the newcomers thus seemed to rely on an equal dependence, where the established bosses needed cheap labor and the workers desperately needed a source of income in the city. Work was however not the only way the Indian workers were dependant on the more settled Indian community. As we have seen, they would usually not be issued more than a few weeks tourist visa on each arrival to the territories. Since frequent day trips over to the mainland would soon have created suspicion of illegal labor work in the territories,

²⁰ A domestic servant ID card is a limited Hong Kong ID card, allowing the worker to work as a domestic servant in the territories for an limited period of time.

they were forced to frequently commute back to India in order to assure immigration authorities of their alibi of being frequent business travelers. Since the salaries in the building were seldom sufficient to afford frequent, often monthly, trips back to India, the workers had to finance their trips by carrying goods with them on their trips home. The Indian workers told me that most attempts to trade individually by themselves seldom proved profitable, as profitable trade between Hong Kong and India required both established networks for sale in India, and a decent amount of money to invest in larger quantities of goods in Hong Kong. The experienced Indian workers would therefore only engage in trade for themselves if they had a concrete request of goods from India, usually from relatives, and the money at hand by themselves, or in operation with others who had money at hand. Most times however, they ended up carrying goods for the established Indian traders in Hong Kong. The established traders would usually pay them around 50 HKD per kg of cargo, usually textiles or electronics bought cheap in mainland China. The return flight ticket cost around 3200 HKD and allowed up to 60 kg of baggage, the workers would therefore seldom have to add more than a few hundred HKD for their tickets.²¹ According to the Indian workers, the established traders needed them to carry their goods, as they would usually need to ship more goods than they could carry themselves. Also, the goods had to be carried through airport customs in India, as the workers frequently traveling would always “know somebody” at the airport customs, which could give them a “friendly” toll price for the goods.

This, usually monthly, circle between home and the Chung-King Mansions, was essential for the Indian illegal workers if they were to sustain their life in Hong Kong. Without this circle, their passports would soon become overfilled with Mainland-Hong Kong border stamps, generating suspicion from Hong Kong immigration authorities, and eventually denying them access to the territories. The frequent traveling also helped them sustain a simultaneous presence both in their homeland and in Hong Kong. Many workers had family at home in India, and often engaged in longer periods of labor work at home before returning to work in Hong Kong, if work

²¹ The example provided here is based on my Indian informants' most usual route, between Hong Kong and Kolkata, India, with Biman Bangladesh Airline. By current (2006) rates, 50 HKD equals approx 6.44 USD, 3200 HKD approx 412.39 USD. Given 60 kg of goods at 50 HKD, the traveler would have to pay around 26 USD (201.7 HKD) for their round trip.

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at home was more profitable. The frequent traveling also enabled them to profit from their travels without risking large investments in both goods and tickets. If they were lucky, they could sometimes earn extra money through bringing profitable goods, like electronics and particularly cell-phones, which did not require much space and could easily be transported along with the goods from the established traders. Although this small-scale international trade did not give any huge profits, the frequency of travels made them a welcome addition to their other incomes.

In this ways, the Indian workers I studied were able to sustain their transnational lives with the help from their more established countrymen. Without them, it would have been far more difficult for the newly arrived workers to find work, and even if they did, it would be impossible to afford the frequent home trips without carrying goods for the established traders. However, these established Indians' willingness to help their more unfortunate countrymen can hardly be understood as sheer acts of solidarity between countrymen, as they seem to profit greatly from the unfortunate workers position. An unfortunate position which, if we are to believe the workers' own statements, some of the Indian managers would like the workers to remain in, even if the status quo meant denying their own workers, often kin, any chance of economic and social advancement in the city.

The African traders and their dwelling countrymen

For the Ghanaian dwellers I met, there was no established settled community of countrymen in the city to seek work and help from. Although there were a few Ghanaians living with ID cards in the area, who could help a few of the newly arrived travelers with jobs and sometimes a place to stay, there were very few Ghanaian owned businesses in the area that could offer any jobs. Most therefore had to rely on the Indian and Chinese owned guesthouses in the building if they were to find any somewhat stable work in the city. As we have seen, competition in obtaining these jobs was fierce, and the dwellers by far outnumbered the available jobs. There was therefore a large number of Ghanaian, and other African dwellers in the area, who dwelled for long periods without any regular jobs. They were therefore reliant on the

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help and small jobs offered by their friends and countrymen for survival in the city. There seemed to be a presence of countryman solidarity among the Ghanaian dwellers, and we have already seen how a number of those who came empty handed to the city soon received help in finding a place to sleep and eat. In addition, I often witnessed how the few that had jobs within the building would often do what they could to make sure that their less fortunate friends had something to eat and a place to sleep. Resources to share were however limited, even among those who had jobs. The Ghanaians did however have a number of traveling counterparts in the building who could help them keep themselves on their feet.

Although there were very few settled Ghanaians in the area, there was a number of traveling Ghanaian traders attempting to do international trade between Hong Kong and their homes. Even though the line between these traders and the dwellers is unclear, as most of the dwellers were also attempting to get in on the trade, it is possible to draw a general distinction between those who came to Hong Kong with the necessary capital to engage in trade, and those travelers who ended up dwelling in Hong Kong after arriving with nothing.

Although the Chung-King Mansions' role as an arcade for African traders was fairly new, informal intercontinental trade between Hong Kong and the Sub-Saharan Africa's informal economies is no new phenomenon.²² For example studies on ivory trade between Kenya and Hong Kong during the 1970's have, by comparing Kenyan export figures to Hong Kong custom figures, suggested that real Kenyan ivory exports to Hong Kong between 1970 to 1977 were no less than 137 percent greater than those acknowledged by Kenyan authorities (Ellis and Macgaffey, 1996: 21). From what I observed at the Chung-King Mansions, the traders were at the time mainly bringing cash in and goods out of Hong Kong. The goods exported at the time were mainly Chinese manufactured clothing and electronics, along with Hong Kong bought GSM phones. There were also a number of used goods being exported, especially used cell phones and computer equipment, but also larger and more bulky goods like washing machines, TVs, refrigerators, other household appliances, and even cars. Inside the Chung-King Mansions, there were a large number of shops specializing in providing

²² The experienced Indian workers who had spent decades in the building told me that the African traders had started coming to the building during the late 1990's.

goods for these traders, many bringing in goods from the Chinese Mainland within a day after receiving orders from the traders. On visits accompanying traders to distant areas in the territory, I was also brought to larger workshops specializing in restoring old household appliances and electronics for export to Africa. There was also a number of used car sales on the outskirts of the city selling used cars ready for export.

