

A Cultural and Spiritual Cityscape: Manila Chinatown in Charlson Ong's *Blue Angel, White Shadow*

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Abstract

Binondo, Manila's Chinatown, is a sanctuary of the immigrant Chinese. It is a place where members of the Chinese community find things more familiar and comforting to them. As a commercial centre in Manila, its role in the economic life of Filipinos has often been highlighted. Charlson Ong's novel, *Blue Angel, White Shadows* (2010), however, has painted it as the strange other, ominous and deadly. Ong's contemporary Binondo is a place where identities have become intractable and Chineseness has become liminal. It has become an undesirable, frightening place where community disintegrates and humanity becomes a burden. The novel revolves around the mysterious death of a Filipino woman in Binondo. This article examines the existential and cultural questions that her death generates. Looking at Binondo as a dystopia, it will explore resulting ethnic anxieties and moral dilemma in the context of a Chinatown that has become more porous and therefore vulnerable to the unwanted socio-political osmosis from the external Filipino world.

Keywords: Manila Chinatown, Binondo, dystopic literature, Tsinoy ethnicity, immigrant Chinese, crime novel

Introduction

In many cities, there are places that are considered foreign and strange. Such a place can be a ghetto, a cultural anomaly, an inappropriate, or unexplained monument. It marks the numerous detours a city has taken and the unusual forces or events that helped create it. Despite its alien nature, it has become part of the city, even a significant chapter in its history.

Philippine society is relatively homogeneous. Its ethnic divisions are mainly local. If there is one foreign ethnicity that has made a mark in its quotidian life, it would be that of the Chinese. Comprising a mere two percent of the

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Filipino population, the Chinese have settled in various parts of the Philippines, led Philippine industries, and participated in nation building. Nonetheless, Binondo reminds Filipinos that the Chinese were foreigners who lived in their midst.

Chinatown is a place where Chinese migrants congregate. Kay Anderson, looking at it in terms of social geography, describes it “as the launching point in the assimilation of Chinese immigrants,” “an ‘ethnic’ community” that is often ghettoized (580). The voluminous studies on Chinatowns tell us that the meaning of Chinatown has evolved through time and place. Richard Chu explains that it has metamorphosed from a ghetto to a business district to a cosmopolitan centre of diverse cultures. This essay will cull common observations from the various readings of the Chinatown text and locate Manila Chinatown within the discussion. Scholars seem to agree that first, it is urban, “a town within a city” (Lai 1988, cited in Luk 1), standing at the centre of a city, a social and cultural construct which illuminates questions of citizenship, rights, place, and memory of that city (Wong, C. and McDonogh 42). Manila Chinatown is indeed a town within a city, removed from the mainstream by its language and affinities, possibly imagining a community that can remain confined within its cultural boundaries but at the same time desiring citizenship, acceptance, and civic opportunities. In 1594, Governor General Dasmariñas bought a piece of land in Manila for a measly sum of 200 pesos not just to house the Chinese Christian converts but also to propagate the faith. This early founding makes Binondo the oldest Chinatown in the world. The place was called “Binondok” (hilly), which later became Binondo (Aquino 1). It is in fact also referred to as the island of Binondo (Yap 180), which metaphorically projects a cultural enclosure and ethnic distance from Filipino mainstream society.

Manila Chinatown

Chinatown is a social enclave with its unique, meaning Chinese, cultural elements “defined by visible features of entrance and boundary decorations, activities and sensation; in other words, it is a space of representation” (Wong, C. and McDonogh 43). Built in the centre of Manila, Binondo is introduced to the pedestrian by a huge Chinese gate, after which Chinese characters on structures abound. Chinese food, dragon and lion dances, the traditional lunar new year are ethnic signifiers to the ordinary Filipino. On February 19, 2015, the Philippine government finally recognized the contributions of the Chinese community by declaring the lunar New Year as a public holiday.

Chinatowns are built by the community, not given by the authority (Wong, C. and McDonogh 42). While the site of Manila Chinatown was designated by the Spanish authorities, its growth and development can be attributed only to the Chinese community itself. From a small tract of land, Chinatown has expanded to include “a big portion of several districts of Binondo,

San Nicolas, parts of Santa Cruz, parts of Tondo and even parts of Quiapo” (Garcia). These enumerated locations make up the commercial centre of the city of Manila and attests to the expansion of Binondo’s commercial influence. One tends to forget that it began with rows of huts and several street vendors. It started as a Christian mission that outgrew others, evolved into a town, and became the centre of Chinese integration into Manila’s Hispanic, Christian society (“Minor Basilica”). It is now a combination of busy traditional shophouses and sophisticated commercial/residential high-rises, a testament to the tenacity and business acumen of the Chinese immigrants.

