HOMInG interview
with Gordon Mathews
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Conducted by Paolo Boccagni
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Gordon Mathews has written or edited books about what makes life worth living in Japan and the United States, about the global cultural supermarket and the meanings of culture today, about the Japanese generation gap, about what it means to "belong to a nation" in Hong Kong, about how different societies conceive of happiness, about Chungking Mansions as a global building, about low-end globalization around the world, and about African traders in Guangzhou; he is currently finishing a book about the meanings of life after death in the United States, Japan, and China, and how these link to people's lives before death. You can reach him at cmgordon@cuhk.edu.hk

Could you tell us how the notion of "home" has come into your work, and about its specific significance for anthropology and ethnography?

Obviously one big issue is home as a physical place as opposed to an emotional place. I am always thinking of home as an emotional place, not simply as the physical structure where people are living. Home, to me, is more a place where one feels one belongs. And I guess this is my definition of home: where I feel I belong.

Now, as soon as I say this, it gets rather confusing, because in my book *Global culture / individual identity* I'm talking about a *cultural* home. That is rather different: when I think about my own sense of home, it's probably where I am with my wife! And that has nothing to do with a cultural home. I don't feel I need a cultural home. A certain percentage of people don't need a cultural home. Other people feel that need very strongly. So, a sense of cultural home is a bit mysterious to me and that's why I wrote the book! Who needs this? I believe that home is important to study because it is a matter of cultural identity today. It is this matter of "this is my home," "this is where I belong" – this certainly motivates contemporary politics to a great degree. A lot of people seem to feel this. So, it is a big issue, well worth investigating.

For example, when some people see Africans here in Tento, some people are probably thinking subconsciously: "this is not *their* home, this is *my* home!" Other people are thinking, "everybody is welcome here!" This gets into the complexity of civic belonging vs ethnic belonging to a country: who is allowed to say that a place is home? In Hong Kong, although I am in a far better situation than most Africans in Trento, I myself have faced this question in a number of ways: Am I allowed to say I am home in Hong Kong? Some people would say yes, and others no.

Following *Global culture / Individual identity,* what does "cultural home" specifically mean? Do you use home as a metaphor, here, or in a more substantive sense?

In my view home would *have* to be a metaphor. And a fictional metaphor, because in truth we have *no* home. We can say home only in some critical sense: maybe our family of birth

will be a home, but with the passage of time no home can ever last… I'm sceptical about home in this sense, so I have to use it as a metaphor. Is home the one place where we truly belong? But bluntly put, is there any place where we truly belong?

Maybe those more comfortable in their own skin would say that the whole world is home. I feel like that sometimes, but somehow in today's world it is very easy to sense that there is no home where you absolutely belong. Home in my usage is metaphorical and refers to this particular belonging that we feel – belonging to something, some place that we can't ever really get to. I suppose, to be philosophical, that the fact of death means we have no home. If our bodies are made of matter, we do go back to nature, to home in that sense. That's going to happen inevitably, whether we believe in life after death or not; maybe that's truly home! Decompsing back in the earth...

So you wouldn't attach the label of home to a physical place whatsoever…

I would not, and as long as we are talking about religion – a lot of Christians think that heaven is home. I mean, there's never really a home on the earth but heaven is given that sense of truly being-at-home. The question of home is, however, more complex for the faithful of different religions.

Your work on Chungking Mansions can also be seen as the cumulative result of many visits into a house – possibly into the homes of those living there. Could you tell us about the unique opportunities, and the unique dilemmas, this has created?

For about four years, while I was doing the research, I felt Chungking Mansions was more home than my department. I was just spending more time there, and I just knew people there, and my department at that time wasn't particularly friendly. But as we know, any work place, when we think it is home, that's a fiction. Some workers I interviewed used to say, "my company is my family"; but no it's not, you can lose your job any time: you can do this for a while and then… it can't be home, because we do think of home in some sense as being permanent. And of course no relationship is going to be permanent. People die. So, can a relationship be home? This would mean attending to the whole question of the relationship of home to love. Because there is a relationship, what you love is home. Is home something permanent, or is it is necessarily temporary? And if it is temporary, is it a real home? Can you have a home, if it's yours only for a brief period? Probably this is the distinction between physically renting a home and owning a home. If you own a home there's the illusion of permanence. But of course, it's impermanent!