There was great diversity among the traders regarding trade experience. Some of the traders were very experienced in doing trade between Hong Kong and their homes, and would travel frequently to both Hong Kong and Mainland China and bring large amounts of goods back home. On the other hand, there were many less experienced traders who were in Hong Kong attempting international trade for the first time in their lives. These inexperienced traders, new both to Hong Kong and the trade, had often heard about the possibilities through experienced traders, and had on this basis decided to invest large parts of their savings in the journey and trade. In their review of the research done on sub-Saharan Africa's underground international trade, Ellies and MacGaffey (1996) have also noted that research on the African traders suggests that different categories of people conduct in intercontinental trade of the sort found at the Chung-King Mansions. They state that while the specialized professional traders have often been successful regional traders who eventually have the option of breaking into intercontinental trade, there are also people who are "occasional traders" who make a small number of trips to make money for specific purposes, or to attempt breaking into full time trade. They also note that there are, similarly, people who are not professional traders that attempt international trade if the opportunity arises. These are often people not aspiring to become fulltime traders, but make use of a trip overseas to do some business on the side (Ellis and Macgaffey, 1996: 35-36).

When meeting these inexperienced traders at the Chung-King Mansions, I was often astonished by how little planning and knowledge about trade these traders had when arriving in the building, considering the significant effort and capital they put into it. What sort of goods to buy and how to ship them often seemed largely accidental, and vital knowledge about the quality of goods bought and custom regulations in their own country seemed scarce. Many of the traders I met were arriving for their first time in the city, without any contacts in the city or knowledge about what goods to buy and where to buy them. The solution was however meeting fellow countrymen in

the building who could guide them through the trade process in Hong Kong. A number of the Ghanaian dwellers who had spent longer periods of time in the building and city were well experienced in conducting trade, although they did not have the money to engage in it fully themselves. Especially many of the dwellers without regular jobs in the city had specialized in guiding first time traders around the city to buy and sell goods, and they would usually be well informed on the best spots for buying any type of goods in the city. At first, both the traders and the “guides” insisted to me that the guiding was simply a friendly gesture toward their countrymen in need without any pay. However, as I started accompanying both the traders and their guides on their daily tasks, I soon noticed that the traders would usually provide the dwellers with a small amount of money, food, and if needed a place to sleep when the day came to an end. When I later asked one of the Ghanaian dwellers about this “guiding”, he again insisted that this was only a friendly gesture between friends, but as he explained me:

I don't charge them, but when I take them [to buy goods] and we come back, maybe they will give me 200-300 HKD. But if they don't give me the first time [I bring them], then next time I will charge them [in advance]!

(Field notes, 25/04 2005)

I soon realized that for a number of the Ghanaian dwellers staying without any job in the city, the income earned by guiding these inexperienced traders was vital for surviving in the city. Although a number of the Ghanaian dwellers were living in distant parts of the city, often sharing crowded low cost apartments, many, with nothing else to do, would come in to the Chung-King Mansions in the early morning hoping to meet traders in need of their services. The Ghanaians were not the only ones engaging in this activity, and there was a number of African dwellers operating similarly in the area, guiding visiting traders from their home countries around the city. A few of the Africans I met had also successfully specialized greatly in offering guidance to traders, and were now making quite a good living in the city in this way. One of these was my dear Angolan friend John, who operated both in Hong Kong and Guangzhou guiding traders. Fluent in French, English, Portuguese and his native Angolan language, he was now working with traders from various countries. He had built himself a large network of business contacts both in Guangzhou and Hong

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Kong, and was receiving commissions from professional traders, who regularly contacted him to set up things even before they arrived in the city.

For most of the dwellers, however, this sort of guidance was barely enough to keep them on their feet while in the city, but it was an important way to make use of the knowledge they had acquired during their stay in the city, and to learn more about the trade they wished to engage in themselves. In this way, knowledge of trade and the city became a valuable commodity in the area, something I also experienced personally during my stay. Towards the end of my fieldwork, one of the Indian guesthouse workers was given 2000 HKD and a golden necklace after helping one of his African guests with buying certain goods. This sparked a sudden realization among some of the Indian guesthouse workers of the potential of earning extra money by guiding their African guests. However, the Indian workers were not accustomed to the buying of larger goods like cars and household appliances, and were therefore unsure of where they should bring their guests. Asking the Ghanaian dwellers was no option since they would probably try to avoid competition from the Indian workers. A few of the workers were however aware of the fact that I had accompanied the traders on the guided trips around the territories buying cars and other items. I was therefore on several occasions during the next weeks, approached by Indian workers being unusually curious about the details of my daytrips with the Ghanaians.

Guiding inexperienced traders was however far from the only relation the Ghanaian dwellers had to their trading countrymen. The dwellers also included a number of professional traders in their communities, and at night, some of the guesthouses with Ghanaian workers would often be crowded with Ghanaian workers, traders and travelers all dining together and chatting eagerly. As a number of the professional traders would frequently be visiting Hong Kong and the building, some as much as several times each month, there would usually be a mix of both old and new faces in these gatherings. The professional traders would also often offer the dwellers small jobs, like helping them load their goods, or store goods safely in Hong Kong while they traveled elsewhere. Also, the professional traders were of vital importance to the dwellers when they attempted to do their own small scale trade. The frequency of the professional traders trips made it possible for the dwellers to send small quantities of goods, like a few cell-phones, with the professional traders back home to Ghana,

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and even have the money for the goods returned the next time they came to Hong Kong. In return, the dwellers who stayed in Hong Kong offered a somewhat stable community in Hong Kong, a home away from home for the frequently traveling businessmen.

