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Demystifying Chungking Mansions as Vertical 'Little India'/'Little South Asia' Urban Enclave: Linguistic Landscape, Low-End Globalisation, and Hub of Superdiversity

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Abstract

Positioned as a node of low-end globalization, the Chungking Mansions in Hong Kong's Tsim Sha Tsui represents a transnational urban space with many ethnic restaurants, grocery stores, shops and cheap hotels. As a vertical hub of superdiversity, the building features significant number of people from South Asia (e.g., India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal), Southeast Asia, Africa and beyond. Unlike most ethnic enclaves and multicultural areas that feature horizontal spatial organization, the Chungking Mansions conceptually represents a vertical 'Little South Asia' or 'Little UN' condensed into one building. The transient and anonymous Chungking Mansions is something of a 'non-place' but it also has a sense of community. The building over time gained a bad reputation as a mysterious, dodgy, shady and dangerous ethnic place where violence and crimes take place. This article aims to demystify the Chungking Mansions from under-explored sociolinguistic/multilingual perspectives. Languages and symbols inscribed in the linguistic/semiotic landscape, we argue, represent important anthropogenic impacts on geography and nature, which constitute salient entry points into understanding how migration, low-end globalization and superdiversity leave traces on the urban landscape. This study documents and shows how various multilingual signs and cultural and religious symbols enact ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious identities and produce and reproduce social meanings alongside the building's verticality. These materially and symbolically contribute to a vertical geography of superdiversity.

Keywords: vertical Little India; linguistic and semiotic landscape; Chungking Mansions; low-end globalization; superdiversity; living heritage

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1. Introduction

Nestled in the heart of Hong Kong's bustling Tsim Sha Tsui district, Chungking Mansions (cf. Figure 1 top left) stands as one of the most extraordinary architectural and social phenomena in the contemporary world. Chungking Mansions has achieved global significance as a symbol of alternative globalization. Scholars study it as a laboratory of superdiversity. Journalists write about it as a window into worlds that mainstream globalization ignores. Filmmakers capture its chaotic vitality (i.e., Wong Kar-wai's film Chungking Express). Travelers seek it out as an authentic experience far from Hong Kong's polished tourist destinations. This seemingly dilapidated 17-story complex, built in 1961, defies every conventional understanding of urban space, globalization, and cultural interaction. While on the surface it might appear as just another aging building in a city famous for

its vertical density, Chungking Mansions is in many ways a living legend. The building represents a spectacular case of "superdiversity" [1] in action. At the same time, it is also a living, breathing monument to what can be called a centre of 'low-end globalization' [2–6] or a hub of 'globalization from below' [7]. The idea of 'low-end globalization' is somewhat different from the closely related concepts of 'subaltern globalization' (e.g., globalization driven by marginalized groups) and 'vernacular globalization' (globalization recontextualized or localized in a certain place). Despite their similarities, low-end globalization features the informal and small-scale transnational trade of relatively cheap goods and products by traders and migrants at a grass-roots level [2]. As such, unlike the gleaming glass towers of Hong Kong's financial district that symbolize top-down or elitist corporate globalization (e.g., Morgan Stanley, HSBC, Standard Chartered, Coca Cola, Adidas, Starbucks, McDonalds, Samsung), Chungking Mansions is uniquely positioned as the world's premier node of low-end globalization. The building operates as a grassroots and informal hub [2] where traders, asylum seekers, budget travellers and entrepreneurs converge. Such low-end globalization features the flows of goods, people, and capital that occur outside formal and regulated channels. Such low-end globalization is largely maintained through personal networks, informal agreements and face-to-face interactions.



Figure 1. Façade of the Chungking Mansions (**top left**), the floor plan of the building (**top right**) and old photo of the Chungking Mansions (**bottom**) as a towering presence in Tsim Sha Tsui (photographed from the Hong Kong Museum of History).

The building has several businesses run by Chinese Hong Kongers, and local Chinese Hong Kongers may manage the property. Tourists and visitors from mainland China, Japan, South Korea, Europe and North America, etc., can also be found. Yet, overall, most people in the Chungking Mansions are from the Indian subcontinent (e.g., India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh) and Southeast Asia (e.g., the Philippines and Indonesia), Africa and further afield. These can be seen as an informal gathering spot of some of the world's developing economies. Among these, the existence of South Asians from the Indian subcontinent represents a particularly visible feature. In many ways, the Chungking mansions and for similar reasons the adjacent Mirador Mansion resemble a 'Little India', 'Little South Asia' and, by extension, 'Little UN' condensed into one building. What truly makes this building unique and fascinating is its verticality and (super)diversity. Such verticality stands in stark contrast to most South Asian enclaves and ethnic areas in general globally, which tend to spread out horizontally. Such urban verticality is not only reflecting certain sociocultural realities but is constantly shaping and reshaping, producing and reproducing social meanings [8,9]. The fact that Chungking Mansions is a vertical 'Little South Asia' possesses great meaning potentials, giving expression to a new type of ethnic area or multicultural reality in a densely populated global city context.

So far, several studies have explored or mentioned Chungking Mansions from the perspective of global trade, economy, business, international relations, cultural studies, film studies, anthropology and sociology [2,3,10–12]. For instance, from an anthropological perspective, Mathews [2] has extensively explored the building's intricate connections to the international circulation of goods, money, and ideas, highlighting the dynamics of low-end globalization in a context of China–African and China–foreign contact. However, despite the multilingual and multicultural nature of the building, it remains significantly less explored from a sociolinguistic and multilingual perspective. The visual elements (e.g., signs and symbols) inscribed in the building's linguistic and semiotic landscape remain particularly under-explored. The only (socio)linguistic study on the building, carried out by Wang and Liang [13], has explored the place's tourism-related linguistic ecology, with a focus on indexical order and language ideology. Given the research gap, this article, taking a data-driven approach, aims to demystify the Chungking Mansions from under-explored sociolinguistic/multilingual perspectives, exploring how various linguistic and semiotic resources are deployed and how social meanings might be produced in a vertical and condensed context.

2. The Chungking Mansions: A Brief Historical, Socio-Cultural and Sociolinguistic Account

Situated in the busy commercial, business, retail and tourist district Tsim Sha Tsui (TST), the Chungking Mansions (Figure 1) is an approximately 5 min walk from the iconic Victoria Harbour. The building is also about a 1–2 min walk from the Kowloon Mosque (Figure 2) and the Kowloon Park. The present-day Kowloon Park is the former site of the Whitfield Barracks in British Hong Kong. Indeed, Tsim Sha Tsui used to be a military area. Apart from the Whitfield Barracks, other military sites in the area included the Gun Club Hill Barracks and Chatham Road Camp. Historically, these colonial-era military sites used to have many Hindu, Sikh and Muslim soldiers from the Indian subcontinent (e.g., current-day India, Pakistan and Nepal). Figure 3 shows a few old photos about the earlier presence of South Asians in colonial Hong Kong. Such a colonial-era legacy explains why there is currently a visible presence of Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Nepali people in the Chungking Mansions, the adjacent Mirador Mansion, and the Yau-Tsim-Mong district in general (e.g., pockets of Tsim Sha Tsui, Jordan, Yau Ma Tei). In addition to the earlier South Asian migration, more recently, Hong Kong also sees new waves of migration from the

Indian subcontinent [14], where South Asians work, live, study and do business in these areas in a context of globalization and mobility [15]. Some South Asians might live and work illegally in Hong Kong [2].



Figure 2. The Kowloon mosque.



Figure 3. Old photos from the Hong Kong Museum of History depicting the presence of Indians, Pakistanis, the Nepalese (Gurkha) in the colonial era.

There are a few smaller entrances to the seemingly unassuming Chungking Mansions. Yet, the main entrance to the building is from the crowded Nathan Road (named after a major colonial-era figure), which is the main artery of the Kowloon Peninsula. The dilapidated Chungking Mansions may now look unassuming in the midst of modern skyscrapers and upscale shopping malls and hotels. However, built in 1961, it used to be a high-end apartment building several decades ago and was once home to celebrities and middle-class

families in colonial Hong Kong. The building used to be a towering presence in Tsim Sha Tsui's former colonial-era skyline (cf. Figure 1 bottom). The 17-story mixed-use building complex has a few escalators and consists of five interconnected blocks. Although it was originally constructed as luxury apartments in the early 1960s, the building has gone through its fair share of ups and downs in a changing sociopolitical and historical context. Over the decades, the building has undergone countless informal modifications that reflect the organic, unplanned nature of the communities it serves. At various points, it was a hub of nightlife, a seedy flophouse, a place of violence and crime, a haven for illegal migrants and asylum-seekers and in recent decades a hub of low-end globalization [2] made up of people from South Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa and beyond. Over the decades, the building has seen ethnic violence, murders, rape cases, prostitution, drug dealing and other incidents and crimes. Now, the building is safer and more regulated. CCTV cameras have been installed in different places and the building is subject to frequent police inspection.