Chinatowns can be seen as contested sites (Wong, S. 3) of both segregation and diversification, of containment but also of inevitable porous cultural border crossings. Chinese migrants in the Philippines had their share of challenges. Harassed, hamletted, and massacred by the Spanish colonizers, envied, mistrusted, and misunderstood by present day Filipinos, the Chinese migrants persisted, eventually becoming known for working long hours, eschewing relaxation or pleasure and postponing enjoyment of the fruits of their labor for better times. By dint of hard work and pragmatic cultural negotiations, the progeny of these early immigrants established businesses and social networks that gave them foundation and value not only within the Chinese community but even in the greater Filipino society.

Finally, Chinatown is a “maker of modernity, cosmopolitanism and globalization” (Wong, C. and McDonogh 42). Located in the mouth of the Pasig River that opens into Manila Bay where the big ports are, Manila Chinatown or Binondo once was the hub not only of commerce but of new waves of people bringing with them new ideas. The Chinese had traded with Filipinos long before Spanish colonization (1565-1899), but they joined the global trade through the Spanish galleons. The foundation of Binondo’s success was the Galleon Trade which paved the way for the rise of the Filipino and Chinese middle class. According to Richard Chu, it was the start of the first global commerce linking Asia, America, and Europe. The American period (1899-1946) saw the expansion of trade, leading historians to call this period Binondo’s Golden Age. Binondo became America’s commercial showpiece, a product of “economic freedom and liberalization of the economy” (Reyes F-3). It also became the showpiece of American modernity. According to Fernando Zialcita, the first high-rise in the Philippines is the Yuchengco building which still stands to this day across Escolta Avenue which was the financial hub of the city. Escolta Avenue was also the Broadway of Manila because of the theatres that lined it (Reyes F-3). It was where the rich and famous shopped, a kind of Rodeo Drive without the excessive glitz. World War II damaged Binondo but it quickly recovered after the war. When the Philippine economy was floundering during the Martial Law period (1972-1981), Binondo became the unofficial Wall Street, perhaps saving the Philippine government from imminent bankruptcy.

Modern Binondo

Today, Binondo continues to be an active place.

Binondo is probably the busiest and most crowded spot in the metro—what with the crazy maze of thrift shops, jewelry stores, age-old churches, apothecaries selling traditional Chinese herbal medicines, and who has not gone to well-loved estero eateries (Reyes F-1).

Makeshift restaurants beside river tributaries not well known for cleanliness as well as floors and floors of consumer goods in gigantic stores like 168 are found in Binondo. Touted in 2012 as one of the world's best Chinatowns by *CNN Go*, the travel website of CNN, Binondo now joins the rank of the most scenic Chinatowns found in major cities in the world (Reyes F-1).

What is demonstrated by this short historical account is that it is a possible imagination of Binondo from an idealistic yet popular perspective. It can be seen as a place where human progress is expected and achieved. The present Binondo is expected to carry these dreams and endeavours forward. We see this in the new high-rises changing the Binondo landscape, in the quick transformation from abacus to computers, in the new business culture among the second and third generation Chinese.

Also important to the Chinese financial success is the presence of a traditional but highly moral world in old Binondo. Teresita Ang See highlights the Chinatown value of word of honour. She claims that “in a very small community, there is social sanction. Honor your word. Guard it with your life because that's your only capital” (Reyes F-1). Word of honour, faith, and trust in one's business partners were the unwritten norm, stronger than a legal contract. It is now seen as a form of nostalgia but is still strong enough to guide serious business transactions.

Binondo as dystopia

Charlson Ong in his novel *Blue Angel, White Shadow* (2010) chooses to see a different Binondo. He looks at an underbelly Binondo, peopled with rogue policemen, immigrants with dark secrets, fallen women, fallen men of God, murderers, and the dead. Not that this visioning of Chinatown is unique. The Chinatown trope as an evil place is not new. Chinatowns “usually carry images of physical decay and infestations of social vices” (Luk 1). Charlson Ong seems to be playing to the western notion of Chinatown as a place of mystery, filth, and crime, popularized by western cinema and media. What is interesting here is that

this is not how most Chinese Filipinos would like to view Binondo, and Ong challenges idealistic perceptions by painting a darker picture of it.