While in Hong Kong, the Ghanaians would usually emphasize the importance of countryman solidarity and helping out each other despite differences in social status or religion, because as one of the dwellers expressed: “Every Ghanaian man here is my brother” (Field notes 3/7 2005). As seen through their stories, they indeed seemed to take care of each other while in these uncertain and unknown surroundings. Especially the experienced dwellers, with work and long time spent in Hong Kong, would often engage themselves in taking care of the newly arrived travelers. This did indeed create a bond between them, as one of the Ghanaian dwellers expressed when talking about an experienced dweller helping him when he first arrived in the city:

He is my brother, he has helped me in so many ways that I cannot describe after I came to Hong Kong. And not just me, he has also helped so many others. He is a very, very kind man.

(Field notes 3/7 2005)

Despite these seemingly close bonds between the Ghanaians while in the Chung-King Mansions, I all too often observed cases where these bonds seemed to degenerate as soon as one of the involved parts had left the building and returned home or elsewhere. I have already mentioned the difficulties the dwellers attempting trade often had obtaining the money from their families for goods sent home. However the problem would just as often be the business travelers carrying the goods, goods that did often not reach their designated destinations, and money that disappeared while in the business traveler’s hands. When confronting the business traders, either through family visiting their doorstep in Ghana, or when they returned to Hong Kong, the dwellers would often only face a series of excuses, some less true than others, about defects in the goods, custom problems, or that the money would come later. This was often the case even among the dwellers themselves. Often, if one of the dwellers were returning home, they would invest together in a load of goods for the dweller to carry home. However, the remaining dwellers in Hong Kong often saw nothing of the profit

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coming back. The trust and solidarity so deeply expressed while together in the building therefore seemed to disappear as soon as one of the dwellers left the building, and I more than once witnessed dwellers in the building phoning home, organizing trusted family members to meet the soon arriving carrier of goods at the local airports, as even the most trusted friend in the building could not be trusted to deliver the goods by himself when at home.

These incidents later made me question the seemingly close bonds I witnessed in life within the building, and left me with the question of to which extent the Ghanaians generated trust between each other by living so closely together. As discussed in chapter two, Portes (1997), when discussing the immigrant workers' networks, claims that these networks tend to generate solidarity by virtue of generalized uncertainty. As the exchanges between the actors take place in uncertain situations, with little initial information about the exchange partners and little reliable state regulation, they create a strong need to "stick together". Portes claims that, when in place, these "extended, dense, and solidary networks can be put into play for a number of economic initiatives" (Portes, 1997:7-8), one being the transnational trade attempts I witnessed at the Chung-King Mansions. Although this might very well be the case among more settled immigrant communities, like the Indian community in Hong Kong, the seemingly strong bonds created by the need to stick together among the Ghanaians did not seem to always create bonds trustworthy enough to secure solidarity across the long geographical distances successful transnational trade required. The dilemma presented here, of trust in a face-to-face community as the Chung-King Mansions not being the same as the trust required in the larger setting of a global world, can be related to Giddens' discussions of fundamental contrasts between the conditions of trust relations in pre-modern cultures and in those of the modernity (Giddens, 1990:100). Giddens conceptualizes trust in relation to absence in time and space, and claims that:

There would be no need to trust anyone whose activities were continually visible and whose thought processes were transparent, or to trust any systems whose workings were wholly known and understood. It has been said that trust is "a device for coping with the freedom of others," but the prime condition for trust is not lack of power but lack of full information.

(Giddens, 1990: 33)

Because of its inherent connection with absence, Giddens writes, trust is always bound up with modes of organizing “reliable” interactions across time and space (1990: 100-101). As the level of time-space distances in pre-modern cultures was relatively low compared with the conditions of modernity, Giddens suggests that there has been a change in the nature of trust relations during the transition between traditional society and modern societies. While localized contexts of trust, such as kinship, local community, religion and tradition predominate in pre-modern societies, trust relations in modern society is vested in disembedded abstract tokens and expert systems (Giddens, 1990:79 -111).

While Giddens’ contrast between modernity and pre-modern societies has been challenged,²³ his concept of trust in relation to absence in time and space is well applicable in understanding the trust relations among my Ghanaian informants. Within the “local” settings at the Chung-King Mansions, the need to “stick together” created strong bounds between the countrymen. However, as the small size of the community in the building made it easy for the actors to observe each other’s day to day activities, there was no need for “trust” as they would always, to a certain extent, know what their fellow countrymen was up to. When engaging together in transnational trade, however, the absence from each other makes it impossible for themselves to regulate each other, and since this transnational space is to a very little extent governed by the nation-state and its regulating laws, trust between the involved actors becomes essential if they are to succeed. In the cases of mistrust I observed, it could thus be claimed that although the uncertain situation within the building created bonds of solidarity between the Ghanaians out of a circumstantial need to stick together, this “local” bond did not entail the trust necessary for confidence in each other across the vast time and space which successful transnational trade involved. Instead, the attempting traders preferred to do business with their own kin, despite the difficulties mentioned earlier of retrieving the payments for goods sent home. However, as the trade processes could seldom be done without the involvement of others than their own kin, as with the carrying of goods home, they could usually only

²³ See for example Kolshus (2005: 40-41).

attempt to shorten the involvements of others. However, as we will see later, the preference of trading with kin was not only caused by the lack of other trustworthy partners, but also concerns the very nature of their transnational networks and ties.

The importance of maintaining transnational ties

For the Indian workers the relations they had with the established Indian community and traders were essential for surviving in the city and maintaining their transnational lives. Similarly, the Ghanaian dwellers were also dependent on relations with a group of more fortunate countrymen, the Ghanaian traders. However, both the Ghanaian traders and the Indian managers and professional traders clearly benefited greatly from this relationship, thereby making the relationships a mix of countryman solidarity, mutual dependency, and in some incidents, possible exploitation.