However, its narrow hallways, dimly lit corridors, and labyrinthine layout still create an almost maze-like experience for first-time visitors not familiar with the building. Unsurprisingly, given its somewhat shady reputation, the building is a dangerous 'no-go' zone for many local Chinese Hong Kongers and many mainland Chinese tourists. Indeed, many Chinese people call this building 龙蛇混杂 (a chaotic and crime-ridden den where dragons and snakes are mixed), hence an unfamiliar alien place of foreignness that evokes a great sense of fear. Also, given the great density, the building is seen as a death trap by many from a safety and security perspective. Nevertheless, for many others who are more adventurous and open-minded, the Chungking Mansions is a paradise for exotic ethnic cuisines and cheap accommodation, a 21st century exemplar of urban conviviality, and a cosmopolitan and transnational space to experience and enjoy unprecedented diversity rarely seen in an East Asian context. Indeed, visitors, residents and business owners in the building are from over 120 different countries and regions [2]. Yet, South Asians such as Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Nepalis are significantly represented in the building.

To some extent, the Chungking Mansions is a 'Little India'/'Little South Asia', a hub of superdiversity, and vertical city made up of various businesses and various activities. In the building, the lower floors tend to be restaurants and eateries, clothes and shoe shops, ethnic grocery stores, mithai shops, electronics shops, barber shops, massage parlours, book stores, toy shops, Islamic shops (items such as prayer caps, prayer mats and miswak are sold), laundry businesses, travel agencies, money exchange services, money remittance businesses and various import and export companies (Figures 4 and 5). The upper floors tend to be occupied by cheap hotels and guest houses (Figure 1 top right illustrates the rough floor plan). A visit to the building feels like a one-stop shop, which can meet tourists, residents, traders and businessmen's dietary, religious, cultural and entertainment needs. Given the all-inclusive and organic nature of the Chungking Mansions, the building seems like a society within a society [2], representing a transnational space on Chinese soil. To some extent, the Chungking Mansions can be seen as some kind of a 'non-place' [16] or 'Le non-lieu' in French. Like train stations, airports, hotels, the Chungking Mansions features great mobility and transience [16], where people come and go. That is, visitors, tourists and businesspeople are transient and anonymous. Some visit the building and then leave after eating at an Indian restaurant. Some tourists sleep at a hotel and then check out the next day. Some only come into the building to get foreign currencies in the money exchange shops. Beyond the transient and seemingly chaotic vertical setting, the building is also a community of diverse groups of people brought together as a result of history, migration and globalization. In many ways, people co-exist and get on with their life in a relatively

harmonious and peaceful way. The various people and businesses in Chungking Mansions have their own goals, aims, purposes and agendas. Occasionally, minor ethnic and religious tensions might exist [2]. Overall, given the nature of the place as a self-sustained society within a society, there is a sense of communitas [17] within the complex, with making money being an overarching unifying force. For example, a shop run by Hindus may sell halal food items. Similarly, a Pakistani/Muslim business may have gangajal, which is used for Hindu religious rituals. These different elements contribute to the existence of the place as a vertical bazaar of low-end globalization and superdiversity [2,11]. Given the tourists and business-oriented nature of the place, the Chungking Mansions can be seen as an information-rich and visually dense environment made up of various signs and symbols for advertising purposes. Figures 6 and 7 illustrate the nature of Chungking Mansions as a superdiverse multilingual and multiscriptal vertical city.



Figure 4. Typical examples of eateries and restaurants in the building.



Figure 5. General ambiance of the building.



Figure 6. Multilingual and multiscriptal landscape.



Figure 7. Multilingual and multiscriptal landscape.

3. Ethnic Enclaves and Spaces: Horizontal Development Versus Vertical Growth

In a context of globalization, migration, mobility and tourism, ethnic enclaves and ethnic communities can be found around the world. Examples of such ethnic areas, spaces or enclaves include Chinatowns [18–20], 'Little Indonesias', 'Little Manilas' [21], Little Indias/Little South Asias [22,23], Little Arabias [4,24,25] and Little Africas [4,26], etc. From sociological, anthropological, urban studies, visual studies, landscape studies, psychological, sociolinguistic and multilingual perspectives, studies on ethnic and cultural enclaves call into question various socially relevant issues related to ethnic businesses and ethnic economies, multilingualism, linguistic diversity, linguistic and semiotic creativity, ethnic and cultural identities, integration, social harmony and peaceful co-existence [27–29].

For historical reasons (e.g., British colonialism) and also in a context of globalization, increased mobility, mass migration, and tourism, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and South Asian enclaves/areas exist worldwide. In Southeast Asia, South Asian communities are found in Singapore's 'Little India', Kuala Lumpur's various areas (e.g., Chowkit, Masjid India, Jalan Silang, Kotaraya, Petaling Street and the Brickfields), areas in and around Indra Square mall and Phahurat in Bangkok. In the Middle East, various pockets in Saudi Arabia, Oman, the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain feature significant Indian, Pakistani, Nepalese and Bangladeshi communities. Similarly, South Asian communities are found in East Africa and South Africa, for historical reasons.

In addition, examples of South Asian areas also include Oslo's Grønland, Martim Moniz area in Lisbon [30], parts of Sydney (e.g., Harris Park) and Melbourne in Australia, Jackson Heights and a stretch of Coney Island Avenue in New York, Gerrard Street in Toronto and pockets of Surrey and Brampton in Canada. The United Kingdom also features significant South Asian communities/areas. These include London's multiple areas and neighbourhoods (e.g., Brick Lane, Wembley, Southall, Whitechapel, Bethnal Green

and Newham), various neighbourhoods in Birmingham (e.g., Sparkhill, Small Heath, Alum Rock), Manchester (e.g., Rusholme, Cheetham Hill, Longsight), Rochdale, Oldham, Leeds, Leicester, Bradford, Blackburn, Sheffield and Luton. In places such as Shin-Ōkubo, Asagaya, and Nishi Kasai in Tokyo, Indian, Nepalese and Pakistani communities are visible. China's Yiwu has a business and trade-triggered 'Little India'.

These South Asian neighbourhoods and ethnic areas and enclaves in general (e.g., Chinatowns), despite their differences, almost all spread out horizontally [22,23,30–34], where ethnic restaurants, grocery stores, clothes shops, etc tend to spatially cover an area. Yet, what makes Chungking Mansions unique is its vertical organization of diversity. That is, the Chungking Mansions compresses this (super)diversity into a vertical space, stacking cultures, economies, and communities floor upon floor in what can be called a vertical "Little India", "Little Pakistan" or even "Little United Nations" rolled into one. As one reviewer usefully pointed out, this verticality or vertical organization of place or locality described in the current study is to varying degrees related to the idea of 'socioscape' [35] and also other notions such as 'translocality' [36], 'transnational spaces', 'microglobalization' and 'nested urbanism'. These terms, despite their slightly different foci, tend to capture the dynamic, non-linear and complex processes in contexts such as geography and urban development in an era of globalization, mobility and migration that transcend traditional boundaries [36]. Despite the usefulness of these potentially relevant terms, I will use terms such as 'vertical Little India', 'verticality' and 'vertical organization" of space as these, to me, are more accurate, simple, and straightforward descriptions of the urban enclave being studied. More detailed analysis of the place is provided as follows.