I went back and visited my grandparents' old home. I was giving a talk close to where my grandparents had lived in the US, and I went to visit the place, their home for decades. It was very strange, because it all looked exactly the same: the same furniture outside, and everything. And then, as I was just looking very closely, a woman came out. I'd never seen her before. And I thought, should I introduce myself? No, it's just going to seem weird! So I left, and there was just this profound sense of loss. My grandparents had died 35 years ago, so it was a long time ago, but still there was this sense that "this used to be my home and now it is not." And it really was a home, I spent summers there, I knew this place rather well, I could have told what there was in each room… I was much more powerfully moved than I would have thought, although I'm not a sentimental guy. So, if even a guy like me can be affected by this sense of a loss of home, it must be a powerful emotion.

More in general, what is your view of home visits, or staying in the home of someone else, as a way of doing ethnography?

Well, home is a place where you feel really comfortable. That's just a standard, ordinary definition, but it happens to be true, in my view. When I went in my room in Chungking Mansions, you know, rooms there are really small, I had a powerful sense that "this is womb-like." When you are in a tiny room that many people think is a little frightening, it's a very particular feeling… One way of defining home is where you can sleep at ease, and feel completely comfortable. And often when you are in a new place you can't really sleep—you sleep and then wake up and realize where you are. Home is a place where you can just lie down and have no concern about anything. Being homeless means that you can't get a place to sleep where you can feel this way. Home is where you can really have no concern, and can enter into a state of vulnerability. Because sleeping means profound vulnerability. To be home is where you can simply sink into this state.

But what if the place you call home is a place where you are subject to domestic violence, abuse etc.?

I guess I would have to say that that's not home. A child abused by parents or a wife abused by a husband is no longer home. If you ask them if that's home, they might say it's home, simply because of our standard definition of home, but the definition I've given is, the place where you are truly and completely at ease. And by this definition, maybe there are billions of people in the world who are homeless.

There is not much of a debate on home in anthropology, though. In my view, anthropology is not sufficiently dealing with these existential or phenomenological issues. Anthropology now looks more at external suffering than at internal phenomenology. There are exceptions, people like Michael Jackson, but not many. I do really like what you do in your research, because it is existential research in implication: what does it mean to have a home? This is the most profound sense we have as human beings: whether life is worth living, and what is home. We really need to look at these questions, because these are the most important things we face.

Now, in Chungking Mansions I went into homes occasionally, but in Chungking Mansions, because everything is so tiny, you can't really do it. It's interesting to think of this in terms of a home because, you can stay in a room for a few days, but even only one week would drive you crazy, because it would be so claustrophobic. Hotel rooms in general can't be home, they say, because they are generic – they look the same for everyone, and you are not able to personalize them as if it were yours, which is what you can do with a real home. While staying in Chungking Mansions, by the way, I decided to stay in hotel rooms rather than renting one room and making it home. My decision was very practical – in order to stay several nights in all of the hundred different guesthouses in Chungking Mansions for my research, I needed to do that.

But would anybody living there call that place home?

Yes, they would. Most people would stay in guesthouses only for a while, but some people, maybe one hundred families or so living in apartments, make this their home, and

undoubtedly think that it is home – they might not think that it's a wonderful home, but still it's home. Now, I've almost never been in a home in Chungking Mansions, largely because people that live there do not deal with the building much. They typically work outside, and the building just happens to be where they live. The people I have known – most of them come to the building to work, while living elsewhere. And the people who live there do not generally interact with the other people in the building, so it's a very curious sense of home! Now, people would often metaphorically tell me that "Chungking Mansion is my home… it's truly where I can experience my life" as South Asians, or African, and so forth: "I can just sit here and relax–it is a place where I belong." So, it would be home, but it wouldn't necessarily be where they sleep. And we often make this equation: home is where you sleep. But the psychological home, the emotional home, may be not where you sleep.