For both groups of dwellers and workers, maintaining their transnational lives and connections to their homes was essential for meeting their goals and/or surviving in the city. For the Indian workers, frequent travels back home were necessary for maintaining life in Hong Kong due to visa regulations. Traveling back home was also important for keeping in touch with their families at home, and for obtaining extra profits by small-scale trade. For the Ghanaian dwellers, the distances and expenses of traveling frequently back home made it impossible for them to travel themselves. However, as Ghanaian nationals were given three months visa upon entry, they could stay for long periods of time in the city by crossing the mainland border every three months.²⁴ Maintaining transnational ties back to their homes was however also essential for them, as breaking into transnational trade was understood as the way to achieve any upward economic advancement. Especially among the Ghanaian dwellers, and to a certain extent also the Indian workers, we see that work and other income gained within the Hong Kong and the Chung-King Mansions, was to a great

²⁴ At the late stages of my fieldwork, the Ghanaians I spoke to indicated that there had been a recent hardening on visa regulations, and that many were given only a few weeks entry when returning from visa renewing trips to the mainland. This led to a strong decline in the number of Ghanaian dwellers in Hong Kong. When I again spoke to some of the remaining dwellers November 2005, I was told that many of them were now dwelling in cities on the Chinese Mainland instead of Hong Kong.

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extent considered only as a means of survival while in the city, as an income to keep them on their feet while they awaited the possibilities of progress that their transnational state could deliver them.

In this sense, my findings coincide with Portes' assumption that the immigrant workers activate their transnational networks for economic use, as they are aware that their poor pay and labor conditions will not go far in promoting their own economic goals (Portes, 1997:7). Some studies have also suggested that the immigrant workers hold to transnational ties back home might be a resistance, or response to the conditions of social, economic and cultural marginalization they face in their foreign host societies (Olwig, 2003: 67-69, and Basch et al. 1994: 234-236). In the case of the dwellers and workers I studied at the Chung-King Mansions, the difficulties in obtaining stay permits, along with the feeling of being in a hostile environment, was indeed a reason for holding on to the transnational ties to their homes, as permanently settling in Hong Kong did not seem to be an option, or at least an undesirable option. I do, however, believe that in the case of the dwellers and workers I encountered, it would be wrong to perceive their maintenance of transnational ties to their home solely as a consequence of the difficulties of working, settling, and surviving in the city. Such an assumption would also, in my case, wrongly grasp their transnational state as a temporary stage in a process of attempting permanent settlement in the city. As has been shown through the stories from my informants, many left their homes without any plans of migrating permanently, and many did not even plan for the destination of Hong Kong. Even among many of those who had spent decades in the building, Hong Kong was still only perceived as a temporary home. A number of the people I met had also left their homes not intending to work temporarily in Hong Kong, but only to benefit from a short stay and transnational trade. Although some of the workers had come to Hong Kong planning to engage in temporary work, what I hope has been made clear throughout this thesis, is that even among these, the real hope was to benefit, not from work and migrating to Hong Kong in itself, but from the transnational life that they temporarily engaged in. These benefits, as I have shown, came in many forms. While the workers and dwellers themselves would usually emphasize the possibilities of economic profits through transnational trade, I have also shown how the experience of traveling and doing business, along with an increase of social status when returning home was also important factors in the choice

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of engaging in such a life. Thus the image of Hong Kong as a city of possibilities has to be understood in relation to the possibilities their transnational lives had to offer, in combination with both the special economic conditions of the Hong Kong and their homes, enabling profitable trade.

To avoid understanding the transnational nature of their lives as a result, or a consequence of a migration process to Hong Kong, we need to explore the important role played by their family networks back home, and elsewhere.

The Transnational family

The transnational networks of the dwellers and workers were often based on kin. As we have seen, both money for investing in their journeys and money needed while in Hong Kong to engage in trade, was often provided by family members at home or family members traveling and working elsewhere. This observation also coincides with Basch et al.'s observations in their study of transnationalism (Basch et al, 1994):

The migratory efforts of individuals are often made possible through collective efforts of family networks. These collective efforts take many forms. The pulling together of capital and labor resources across transnational space may allow a poor family member to migrate.

(Basch et al, 1994: 240)

This indeed seemed to apply for my informants in the Chung-King Mansions. In most cases, the dwellers and workers were young men, not able to afford the expenses of travel, or the expenses of attempting trade themselves. Usually the money to engage in their journeys would therefore come from elder family members, usually parents or older siblings. Fifi, the Ghanaian dweller mentioned in the two previous chapters, who at the time was working in one of the buildings guesthouses, explained how his journey was a part of a larger plan he and his brothers had created. The plan involved pulling together their funds so that each of the four brothers could, in turn, travel abroad and try their luck at gathering more money through work and trade, which would be brought home so that the next brother could travel and attempt the same.

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The hope was that together they could manage to bring home enough money to support their entire family. The oldest brother, who had already spent a few years traveling, had proposed the plan. The oldest brother had after an unsuccessful attempt in crossing over to Spain from Morocco, decided to head for Asia instead. He therefore traveled to Senegal where he boarded a ship, which he was told was heading to Japan, as a stow-away. Unfortunately however, the ship turned out to be heading to South Africa. In South Africa he was fortunate enough to find work with a shipping company, and worked for a few years on ships sailing in Asia before he was discharged and sent back to Ghana where he proposed his plans: “When he come home he say: Now that I have a little money, I have to help my little brother to start” (Field Notes: 19/6 2005). With the money his elder brother had earned abroad, Fifi set off to Asia, and eventually Hong Kong, hoping to earn enough money both to contribute to the sustaining of his entire family, and to send off his younger brother next in line for travel.