4. Data and Methodology

Drawing on various ethnographic approaches, the data comes from sustained and in-depth on-site observations, field notes, interactions, small talk, conversations [2,3] and linguistic landscaping [37,38] over the past 12 years. In the process, consent was sought and due procedures were followed as appropriate. Between 2014 and 2026, the author carried out over 200 field trips to the building and surrounding areas and collected photographic data. Over 1500 signs that feature linguistic and semiotic elements have been collected, with a view to establishing how these elements might be combined to give the ethnic space an image and identity. These include 987 signs featuring linguistic elements (e.g., business-related signs in English, Chinese, Hindi, Urdu, Nepali, Arabic and African languages), and also around 600 signs that feature various other semiotic/multimodal elements (e.g., photographs of cultural and religious symbols and various logos, motifs and patterns) and contextual details. A focus on linguistic and semiotic landscape data is particularly crucial. Multilingual signs and various multimodal elements in the linguistic and semiotic landscape [20,37–39] go beyond just simply language and symbols. These linguistic and semiotic elements inscribed in our built environment represent a socially shaped and socially shaping discourse or narrative [18,19,28], telling a story about a city's evolving history and contributing to its increasingly complex urban palimpsest both physically, materially and symbolically [30,40]. A careful analysis of elements in the linguistic and semiotic landscape can shed light on topics such as ethnolinguistic diversity, vitality and identity, etc. [38]. A combination of these myriad approaches leads to great ethnographic engagement and immersion and also familiarity with the building. This mixed-methods approach also leads to methodological triangulation, which promises to yield more comprehensive, systematic and in-depth observations. The data collected are thematically processed. Given the limited space, only the most salient features and trends will be presented, using the researcher's best academic judgment.

5. Data Analysis

5.1. Conceptualizing Chungking Mansions: Vertical Little India/South Asia/Little United Nations

The spatial aspects are crucial in the production/reproduction of ethnic spaces in urban settings [31,32]. As briefly mentioned, what truly makes this building unique and fascinating is its verticality. That is, by dramatic contrast, the Chungking Mansions and similarly the Mirador Mansion compress this (super)diversity into a vertical space [2,11], stacking cultures, economies, and communities floor upon floor in what can be described as a vertical "Little India", "Little Pakistan", "Little South Asia" or even "Little United Nations" rolled into one. The Chungking Mansions is vertical city made up of various businesses and various activities. In the building, the lower floors tend to be restaurants and eateries, clothes and shoe shops, ethnic grocery stores, mithai shops, electronics shops, barber shops, book stores, toy shops, laundry businesses, money exchange services, money remittance businesses and various import and export companies. The upper floors tend to be occupied by cheap hotels and guest houses (Figure 1 right illustrates the rough floor plan). A visit to the building feels like a one-stop shop, which can meet tourists, residents, traders and businessmen's dietary, religious, cultural and entertainment needs. Given the all-inclusive and organic nature of the Chungking Mansions, the building seems like a society within a society [2], representing a vertical transnational space on Chinese soil. From this perspective, the Chungking Mansions is an architectural marvel and an iconic spectacle.

Verticality [9] is a major feature of modern urban landscape in a context of globalization and technological development. Usually stratified and hierarchical in nature, vertical space represents a unique and fascinating space, which encompasses various architectural, aesthetic, functional, symbolic, socio-cultural and political dimensions [8]. The verticality of a place is not just the result of a place's history, landscape and geographical situations, unique urban morphology, broader policy-related factors, and demographic and sociocultural realities. More importantly, verticality possesses significant indexical social meanings and can have important agentive roles in both reflecting and shaping social stratification in our consumerist, globalized, interconnected and touristed world [9]. This has been saliently evidenced in the case of the International Finance Centre building in Hong Kong [9].

In most global cities, South Asian communities tend to spread outward—a street here, a cluster of shops there. However, in Hong Kong, space comes at a premium. As such, in the Chungking Mansions, the geography is vertically stacked. The vertical dimension of Chungking Mansions fundamentally shapes how its ethnic and economic enclaves might function. In such an ecology, different businesses and shops have different roles symbolically, socially and economically. At the heart of the Chungking Mansions is its foodscape. The restaurants of Chungking Mansions offer one of the most authentic South Asian culinary experiences outside the subcontinent. These establishments cater primarily to South Asian traders and travellers seeking the tastes of home. The basement food court and first-floor eateries serve everything from authentic butter chicken, hariyali chicken tikka, chapli kebab, tandoori chicken to South Indian dosa and idli. What makes these restaurants unique is their dual function. By day, they serve as informal business centres where traders negotiate deals over cups of chai. By night, they transform into community gathering spaces where news from home is exchanged, marriages are arranged, and political discussions unfold late into the night. The grocery shops scattered throughout Chungking Mansions' lower floors represent sophisticated transnational supply chains [2] that connect Hong Kong directly to the villages and cities of South Asia, Africa and beyond. These cramped, crowded stores stock everything from multiple varieties of dal (lentils)

and namkeen to momo and fresh masala spices ground specifically for the community's needs. Walking through these shops arguably is to experience the sensory overload of South Asia. These grocery stores do more than simply sell food—they maintain cultural connections [2]. Money exchange businesses represent one of the most critical financial and economic functions within Chungking Mansions' ecosystem [2]. These small counters, often no larger than a closet, facilitate the financial flows that make low-end globalization possible. Here, South Asian and African traders and international tourists exchange currencies from dozens of countries, often at better rates than formal banks can offer. The money changers themselves represent a fascinating aspect of the building's economy. Many are South Asian themselves, often from communities with long histories in trade and finance. They operate on some kind of trust networks that span continents [2]. If any single product defines Chungking Mansions' economic role, it is probably electronics. The building has become legendary throughout the developing world as a place to buy mobile phones, computers, and accessories at prices often impossible to match elsewhere. This electronics trade represents the heart of what Gordon Mathews [2] calls 'low-end globalization'. The electronics shops of Chungking Mansions, concentrated primarily on the ground floor and first few levels, present an overwhelming spectacle.

Ascending Chungking Mansions' floors reveals another layer of its vertical economy; that is, the budget accommodation that serves the building's transient population. From the fifth floor upward, dozens of independently operated guesthouses and hotels offer some of Hong Kong's cheapest lodging, with rooms ranging from closet-sized singles to slightly more spacious family accommodations. Some of these guesthouses operate in a grey zone between legality and informality. Some operate in spaces originally designed for other purposes. Yet they fulfil a crucial function, providing affordable accommodation for precisely the population that mainstream Hong Kong hotels ignore—South Asian traders on tight budgets, African merchants saving every dollar for merchandise, asylum seekers awaiting determination of their claims, and backpackers seeking authentic experiences [2].

This vertical geography creates what urban theorists call 'vertical communities' where proximity is arguably measured in elevator stops rather than walking distance in a traditional sense. This stacking creates unique patterns of interaction, competition, and cooperation that would be impossible in horizontally organized ethnic enclaves. Also, the building's five elevators, notoriously slow and often out of service, become social spaces in themselves [3]. Here, South Asians such as Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Nepalis rub shoulders with African traders and merchants, mainland Chinese tourists and visitors from around the world. The vertical journey, to some extent, becomes a ritual passage through the building's many layers, each floor revealing a different facet of the global South [2]. Spatially, while Indian- and Pakistani-run businesses are pervasive across the lower floors of the building, certain ethnic businesses tend to gather in certain areas. For example, a small pocket of the building features a few African-oriented stores, shops and restaurants. Similarly, in another spot, there is a concentration of Nepali-run restaurants, stores and other businesses.

5.2. Superdiversity and Its Linguistic and Semiotic Manifestations

Having theorized Chungking Mansions as a vertical 'Little India' or 'Little South Asia', this section aims to focus on the linguistic diversity and semiotic complexities in the building, aiming to document and explore the concrete linguistic and multimodal manifestations of such (super)diversity. Multilingual signs and various multimodal elements in the linguistic and semiotic landscape [20,28] go beyond just simply language and symbols. These linguistic and semiotic elements inscribed in our built environment represent a kind of a socially shaped and socially shaping discourse or narrative [18,19], telling a

story about a city's evolving history and contributing to its increasingly complex urban palimpsest both physically, materially and symbolically [30,40].

The concept of "superdiversity" initially developed by sociologist Steven Vertovec [1] describes conditions where multiple variables of diversity intersect—not just country of origin, but also language, religion, migration channel, legal status, gender, age and economic position. Some urban areas in the world can be seen as divercities [41] in a context of globalization, migration, tourism, business, trade and other transnational flows of people [42]. However, most works on 'diversity' and 'superdiversity' have approached the topic from Western perspectives [1,43–45], drawing upon multilingual and multicultural experiences from countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany, French, Belgium and Australia [46–48]. The topic is relatively less explored from East Asian lenses. Inevitably, the specific shape and form a (superdiverse) ethnic area can take arguably is shaped by a place's history, geographical situations, unique urban morphology, broader policy-related factors, and demographic and sociocultural realities.