So, belonging is key: Chungking Mansions is where people from around the world may think, "I'm not looked down as a foreigner here. So it feels like home." I'll never forget when I saw a Sikh proprietor of a store in Chungking Mansions sobbing. There had been a bombing in Amritsar. I looked into his store, and he was crying in front of the TV screen showing this. When I talked with him later, it turned out that he had never been there in his life! But that was still his cultural home. And for a number of South Asians particularly in the buildinbg, this is what home is: an imagined cultural home, an ancestral home, which they can experience in the second home of Chungking Mansions.

I'm sure you know all that literature on "You can't go home again"; the novel by Thomas Wolfe, and so on. I remember reading in a book edited by T.H. Eriksen an essay by Heike Drotbohm about asylum seekers originally from Cape Verde who had been deported from the US, after living there for many years and returned to Cape Verde, but Cape Verde was no longer home. Their actual sense of home was by now the US, but they couldn't live there any more. This happens to lots of people, as you know.

Do you think the "You can't go back home again" argument holds in these circumstances only?

No, I think it is true for everyone. This is the message I conveyed in the last chapter of *Global culture / Individual identity:* we *imagine* a home, but we imagine it out of all we can take from the cultural supermarket. So, think of a Japanese person my age, grown up with the Beatles and rock'n'roll, who at some point decides, "I want to learn to play the *shakuhachi,* the traditional Japanese flute, to go back to my Japanese roots." But very few people in Japan know anything about *shakuhachi* now! Of course, people can think whatever they like, but for a person like this, their cultural home is the Beatles, and all the stuff they grew up with. I would define "cultural home" is what you grew up with, and in some cases what you return to – but while I won't say it's impossible, for the majority of people, what they think as their cultural home is gone. You can't go back. Once you learn about the cultural supermarket, the fact that you can pick and choose anything, then when you go home again, it's not your home as a natural place, it's a home you choose, and once you have chosen it from the cultural supermarket, by definition it's not "home" anymore—it's not where you naturally belong to, but something you choose.

So, we are getting to a major point: is home a matter of ascription or of choice?

Well – we want to think it's ascription, but in fact it's choice for most of us. In the book I describe how a mainland Chinese student in my class on globalization and culture said to me, "You know, I thought I had a cultural home, but after taking this class, I can't go home again! Because I go back and I know too much, I know I can pick and choose from anywhere, so being home means it's no longer the home I take for granted." And then he said, "You've stolen my home!" Which is true: education means you can be anywhere, so where is home? Now, you can often find home in deep human relations – I think very much of the spousal relation, but it could be with friends too. You can find a personal home there in terms of somebody you are so accustomed to, and you feel so close to, that it's almost an extension of yourself – that would be home. We are always trying to find our other half, Plato said. Being with my wife is as close as I can get to home, but I also realize that that's an illusion because once you're dead, there is separation. In this sense, home can never be something permanent. It's like a hotel room, you might stay there for a while but it's impermanent.

Now, I think you *can* achieve home in some sense, if you get along well, over time, in a country you were not born in. When I'm back to the US, I wouldn't call that home – even in terms of family life, because I'm there only for temporary visits. I certainly enjoy the visits, but I wouldn't call that home. It's funny because, when my wife and I are visiting my family, or for that matter her family, the first thing she would say after twelve hours is, "I want to go home!" which is the particular place we live in together, and which she truly feels is hers.

What is your view of home visits, or staying in the home of someone else, as a way of doing ethnography?

I don't much like to do that personally. There is a degree of privacy in other people's homes and lives that is really important. In Japan I often had the opportunity to stay with other people, but I still feel like I'm intruding – I do stay with families, of course, in a guestroom, that's fine, but I wouldn't want to do ethnography that way, because of the obligations it would entail. I mean, there is something remarkably liberating in staying in your room – you have your door, you can go out and get back any time… that's a feeling that I treasure greatly. But this is more a personal predilection than a way of doing ethnography. Certainly for those who are new to a culture, living in a family is a wonderful thing to do, because you can find out a lot more. *I* don't, at my age! So, it's a great method if you can do it, but I personally would rather not. I want to have my own space. My own choice when in Chungking Mansion was to hang around in guesthouses all the time to meet more people. That was a legitimate choice. Staying in people's home would be another legitimate choice. It's a matter of research options. By the way, most of the people I met, maybe 60 or 70%, were South Asian or African Muslims. And it would have been very weird for me to go home and meet their spouses. Women generally don't work in Chungking Mansions. So going home would have had a different meaning. And in Chungking Mansions, actually, the workplace of these guys was more home than home: they knew everybody there.