Charlson Ong is probably the first Filipino fictionist in English to put the Tsinoy (i.e. a term combining the Filipino words ‘Tsino’ [Chinese] and ‘Pinoy’ [Filipino]) world on the literary map. He has written three collections of short stories and four novels, namely, *Enhancement of Riches* (2000) which won the Philippine Centennial Literary Prize, *Banyaga* (2006) which is a powerful rendition of Philippine history from a Tsinoy historical perspective, citing Binondo as the diasporic originary, *Blue Angel, White Shadow* (2010) and the newly minted *White Lady, Black Christ* (2021) which is also a crime novel.

Blue Angel, White Shadow, Ong’s third novel, is a detective fiction set in contemporary Binondo. Alma Anonas-Carpio describes Ong’s latest novel, *White Lady, Black Christ*, thus:

Ong begins contemplatively, with hooks geeks will not be able to escape once they read them, and he keeps you turning pages with science, philosophy and cogitative meditations, as well as with suspense, engaging characters and intricately woven subplots that, in the end, bring you to the most unexpected of endings.

(Anonas-Carpio)

The novel opens with a crime scene—Laurice Saldiaga, a singer in the Blue Angel bar, has been found dead. Cyrus Ledesma, a policeman with a dark past, is assigned to her case. The novel revolves around the myriad characters involved in the murder of Laurice, each one a suspect. There is the Chinese man, Antonio Cobianco, who owned the building where the Blue Angel bar is located. There is the mayor, a former police officer who is obsessed with Laurice. There is the piano player who wrote songs for Laurice. There is Rosa, the bar manager whom the piano player suspects is jealous of Laurice. And then there is Bituin, the young waitress with an obsession. What binds the characters who otherwise would not have known each other are the Blue Angel bar and Binondo.

As described earlier, Ong’s Binondo is a far cry from the place of hope, cooperation, and moral steadfastness. His Binondo is old, decaying, corrupt, depraved, and deadly. Binondo is depicted as a dystopia. The word ‘dystopia’ was born out of the word ‘utopia,’ a term used by Sir Thomas More when he wrote his book of the same title. More’s satiric work *Utopia* (1516) lays out a plan for an ideal society where there is no crime or poverty. Dystopia is its opposite, referring to a community that is undesirable, unbearable, and frightening. There are many kinds of dystopia—political, economic, and technological—and one common element among them is violence. Violence is often used to control, to execute power, and to restore order. It is also used to stifle dissent, individuality, and difference. Dystopian literature often depicts dehumanization, totalitarian governments, and environmental disasters. Some of the famous dystopian literary texts are *1984* (1949) by George Orwell, *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous

Huxley, some works by Haruki Murakami (1949-) and Kenzaburō Ōe (1935-), and more recently, *The Hunger Games* (2012) by Suzanne Collins.

Dystopia becomes possible only when a utopia is imagined. Since a utopia is often conjured as an ideal or a fantasy, dystopia is regarded as the entry of reality or a utopia challenged by reality. For instance, to create a society without crime, extreme regimentation is necessary. It sounds plausible and ideal except when, because of regimentation, one is incarcerated or killed without due process. Dystopia refers to the crushing of hope (Varsam 209). Community disintegrates and humanity becomes a burden.

In Ong's novel, a dystopic cityscape is seen in two aspects: ethnicity and morality. Binondo is ethnically dystopic for the following reasons: First, it has deteriorated physically. Gone are the oriental palaces of old, in their place are structures that have given way to sordid decay and spaces that have forgotten their original function. It is run down, directionless, like a man whose misfortunes are making him drink to his death, as can be seen below:

Once upon a time, people lived here who wore gemstones on their hair, smelled of faraway essences, and spoke the tongues of kings and angels.