In a densely populated city like Hong Kong, space is at a premium. Especially in a highly commercial, business and touristy area like Tsim Sha Tsui, the only way to look for space is to look upward. The Chungking Mansions, in many ways, embodies superdiversity more than perhaps any other place on earth [2,3], where (super)diversity manifests itself in one building. As discussed, people from over 120 nationalities can be found in the Chungking Mansions. There are not only South Asians, Southeast Asians, and Africans from the so-called developing world but also tourists and visitors from more developed economies (e.g., the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan and South Korea). Notably, superdiversity here not only refers to different nationalities. There is also a superdiversity of business types, cuisines available, cultures, languages and religions. Even within one nation (e.g., India), people can be Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Jains and Buddhists and can be from various places in both North India and South India speaking different native languages. In a single elevator ride, one might encounter a Punjabi Sikh shop owner, a Nigerian Igbo merchant, a businessman from Ghana, a Nepali restaurant waiter, a Pakistani Pashtun asylum seeker, a Gujarati Jain cook, a Bengali restaurateur and tourists from the United States, Japan and mainland China [49]. Each brings not just a different nationality, but different languages, different worldviews, different religions, different legal statuses, different migration histories, different life trajectories and different economic positions. While crimes and ethnic and religious tensions can occasionally occur [2], the Chungking Mansions exhibits a great sense of dynamic cosmopolitanism and a sense of multilingual and multicultural conviviality [50] in a transnational and mobile urban context, reminding us of places such as Dubai, Doha, Riyadh or ethnically and sociolinguistically diverse areas in cities like Birmingham, London, Manchester, Leicester and Bradford in (West) Europe.

As a general observation, the languages represented there (cf. Figures 6 and 7) include Chinese (traditional and simplified characters) and other East Asian languages (e.g., Korean and Japanese), South Asian languages (e.g., Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Nepali, Bengali and Tamil), Southeast Asian languages (e.g., Malay, Bahasa Indonesia and Tagalog) and African languages (e.g., Twi and Swahili), Arabic, various European languages (e.g., English, Spanish, Italian, French and Russian). However, despite such superdiversity, there is a communicative order in the Chungking Mansions. Overall, English is the larger lingua franca, permitting communication between South Asians, Africans, Southeast Asians and tourists and visitors. Visually, English is rather dominant in the building (Figure 8), for various advertising and commercial purposes. In addition, given the place's ethnolinguistic and demographic make-up, Hindustani (Hindi and Urdu) represents the lingua franca uniting South Asians from North India, South India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. This

is widely evidenced in the researcher's numerous on-site observations. It is also saliently illustrated in the researcher's informal conversations with a Tamil-speaking Muslim employee (from South India) working in an electronics shop. In the informal conversation, the Muslim employee from South India said the following:

> *I am originally from Tamil Nadu and I am a Muslim. My native language is Tamil, which is very different from Northern Indian languages such as Hindi. But here in the Chungking Mansions, Hindi and Urdu are commonly used. When I talk to North Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis here, I speak Hindi/Urdu to them. I learned Hindi/Urdu myself. Many South Indians back in India do not speak much Hindi/Urdu. It is basically a second language for me. (Location: inside Chungking Mansions. Time: 24 October 2025)*



Figure 8. The visual dominance of English (Latin script).

This is also backed up by the researcher's informal conversation with a Bengali speaker who is Muslim and works as a salesperson in a shop (from West Bengal in India). He says the following:

> *Although my mother tongue is Bengali, my Hindi/Urdu is good. All South Asians here have to know Hindi/Urdu. It is the common language in this building. The customers are tourists and business people from India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh. If you work in the shops, stores and restaurants, Hindi/Urdu is very important. (Location: inside Chungking Mansions. Time: 24 October 2025)*

This phenomenon of Hindustani (Hindi/Urdu) serving as a lingua franca between South Asians from diverse linguistic, religious and cultural backgrounds is an emerging phenomenon. This is found in places such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE and Oman, where Hindustani has established itself as the go-to language for communication amongst South Asians from a (super)diverse range of backgrounds. To some extent, Chinese (Cantonese and Mandarin) is also heard.

Overall, in the shops and restaurants, conversations shift fluidly between languages. English often serves as the common ground, but often not the standard English of textbooks. Instead, a pragmatic and simplified kind of English is adapted for cross-cultural business and trade that characterises such low-end globalization [5,6]. Clearly, the various restaurants, grocery stores, small shops and hotels inside of the building represent sites of everyday diversity and everyday multilingualism [51], which feature a multitude of linguistic and non-linguistic interactions. This multilingual environment creates fascinating patterns of communication. A Pakistani shop owner might conduct business with a Nigerian customer in basic English, then switch to Urdu or Punjabi to argue with his partner, then use Arabic phrases for religious expressions, and finally employ Cantonese numbers when dealing with local suppliers. Language use in Chungking Mansions is not always about grammatical perfection but about practical communication—finding whatever shared vocabulary exists to complete the transaction in a fluid, flexible and pragmatic way [5,6]. This is aptly evidenced in two short transactions/conversations, one between a Chinese tourist and a Pakistani restaurant employee and one between a North Indian customer and a South Indian waiter. In the first example, the Chinese tourist and the Pakistani employee do not have an obvious shared language. The Pakistani employee knows basic Chinese words like 'jirou' (chicken meat), 'haochi' (delicious) and 'yige' (one). Similarly, the Chinese tourist knows basic English words and expressions such as 'ok', 'how much' and 'one'. The linguistic practice (see below) can be seen as translanguaging and is hybridized in nature [5,6].

Conversation between Chinese mainland tourist and a Pakistani restaurant employee:

Chinese tourist: zhege shi jirou? (Chinese: this is chicken meat?)

Pakistani employee: Which one? This one? Yes. Jirou jirou. Haochi haochi. You want? (which one? This one? Yes. Chicken chicken. Delicious delicious. Do you want one?)

Chinese tourist: ok. duoshaoqian? How much? (ok. how much? How much?)

Pakistani employee: 35 dollar one. Want? Want one? Yige? (35 dollars for one. Do you want? You want one? One?)

Chinese tourist: Ok. Want one.

A similar dialogue has been recorded between a North Indian customer and a South Indian restaurant waiter. In this conversation, the North Indian customer assumes that the South Indian waiter can understand and speak Hindi. However, it turns out that the waiter has only limited knowledge of Hindi and he extensively resorts to English in the communication process. Overall, the conversation features a dynamic mix of Hindi and English in a pragmatic way. While not always perfect grammatically speaking, the conversation is overall functional.

Conversation between a North Indian visitor and a South Indian restaurant waiter:

South Indian waiter: Welcome sir. Namaste!

North Indian customer: Namaste! Kaise ho aap? Sab thik hai? Bhai Indian khana yaha pe? Menu kidhar hai? (Namaste! How are you? Everything is fine? Brother, this is Indian food? Where is the menu?)

South Indian waiter: Menu? You want menu? Menu chahiye? One second sir. (Menu? You want menu? Want menu? One second sir).

North Indian customer: Acha. Ji ji ji. Menu chahiye. Thank you.Toh hindi nahi ati hai apko? No Hindi? (Ok. Yes yes yes. Want menu. Thank you. So you don't know Hindi? No Hindi?)

South Indian waiter: Hindi? Hindi ata hai. But thora thora ata hai. (Hindi? I know Hindi. But I know a little Hindi only).

……

North Indian customer: Thik hai. Mujhe yeh wala chahiye. (ok. I want this one).

South Indian waiter: ok yeh wala chahiye. You want garam? (ok want this one. You want it hot/microwaved?)

North Indian customer: Yes. Garam please (Yes. Make it hot please).

