

Urban Sensations of Colonial Malaya and Singapore: The *Flâneur*'s Sensory Experiences in Chan Ling Yap's *New Beginnings*

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ABSTRACT

*Urban sensations are the grounding force that binds the 'flâneur' to the streets. A 'flâneur' is a French term that describes a casual wanderer and a keen observer of society, culture, and the environment, often found in urban settings. The term originates from the 19th-century Parisian context and is associated with the literature of Charles Baudelaire and the idea of modernity. This study applies the theoretical approach of psychogeography, giving a heuristic point of view to present an analysis of the sensory urban experience that allows the 'flâneur' to move sensibly in the fictional urban labyrinth. Drawing from Boutin's work, which addresses how the 'flâneur' transforms the city into a sensory-rich environment, this study delves into the visionary, auditory, and tactile experiences that anchor the 'flâneur' in Chan Ling Yap's *New Beginnings* to the streets of the British colonial rule in Malaya and Singapore. It also explores the protagonist's struggle to navigate and confront the alluring yet perilous attractions of the urban landscape. The aim is to uncover deeper insights into his internal conflicts and the implications for urban residents' interactions with their environment. The findings show that the protagonist's engagement with the urban environment demonstrates the pleasure of city wandering and the wisdom of 'flânerie' is not exclusive to the privileged but can also empower individuals from less privileged backgrounds as he adeptly navigates and interprets the city to elevate his societal standing and achieve his goals.*

Keywords: flâneur; British Malaya; psychogeography; sensory experience; urban studies

INTRODUCTION

Making sense of what we are sensing is the core idea behind this work. In daily life, we often overlook our senses or prioritise one over others due to routine, becoming indifferent to them unless disrupted by illness or a significant change. This study explores the sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and tactile sensations of the urban environment, emphasising their role in the interaction between humans and the city. From a psychogeographical perspective, experiencing the urban labyrinth requires heightened sensory awareness, enabling the observer or *flâneur* to fully engage with and interpret the diverse, often disconnected, lives within the city.

Nord summarises a *flâneur* as a man who discerns the intricate patterns of social relations, reveals the concealed, and delves into poverty, disease, and class differences (1995, pp. 1-3). He is the epitome of modernisation who stood at the centre of 19th-century modern European cities, and he is aligned with the principles of psychogeography that theorise urban affairs (Mohd Fadhli et al., 2021, p. 142). The urban panorama is subjected to his observation, construction, and control but still offers insights that were once concealed and unreachable. Adopting the concept of the *flâneur* figure and the senses in 19th-century London and Paris, which has been popularised by authors from Joseph Addison to Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire (Murail, 2017; Steinman, 2014), this study explores the work of a Malaysian diasporic author and suggests the inclusion of a non-European *flâneur* into the discourse. His experience and observation in this narrative provide

some perspectives on non-European cities in the late 19th-century setting. It also examines the new and revolutionary approaches that complement Wrigley's works to challenge this constant association with the European archetype, which he believes has become a "tired cliché" (2014, p.1).

Sensory themes serve as a pathway to profoundly discover the meaningful fragments of the cities in the selected novel. The viewpoint of the early colonial cities in this narrative establishes their existence and role within the broader context of that era's global political, economic, and social processes. Through the lens of psychogeography, a young Chinese immigrant constitutes the protagonist's relationship to the idea of spectatorship, where he enjoys similar privileges as the Parisian *flâneur* and London wanderer who exercise the right of the gaze in the middle of foreign crowds and cities. Critics frequently draw comparisons between the *flâneur* and a camera, highlighting the role of sight in capturing the elements of the city while wandering on the streets. Nevertheless, this study acquiesces with Murail's idea that sensory themes often underscore the prepotency of vision over other senses (2017, p. 162), hence taking a more comprehensive strategy to examine the functions of different senses in the narrative.

Chan Ling Yap's third novel, *New Beginnings* (2014), is selected for several reasons. Renowned for her intricate depictions of Malaysia's history, Yap once again takes the same family from *Sweet Offerings* (2009) and *Bitter-Sweet Harvest* (2011) in this novel. The story goes back to when their ancestors first arrived in Malaya. This novel delves into the early days of Kuala Lumpur from the perspective of a Chinese indentured labourer, exploring the crucial transition brought by colonisation and modernisation. The selection of this novel is built upon the previous analysis of the author's works while delving into new and distinct thematic and contextual elements presented in this selected text. Earlier studies underscored *Where the Sunrise is Red* (2018) and *Sweet Offerings* (2009), which provided insights into the existence and significance of a female version of a *flâneur* (Nurul Atiqah Amran & Arbaayah Ali Termizi, 2020) and the association of walking and seeing with gender roles that connect and disconnect women with a particular space (Nurul Atiqah et al., 2022). While Yap highlights the Japanese Occupation and post-independence Malaya period in her other novels, *New Beginnings* (2014) sheds light on the pivotal era of the early urban establishment influenced by colonial economic forces in heavy mining and agricultural industry. Yap depicts a gradual transition from a tin-mining settlement to the establishment of a new town and city centre, offering a vivid portrayal of the socioeconomic tensions and transformations of the time. This aspect in Yap's narrative has not been critically explored, prompting this study to examine the representations of urban imagery and sensations in Yap's third novel, *New Beginnings* (2014).