Would you say that people living there can "feel at home," or "make themselves at home," more than anywhere else? How far is this possible for labour migrants and, in particular, for asylum seekers?

That's a good question – can an asylum seeker feel at home? One definition of home that I've given you is that it involves a sense of total ease. But if I'm an asylum seeker, or even

more, if I'm an overstayer like in my study in Guangzhou, there is no possibility of home. Police can come in at any time. As soon as they see you don't have a valid passport or a visa, they can take you away. And that's the definition of *not* being at home: when you can be taken away, taken off to jail, at any time, at any moment.

Now, we can go deeper into this, existentially: because we can drop dead at any time, there is no home! I mean, I can feel at home and drop dead of a heart attack at this very moment, so there is no home. If you can die easily, as all of us can, there is no home. However, overstayers feel this much more strongly. Asylum seekers may feel a little more at home than overstayers because, in Hong Kong at least, they can't be arrested for simply being asylum seekers. If they work, then it's a different matter because you are not allowed to work; but aside from that, you have a place in society, however restricted and difficult it may be. For the overstayers, who can be taken away by the police at any time, they may have many friends, but that's really more of Agamben's "bare life." I remember an overstayer in Guangzhou who had always a bag wherever he went; in case the police burst in to take him to jail, he could pick up the bag to take with him. Asylum seekers instead, because they have the right to be there, are in a sense halfway home. Some of those I met in Chungking Mansions did indeed feel at home there. And there's a fascinating contradiction: whenever I talk about home to the asylum seekers I teach, they show profound patriotism. "I love my home, I miss it so much" – but they left it! And they left it, at least in theory, because their government persecuted them. Now, sometimes they would get more analytical and say, "I hate the government that did this to me, but I love my country." But anyway, can an asylum seeker be home? I think the key factor is if someone can come and take you away at any time, then you probably can't feel at home. But again, there is the classic existential issue: you can die any time—a bus can run you over, and so on. This means that home is an illusion. We falsely assume home. We have a fallacy in our consciousness, that things will last forever – they don't. This is a really powerful theme, which leads to my own life-after-death research, which is basically research on home. Is there a home after you die?

Many scholars point out that what home means in English need not match with the corresponding terms in other languages. Is there an issue of ambiguity in translation, for instance, with the terms that stand for "home" in Japanese, or in Chinese? Do you think this is a challenge for comparative research on people's view, emotions and practices of home?

I've addressed exactly the same question when writing about happiness in different societies. The term for home in different languages may have different emotional resonances. So, home in Japanese would be *uchi.* And *uchi* probably has a stronger emotional resonance than home in English, although they are both very powerful and have a somewhat similar meaning. In Cantonese, *ngokkei* might mean a physical place as much as an emotional place. One interesting thing about the current protests in Hong Kong is that for the first time people feel Hong Kong is home. Many people in the protests say that if the mainland Chinese army, the People's Liberation Army, comes into Hong Kong, they are ready to die for their country, which they think of as Hong Kong. And when you die for your country, you're dying for home. This is the first time in Hong Kong history that you've had more than a tiny fraction of people making this claim. That means that this place is becoming home for people! Home is something you're willing to die for. So this could be another way to look at home: what you are willing to endanger your life for, for the sake of defending it. As for Hong Kong, protesters who don't have a foreign passport, as many

Hongkongers do, cannot easily consider the emigration option. Their thought may be, "This is home – I can't leave it – therefore I'll fight with my life for it."