5.2.1. Linguistic and Semiotic Landscape Related to the Indian Community

The Indian presence in Chungking Mansions predates the building itself, connected to Hong Kong's relatively long history as a British colonial outpost. During the colonial period, Indians from various ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural backgrounds came to Hong Kong as police officers, soldiers, sailors, businessmen and traders. These included Punjabis, Gujaratis, Marwaris, Sindhis, Parsis and Tamils, amongst other groups. More recently, in a context of globalization and increased mobility, Indians from various other backgrounds can be found in Hong Kong for various reasons. When Chungking Mansions opened in 1961, it gradually attracted communities from India, who saw its potential as both a residential and commercial space. Today, the Indian presence in the building constitutes multiple linguistic, religious, and regional communities. Even within the Indian community itself, there is significant internal diversity. This is illustrated in the following ethnographic note:

Ethnographic Note

Time: 13 February 2024 Place: Inside of the Chungking Mansions.

Note: People here can be from North India and South India. People can be Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists and Muslims and of Bengali, Sindhi, Gujarati, Jain, Punjabi Sikh backgrounds and traditions (many Indians in the building are from Calcutta and other places in West Bengal). While there exists interactions amongst the community in general, these Indians often tend to interact with people from the same background based on their origin, linguistic profile, and/or religion. For instance, a Sikh man originally from Punjab tends to speak Punjabi to his fellow Sikh friends. Similarly, a Muslim shop owner frequently interacts with his fellow shop assistants of the same religious background.

In the Chungking Mansions, the Indians run businesses such as hotels, grocery stores, restaurants, foreign exchange businesses, tailor shops and garment stores [49]. For them, Chungking Mansions is a familiar gathering point. Each group carved out its own niche within the building's vertical space, creating a microcosm of India's own internal diversity. Figure 9 illustrates a range of Indian-run businesses, which exhibit great diversity (e.g., products and foods from North and South India). These business names tend to feature elements of great linguistic, cultural, religious and social importance, showcasing Hindi, Punjabi and South Indian languages, etc.



Figure 9. Various Indian-run businesses.

In the first sign, the message 'IS SE SASTA AUR ACHA AUR KAHI NAHI!' is Hindi (nowhere is cheap and good as this), highlighting the affordable and high-quality nature of products sold in the store. Interestingly, instead of using the Devanagari script, Latin script is used here. Using the Latin script to write local languages is a common trend in both India and other parts of the Indian subcontinent. The use of Latin script here can be seen as a deliberate choice, as this can minimize the hurdle created by script choice and make the information easy to understand for other South Asians (e.g., Urdu, Punjabi or Bengali speakers). For instance, Urdu and Hindi are essentially the same language, yet they traditionally use different scripts (Urdu uses a Perso-Arabic script and Hindi uses a

Devanagari script). Using the Latin script makes it possible for Urdu speakers (e.g., from Pakistan) to also understand the advertising information. This reaches a broader customer base, thus magnifying the advertising effect. In other names in the signs, culturally, religiously important words can be found ('Punjab', 'puja', 'sher-e-punjab', 'smrat', 'swagat'). 'Punjab' refers to a major region in North India, known for its rich Punjabi/Sikh culture. 'Puja' in Hinduism means 'worship' and 'pray'. 'Sher-e-punjabi' means 'lion of Punjab'. 'Swagat' in Hindi (or 'swagatam' in Sanskrit) means 'welcome', which is a core cultural concept in Hindu/Indian culture. The visual dominance of these Indian and South Asian linguistic elements proportionally has witnessed the relative backgrounding of the local language (i.e., Chinese). This points to the reality of the building as a multicultural ethnic space different from many/most parts of the city which largely feature Chinese and English bilingualism [52].

Interestingly, although demographically South Asians in Hong Kong are largely from the northern parts of the Indian subcontinent (i.e., North India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh), South Indian restaurants are also represented in the Chungking Mansions. Figure 10 shows a few examples of South Indian restaurants in the building. All of them feature Tamil elements to varying extents. In the first two examples, the 'House of Curry' and 'Chettinad' signs feature Tamil in the Tamil script. These signs specifically indicate that these are Tamil restaurants. Chettinad or Chettinadu is a region in Tamil Nadu. The use of the place name itself indicates a strong sense of regional and cultural bonds. In the next sign, the Tamil name in Tamil script indicates its name 'saravana', which is a common name for restaurants and has deep cultural meanings in the Tamil Nadu region and South India. In the last sign, the restaurant name is 'suvai'. Although it is written in the Latin script, the word 'suvai' means 'taste', 'flavor', and 'deliciousness'. The name with positive connotations makes sense given that it is a restaurant. In these examples, the elements in Tamil evoke in-group feelings for Tamils and South Indians. For outsiders without knowledge of Tamil, it might just appear as a regular Indian restaurant. Interestingly, although these restaurants are mostly South Indian restaurants, they often advertise that pure veg, South and North Indian food, etc., are all available (cf. the Saravana restaurant example). This is a common advertising strategy used by many businesses in the building. In the 'Smrat Pure Veg' restaurant (Figure 9), they also claim that Indian, Punjabi and Jain food items are on offer. Regarding this advertising strategy, the researcher had an informal conversation with an employee of a South Indian restaurant. The employee said the following:

> "*People who come to Chungking Mansions are very mixed. Mostly South Indians come to our restaurant. But some customers are also from North India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Sometimes, mainland Chinese tourists and YouTubers from other countries also come. It is a good idea to advertise that different food options and cuisines are available so that more people can come. Our restaurant is on the second floor. Not many people come to the second floor. Now, business is not very good, especially after Covid. We have to advertise that we have different cuisines available so that more people can come." (Location: a South Indian restaurant on 2nd floor of Chungking Mansions. Time: 3 September 2023)*



Figure 10. Tamil in signs from South Indian restaurants.

Overall, many Indians in the Chungking Mansions follow Hinduism. As far as the semiotic landscape [39] is concerned, Hinduism-related symbols (e.g., Om) and various gods, goddesses, deities and respected figures in Hinduism (e.g., Shiva, Parvati, Durga, Kali, Ganesha, Hanuman, Saraswati, Lakshmi and Shirdi Sai Baba) are commonly displayed in the building (cf. Figures 11 and 12). Some Hindu religious signs and stickers say 'shubh laabh' ('good luck') and 'shubh diwali' (happy Diwali). Other Hinduism related products are sold. For example, ganga jal (water from ganges) is available for religious rituals. The notion of 'everyday heritaging' [53] well captures the widespread and routine use of these religious icons and symbols. These religious and cultural elements may seem trivial or be often neglected by the passers-by. Nevertheless, these elements are crucial to the practitioners of the religion, which serve to help with the maintenance of their faith on a foreign land. Materially, symbolically and discursively, these elements contribute to the production and reproduction of the space, giving sections of the Chungking mansions a sacred feel and a divine aura in a multisemiotic [39] and multimodal way. Outside the

Chungking Mansions, there are a couple of Hindu mandirs in Tsim Sha Tsui. These are relatively informal and smaller in scale, given the scarcity of space in Hong Kong. Also, contributing to the semiotic assemblage [39] are various multimodal elements related to India (cf. Figure 13). These include various popular Indian products (e.g., Parle-G biscuits and kurkure), food items (namkin and mithai such as jalebi and gulab jamun), portrayals of Punjabi lifestyle, flags of India, popular Indian movies such as 'Three Idiots', and the sound of Bollywood music. Notably, the display of the Indian flag not only indexes a sense of ethnic pride and identity but also seemingly marks 'boundary' and lays 'claim' to sections of the building as a transnational urban space as part of a vertical geography. All of these semiotic elements serve to carve out an Indian space in the vertical city that is the Chungking Mansions.



Figure 11. Hinduism-related elements and Hindu deities.



Figure 12. Hinduism-related elements and Hindu deities.



Figure 13. Various linguistic and semiotic elements related to India.