Now Inspector Ledesma noticed how the building housing the Blue Angel, one of the remaining antebellum edifices that had yet to be torn down, had morphed into a maze of back rooms, mini porches, leaking pipes, rusting spiral staircases that led to God knows where. The larger homes were sectioned, subdivided, sublet or converted into student dormitories, noodle stalls, mahjong dens, even a less conspicuous brothel or two. He was reminded of those stately Cadillac limos that have been turned into hearses. (Ong 4-5)

Second, Binondo has lost its sense of place. Location in its simplest form is geography. It is an identifiable entity that provides tangible objects of remembrance that in turn generate interpersonal connections among its inhabitants. It is both a physical regard and a topophilic cord that ties one to a specific space during a particular time. But place is not only geographical, it is cultural, historical, and spiritual. It suggests a sense of uniqueness and continuity promoted and preserved by a community, e.g. birth and death rituals, most of which are quotidian to a people but extraordinary to the outside world. This creates a sense of belonging, a psychic location where shared values and sensibilities are recognized and perpetuated. Modernization and globalization have sometimes hurt old cultures, putting old ways of life on the defensive. Literature has often served as a weapon of preservation, grafting into its pages the uniqueness of a cultural space.

Binondo as seen through the Blue Angel bar has lost its uniqueness:

[T]he Blue Angel Bar and Café that was on the ground floor of the century-old building along Sto Cristo Street. The joint was a fifteen-table affair that could pack seventy people at most but Cyrus Ledesma doubted the place saw more than a handful of tipsy old fogies most evenings who couldn't stand going home to their wives. It reeked of oldness: old wood, old linen, old plumbing, and he could guess, old songs. There was a bright blue neon sign though, that lit up the stage: The Blue Angel. It was half the size of the one by the door and was written in cursive. (Ong 4)

In fact, many of the characters have left Binondo and have come back only for the nostalgia. Inspector Cyrus Ledesma came back only because he has to solve a case. In the old days, Binondo was guarded space for the Chinese community; now it has become porous, absorbing the social evils of mainstream Filipino society.

An ethnic non-space

There is nothing Chinese about the Blue Angel. Although the space is owned by a Chinese, none among the managerial staff is Chinese. The music played there is standard, sometimes jazz, not Chinese. It could be a bar anywhere in Metro Manila—its dingy interior a reminder, not of successful business, but of the struggle to survive in Filipino mainstream life. The Blue Angel, therefore, is almost a non-place, a site created by economic necessity. Unlike the sense of place which is organic to a community, a non-place does not carry a cultural uniqueness or particularity. Like a McDonald's joint, a gas station or a supermarket, the Blue Angel is not endemic or native to Binondo. It does not encourage a sense of belonging and does not stem from community. It attracts people who need a place to go to, anywhere will do. Its presence in Binondo in a way threatens Binondo's ethnicity. It is a tentacle of the external Filipino world, a hand that claims a space to which it is a stranger.

Binondo used to belong to the *Lannang*, who consists of individuals with a "Southern Chinese ancestry and a mixed Chinese and Filipino cultural heritage" (Wilkinson 6). The ethnic segregation imposed on the community as early as 1902 through the Chinese Exclusion Act allowed the community to protect its culture and keep away *buanna* (Filipino) culture from tainting its traditions. However, the thawing of borders has allowed Filipino inroads into *Lannang* territory. While this would be threatening to the first-generation migrants, the latter generations find the Filipino presence inevitable and quite comfortable, as can be seen in the novel.

Laurice Saldiaga, everyone's object of desire, is not from Binondo. She was a local migrant, lured by the city, even if the only capital she has are her music and her sex appeal. She brings into Binondo the social iniquities of the external

Filipino world and like the Blue Angel bar is a representation of the Filipino struggle to survive. Antonio Cobianco, one of her admirers, asks her to wear the red cheongsam of the woman he loved, perhaps in a bid to find a substitute but also to ethnicize her. Both attempts fail. Her admirers are both Chinese and Filipino, male and female. She seems cruelly indifferent to them yet binds them all in desire. As a great leveller, Laurice is not subject to Binondo traditions, yet she is a binding presence nonetheless. Her death signifies the tortuous process of ethnic negotiations, or perhaps the absence of it, in Ong's Chinatown.