The study examines the human senses that tie the *flâneur* in Chan Ling Yap's *New Beginnings* (2014) to the streets. It further questions whether the protagonist becomes one with the crowd or grapples with the yearning to assert control over the urban influences. His challenges in navigating urban sensations and attractions may contribute to his development as a unique individual, setting him apart from the European *flâneur* and his peers. This outcome can only be established through a comprehensive investigation of the protagonist's experiences within the narrative. Looking at Yap's reinterpretation of British Malaya in the 1850s to the 1860s through the lens of psychogeography contrasts sharply with London and Paris. During the same era, Malaya faced the challenges of global migration influenced by British colonisation, while the two megacities in England and France advanced as centres of global industrialisation. Consequently, by combining the principles of psychogeography theory and emphasising the sensory experience

approach, a more robust method of interpreting the literary text can be achieved, as this paper aims to demonstrate.

REPRESENTATIONS OF CITIES IN MALAYSIAN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

The city or urban setting offers an exciting place for discovery, interaction, and leisure that rural areas cannot provide (Festa, 2015, pp. 7-8). Cities such as Kuala Lumpur, Georgetown, Ipoh, Bandar Melaka, and Johor Bahru recur in the settings of Malaysian stories for various purposes. These cities can be mere background settings where the narrative takes place to enhance the plot, or they can evoke a visceral response from readers, making a specific period more relatable. The settings where history unfolds serve as a fascinating element to reimagine that history; for example, Tan Twan Eng's *The Gift of Rain* (2007) highlights the settings in Penang and Ipoh, and *The House of Doors* (2023), which tells another tale of memory, loss, and cultural dissonance, also takes place in Penang. The excerpt from *The Gift of Rain* (2007) below describes Georgetown during the Japanese occupation, highlighting the transformation of a vibrant urban space into a ghost town.

The streets remained relatively empty as most people were in the jungle or in the countryside, where contact with the Japanese was minimal. In Georgetown, the entire streets of houses stood empty, and their inhabitants were either in hiding or taken away by the Kempeitai. Food supplies were hard to obtain, and prices on the black market were astronomical. People resorted to planting sweet potatoes and yams in their gardens.

(p. 343)

The reimagination of the historical situation in this city blends historical facts with creative interpretation. The focus on the emptiness of the streets, the desperate measures people took to survive, and the fear instilled by the Kempeitai evoke a deeper imagination for the readers to relate the narrative to reality. Apart from that, Yangsze Choo's *The Ghost Bride* (2013) brings readers to experience the sleepy port town of Malacca in the 1890s, and Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2006) traces the story of a textile merchant in Kinta Valley set in the 1940s. This fictional portrayal of Malaya during a particular historical period can be considered a repository of historical documentation, offering insights into the anxious atmosphere experienced by the people of that era (Lajiman et al., 2016, p. 189).

Various collections of short stories published by local Malaysian writers, such as *Love in Penang* (2013), edited by Anna Tan and *KL Noir* series, have portrayed the cities' vibrant and darker sides. The urban labyrinth is interweaved with history, culture, and mystery, central to these stories. Malaysia's cities have experienced a transitional period and have developed gradually since independence, offering endless stories and inspiration to literary and creative writers. Eight poems by selected poets from *Malchin Testament: Malaysian Poems* (2017) have described Kuala Lumpur, which has grown from a small community to a vibrant metropolis. A study has also found that the depictions show that the city's growth has disregarded the human aspects of its citizens (Mohd Fadhli et al., 2022, pp. 196-197). Similarly, Ruzy Suliza Hashim and Fatin Nur Syahirah Faizal (2017) have unearthed Kuala Lumpur as depicted in Nassury Ibrahim's selected poems. Their study shows that the poet longs for a humble life in the village, as Kuala Lumpur has lost its values and qualities to feel at home. Indeed, the dynamic force of this bustling metropolis energises everyone who encounters it.