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5.2.2. Linguistic and Semiotic Landscape Related to the Nepalese Community

The Nepali presence in Chungking Mansions connects to Hong Kong's history with Gurkha soldiers recruited into the British military. Known for their military prowess, bravery and loyalty, the Gurkha soldiers were recruited to fight for the British in Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, amongst other places. During the colonial era, the Nepalese soldiers used to be stationed in a few military barracks in places such as Tsim Sha Tsui and Yuen Long in Hong Kong. When Hong Kong was transferred to Chinese administration in 1997, many were redeployed or retired. Some went back to Nepal and some settled in the United Kingdom (places such as Basingstoke, Reading and Aldershot) and other countries. Also, many former Nepali Gurkha soldiers who had served in the British military chose to stay in Hong Kong. As mentioned, Tsim Sha Tsui and Yuen Long used to have several military barracks and bases. This explains why Nepalis and other South Asians now tend to live and work in areas close to these former colonial-era military sites (Tsim Sha Tsui, Jordan, Yau Ma Tei and Yuen Long). In the post-1997 era, recent immigrants from Nepal are also found. The Nepalis in Hong Kong are mainly engaged in 'low-skilled' jobs, working as security guards, restaurant owners and waiters, shop owners, street sweepers, etc. Many Nepalis in Hong Kong are from ethnic groups such as Limbu, Gurung, Rai, Magar, Newar and Tamang, following various religious beliefs including Hinduism and Buddhism. While they speak their respective ethnic languages in less formal settings, Nepali is widely used as a lingua franca. Many/most Nepalis can also understand and/or speak some Hindustani (Hindi/Urdu). Overall, the Nepali community in Hong Kong can be largely seen as a military-diaspora-turned civilian group. Yet, within the Nepalese, there is also great internal diversity. Some Nepali people are running businesses such as restaurants, stores and shops in Chungking Mansions. Restaurants serve as community hubs for Nepalis from all backgrounds—not just those from Nepal itself, but also the substantial Nepali-speaking population from places such as Darjeeling and Sikkim in India. Here, conversations flow in Nepali, news from Kathmandu is shared, and connections are maintained with home. To some extent, the Nepali community in Chungking Mansions connects to a global diaspora. Relatives working in Japan, South Korea, the UAE and Qatar, for example, may pass through Hong Kong. Young Nepalis seeking opportunities in new destinations may also use Chungking Mansions as a temporary base. The building serves as a node in networks that stretch from Kathmandu to Doha, from Hong Kong to London.

On one side of the Chungking Mansions' lower floor, there is a small concentration of Nepalese-run restaurants, grocery stores, liquor shops and other businesses (cf. Figure 14). The first sign is called 'Bhancha CORNER', indicating that it is a food corner. The business name can be seen as a case of translangauging or code-switching, which combines the local Nepalese word 'bhancha' and the English word 'corner'. Various typical Nepalese food items such as momo, chowmein, thali set and buff sukuti are visually depicted. A religious and cultural decoration is also visible which says 'shubh laabh' ('good luck'). The Nepal and Hong Kong SAR flags are also presented (also in a few other Nepalese-run businesses in the building).

In the next sign, the Devanagari script is visible. It says 'lasso Hong Kong'. This is not standard Nepali. Instead, it is likely a linguistic representation of the language of a local group in Nepal. In this sign, a section of the Himalayan Mountain Range is multimodally represented. This indicates their root or origin from the Himalayan region of Nepal. At the bottom, colourful prayer flags can be seen. Colour flags are commonly found in places in the Himalayan region (e.g., the Tibetan regions of China, parts of Nepal, parts of India and Bhutan). These represent important religious and cultural symbols in (Tibetan) Buddhism. The sacred mantra 'Om Mani Padme Hum' is commonly written on the prayer

flags. These various religious and cultural elements reinforce their unique identity as a minority group in Hong Kong. Similar to the previous sign, the Nepal and Hong Kong SAR flags are also visually portrayed, which indicates their strong connections with both their original home country (Nepal) and the current host city (Hong Kong). The visual design also highlights great friendship between these places (Nepal and China's Hong Kong SAR). In the other signs, the text 'Gorkha Palace Restaurant & Bar' is visible. Also, the Gorkha Palace is multimodally represented. The Gorkha Palace, situated in the Gorkha district of Nepal, is an important historic landmark and cultural icon in Nepal. Inside these businesses, Hinduism- and Buddhism-related symbols such as 'om' and the portrayals of Hindu and/or Buddhist deities such as Shiva, Durga, Lakshmi, Ganesha and Mahakala are commonly found. The dynamic and complex interactions of multiple linguistic and semiotic elements point to a semiotic assemblage [39] which is crucial in indicating and foregrounding a unique Nepali cultural, religious and ethnic identity. Beyond the Chungking Mansions, significant Nepali communities can be found in Jordan, Yau Ma Tei, Sham Shui Po and also in Yuen Long.



Figure 14. Signs related to Nepalese businesses.

5.2.3. Linguistic and Semiotic Landscape Related to Pakistani/Muslim Community

Predominantly Muslims following Islam, Pakistanis also represent a highly visible group within the Chungking Mansions. The initial presence of Pakistanis in Hong Kong was also connected with British colonialism (at that time current-day Pakistan was part of

British India). The Pakistani community within Chungking Mansions maintains its own distinct identity, spaces and networks. Pakistanis run halal restaurants, grocery stores, money exchange stores, etc. They are also extensively engaged in textile and electronics trade. Electronic products and other products they sell not only serve the South Asian community in Hong Kong but also are exported to Africa and the Middle East and further afield. The Pakistani presence in the building reflects the diversity of Pakistan itself. Based on the researcher's observations and conversations with members of the community, people can be Punjabis, Pashtuns, Sindhis and Muhajirs (descendants of migrants from India) who might be from Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, Sialkot, Multan, Faisalabad and Peshawar. They maintain their own networks while participating in the broader community. As mentioned, Pakistanis predominantly follow Islam. When the call to prayer (azan/adhan) sounds, Muslims from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and African nations gather together to pray. Their shared faith temporarily transcends the national and ethnic divisions that organize the building's commercial life. The Friday prayer (or 'ṣalāt al-jumuʿa' in Arabic or namaz-e-jumma in Urdu) is of particular importance. On Fridays, many Pakistani Muslims and other South Asian and African Muslims proceed to pray in the nearby Kowloon Mosque. During Ramadan each year, the Chungking mansions becomes a hub of iftar, uniting Pakistanis and other Muslims in the adjacent areas (cf. ethnographic note below).

> Ethnographic Note:
>
> Time: 2 March 2026 Place: Inside of the Chungking Mansions (first floor)
>
> Note: During Ramadan, the Pakistanis greet each other and other Muslims with expressions 'Ramadan Kareem' or 'Ramadan Mubarak'. In the Chungking Mansions, at sunset, Islam-related announcement in Arabic is played, which signals the start of the already prepared evening meal of iftar. They drink water and chai and eat food items such as dates, chicken biryani, lamb biryani, tandoori chicken, Hariyali Chicken Tikka, Pakistani-style curry, samosa, chaat, jalebi and fruit. Some businesses also provide free food and invite other people to join them for iftar during Ramadan time

In the soundscape, Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, serves as a lingua franca amongst the Pakistanis. Punjabi is also a common language. In the hallways and shops, one can hear the distinct dialects/languages of different Pakistani regions. As far as the written LL is concerned, Pakistani languages especially Urdu are of great visibility (cf. Figure 15). Urdu uses a script derived from the Arabic script and is often written in the Nasta'liq calligraphy style. The first sign (top left) in Figure 15 is a sign from 'Alvi travels'. Although the sign is written in the Urdu script, almost all words are phonetically rendered from English. The sign roughly reads 'alvi triiwlz. Chaina viza thailiind viza. Aiirlain tkt (hotl bking)', which is transliterated from English 'Alvi Travels. China visa Thailand Visa. Airline ticket (hotel booking)'. Another sign (top right) in Urdu says 'taazah murghi' (or 'fresh chicken'). In the next sign, the Urdu message says 'fruit chaat', which is a typical Pakistani and South Asian food item. In the sign, the English word 'fruit' is disguised in the Urdu script. In the next sign, the Urdu message says 'desi dhaba'. 'Desi' refers to countries such as Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Nepal, indicating a pan-South Asian identity. 'Dhaba' is a traditional restaurant or eatery that offers authentic, flavourful local South Asian cuisine in a simple, casual and informal environment. This sign also explicitly says that Indian, Pakistani, Nepali and Malaysian food items are available. This is an advertising strategy widely found in the building, which makes sense from a business perspective given the locale's (super)diverse nature. In the next 'UNCLE'S CENTER' sign, the text in the Urdu script phonetically says 'chacha siintr'. It can be seen as a case of code-switching or translanguaging, combining the Urdu/South Asian word 'chacha' (or 'uncle')

and the English word 'centre'. Such sociolinguistic hybridity is aligned with the multicultural atmosphere of the building. In the next sign, the English business name 'GUJRAT FAST FOOD CENTRE' and the Urdu name 'gjraat faast food siintr' can be seen as being equivalent phonetically. The version in the Arabic-based Urdu script extensively uses lexical items from English (e.g., 'fast', 'food' and 'centre'). The 'Alvi travels', 'fruit chaat' and 'UNCLE'S CENTER' examples mentioned earlier also feature a similar strategy, where English words are partially or fully rendered into the Arabic-based Urdu script. This shows the powerful nature of English in influencing other languages in the 21st century. This is a trend also found in countries across South Asia, where English elements are extensively written in various South Asian languages/scripts such as Hindi, Punjabi, Nepali, Urdu, Bengali, Odia, and Tamil. At the bottom, the sign (left) is a poster about a religious event/activity related to Islam (where a masjid is also multimodally depicted). The sign (right) is a trilingual sign about 'no spitting', featuring Chinese, Urdu and English versions. The Urdu message says 'thookna mana hay' ('spitting is banned').