The importance of sticking together as family units despite the long distances was also expressed by a number of other Ghanaians. Tutu, another of the Ghanaian dwellers mentioned previously, had been given the money to travel to China by his elder sister. His original plan was to work as a teacher in Mainland China, but failing to get any teaching job, he phoned home to his elder sister that advised him to travel to Hong Kong where he had a cousin already dwelling at the Chung-King Mansions. When he arrived at the Chung-King Mansions, he soon learned of the trading possibilities, and therefore contacted his elder brother at the time working in the US, who agreed to send him money to invest in cell-phones that would be sent home to another elder brother in Ghana who would handle the sale. In Tutu’s story, it is interesting to note that he himself was unaware of his cousin staying in Hong Kong, and that the information leading to Tutu setting off to Hong Kong, from Mainland China, was provided to him by his sister at home in Ghana. This observation suggests that his transnational network of kinship was managed and centered around his sister or other family at home in Ghana, and coincides with another observation done by Basch et al. Based on research Filipino and Caribbean transmigrant kin networks to the US, they write that: “Transmigrant kin networks frequently center around women who are said to have special responsibilities as “elder daughters” for their kin” (Basch et al. 1994: 239). With the family at home as a base, it seems that the transnational

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family network created a means of common strategizing and allocation of the family's mobile resources globally, across economic and political borders. In practice, this allowed the individual family members to travel abroad, with money pulled together from other family members, while the family at home provided them with a safety net of resources, and also systematically sustained their relations to family members elsewhere and at home. In this way, the transnational family was able to relocate their combined resource to whatever family member, at home or abroad, who was in need of them, and wherever there was profit to be gained through investment. The family members at home were also largely engaged in, and profited from, the transnational lives of their members abroad. Goods sent back home would usually be managed and sold, at home, by family members, and in many cases the dwellers at the Chung-King Mansions received concrete orders of goods needed by family members at home. In cases of need, as in one incident when the mother of one of the dwellers was in need of hospital treatment, money could be gathered from all family members abroad and sent home. By helping the physically absent travelers sustain their interests and relations at home, they also ensured that the travelers had a continual social presence in their home communities, and a home to return to.

The understanding of the dwellers as parts of a larger economic family entity also sheds light on the attempting traders' continuous efforts to send goods home despite often not receiving any payment back to Hong Kong. In this light, we can understand the traders' frustration as a feeling of not being prioritized in the families' re-location of resources. However, in many incidents, the dweller would be pleased even if he did not receive any payment, if he learned that another family member had put the money to good use. One example of this was provided to me by Tutu, which on one occasion during my fieldwork invested in, and sent home, a relatively large number of GSM phones without any payment coming back. In the beginning, he was very frustrated about not receiving any payment, as he was in need of money. However, when he later learned that the profits had been used by a younger cousin to travel abroad, he was much more pleased, as he explained:

It is much better for him, so I am not angry, he travels to Spain, that is good use of the money. Much better than if he stay in Ghana and spend it on women and things, then I would get angry.

(Field notes November 2005)

In light of what I have shown, it seems that Tutu was pleased that his money had been relocated correctly to investing in another family members journey, much such as his own journey had been financed with money from other parts of his family.

However, the distribution of kinship wealth was not always as fair as in this case, and it often seemed that some members of the family profited more than others. This especially becomes apparent upon examining the situation of many of the Indian workers in the building. These were often brought to Hong Kong specifically to work in restaurants and guesthouses in the building, often managed by relatives. The Indian workers' kinship networks seemed to function much in the same ways as the Ghanaian dwellers transnational kinship networks. Particularly I found that the Indian workers working for relatives could be understood as belonging to a larger economic entity of kinship. However, here we see that their own inexpensive labor was the resource distributed where it was needed, and workers regularly working at the Chung-King Mansions could often be called upon to work in family related business at home. Concerning such exploitation of cheap labor found within the kinship network, Basch et al. (1994) write that the transnational family networks entail issues of class formation:

The ideology of kinship helps to ensure workers who are reliable and trustworthy and willing to exchange their labor for only a small stipend. The rubric of family solidarity, shared mutual interest, trust, and responsibility is used to justify both at home and abroad the exploitation of individuals as cheap labor. As we have seen, transnational survival strategies are not of equal benefit to all players. Consequently, the tensions of family life may at the same time reflect the tension of class struggles. Those who find themselves entrapped and severely limited by family circumstances and ideology may develop festering resentments.

(Basch, et al. 1994: 241)

With observations from Caribbean and Filipino immigrants, brought to the US to provide cheap labor that sustains family enterprise and strategies, Basch et al. state that the immigrants working under such conditions often begin to feel exploited. They

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are therefore often likely to rebel when they start comparing the subsistence they receive with other employment possibilities in the US. As we have seen, there also existed a feeling of being exploited among the Indian workers at the Chung-King Mansions. The issue of class struggle within the transnational kinship network especially became apparent in the case of obtaining Hong Kong ID cards, when the workers felt that their managers were limiting their prospects of social and economic advancement by not helping them. Among the Ghanaian dwellers, the frustration over the fruits of their labor not returning to them also occasionally led to expressions of wanting to advance beyond the limitations set by their kinship network, and many expressed that they dreamt of earning enough money so that they could run their own business all by themselves. Because, as one of the dwellers explained in his frustration over his elder brother at home not returning all of the profits from a shipment of goods: “To be under somebody is a very big problem” (field notes: 19/4 2005).

As my own observation and findings are strictly limited to the Chung-King Mansions and the people I met there, it is impossible to reach any final conclusions on who actually benefited from my informants transnational lives. In any case, my findings support the notion that not all members of the transnational family profited equally.

Understanding relations within the building, and within the family

In this chapter, we have seen how both the Indian workers and the Ghanaians had important relations to more established groups of countrymen. These relationships were of great importance to surviving in the city, maintaining their transnational relations, and to reach the goals of their journeys. It is however important to note that both the Ghanaian traders and the community of established Indian migrants benefited greatly from their relations to their working and dwelling countrymen. Thus it is impossible to explain these relations solely out of countryman solidarity, or sheer obligation to help out less fortunate countrymen. Instead, we see an issue of class formations within the building, where more established immigrants, and capital strong

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traders are profiting from their less fortunate countrymen's cheap labor, transnational traveling, and knowledge of the city.