In *Global culture / Individual identity* I've never brought up the issue of home as being different in different cultural contexts. It might have been because I was using home more as a metaphor. But it might also have been simply a flaw in the research. In retrospect I might have talked more about that, because logically it would have made perfect sense that there would have been significant cultural differences in senses of home. For sure, the emotional power of the words that translate home into different languages would have to be different. Now, it's hard to imagine a society where home would have no meaning whatsoever. Possibly among nomads, or hunter/gatherer cultures; but then home would probably mean the group you're in, which would still be extraordinarily powerful, even if it would not be much of a physical place, except for a broader region than what we ourselves typically think of as home. I've never even thought about this, but that would be a wonderful research topic: what do hunters/gatherers think about home? I suspect that there is indeed an extraordinarily strong attachment to place among hunter-gatheres, but that home is far more broadly defined than we ourselves think of as home.

So, would you subscribe to the statement of home as a universal experience?

In a broad, metaphorical sense, yes. It couldn't be universal in a literal sense, because, for example, pastoral or nomadic groups cyclically change their place of residence. In a metaphorical sense, however, you always have people you love and places you love. Family *is* a universal in a broad sense. In every society there are children raised by their mother, and typically by the father as well, although that's less universal. You could even say that, because this is a universal, you can equate home with mother's love and with the repetition of mother's love throughout our own personal experience. And the womb, of course, can also be appreciated as a metaphor for home – where you come from, you had to depart from, and cannot return to.

Moreover, in a way, homelessness is the true way of being at home – when you are homeless in a psychological sense, everything is home: when, whatever you are going through, you can accept it and be psychologically comfortable, that means the entire world and all of its experience can become home. I think that corresponds to the state of Buddhist enlightenment, as I understand it: when everywhere is home. Most of us cannot do that. Maybe the true state of wisdom is when homelessness can be home. But most of us can't feel that and so we long for a home that we have left, for the very fact that we left the womb, and we can only find a facsimile of home. But even if you were to be back, you would find it so oppressive that it couldn't possibly be a real home. I like your metaphor of *homing* here – we are all, in a sense, homing. You are tempting me to philosophize all the time, and I'm not sure how valuable it is – we are always homing, because we have lost our home by being born, and then we are always seeking a return to home. The religious seekers I have interviewed were always looking for home. Home for them is God, because God would give us this absolute sense of peace, which is the definition of home: where there is an absolute sense of peace.

So, "home" is "God," but couldn't it also be a church, a mosque, a temple?

I would think all these will always be facsimiles of home. They wouldn't be a real home. Anything human, by the fact that it is human, cannot be real home! I say that, but in my own experience, home is fairly obvious. It's not a permanent home, but maybe we *can* have a temporary home. I'm at home for a few decades, and then I die, but that's still home. It depends how rigidly you want to follow this metaphor!

But is there a point in defending home in a radical way? As something that can't be achieved at all?

I would say that home can never be permanently achieved, because we are impermanent as human beings. So home is always temporary and partial. Now, since home can never be permanently achieved – since all home is ultimately an illusion – why should we ever defend home? Nationalism and patriotism are in this sense the defense of an illusion. And yet it is an illusion of home that millions of people might defend to the death.

But having said that, as I get older, I seem to become a little bit happier and it seems a little bit easier: what could be more than home in sitting here drinking coffee, talking about interesting ideas, looking at that fountain a few meters from here – how can this not be home? Of course it's not home in any permanent sense, but you know, being completely at ease, that seems as good a definition of home as I can come to. Where you are completely at ease is a good definition of home. Instead, where you feel that you belong is quite a higher definition, because "to belong" demands more of a sense of permanence. Being totally at ease, and not to need to worry, is a simple and good definition of home though. Wherever any of us are subject to oppression, violence or abuse, that cannot be home, by definition.

So home is necessarily something positive…

Well, to me it would be. Obviously, to hundreds of millions or billions of people on the planet, it's not something positive. I'm certainly not denying the empirical reality, but the term in itself can hardly be used in a non-positive sense. There are so many sayings about home, and almost invariably they are positive. Maybe you could do a Google search and find out, but almost nobody says negative things about home! It's the same as to say negative things about love: you don't do that. You can't have a negative connotation for the term itself, it seems!