In the novel, the only homage to tradition is the old house of Antonio Cobianco. Built by his parents who were first generation Chinese migrants, it too has deteriorated, inhabited by white shadows, which can be read here as the memory of what was lost by the family—love, life, and filial duty. This is shown below:

For a while, Ledesma allowed his eyes to roam. He missed this house, missed the light and air, the large oval mirror at the center of the living room, the aroma of pig's knuckles stewed in sibut herbs and oregano, the smell of incense, the grand staircase. He missed the old man with his hearty laugh and ribald stories about rich men sucking on deformed toes of infant-footed prostitutes in the cathouses in Shanghai. As a boy, Cyrus had thought of this as the largest house in Manila, perhaps in the world. Four or five apartment units might fit into the living room alone and there were other rooms. At the bottom floor was the storefront, at the back, the warehouse that stacked mountains of rice and grain. People came and went—relatives, friends, traders. The family didn't seem to mind, all seemed welcome... until the accident. (Ong 28-29)

The house of the Cobianco family chronicles the migrant's journey, its successes and failures. It embodies the patriarch's commercial success but it is also haunted by the tragedies of his family. The suicide of the eldest son, the second son's forbidden love, the grandson's seething hatred all contribute to the ruin of the family. Filial piety, rooted in the Confucian tradition of bearing responsibility for the family (Albertini and Mantovani 5), the solidifier of the Chinese social structure, becomes a failed value. Its failure foreshadows the possible demise of cultural strongholds in Binondo.

Spiritual dissonance and redemption

The dystopic narrative also suggests a moral or spiritual dissonance that provides the conceptual thread of the novel. One would expect a Chinatown to mirror Chinese beliefs such as Buddhism and Taoism. However, Binondo is also a prominent Roman Catholic parish, proving it has pursued its original purpose of

providing a community for the Chinese converts. On its main plaza still stands the Binondo Church, a spiritual lodestone for many Roman Catholic Chinese.

This is not to say that Chinese beliefs have been marginalized. Here, Christian figures such as the crucifix is worshipped with joss sticks and household altars combine Buddhist or Taoist personages with Catholic saints. The Chinese have a syncretic attitude towards religion, and this has extended to the Roman Catholic religion (Dy 44). Binondo is a by-product of integration, cultural transformation and religious syncretism. That's what makes Binondo unique, according to Teresita Ang See. Cultures are blended here, rather than separated (Reyes F-1). This syncretism allows the novel to eschew traditional religions as ethical anchor of the novel and instead pursue its own version of morality.

The novel at the outset is character-driven, its chapters divided into character stories linking each one to the Blue Angel and Binondo. The number of characters create an almost episodic structure that initially seems disunited. Later, the reader realizes that aside from geography, another source of connection among them is the spiritual journey each takes. The journeys take on the trope of the moral fall and redemption. After all, Chinatown has a meaning, that it is not just a place but an idea (Novak 257).

The most interesting characters are the policemen. Most can be considered rogue. The dystopic feature of their narratives can be seen in their perception of what is good and what is right and the ambivalence resulting from the choice between the two. The main character, Cyrus Ledesma, begins his career as part of a shadowy group of policemen assigned to kill criminals extra judiciously. Extra judicial killings are part of a secret police operation that allows agents to kill criminals who cannot be touched by the law. In the novel, rookie policemen or those who have bad behaviour are assigned executions that the police think might incriminate those in uniform. The group is a "unitless, nameless shadow of law enforcement" (Ong 39). This represents the violence expected in dystopic narratives. State-run, secret, and below detection, the violence is justified as a social necessity for the eradication of crime. This touches a chord among Filipino readers as if the book foretells a historical future. The activities of this group become more public and frequent with Philippine President Duterte's war on drugs during which EJK (extra judicial killing) becomes a household word. The Philippine police continue to deny the existence of the shadowy group.

Cyrus allows himself to be convinced to perform killings not only because he has to obey orders but also because he kills criminals, and it is for the good of all. Here, we find Cyrus losing his ethical moorings, as "individual thought or initiative lost its power in dystopian fiction, 'we' took the place of 'I' and the 'collective' authority dominates over simple individuals" (Akman 75). When confronted with an asset who is a paedophile, he could not help it, he kills

the asset, with dire consequences. He seems to be a killer who has his own sense of what is morally right.

Out of prison now, he is sent to Binondo to investigate the murder of Laurice, the bar singer, not so much because he is a good cop but because he grew up there and can speak Hokkien, the more popular language of Binondo. A half-breed, Cyrus had street understanding of the Binondo Chinese and is perfect for the assignment. But the Binondo he knew is no longer there and he has to reacquaint himself with the 'new' place, relying mostly on homing instincts to understand it again. He has to negotiate ethnically with the new Binondo, this dark Binondo, by going back to the language and his early knowledge of the community.

During the investigation, he is drawn once more into the vortex of power and revenge. His superiors have questionable morality. This moral ambiguity is frightening because these men are agents of the state, who swore to save and protect. It seems that power frees them from accountability.