We have also seen how, in despite of the strong expressions of countryman solidarity, the seemingly strong bonds, even among the dwellers themselves, were not trustworthy enough to secure the trust in the conditions of absence transnational trade required. The attempting traders would therefore attempt to limit the role played by other dwellers, by for example having their own family members meet the home coming travelers and secure goods sent as soon as possible. The preference of dealing with family in business is also connected with the very nature of their transnational lives and relations, which we have seen were frequently based on kinship ties. In much of the same way that transnational corporations have expanded across the economic connected globe, it seems as if the transnational families have followed and are making profitable use of local economic conditions, and differences, between home and their "stations" abroad. By commonly strategizing and pulling together resources, the transnational families are able to send their members abroad, and relocate their resources into whatever location they are needed and where there are profits to be made. However, the benefits from these transnational survival strategies were not always distributed equally to all players, and there seemed to emerge issues of class formation and class struggle also within the transnational family. The Indian workers wish to obtain Hong Kong ID cards, and the Ghanaian traders' wish to earn enough to one day "be their own bosses", were clear indications of tensions within the transnational family.

The notion that the transnational networks of these dwellers, workers and travelers were frequently centered around family members at home is also an important observation, as it reminds us of the fact that these networks are not simple results of immigration to Hong Kong, but were in many cases well established even before the travelers left their homes. The very reason for leaving their homes, it seems, was not to migrate permanently to Hong Kong or elsewhere, but rather the state of traveling and creating/extending transnational relations was a goal in itself. As I have shown, economic advancement was to be achieved through the special economic possibilities their transnational lives entailed, combined with the special economic conditions of Hong Kong, and not as a result of simply migrating to, and working in the city. It may

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therefore be claimed that the relations the established immigrants and traders, along with work in the building, were often the only means of sustaining and retaining life in Hong Kong and their transnational kinship relations.

Understanding these transnational families as an economic entity and security net is important for understanding my informants' persistence in maintaining their transnational relations and lives abroad. During my fieldwork, I witnessed very few signs of any upward economic mobility among the workers and dwellers I studied, instead I often saw people having to return back home with even less than they had brought to the city. The dwellers and workers seemed to be stuck in a deadlock circle, where the established migrants and traders, as well as families back home receiving goods, seemed to be the ones profiting from the transnational life of the workers and dwellers. Individually, there seemed to be little economic gain to be achieved compared to the difficulties of their transnational lives. However, if we acknowledge them as parts of a wider economic entity, in this case family, along with the assumption that the benefits of their labor is not always redistributed equally to all players, it is possible to reach the conclusion that any economic motives must be understood, not in individual profits, but in relation to the transnational family as a whole. Many of the dwellers and workers also expressed that the hardships of life in the building were endured in order to support their families. I have already shown how supporting the family at home was an important factor for Fifi in his decision to travel abroad. When discussing the hardships of life in Hong Kong with one of the Indian workers, I asked directly why he chose to remain, upon which he explained: "If I don't work here, maybe they [family at home in India] will die [starve], that is why I still work here." (Field notes 17/07 2005)

Obviously, providing income for the family entity was an important motivating factor in both the decision to leave home, and the efforts to endure and sustain life abroad. However, there were also, as we have seen, individual benefits to be gained for the travelers. Many emphasized the experience to be gained, and an increase of social status at home upon returning. The increase of social status and experience were also means of advancing in what we may refer to as a class system within the transnational family. For some, there was also a hope that the experience gained, and money earned, would perhaps let them one day establish their own independent businesses.

Survival, solidarity and transnational relations

The belief that there was money to be made stood firmly. The Chung-King Mansions were a place where things happened, and observing successful traders making easy money through trade enforced these beliefs. My informants never knew what the next day would bring of opportunities, but they knew that giving up and heading home would mean missing out of the opportunities Hong Kong and their transnational lives could potentially offer. And even if they one day were to be forced to head home with less money than they had brought, they would always have the experience. As Tutu told me when discussing the prospects of soon heading home:

I will see if I can start business, that is what I want to do. In Hong Kong I have learned so much about the business, so I hope I can do it when I go back.

[Me:] Is it the Chung-King school of business?

-[Laughing] yes it is!

(Field notes: November 2005)

Conclusions

While the questions I first started with were simple, the answers to them soon proved more complex than I would ever have imagined, and have been revised and rethought until the very end of writing this thesis.

What I hope has become evident during the course of the thesis, is that for the people I met, the possibilities offered through migration, concerned more the opportunities offered by mobility and transnational life itself, than the opportunities particularly offered by immigrating to Hong Kong, or any other particular place. In the second chapter of this thesis, I have described the problem of fitting the personal stories I found into the conventional concept of migration involving a permanent settling in the “host” society. As I have shown, permanently settling in Hong Kong was not the intention of the people I met in the building. This was true even for some of the most established people I met, some of whom had spent decades working and dwelling at the Chung-King Mansions. Instead, the people I met would emphasize the international character of their lives, and express the importance of being equipped with the internationally useful experience and tools their lives abroad had provided them with, and which could enable them to move on to whatever location on earth where they could find opportunity and better life.

There was a number of reasons to why settling in Hong Kong was deemed undesirable, many of which were connected to the difficulties life in the building entailed, and the feeling of being in a hostile environment with few chances of advancing. For many the inaccessibility of any permanent stay permits also made permanent settling impossible. Most importantly however, I have through their own stories of embarking on their journeys shown that any permanent migration was seldom the intention of their journeys. Instead, it seems, the strategies involved in the choice to embark was more connected to the perception of possibilities transnational and mobile life entailed, rather than any specific possibilities immigration to any particular place could offer. Even though many of the workers I spoke with had actually come to Hong Kong for specific job offers within the building, jobs that would usually pay much more than achievable by working at home, working in the

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building was commonly conceived only as a means to support their transnational lives until the possibility of true profits through trade, or moving on to a more profitable location, would become available. The key of success in their strategies was to remain mobile and hold on to their transnational relations and life, in order to be capable to act on any new possibility that would turn up in their mobile lives.