I'm not sure, then, how I could work with such an ideal notion as a category of analysis…

I think you could. Actually you could just say: home is an ideal that is overwhelmingly positive for almost everybody. In reality it often does not fit that. There are hundreds of millions of people, or probably billions of people, for whom the *actual* home they feel is lacking – whether they are abused by a spouse or a parent or whether they are in poverty, *home does not seem like home.* But the ideal remains. Home is a bit like God, or love. These things may be seriously flawed in your own relations. You may pray to God and still have a beloved child dying, you may have a spouse who abuses you, but the ideal of love or God – exactly like home – is a positive ideal. It's an ideal we live for. It's incredibly

powerful. But of course, it may have all sorts of real consequences. People kill for home. The Nazis would kill for home – the homeland. So, nobody says home is *empirically* ideal, but the ideal touches these chords that are very powerful in the heart, that people think of as overwhelmingly positive. Very few people would say, "I hate my home."

What does home actually mean to you, and where/when it is located? Need it be your country of origin?

Home absolutely does not need to be my country of origin. No question about that. For me it's manifestly not. But for more people today, just because travel does not happen that much, home is reflexively where you live, but not necessarily where you come from. As for migrants, when does a place become home? Think of Joseph Conrad – I was wondering, while reading *Heart of Darkness,* where would home be for him? A Pole, he learned to write in English: at what time did home become his new home, if it ever did? This is interesting for everybody, including myself.

When a reporter asks me "Where is home for you?", or "Where will you go after you retire?", it could be Sapporo, Japan, where my wife's brother has an apartment – not really home for me, but it has some feeling of that. Or it could be Hong Kong: the Umbrella Movement and the current protests have had a significant effect in making it feel like home, thanks also to the legacy of my teaching to students in anthropology there over the last 25 years. Now, will this continue? Can I lose home? I suppose I could, as a very old person – maybe in an old people's home, which by definition is *not* home! But in fact, if I happen to be in an old people's home some day, I hope to be wise enogh to feel at home even there – maybe looking at a tree or a bird out of the window, and saying "Wow, that's great!" With the right wisdom, I suppose everywhere can be home. But a *cultural* home, that's more difficult. I don't really have one. In Hong-Kong, I don't understand the language enough to make it home. In Japan I understand almost all of the language, but it still wouldn't be home because people see my face and recognize that I'm not Japanese. And so people say: "Where are you from?" "I'm from Sapporo". "Come on, where are you *really* from?" – that's the kind of question I sometimes get… Again, I think home is with my wife. But if one of us were to die, where would home be? That would really test my own wisdom as a human being, if I weren't the one to die first.

So, we are somewhat shifting from *where* it is home to *when* it is home…

That's because, as one gets older, one thinks more about death. And death means by definition the loss of home – of one's human home. And again this makes things more philosophical than a lot of what you're looking at… but, yes, death is the ultimate loss of home. Because our bodies are our homes. This is what we're used to. I'm not dealing much with the cultural issue of home, largely because I myself don't understand it really. I still feel like I don't really need a home… and I'm kind of mystified by the very idea of home. I'm thinking, now, of an Indian guy I met in Chungking Mansions. He was telling me, "I love being in Hong Kong—it's really my home, because, unlike India, here I can go out and eat sushi!" That's a very interesting definition: home can be anywhere… He is poor, he makes some money but not very much, whereas I know of Americans who would never leave the US, and say of somewhere else, "*This* is my home."

It would be simplistic to say that rich people can find home everywhere and poor people can't. There's some truth to that, but things are more complex. Much has to do with your psychological make-up. And of course, those people who need a solid, single cultural home – fine, that's perfectly OK, but it's a different way of thinking than I myself would have. I don't really understand the need for home except in the limited sense I have talked about, of staying with a person for my life. "What is home?" is really a fascinating question! To me "home" refers to the ultimate meaning of our lives. I suspect that we are all ultimately homeless. But then, I'll only find out when I die! In this sense, I'm looking forward to death, although I suspect that I'll find out that all senses of home are an illusion.