Chua Kok Yee's *Sambal Without Anchovies* (2010) is a collection of twenty-two short stories on different themes set in Malaysia. The stories reflect Malaysian life, especially the urbanites, in all its forms and colours. The urban stories in this collection have a strong sense of

everyday life and routine, and the stories are familiar and accessible to urbanised Malaysian readers. In addition, a significant connection to the cultural past is weakening due to modernisation and urban preferences (Tope, 2011, p. 151). In her reading selection of noir fiction to understand the illustration of a city's dark side, Trisnawati (2017) explores the lurking stories hidden beneath Malaysia's metropolis, Kuala Lumpur, and she reveals that noir fiction can mirror the urban reality as it vividly illustrates the moral breakdown of the city inhabitants (p. 222). Noir covers the nuance of dark and mystery, and incorporating urban settings and lives in this genre is interestingly imperative to study. Similarly, in Seach's work (2024, p. 96), he finds Kuala Lumpur has the capitalist energy that traps and lures the marginalised community, such as female commercial companions in the story, *A Night at Tulips* (in *KL Noir*, 2021). This group of women plays a crucial role in the lives of wealthy and powerful conglomerates, rendering them vulnerable and incapable of escaping or surviving the grasp of these men. However, reading the story from the spirit of carnivalesque, Seach discovers that the women in the story can reverse the social hierarchy in this shady part of Kuala Lumpur, turning them into a powerful group and ultimately overthrowing the man who controls them. Collin Yeoh vividly highlights the obscurity of residential buildings in Kuala Lumpur, contrasting them with social issues.

But you know, there's a rumour I heard about Wisma Cosway. The highest floors are condos, and supposedly, they are occupied by the mistresses of the wealthiest men in KL. That's right, they bought the condo unit there just to house their women. Maybe that's why this building is still standing- maybe one of the rich tycoons owns it and keeps it just for his and his friends' mistresses.

(p. 24)

The studies discussed above pay attention to the city of the present day, which contains a defined cultural and physical map of Malaysians. The significant urban portrayals depicted in Malaysian historical fiction have been largely overlooked. One of the reasons for this lack of insight into these types of novels is that the nature and situation of Malaysia in the past were not as advanced and liberated as the Western metropolises, such as London and Paris, in the 19th century. The demographic and historical factors portrayed in Malaysian historical narratives do not correspond with Debord's underlying principles of the theory of psychogeography. Building on and expanding the contemporary movement initiated by Tina Richardson (2015) in her exploration of the current state of psychogeography, this study moves beyond the traditional geographic focus of the theory and explores the potential of non-European cities depicted in non-European texts. The extensive discussion of these texts helps to diversify the scholarship of psychogeography. Wrigley (2014), Elkin (2016) and Bautista (2017) have also emphasised the new and versatile combination of the urban figure outside Paris and London. The previous studies disclose the ordinary portrayal of contemporary urban settings, intimately connecting it to the present and young generation of readers. The new urban lifestyle narrated in the prose and poetry above has brought about cultural and psychic changes relevant to the current situation. However, this paper aims to bring about the urban sites in the past through the lens of the earlier generations living in the colonial setting with a culturally and socially confined and limited life, which could illuminate a new scholarly interpretation of urban experience in a different context.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Psychogeography offers a broader theoretical framework for this research, encompassing how the geographic environment affects human emotions, behaviours, and perceptions. The theory seeks to uncover and understand the influences of the physical environments, built environments, or urban spaces that shape individual psychological experiences and interactions. Guy Debord, a French Situationist, was the main theoretical drive behind this theory. He defined psychogeography as:

The study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviours of individuals.

(in Coverley, 2006, p. 10)

Debord was highly devoted to safeguarding the critical foundation of his intellectual creation (Coverley, 2006, p. 14). However, Tso (2020), Richardson (2015), and Ross (2013) held the belief that his main idea could be analysed and understood without limitations to a specific context. Due to this rationale, Ross carefully deconstructed Debord's definition. He discovered that "the study" could be viewed as an ongoing process of acquiring knowledge, demanding a scientific exploration, and not being limited by a singular notion. Moreover, "the specific effects of the geographical environment" emphasised the spatial and physical dimensions of interactions between humans and their environment. In other words, the literary tradition and modern interpretation are concerned with "appreciating the terrain" (Hindley et al., 2015, p. 204). Finally, "consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviours of individuals" addressed the psychological facets of this human-environment connection (Ross, 2013, p. 4).