The notion of possibilities through transnational life was transmitted to my informants from friends and/or family already engaged in traveling to Hong Kong or elsewhere. From this notion the strategy of creating a livelihood through traveling was molded, and became the very reason for embarking on their journeys. As I have shown, these strategies were not always individual creations, but would often be communized strategies of groups, in this case based on kinship, that by pulling their resources together could send individual family members abroad. When put in place, these geographically extended networks could through further relocation of resources, such as capital, goods and labor, make sure that their resources were put to use wherever they were needed, and profits were to be made, at home or abroad.

Although the possibilities of economic advance would often be brought up when discussing the decision to travel abroad, less direct economic gains seemed to be equally important in the individual travelers' strategies for creating a livelihood out of their transnational lives. The importance of gaining experience as travelers and traders seemed extremely important to the people I met, and even if they were to return home with less money than they brought with them on their journeys, it was frequently emphasized that they would always have the experience and lessons learned from their life abroad. These experiences, I was told, would lead to a certain upward mobility in social status in their home communities, and there was also a hope that the experiences earned could help them achieve economic advances later in life at home, or on new journeys. In light of what I have shown, it is easy to speculate that returning home with the experiences of travel, and possibly goods and money, would lead to an upward mobility within both the home society, and transnational family. Many also stated that they might want to open a business back home for themselves, selling goods they might bring home themselves on shorter dedicated trading trips, or selling goods sent home by other travelers they might help send off for trips abroad.

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The dream of becoming “one’s own boss” was a frequently stated individual goal among my informants, and it was believed that this might one day become accomplished through experience and money gained through their transnational lives. The possibilities transnational life entailed had already been proved at home before embarking when seeing goods and money sent home from successful travelers, and by hearing returning travelers’ stories about the possibilities abroad. While traveling these possibilities were also further proven, by meeting and witnessing the successful traders at the Chung-King Mansions and elsewhere. The strategies for making use of these possibilities had to be revised and rethought constantly when facing the realities of Hong Kong and other places on their journeys. However the fact still remained that in order to create a better livelihood of these possibilities, they would have to remain mobile and transnational until they could successfully make use of these opportunities.

The notion that the strategies of livelihood at play were more connected and based on transnational life itself than any specific location to which to migrate does not undermine the need for extensive studies of specific sites such as the Chung-King Mansions. On the contrary, the conditions of the Chung-King Mansions and Hong Kong played a vital part in molding and facilitating these strategies. As I have shown, many were unaware of this specific place upon departure, and many did not become aware of the possibilities the city entailed in terms of trade and work before actually arriving in the city. Strategies of transnational livelihoods therefore had to be revised and rethought upon arrival and upon exploring the possibilities transnational life in the city entailed. This also applied for many of the travelers arriving with the Chung-King Mansions as a designated destination for their trips. The possibilities in the building and in the city would often turn out less glorious than what had been assured by fellow travelers and traders with prior experiences, and as I have shown, the dream of easy money through trade often turned out to become long periods of hard work and dwelling.

The unique character of the Chung-King Mansions and its amazing drawing power for such an variation of people and backgrounds beg the question of why so many people have found their way into this unique location, and why so many choose to stay for long periods of time. Concerning the people I met, I believe the answer lies in

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Hong Kong, and also specifically the Chung-King Mansions' possible unique way of facilitating the transnational livelihood strategies of the people in question. The easiest factor to point out in this enquiry is of course the special economic conditions of Hong Kong, which make transnational trade both possible and potentially profitable. The Chung-King Mansions clearly played an important role here by facilitating for such trade by housing a large number of shops and businesses specializing in the wholesale of goods marketed to these international traders. Another related factor is of course the easy accessibility from Hong Kong to Mainland China which not only assured the traders with an accessibility to Chinese goods for export, but also allowed them to stay for longer periods of time in Hong Kong by renewing their visa after inexpensive and short trips across the border.

Most importantly however, I have shown how both the Ghanaian and the Indian dwellers and workers depended on the community of fellow countrymen and others they found at the Chung-King Mansions. I believe that the key to understand the unique factor pulling my informants into the Chung-King Mansions lies here. As I have shown through their own stories of surviving in the city, maintaining transnational lives in Hong Kong would be near impossible for the dwellers and workers I encountered without the special conditions and community found at the Chung-King Mansions, which made it possible to earn some income and keep their ties back to home through traveling themselves, or sending of goods. In this way, the Chung-King Mansions did not pull people in only because of the possibilities of work, and shops to buy goods, but also because of the community of workers, traders and dwellers that offered a unique way of facilitating the transnational and mobile strategies for creating a better livelihood, that were at play among the people in question.

Throughout the fieldwork, I felt in many ways that I was witnessing a time of changes in the building. With the building's "renewal plan", a number of upgrades were done in the building. Among a number of changes, the notorious "steel coffin" lifts were replaced, new guesthouses with more acceptable standards were opened, and video surveillance was fitted all over the building, adding to the safety. For the guesthouse workers however, more profound changes were a frequent topic of discussion. With the opening of Mainland China's market, tightening of visa regulations to Hong

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Kong, and the opening of new direct flights between the African continent and major Chinese cities, an increasing number of the African professional traders were flying in directly to Mainland China for business. Many of the building's inhabitants ascribed these changes to a decline of African traders coming to the Hong Kong and the Chung-King Mansions.²⁵ When I for the last time visited the building in November 2005, very few of the Ghanaian dwellers were still present, as would be expected because of their dependence on the traders, although guesthouse jobs in the building were still available. By the few remaining Ghanaians, I was told that although many had gone back home or were traveling elsewhere, a large number of the former dwellers in Hong Kong had followed their trading countrymen to new locations in mainland China where they were now living much as they had been while in Hong Kong. The experienced Indian guesthouse workers were however not too worried about the recent developments because, as they explained to me, despite changes in both Hong Kong and the rest of the world, the Chung-King Mansions had for decades now been a gathering point for different people seeking their fortune and adventure through traveling, and would probable continue to be so in the future.