Figure 15. Urdu (Perso-Arabic script) in the LL.

Arabic (cf. Figure 16) is also visible in the building, given the fact that Arabic is the language of the Quran and Arabic is the liturgical and sacred language of Islam. The sign at the top features the Arabic phrase 'Hadha min faadli Rabbi' (or semantically 'This is by the Grace of my Lord'), which is a common Arabic and Islamic expression used by Muslims to express a sense of humility and gratitude to God. Other Arabic signs include the 'halal' sign (which indicates food Muslims are permitted to consume). The 'Basmala' sign is also commonly found in the building. The Islamic expression says 'Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim' (or 'In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful'). Other Arabic/Islamic expressions include the Shahada, 'Mashallah' and 'Ya Allah Ya Muhammad'.

Arabic here, though often less informational, represents an important vehicle for the symbolic expression of religious identity, heritage and tradition. The display of these Arabic/Islamic elements can be seen as cases of everyday heritaging [53], which contributes to the dynamic maintenance and renewal of their Islamic faith for the Muslim.



Figure 16. Arabic and Islam-related symbols, phrases and expressions.

In other cases, while English (Latin script) might be used, the messages on signs feature rich linguistic, religious, cultural and dietary elements central to Pakistani and Muslim identities (cf. Figure 17). For instance, 'Gujar Khan' and 'Chakwal' are place names in Pakistan. Gujar Khan is a city in Rawalpindi District, Punjab, Pakistan and Chakwal is a city in Chakwal District in the Potohar region of Punjab, Pakistan. These elements in store names usually indicate the store owners' hometowns. These convey the businesses' strong ties with Pakistan, evoking strong emotions of local Pakistani identities. In another example, the store name features the name 'mohammed', which is a common Pakistani/Muslim name and the name of the prophet in Islam. In the sign 'Eman Mobile Center', 'eman' is also a common Muslim name, which means 'faith' or 'belief' in Arabic. Similarly, 'Makkah' as in the name 'Al-Makkah Provision' refers to the Islamic holy city Mecca. The name seemingly targets Pakistani and other Muslims visiting the Chungking Mansions. Another business sign features the name 'buraq'. Firmly embedded in the Islamic tradition, 'Buraq' represents a supernatural equine-like mythological creature which acted as the mount of the Islamic prophet Muhammad during one of his journeys. In other signs, common Pakistani and Muslim food items (e.g., kebab and biryani) can be found. These names, perhaps unfamiliar to outsiders, are profound and rich in meanings both historically, religiously, ethnically and culturally, representing important markers or signifiers of Muslimness.



Figure 17. Linguistic elements related to Pakistan and Muslimness.

In the Chunking Mansions' semiotic landscape [19,39], various multimodal elements related to the Pakistani and Muslim communities can be found (cf. Figure 18). These include the Pakistani flags. The Pakistani flag features the star and crescent design, which is also a common motif in Islam. Signs and symbols in the LL can serve boundary-marking functions [37,38]. Multimodally, the existence of these flags not only suggests a Pakistani and Muslim presence and identity but also seemingly lays 'claims' to pockets of the transnational urban milieu. These agentive semiotic decisions arguably indicate some kind of 'ownership' of the urban zone, actively contributing to the socio-political, religious and cultural 'demarcation' of the space, physically and symbolically. Also, Pakistanis and other Muslim figures can occasionally be found. Figure 18 shows the portrayal of former Pakistani cricketer-turned political leader Imran Khan. The depiction shows the Pakistani business owners' support and respect for and allegiance to the leader. Similar depictions of Imran Khan and the logos of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party founded by him can also be found in other pockets of Hong Kong with a large Pakistani population (e.g., Jordan, Yau Ma Tei and Sham Shui Po). These attest to the political and ideological affiliations of some members of the Pakistani diaspora community, thus showing how sociopolitical life back home can be imported and recontextualized [15] in the new host environment, that is, China's Hong Kong SAR. In some places, the Palestine flag can also be seen in the building, corresponding to the current sociopolitical situation globally.



Figure 18. Multimodal depiction of Pakistani and Muslim identity.

5.2.4. Win–Win Cooperation: The Alliance of Pakistanis and Filipinos

The Chungking Mansions also features a few Southeast Asian restaurants, where Filipino food items (such as tosilog, tapsilog, cornsilog, longsilog and halo-halo) and Indonesian/Malay food items (such as Nasi goreng, nasi lemak and nasi ayam biryani) are available. Interestingly, a few restaurants are jointly managed by Pakistanis and Filipinos, providing both Pakistani and Pinoy cuisines. As illustrated in Figure 19, signs say 'BLEND CUISINE' and 'We serve Pakistani and Filipino food'. Multimodally, the Pakistani and Filipino flags and other written elements can be seen as a sign of unity or solidarity. Such alliance between Pakistanis and Southeast Asians (e.g., Filipino) is an emerging trend [54] seen in a few areas in Hong Kong (e.g., Sham Shui Po and Yuen Long), where ethnic minority groups join hands and foster deeper and intimate connections on different levels (e.g., business, economic and personal levels). For example, in Sham Shui Po and elsewhere, South Asians may sell bags, shirts and other products to Indonesian and also Filipino domestic helpers [15]. Clearly, such close alliances [15,54] between marginalized ethnic minority groups are driven by shared challenges, economic necessities and the human need for community, support and cultural affirmation in a multicultural urban setting like Hong Kong. The existence of these 'joint ventures' and 'blend cuisines' highlights the symbiotic

relationship and mutual reliance seen between different ethnic minority groups in Hong Kong. Similar trends can also be found in places like Singapore, where South Asian and Southeast Asian migrant workers foster close ties.



Figure 19. Juxtaposition of Filipino and Pakistani food.

5.2.5. Linguistic and Semiotic Landscape Related to Africa and African Merchants

Business and trade in Chungking Mansions cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the crucial role of African traders and merchants [11]. Nigerians, Ghanaians, Kenyans, Tanzanians and traders from across the continent form the primary customer base for the building's electronics shops. They may arrive in Hong Kong with cash, spend weeks navigating the building's labyrinthine corridors and depart with suitcases and shipping containers filled with goods destined for markets across Africa [2]. This trade has created its own infrastructure [2] within the building. The relationship between South Asian sellers and African buyers, while primarily commercial, has created cultural exchanges [11] that transform both communities. In many ways, the Chungking Mansions represents an important node of China-Africa business and trade. Guangzhou and Yiwu are other major examples of such connections [4,6]. As a result of the presence of African traders and businessmen, a small pocket of the building features a range of Africa-related businesses (Figure 20), including hip-hop shops, bars, African stores and African restaurants. African linguistic elements can be found. For example, one business features signs 'Karibu' (Swahili for 'welcome') and 'Hakuna Matata' (Swahili for 'no worry' and 'be happy'). In a Ghana-style restaurant, the shop front features the common word 'akwaaba' ('welcome'), which is a common Twi/Akan word widely understood in Ghana and a few places in

West Africa. Moving beyond the linguistic elements, an African image and identity is also discursively and multimodally constructed [19,39]. The flags of a few African countries such as Nigeria and Ghana (cf. Figure 20) are commonly seen. Notably, colours such as red, yellow and green are visually prominent in pockets of the building. Indeed, several African countries adopt these colours as their national flags (e.g., Ghana, Benin, Republic of Congo, Senegal, Cameron, Mali, Guinea and Ethiopia). The visual preference for these colours points to the chromatics of Africanness. Similarly, in one sign, two African ladies are depicted as cooking African food. Their dresses tend to also indicate colours red, yellow and green. These linguistic and visual elements are not random choices but carefully choreographed strategic decisions, representing important signifiers of pan-African identity and heritage and also China–African ties. Overall, these elements contribute to an African-related linguistic and semiotic landscape, adding to the building's superdiverse ecology.