Coverley (2006) also highlights the importance of psychogeography in comprehending how individuals develop emotional and psychological bonds with places, particularly those characterised by extensive geographical features, histories, and cultures that influence human emotional connections. The fundamental idea of psychogeography is looking at two distinct angles simultaneously: psychology and geography (Downing, 2015, p.8; Löffler, 2017, p. 6). This theory and its application enable a broader discussion on psychological practices that facilitate awareness of how human consciousness and psyche interact with the environment. However, specific psychological methods must be considered in the process of reading fiction. In pursuit of this objective, Bridger (2015, pp. 227-228) critically examined the notion of 'psycho' within psychogeography and suggested a novel qualitative method inspired by Situationist practices. Psychology in psychogeography offers an observation of real-life experiences in fieldwork experiments. Integrating elements of psychogeography, such as the act of wandering (*derive*) and *flânerie* (observing while doing nothing) into the domain of fictional narratives, a connection is forged to aspects of our conscious world. This linkage can cultivate awareness of the environment, encompassing both superficial observations and eliciting profound emotional responses.

SENSORY EXPERIENCE: A PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH IN PSYCHOGEOGRAPHY

The elements of psychogeography mentioned earlier illuminate the importance of understanding human psychology in the context of experiencing the environment, particularly within urban settings. Contemporary scholars have delved into exploring sensory representation in literature, but the closest to the psychogeography discourse has been discussed by Aimée Boutin (2012) and Estelle Murail (2017). The classical Aristotelian framework of the senses approached each sensory

modality in the hierarchy of importance and significance, where sight occupies the topmost position, followed by hearing, smell, taste, and touch (Boutin, 2012, p. 125). Smith (2007, p.2) has contested this hierarchy of senses, advocating for an examination of sensory regimes based on their evolving connections to specific contexts, times, and places (in Syrontinski & Maclachlan, 2001, p. 10). In his book, *City of Noise: Sound and 19th Century Paris*, Boutin engages with sound by focusing on the human voice, where sound is perceived as a conveyor of meaning (Boutin, 2015, as cited in Roy, 2017). She records and converts the various sounds into written form, such as the abundant street calls and vocal announcements by vendors, the typical features of the atmosphere of 19th-century Paris. These sounds had a twofold function: they were used to spread information or news and to promote various products for sale.

In addition, scholars frequently allude to the visionary tradition through this psychogeographic interpretation, where information gained through visionary practices takes precedence over other senses in shaping cognitive perceptions (Coverley, 2006, p. 42; Murail, 2017, p. 162). Boutin (2012) emphasises incorporating sensory experiences into this activity, acknowledging that the urban landscapes offer a sensual delight that attracts the urban wanderer to the sensations of the city and immerses him in contemplation (p. 132). The myriad of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations encountered by the urban wanderer led to distinctive psychogeographical experiences. The development and construction of the human senses are significantly shaped by the individual's gender, social class, culture, economic status, and level of education. These aspects collectively contribute to the individual's experiences and interpretations of the world (Murail, 2017, p. 162). Similarly, the *flâneur* of 19th century Paris is often primarily associated with his visual experiences and tends to offer subjective and gender-biased commentary on their environment. The focus on European cities has also been explored in *The City and the Senses*, edited by Cowan and Steward (2007), where they conduct a thorough examination through a series of cases spanning from the 1500s to the 1900s to understand how elements of sensory knowledge, experience, and practice were formulated and functioned with distinct socio-cultural and historical contexts in Europe.

Approaching the subject from this standpoint underscores the timely necessity of examining how the material and cultural environments of cities shape the sensory experiences of their urban residents. This exploration is crucial for understanding the roles and meanings within urbanity. Drawing from Boutin's work, which addresses how the *flâneur* transforms the city into a sensory-rich environment, this study delves into the various sensory dimensions that anchor the *flâneur* in Chan Ling Yap's *New Beginnings* to the streets. It investigates the protagonist's sensory experiences, focusing on how sights, sounds, smells, and tactile sensations influence his perception of the city. Furthermore, the study explores his struggle to navigate and confront the alluring yet perilous attractions of the urban landscape, aiming to uncover deeper insights into his internal conflicts and the broader implications for urban residents' interactions with their environment.

METHODOLOGY

The initial phase of this study involved identifying the *flâneur* in Chan Ling Yap's selected novel, *New Beginnings* (2014). The figure of *flâneur* is often described as a male observer, a leisurely walker, and a skilled interpreter of urban symbols. An urban figure's multifaceted and elusive nature has gradually leaned towards new interpretations and appropriations, mirroring the complexity of the city across geographies and beyond European context and text. This study looks

at the protagonist, Ngao, the critical urban figure who plays a vital role in the narrative and brings readers to experience the city of the past in our history. By examining his activities in *flânerie*, this study explores his sensory experiences. As I argue further in the analysis, the sensory experiences interpret him as a *flâneur* who utilises his senses to connect with his identity and detaches himself from being seduced by the city. Suppose sight was predominance over other senses in the 19th-century European urban experience. In that case, this study redirects our attention to reflect deeply on including other senses that could provide meanings to the protagonist's urban experiences.