Afterthoughts and reflections on studying the Chung-King Mansions

As have been described in chapter three, the decision to focus my fieldwork and master thesis study on the Chung-King Mansions was largely accidental. However, my fascination and curiosity drawing me to this building, was perhaps not as purely accidental.

When I first started learning about, and visiting, the building I was soon struck by the enormous potential the building seemed to withhold for anthropological studies. With its ethnic diversity, closed off position as an exotic village within the city, and its function as a hub for transnational trade, the building did indeed seem to be crying out for research of both classical anthropological themes, and perhaps more modern and highly present-day themes such as globalization, migration, and transnationalism.

²⁵ The decline of African traders to the building might not have been as dramatic as some of my informants expressed, and many of the experienced guesthouse workers also emphasized that the decline of traders might be due only to seasonal fluctuations.

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I was therefore soon convinced that finding an exact theme for my study would not be too difficult, and rather a matter of choice. What in turn grew as a focus of this study, the subject of how these people were attempting to create a better livelihood through their mobile and transnational life, was perhaps just one of many main focuses available from studying the building's inhabitants. It was however chosen because I found it to play a vital and decisive part of my informants' lives, and also because it offered a useful approach for understanding both the building's uniqueness, and larger macro level questions of modern migration.

Conducting a study of mobile and global lives through anthropological fieldwork within a specific confined locality might seem paradoxical. The established picture of the anthropological field is that of a locality, and might therefore not seem suited to investigate such mobile lives and relations stretching through a number of distant localities.²⁶ However, as Hannerz (2003) has pointed out, anthropologists early developed interests that took them beyond a purely local field, and even Malinowski's (1922) classical study on the Melanesian Trobriand Islands was not completely local, as one of the main themes in Malinowski's study was the geographically extended network of exchange involved in the so-called Kula ring (Hannerz, 2003: 19-20). Further more, Hannerz (2003: 20) refers to Clifford Geertz' reminder that the location of the anthropological study is not the object of the study, as anthropologists do not study villages, they study in villages (Geertz 1973: 22). Geertz writes that the anthropologist can study different things in different places, and that some things can be best studied in confined localities, but that does not make the place what the anthropologist is studying (Geertz 1973: 22).

Regarding my own study at the Chung-King Mansions, the enquiry leading to a study of my informants' transnational and mobile livelihood strategies started off in an enquiry into understanding my informants' survival strategies and lives while in Hong Kong. Soon however, it became apparent that their lives and choices while in Hong Kong was so firmly rooted in their larger strategies of creating a better life in general, that any understanding of their lives in Hong Kong would have to encompass their

²⁶ For a discussion of the inherent view in anthropology of the field as confined localities and spaces, see Hastrup and Olwig (1997) and Hannerz (2003).

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entire stories of journey and life elsewhere. Their life at the Chung-King Mansions was a part of a larger strategy for creating a better livelihood through the opportunities offered by mobility and transnational life, and therefore the Chung-King Mansions became an ideal locality for me to explore these individual strategies.

These strategies, I found, would usually be in place already prior to departure, but also had to be revised and rethought at every step in my informants' journeys and mobile lives, when faced with new and changing contextual constraints and opportunities. Smith and Guarinizo write that transnational practices are grounded, and do not exist in any "third space" abstractly located in-between places, which is "neither here nor there" (Smith and Guarinizo, 1998:11). Transnational practices therefore need to be studied in relation to the contextual imposed opportunities and constraints which the individual actor is at any time imposed to.

It is in this respect I believe that anthropological research, centered on the fieldwork and the inherent methodology of participant observation, provides useful tools for understanding the kind of migration found at the Chung-King Mansions and elsewhere in the world today. In a modern and increasingly globalizing world, where place, in Giddens's terms, becomes increasingly "phantasmagoric", as locales are thoroughly penetrated and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them (Giddens 1990: 18-19), the "local" is in need of further examination and conceptualization. Social Anthropology does in this enquiry provide a useful tool, as it through its inherent methodology is able to give adequate in-depth and holistic descriptions of both the local setting, as well as the social relations that link the distant localities together, and make the actors trans-local and/or transnational.

I started by exploring my informant's stories and strategies at the Chung-King Mansions, and from there I was led onward to explore their transnational relations, practices and strategies for creating a better livelihood. This approach, I believe, provided me with a more detailed and elaborate understanding of my informants' lives and choices, than what would have been achievable through a top-down approach, attempting simply to ascribe individual movements and choices to generalized and abstract global economic conditions. This is not to say that economic capitalistic global inequalities were not a decisive reason and motivator for their

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journeys, but to understand how the possibilities of migration are perceived and acted upon, I found the need to explore the individual choices and strategies involved on an individual level, and in light of the concrete conditions the actors were subjected to at the Chung-King Mansions.

Returning once again to Sørensen and Olwig's (2003) concept of mobile livelihoods, I would agree that in-depth research into the specific livelihoods of the people in question proved a valuable departing point. Through focusing on the specific ways my informants attempted to mold a better livelihood out of their mobile and transnational lives, I was given an valuable departure point of which to explore both their lives and relations within Hong Kong and the Chung-King Mansions, as well as the transnational relations and practices stretching far beyond the building. Through the concept of mobile livelihoods, I was also provided with a framework that avoided simply understanding the transnational state of my informants as any temporary state in any immigration process into the city of Hong Kong. Thereby it became possible to truly encompass their mobile lives, and their quest to create themselves a better life, not only while abroad, but also when perhaps returning home, where ever they might find it.

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