Figure 20. Africa-related LL.

5.3. 'Harmony' in Superdiversity: Co-Existence of Diverse Voices and Religious and Sociopolitical Affiliations

To some extent, the Chungking Mansions can be seen as some kind of a 'non-place' [16]. Like train stations, airports and hotels, the Chungking Mansions features great mobility and transience [16], where people come and go. While the restaurants, shops,

hotels and other businesses in the building are relatively fixed, the visitors, tourists and businesspeople are transient. Beyond the transient and seemingly chaotic vertical setting, the building is also a community of diverse groups of people brought together as a result of history, migration and globalization [49]. In many ways, the building can be seen as a communitas [17] overall and people get on with their life in a relatively harmonious, peaceful and symbiotic way. That is, given the building's nature as a space shared by various groups, a Pakistani-run shop not only sells various halal items but also items for Hindus. For instance, interestingly, gangajal (water from the Ganges which is considered holy for Hindus) can be found in a Pakistani-run shop. Similarly, a Hindu-run shop features spices and other items with the halal label on. Making money is the bigger goal in the vertical complex.

Such on-the-surface harmony, however, does not always mean that there is perfect intermingling in an absolute sense or in an ideal way. While South Asians might appear as a monolithic whole to the local Hong Kongers and mainland Chinese visitors, different South Asian businesses tend to be spatially organized in different places. For instance, as discussed, Nepalese-run businesses tend to be clustered in one corner of the building. Similarly, it is common to see Pakistani businesses and restaurants spatially organized in other areas. From this perspective, even the relatively small and condensed South Asian enclave can be seen as consisting of even smaller sub-enclaves or sub-areas.

Notably, despite their shared pan-South Asian or desi identity, the different groups have different lived experiences and have different identities even within the same building. Such different identities and experiences are rooted in history, religion and culture and are also mediated by recent sociopolitical, cultural and religious events. For example, Hindus tend to have stickers related to Diwali celebrations and have small statues of Hindu deities such as Shiva, Ganesh, Lakshmi and Hanuman. Some Hindus in the building are supporters of Modi and the BJP party. In comparison, the Pakistanis and Muslims also have different religious and sociopolitical affiliations. As shown in Figure 18 above, some Pakistanis in the building are staunch supporters of Imran Khan and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party. The Pakistani/Muslim communities in the building also display the Palestinian flag to show solidarity as a reflection of the broader socio-political situation globally. To some extent, the sociopolitical dynamic of South Asia and the world is being played out within the Chungking mansions as a microcosm, which is shaped by people from different sociopolitical and ideological affiliations and cultural and religious backgrounds. Occasionally, there can be tensions and conflicts among people along linguistic, cultural, socioeconomic and religious lines [2,49].

Yet, overall, functional co-existence best defines the vertical urban enclave. As mentioned, Ramadan is an important time for Pakistanis and other Muslims in the building. In the evening, Arabic announcement can be heard during Ramadan time in the public space. Based on the researcher's conversation with a Hindu lady working in an Indian grocery shop, she says that "during Ramadan this religious announcement is played in the evening. After this, the Pakistanis and Muslims will eat their food. I do not know if I like it but I am used to this. We are in the same building. Overall, people get along fine. We just do our own thing". This to some extent summarizes the nature of co-existence between different groups in the building. It shows the pragmatic, practical and functional nature of existence in the complex, where different groups in general get along and operate in harmony, despite their religious, cultural, sociopolitical and ideological differences.

While Chungking Mansions and the adjacent areas have traditionally been seen as a key hub of South Asian action, the presence of South Asians has in recent decades been spreading to various districts and areas of Hong Kong (e.g., Sham Shui Po, Tsuen Wan,

To Kwa Wan, and the New Territories). This has had a transformative role, contributing to Hong Kong's increasingly diverse urban linguistic landscape [14,15,55]. Figures 21–24 show other South Asian spaces across Hong Kong beyond the vertical Chungking Mansions. Figure 21 shows Jordan and Yau Ma Tei's linguistic landscape transformed by Nepali, Indian and Pakistani communities (one KFC restaurant even features a halal sign, given the area's changing demographic profile with many Muslims). Figures 22 and 23 illustrate To Kwa Wan's changing linguistic and semiotic landscape with significant South Asian elements. Figure 24 similarly illustrates how South Asian communities have transformed various parts of the city (e.g., Yuen Long and Tsuen Wan).



Figure 21. Jordan and Yau Ma Tei's linguistic and semiotic landscape related to Nepali, Indian and Pakistani communities.



Figure 22. To Kwa Wan's linguistic landscape related to South Asian communities.



Figure 23. To Kwa Wan's linguistic landscape related to South Asian communities.



Figure 24. Linguistic landscapes of places such as Yuen Long and Tsuen Wan transformed by Pakistani and other South Asian communities.

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6. Conclusions

Although flawed, chaotic and uncomfortable, the Chungking Mansions undeniably is important as a dynamic hub of low-end globalization and superdiversity. What was once dismissed as a slum or ethnic ghetto to be cleared is now increasingly recognized as a cultural treasure and a sort of dynamic and living urban heritage. Chungking Mansions, in its vertical organization of South Asian and African communities, offers a vision of globalization very different from the corporate version celebrated in boardrooms and business schools. Here, in narrow corridors and cramped shops, businessmen, traders, and migrants from the world's developing economies create their own version of global connections. The building's verticality, which so distinguishes it from horizontal ethnic enclaves elsewhere, creates unique patterns of interaction and exchange, contributing to the complex fabric of South–South dynamics. From the perspective of linguistic and semiotic landscape, this study has shown the linguistic diversity and semiotic complexity inscribed in this vertical space's urban landscape and urban geography. The co-existence of various linguistic, religious and cultural elements points to multi-voicedness and separate identities. Yet, these different elements and identities also cohere into one dynamic whole in the shared space. Chungking Mansions shapes and reshapes the urban space, produces and reproduces meanings, and defines and redefines the idea of superdiversity and the understanding of an urban ethnic enclave. Compared with most ethnic, religious and cultural enclaves globally, the Chungking Mansions is one of a kind. As an avenue for future research, it would be interesting to more explicitly examine whether there is cooperation or possibly competition and conflict between 'old' and 'new' migrants from the same destination (e.g., between Gurkhas and their descendants vs. 'low skilled' Nepalis working in low-end jobs).

Overall, the article shows that vertical buildings (e.g., large building complexes, trading malls and shopping centres), often under-explored and under-theorized, represent an interesting locale and a fascinating frame of analysis in our increasingly globalized, interconnected, dynamic and multicultural world. Proven to be revealing in informing topics such as migration, mobility, transnational population, economic, cultural and linguistic flows, superdiversity, low-end globalization and multilingualism, this empirical study paves the way for future studies that explore vertical urban spaces. Featuring similar vertical design, superdiverse urban malls such as MBK Centre and Indra Square Mall in Bangkok [5] might merit some attention so as to explore how the verticality and various sociopolitical, cultural, linguistic and religious elements might combine in meaning-making. Similarly, various big malls in Doha and Dubai (e.g., Dubai Mall) might also be investigated in a context of multilingualism, multiculturalism and superdiversity. Likewise, the current study also paves the way for more studies exploring other informal spaces, ethnic enclaves and transnational zones in our increasingly dynamic, diverse and multicultural world. These include the World-Wide Plaza, various Indonesian-oriented malls and shops in Causeway Bay, Mongkok, Sham Shui Po, Nepali-oriented malls and businesses in Jordan, Yau Ma Tei and Yuen Long, etc., in Hong Kong and other diverse spaces globally. For instance, in Singapore, the Filipino-dominated Lucky Plaza, the Peninsula Plaza or 'Little Burma', as well as Indonesian-dominated malls in Paya Lebar/Geyland Serai are fascinating sites to explore. Building on the current research, future studies may examine these places to highlight how certain ethnolinguistic, religious and cultural identities might be enacted through linguistic and semiotic means. This study contributes to urban sociolinguistics, linguistic and semiotic landscape studies, landscape research, social, human and cultural geographies, linguistic anthropology, migration studies and diaspora studies.

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