The discussion is divided into two parts. The first part covers Ngao's initial journey to this foreign city and how he utilises his senses to gain information and connect with his identity. Each sensory element- sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste- is identified and examined to reveal various aspects of the protagonist's interaction with his surroundings. For instance, the protagonist's observations of the city's visual details, such as the architecture of the buildings and the diverse crowd with distinct characterisations, help him grasp the cultural and social dynamics of the foreign city. The emphasis on certain senses over others is guided by the development of the narrative and the impact on the protagonist's experience, illustrating his evolving relationship with this foreign land.

The second part of the analysis covers the urban sensations and attractions in the narrative, aiming to demonstrate their impact on Ngao's development and the unique experience as a *flâneur* during the critical period of British colonial rule in Malaya and Singapore. Some of the aspects that will be discussed in this part are the cityscape and architecture, including the descriptions of the buildings, streets, and public places. These elements render the visual diversity of the city, reconnecting to the history of the country. The specific design in the urban landscape portrayed in this narrative is linked to certain cultural significance, engaging the protagonist with his identity. Ngao's interactions with other urban inhabitants, various objects, and surfaces in the urban environment contribute to a broader cultural integration and his personal growth.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

FLÂNERIE AND THE SENSES

Chan Ling Yap's *New Beginnings* (2014) revisits the colonial era- when foreign labourers, mainly Chinese men, were recruited to work in various sectors, from construction to plantation work (Lim Tin Seng, 2015). Their labour played a significant role in the British economy in this region, meeting the growing demands of Britain's and America's commercial and industrial interests (Garcés-Mascareñas, 2008, p. 107). Several key features and practices related to labour recruitment are highlighted in this novel, reimagining the hardships and determination of individuals to liberate themselves from oppressive contracts and systems. In this story, the main character, Ngao, shares some common traits with other well-known Chinese figures in our local history who were shipped out to British Malaya as indentured labourers and then rose from humble beginnings to great wealth, like Yap Ah Loy and Taowkay Yau Tat Shin (Yen, 1987, p. 435). The novel also delves into the devastating impact of the opium scourge, chronicling the journey of one man as he faces adversity during the establishment of the early township in British Malaya. Unlike other Chinese migrants in the narrative, driven by the desire to amass wealth and return home, Ngao deviates from them, linking his characterisation and actions with the *flâneur* tied to the street and its crowds yet remains aloof from both. His distinct characterisation aligns with that of the

Parisian *flâneur*, who embodies a rich array of associations: the urban explorer and the connoisseur of the street.

Modernist scholars emphasise the role of vision in extending our eyes to material culture, linking art and history, and exploring the scoping impulse in psychoanalytical research (Boutin, 2012, p. 125). Therefore, this analysis begins by highlighting the importance of vision without discriminating against other senses. This study also strives to comprehend the intricate connections between sight and the remaining four senses involved in the character's activity of wandering.

He looked toward the approaching land and saw a large outcrop of rock to the west of the harbour. Vessels of all shapes and sizes swarmed the waters. Slowly, the junk came to a stop. He looked across and caught Cheng's eyes.

(p. 108)

In the excerpt, vision is crucial in providing information about the new place. The phrase "looked across and caught Cheng's eyes" indicates a visual connection and communication between the characters, suggesting that vision also helps establish mutual understanding and relationships with other human beings. This visual information is used to navigate and understand the geography of the region, as this is the beginning of his new life in Malaya. Ngao's visionary insights offer readers a portrayal of the crucial British colonial period between 1856 and 1868-characterised by its diverse nature and adorned with elements from foreign origins. The phrase "vessels of all shapes and sizes swarmed the waters" proves the presence of this colonial city in this region, indicating its establishment through political and economic control. It also suggests the maritime significance of British Malaya, hinting at the economic forces and social integration.

Groups of men in loose tunics with Mandarin collars and black trousers stood with books in hand, shouting at the disembarking coolies. Dialects of the southern province of China bounced from one end to the other: Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hainanese and Hakka. While some of the men had long pigtailed, many did not. There was no compulsion to keep them; the *Qing* command was weakened by distance. Amidst the groups of Chinese were men with darker complexions wearing different clothes and headgear. Ngao stared at the unfamiliar sight. He had never seen anyone wear a cloth wrapped around the waist. Standing separate from the crowd stood a small group of Europeans. In pressed dark trousers and long, sombre-coloured jackets with high collars and silk cravats around their necks, they stood out from the colourfully dressed assembly of men.