Dystopic literature always includes a rebel leader who resists the oppression and enacts subversion or revolution to promote a more humane world. Authors make him either succeed or fail. The novel's dystopia is not hopeless. Cyrus Ledesma is a case in point. As agent of the state, he has to be morally upright but as a young police officer, he found it difficult not to obey orders. After a while, he learned not to mind killing if he is killing a criminal, perhaps finding a moral good in an act where choice is absent. However, a more mature Cyrus realizes that there is always a choice, that this kind of violence also hurts the innocent. At the climactic end of the novel, he refuses to kill, finally creating a moral assertion that privileges the sanctity of life.

Binondo abounds with other transgressions and perversions. There is Antonio Cobianco who falls in love with his brother's wife. There is Rosa who had two children by different men, toughened by betrayals and her failed search for love. There is Laurice, wise to the ways of the world yet duped by a man in a tight shirt who had a gold tooth. Binondo seems to be a moral wasteland.

The novel is populated by fallen angels, which aptly describes the complexity Ong gives to his characters. No one is entirely good, nor entirely evil. In Hollywood, the *Blue Angel* is a Marlene Dietrich movie where she plays a whore with a golden heart. At the heart of the Binondo dystopia, the image of the angel permeates the novel, the representation of salvation in the Christian myth. Like Michael the Archangel, Cyrus battles evil who is a superior police officer whose shadowy sinister functions represent the demonic hand of the state. This superior officer initially leads Cyrus to the pits of moral hell when he orders the younger policeman to exercise extra judicial killings. In the novel, the angel provides hope in the dystopic heart of the city. It comes in many forms. To the priest Father Jay, Cyrus' childhood friend, it is the vision that leads him away from the call of the flesh. To bar manager Rosa, it is Antonio Cobianco's unconditional

friendship that has kept her off the streets. To bar owner Antonio Cobianco, the only Chinese Binondo resident in the novel, it is the saxophone and its keening music (quite un-Chinese in the context of Binondo) that saves him from despair. To Rosa's daughter Rosemarie, angels are the white shadows of the past, the yin elements of a female Chinese migrant's tragic life. To Inspector Cyrus Ledesma, it is a moral ascendancy coming unexpected when he must choose between life and death. The fallen angels accept salvation.

Salvation comes in the form of friendship, kindness, discernment, and love. It is found not necessarily in one religion but in all, in the form of human empathy. These are the things that are lost in the city and the lack of which creates a dystopia. At the end of the novel, Binondo does not change, it remains dark, dreary, ominous, but its characters find love and forgiveness.

Conclusion

One wonders why Charlson Ong's vision of Binondo is dystopic. Dystopic literature is written when something challenges what one considers precious—this can be democracy, freedom, tradition, goodness, morality, etc. Does the new Binondo perhaps challenge what Binondo stood for in the past? Will the new Binondo threaten to cut ties that bind, making it less Chinese? Is Binondo's transformation frightening? Will the half-breeds—neither Chinese nor Filipino—create ethnic and cultural erasure? Is Binondo's future the moral ruins described in the novel, superficially covered by the emerging towers that clutter its skyline? Will Manila, the Filipino city, eventually suffocate Binondo?

Ong ends his novel on an interesting note. The Cobianco house, the symbol of the past, is demolished. Attachment to the past seems to be part of the dystopia. In Ong's vision, the present may be grim, but it seems to offer more possibilities to the young. Destroying the past is one way for the city to live. In countering this vision, it is evident that the salient presence of hope, of "the human need to imagine and envision new worlds" (Archer-Lean 5) shifts the discourse towards the utopian. Perhaps, this is what the novel has tried to indicate. As many other scholars have already noted, there is a thin line between utopian and dystopian imaginings. Dystopian literature expresses fear and despair but always there is a sliver of hope. An angel is always there to save those who are struggling.

Binondo as a cityscape reflects the dynamic flux within a community that interacts with a city external to it. In the novel, we feel the city closing in on a place that tries to preserve itself. The ethnic and moral dystopia that Ong paints seems to suggest that this is a bleak foretelling of things to come. At the same time, the closure that depicts love and forgiveness sends out a thread of hope. The cityscape therefore is quite undetermined in a good way because this allows Binondo to follow its natural course, balancing its white shadows and blue angels,

creating a cityscape borne out of ethnic assimilation and syncretic cultures. It will continue to preserve memory while simultaneously welcoming the outside world.

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