(p. 109)

Further excerpts depict a vivid and sensory-rich scene, interrelating vision with other senses, such as linking to his auditory to identify and recognise languages. It is evident in this section that the protagonist employed his sense of hearing as a source of cognition, discerning the distinct dialects from various regions. Although not explicitly mentioned, the loose tunics, trousers, and different types of clothing suggest a range of textures. The descriptions conceptualise the texture of the garments, contributing to a more intense tactile experience and hinting at the rich cultural tapestry of the port city. The protagonist can infer the diverse backgrounds and origins of the people around him, leading to a greater appreciation of the new place in this journey. The bustling crowd in the port city, packed with people from various races, evokes a mingling sensation in an environment rich with culture and identities. This experience ignites his curiosity and intensifies other senses to explore the diversity in this city further in the story.

Two and three-storied terrace houses, painted in pastel shades of pink, blue, and green and reminiscent of the buildings in China, bordered most parts of the river as it wound inland. It was almost a replica of a Chinese street back home with the exception of one building, Ngao thought. It caught his eye: an imposing warehouse with numerous pillars. Across from the row of houses were more buildings, all two- or three-storied terraces with narrow fronts that backed onto each other. The river was crowded with barges and *sampans* laden with goods. The whole place was bustling with activity: men pushing carts, men loading and unloading, men pulling rickshaws, men bargaining, talking, shouting, arguing: an explosion of sounds and smells.

(pp. 109-110)

Notably, Ngao's *flânerie* and his senses lead him to resonate with his identity and cultural roots, serving as a poignant link that mentally transports him to his hometown in mainland China. The constant reminder of his cultural origins through materials and physical surroundings serves as a guiding compass that shapes his perspective of the world around him. Although Ngao strives to live in this new place, his profound connection to his homeland manifests through sensory experiences and a transportive journey, reconnecting him with his place of origin. Moreover, the author's choice of words in this phrase, "imposing warehouse with numerous pillars" and "the crowded river with barges and *sampans* laden with goods", suggests a tactile experience, rendering a sense of enormity and solidity that further intensifies the identity of urban space bustling with economic activity. The surrounding atmosphere is filled with an "explosion of sounds" and actions, creating an auditory experience to the lively depiction of the protagonist's experience in this foreign city.

Ngao perseveres by enduring the painful challenges the contracts impose and the obscurity of his future in this unfamiliar land. His goal is to save his daughter; his determination fortifies him against all trials and hardships. He quickly acclimates, adapts, and learns the new culture, seamlessly incorporating the local customs and the diverse array of dialects and languages in the region into his daily routine.

The market resounded with people talking at the top of their voices. All the dialects of southern China seemed to be represented; their sing-song intonations rose and fell according to the fervour of the argument and haggling. Interspersed with the buzz of human voices, the abacus clicked and clacked. Ngao stopped to listen carefully. He had started distinguishing the different dialects. Communicating with other Chinese was not an insurmountable problem because he could always write his questions down. The written word remained the same no matter how it was spoken. It was not as convenient, however, as many people could not read or write.

It was good that his ears were becoming attuned to the cadences of the different dialects. He was a Hakka and many Hakka people had settled in parts of the Guangxi province where Cantonese mainly spoken. But Teochew! He closes his eyes to focus on the sounds. Yes, there was a predominance of Teochew being spoken in the market.

(pp. 167-168)

The passage strongly engages the auditory sense through vivid descriptions of the bustling activities within the market, combining a symphony of sounds, including diverse dialects and intonation, with the ongoing human activities related to economic transactions. Pausing to immerse himself in the lively symphony of the market, Ngao realises that he has developed an ability to distinguish the various dialects. This experience indicates a heightened linguistic awareness and cultural insight. From the outset, the author has established unique characteristics for the protagonist. His linguistic sensitivity, cognitive abilities, and cultural understanding distinguish him from other Chinese characters, reflecting the influences of his upbringing and social context. Ngao was brought up in a prominent family. Without parental guidance, he still acquired a formal education- an opportunity considered a privilege for Chinese men during that era.

He turned into a street. Rising above the skyline of the double-storey. Chinese shophouses were buildings like those he had never seen before. It had figurines of dark men and women clustered together in various poses, layer upon layer of idols, colourful and unfamiliar to his eyes. He walked on, his eyes returning to the building again and again. He saw men dark as coal and dressed in what looked like loincloths entering it, shedding their footwear at the entrance. He surmised it was a temple. Why, he wondered, was there an Indian temple in the middle of a Chinese street? Weren't the districts supposed to be divided by ethnicity?

(pp. 169-170)

Now, the walking has led him to an unfamiliar location, and once again, Ngao's visual experience takes precedence in the passage. In that particular moment, he can discern the peculiarity of the architecture and building structure with its elements. The appearance of "men dark as coal" entering the building intensifies his curiosity about its existence in the middle of a Chinese street. This situation and image that he observes contradicts his preexisting knowledge and expectations. It involves juxtaposing two distinct cultures and ethnicities, challenging the collective understanding that the city is divided along these lines. The clash of expectations based on ethnic division adds a cognitive layer to this sensory perception.

The passages discussed in this section provide a rich sensory experience through *flânerie*. Ngao's exploration and observation of this city have tethered him to an unfamiliar terrain, underscoring the novel's embodiment of the *flâneur*'s perspective. To summarise, the discussion finds that the ability of the *flâneur* to walk in the city and experience the urban spectacle, even if not purely for leisure, establishes that he is engaging in an act of pleasure. Geurts (2022) has reconceptualised this sense of pleasure, which is traditionally a privilege enjoyed by the male *flâneur*, lifting its limitation to a mode that can be accessible by everyone. The mode of pleasure, in this context, manifested through his sensory engagements, not only provides him access to new information but also cultivates linguistic awareness and prompts observations of cultural disparities. Ultimately, this process reorients his knowledge about the city by assimilating with new information, placing him in a higher societal position. His friend, Lee Sik, commended Ngao for his "great foresight in learning the native language," - making him a reliable individual capable of communicating in the local language, hence gaining the trust of their leaders (Yap, *New Beginnings*, p. 204).

Secondly, pleasure in wandering the city has traditionally been linked to the privileged male archetype of the *flâneur* (Coverley, 2018; Geurts, 2022), neglecting to recognise the importance of pleasure in the lives of working and underprivileged men. White further highlights that the *flâneur*'s freedom to take a morning and afternoon walk is the kind of freedom that does not fit the working men's life, such as Ngao in this novel, who is an indentured labourer (2001, p. 39). Ngao is trapped in a contract and burdened by the need to work to pay off his debt. Therefore, he lacks the privilege to partake in a stroll. Nevertheless, he has the opportunity to wander the streets and witness the marvels of urban life because he embodies Baudelaire's ideal of the man of the crowd, "who is able to transform faces and things so that for him they have only that meaning which he attributes to them" (In Tester, 2015, p. 6). The image he sees, the voice and sound he hears, and the elements of the city he feels and touches make him a wise and sovereign man who separates himself from his fellow Chinese who lose themselves in this city.

THE URBAN SENSATIONS AND ATTRACTIONS

The *flâneur*'s urban observations and connections to the city offer rich material concerning urban life, making it particularly promising for literary analysis (Kula, 2018). In this story, Yap purposely transports readers to the historical Chinese enclave in Singapore and Malaya. The location where she places her *flâneur* in this story was formerly known as Chinatown and continues to stand resiliently amid present-day Singapore and Malaysia's modern and urban landscape. Tester states that the city possesses negative influences and dangers to urban wanderers. Consequently, he deems it inappropriate for women to participate in *flânerie*, even to enjoy the city's ambience (Tester, 2015, p. 28). This perspective emphasises why men are often associated with the city, as a strong consensus states that men are not vulnerable to being seduced by the city's negative influences and attractions. However, in this novel, Yap illustrates that the allure of urbanity can also entice men, revealing their vulnerability. These urban sensations and attractions can captivate and tempt even the most resolute individuals, demonstrating that it requires immense courage to resist their pull. It also challenges the prevailing belief that women should be kept out of the city due to their perceived vulnerability and the fear that they will be seduced by urban attractions. Observing the havoc wreaked by opium in China, Ngao opted to leave the city and reside in the hills. According to his aunt, Heong Yook, Ngao's decision stemmed from witnessing how his cousin was adversely affected and ruined by opium. In her remarks:

He wished to protect his family from the evils of the city: from the opium dens that had sprung up everywhere—the dens that had claimed her own son.

(p. 39)

The destruction he had witnessed and encountered in China heightened his awareness of the peril brought about by opium. Consequently, when he found himself entangled in the opium trade in Malaya, he was profoundly hesitant. Ngao's reservations on moral grounds when it comes to dealing with opium have raised significant concerns within the society, impacting their perceptions of him (Yap, 2014, p. 173). During the 19th-century British Malaya, a substantial portion of the revenue was derived from opium, mainly imported from India and sold to Chinese merchants in Malaya. Yap has highlighted this historical aspect in her narrative and how this opium-economic has driven the Chinese merchants and coolies. As stated in the description, "...opium is rampant, thanks to the British. Here, you will find it is legal. The British allow the opium trade because it is a major source of revenue for them" (Yap, 2014, p. 168).

The situation in British Malaya of yesteryear, specifically within the Chinese society, as Lim Tin Seng (2015) described it, was "a thriving hotbed of crime and secret societies". Hidden behind the aesthetic exteriors of the buildings and shophouses, clan associations, and temples is a notorious and disreputable story that occupied this colonial city. Yap captures this dark, unclean, and mysterious section of Chinatown in the following description, illustrating how Ngao experiences it through *flânerie*:

He went into the hallway and then through a door. The air was thick and pungent. Here, there were rough wooden cots, double-decked or single-decked. Men lay on them, their heads resting on porcelain and ceramic 'pillows'. They were oblivious to the discomfort of these hard two-inch thick hollow boxes, their lips moulded around their pipes of dreams, sucking and breathing, their eyes in a dreamy haze. He stood as long as he could bear and went quickly out. Once on the street, he breathed deeply to clear his lungs.

(pp. 174-175)

Ngao's discomfort is evident in this excerpt. However, he has no alternative but to engage in the opium trade to settle his debt, as he mentioned, "My debts are high. Prosperity is a distant dream. My earnings are too small for any chance of freeing myself any time soon" (Yap, 2014, pp. 177-178). He has been advised with an opportunity to choose between the paths of destruction as to how it has destroyed his fellow Chinese men or prosperity in accepting and managing the opium business. Lim Tin Seng (2015) stated that Chinese male labourers who were forced to leave China were known as coolies, and they were mainly regarded as "destitute and worthless". In addition to their suffering from a gruelling sea voyage to reach the port city in Singapore, they were also living a challenging life marked by strenuous labour and poverty. The circumstance has contributed to significant psychological issues in their lives, making them susceptible to both the dangers and attractions of the city. Therefore, to temporarily escape their daily hardship, they sought entertainment available at that time. Thus, it is easy to understand why the Chinese male sojourners in this story were easily tempted by the opium trade, gambling dens and prostitution found in Chinatown. While it is undeniable that opium is regarded as the evil lurking within the Chinese society in this story and has a destructive impact on their social institutions, Ngao's character development points to the contrary.

Drawing from the archetype of a male *flâneur* in 19th-century Paris and London, Yap's protagonist mirrors some similarities and differences. He belongs to the crowd and immerses himself in the elements of the city but remains distant, indifferent, and thoughtful. While the traditional *flâneur* enters his city without a specific purpose, Ngao embraces *flânerie* to learn the new environment and culture, steering clear of the urban sensations and attractions that could divert him from his initial goals. Eventually, Ngao attains freedom from debt, achieves his goals and establishes his wealth and societal presence. He did not turn himself to the seductive and perverse sources of comfort and entertainment available at the time, even when he had the opportunity and privilege to do so. He remained aloof from the mainstream, driven by his impulses, establishing himself as a Chinese indentured labourer and *flâneur* markedly different from the traditional archetypes.

This study uncovers a unique sensory experience that significantly shapes the protagonist's development as an individual. Ngao gains new insights and elevates his social standing, transcending the traditional boundaries of the *flâneur* archetype. Ngao's journey illustrates how sensory engagement with the urban environment fosters understanding and integration, ultimately contributing to a broader redefinition of *flâneur* and *flânerie* in this non-European context. Through this sensory odyssey, Ngao navigates the complexities of a foreign land and reorients his knowledge and identity, embodying a new kind of *flâneur*.

CONCLUSION

In this novel, Yap glorifies the image of colonial cities in Singapore and Peninsular Malaya by idealising the initial phase of developing a township, mainly emerging from the agricultural and mining industry. The discussion shows that the *flâneur* is performing an act of pleasure when he can stroll through the city and take in the urban spectacle, even if it is not solely for leisure. By engaging deeply with the sensory experiences of the urban environment, Ngao not only gains new insights and linguistic skills but also elevates his societal standing. While the pleasure of city wandering has historically been linked to the privileged few, Ngao's experience highlights that such pleasure can be accessible and significant for individuals from various backgrounds,

including those in less privileged circumstances. Despite the constraints of an indentured labourer, Ngao's ability to navigate and interpret the urban landscape reveals his adaptability and wisdom, setting him apart from his peers and underscoring the broader implications of *flânerie* beyond its traditional bounds. Unlike the conventional archetype of Chinese indentured labourers who had the intention of returning to China and were easily tempted by the urban sensations and attractions, Yap's protagonist remained aloof from the mainstream, driven by his impulses, establishing himself as a *flâneur* who embraces *flânerie*, learning the culture and accomplishing tasks to achieve his goals. As a result of what he sees, hears, feels, and touches about the city, he becomes a wise and independent man who sets himself apart from other Chinese characters who become lost and trapped in this urban setting. This finding conveys that the richness of a person's life lies in how individuals perceive and derive significance from their interactions with objects in their surroundings. This narrative conveys resistance and hope, highlighting the notion that growth and prosperity stem from noble beginnings and heightened awareness. While cities symbolise modernity and opportunity, they should not justify moral neglect. This analysis contributes to scholarly discourse by reimagining the *flâneur* and his *flânerie*, expanding the concept of urban joy to be accessible to all, not just the privileged few.

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