3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature® The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies
Vol 31(3), September 2025 http://doi.org/10.17576/3L-2025-3103-25

Changing Covenants: Sociolinguistic Mobilities and the Transgenerational Discursivities of the Convent in the Malaysian Cultural Imaginary

SHANTHINI PILLAI
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia

ANGELINE WONG WEI WEI *
School of Pathways and Immersion
Monash University Malaysia, Malaysia
angeline.wongweiwei@monash.edu

JOANNA TAN TJIN AI
Faculty of Education
Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The convents of Malaysia, founded by the Sisters of the Infant Jesus—emboldened women who journeyed across the seas from 19th-century France—hold profound cultural and historical importance. Rooted in their mission of faith, charity and outreach, the convent schools transformed into dynamic centres of learning that bridged linguistic and cultural divides. While initially dedicated to promoting educational egalitarianism among the less fortunate, the convents gradually adapted to local contexts, shaping identities and nurturing generations of young women. The image of the "convent girl," characterised by intellectual refinement and social poise, became emblematic of the elite status associated with these schools. Convents stand as rich emblems of the complexities of mobility, cultural adaptation, and education in Malaysia's history, given their French foundations in a British protectorate in South East Asia. What was the impact of travel and mobility on the cultural ideology of the French convent and its founders? In what ways did the transplantation of French convents into British colonial environments lead to a simultaneous transformation and estrangement in communal perceptions of the Sisters of the Infant Jesus as well as their convents? How did the mobility factor contribute to the shift from the original mission of educational egalitarianism to the creation and perpetuation of the trope of the elite 'convent girl' identity? To delve into the heart of this matter, we use, as our research corpus, three Malaysian texts written by three "convent girls" across time and the transgenerational discursivities of the convent. We especially interrogate the cultural materiality of central tropes tied to the image of the convent in the hope of dismantling the monoliths of elitist discursivities and bringing to the fore the pluralities that lie hidden deep within its grains.

Keywords: Linguistic mobilities; convents; French female Missionaries; transgenerational discursivities; elitist tropes

INTRODUCTION

Convents may be broadly classified into two distinct categories: strictly enclosed and unenclosed. Strictly enclosed convents are typically contemplative in nature, emphasising prayer, seclusion, and ascetic practices. On the contrary, unenclosed convents are primarily active, engaging in educational, parochial, hospital, or other forms of external work. Additionally, some unenclosed orders integrate both contemplative and active lifestyles without adhering to strict enclosure. Traditionally, the European convent equated a life cloistered away from society, dedicated mostly to prayer and worship. Derived from the Latin term *conventus*, signifying "assembly" or

"gathering," convents historically functioned as religious institutions accommodating communities dedicated to spiritual endeavours. These communities commonly consisted of individuals belonging to monastic or religious orders, such as monks, nuns, friars, or religious sisters, who observed distinct spiritual, cultural, and doctrinal tenets (Harris, 1993; Kelly, 2020; Lowe, 2003; Walker, 2003).

A review of Western literary discourse will reveal that convents have occupied a significant status, and through time, evolved into complex symbols. Convents and nuns have long functioned as literary motifs to critique the restricted roles of women (Watkinson, 2012), the intellectual and social potential of all-female communities (Harris, 1993; Lowe, 2003), and to interrogate the gendered power structures that influence them (Murphy, 2019; Watkinson, 2012). Throughout the Medieval and Renaissance periods, convents played a crucial role in women's lives, offering opportunities for education, spiritual growth, and a measure of social autonomy (Hallett, 2012; Harris, 1993). Scholars have recognised convents as empowering spaces that often extended their influence beyond their walls (Baernstein, 2002; Harris, 1993; Sierra, 2009; Sullivan, 2021). However, convents have also been portrayed as ominous Gothic symbols, representing isolation, danger, and the marginalisation of women within society. Their secluded nature has been used to illustrate the intricate power structures surrounding women's lives within these religious institutions (Murphy, 2019; Rogers, 1985; Strasser, 2003; Waller-Peterson, 2016; Watkinson, 2012). The theme of love or unrequited love has also been the subject of many discussions on convents (Goodrich, 2019; Townshend, 2017; Yee et al., 2025). As such, the representation of the convent has shifted across genres and eras, reflecting themes of devotion, isolation, rebellion, and transformation, and the trope of the convent in literary history remains inherently one teeming with contradictions.

Convents in Malaysia, however, occupy an interesting space; they stand as multifaceted emblems of various mobilities, shifting across both temporal and discursive spaces, not least due to the complex nature of the convoluted historical evolution of the institution itself. Marked by layers of socio-political, cultural, and religious transformations, the convent is generally viewed as synonymous with the convent school, the educational institution established by the Infant Jesus Sisters (henceforth IJ Sisters), the community of nuns who hailed from nineteenth-century Paris. While prayer and reflection formed its foundation, the convents of the IJ sisters were born of an outlook that was predominantly outward rather than inward. Founded in 1666 by Nicolas Barré, the order of the Sisters of the Infant Jesus was primarily dedicated to the educational development and upliftment of impoverished children in France, particularly girls. As such, engagement with the external world was vital, fostering an active role of the IJ Sisters within the community. Barré, however, was not solely responsible for this endeavour, as history may lead us to believe.

According to Raftery (2015, pp. 33–34), Barré established small schools in Rouen with the support of two women of French nobility, Françoise Duval and Marguerite Lestocq, aiming to empower their young charges with the means to earn their own livelihoods. By 1669, the group—now known as the *Soeurs Maîtresses des Ecoles Charitables du Saint Enfant Jésus* or Mistress Sisters of the Charitable schools of the Holy Infant Jesus—had founded seven such schools. In this way, the establishment of the schools of the IJ Sisters exemplified mobility on multiple levels. It was rooted in the concept of progress, encompassing both social advancement for the underprivileged and breaking barriers for women as wage earners. In addition, Barré proposed that the women live as a lay community rather than being cloistered, believing that active engagement within the community was essential to their mission. He also advocated for their independence from patrons to allow them to travel freely and pursue their educational goals. It was this extremely

unconventional approach for seventeenth-century France that triggered movement beyond the immediate land surrounding the convent walls, propelling them on voyages to new worlds across global boundaries.

When these French-founded convents were subsequently relocated overseas—such as those in nineteenth-century Malaya—the concept of mobility evolved substantially. It is this expansion of the concept of mobilities, embedded in the image of the French convent transplanted into foreign lands by French nuns, that informs this article. The convents and novitiates, originally dedicated to their less fortunate French lay sisters, grew to function as transnational spaces, facilitating the transmission of ideas and cultures across borders (Raftery, 2015, p. 32). Hudd (2016) highlights this complex interplay of colonial and religious mobilities in the founding moments of the arrival of the French IJ Sisters in Malaya. Yet, like all transnational migrations, the project of mission and development that the IJ Sisters transmitted across the seas came infused with various elements of foreignness. For as Hudd notes, "they were French in a British settlement; European in an Asian setting; religious Sisters in the midst of a population of many faiths; and female in an overwhelmingly male society" dressed in "distinctive long black woollen habits, each with a black hood" (Hudd, 2016, p. 4). This accentuates the convent as a site of pluralities, emphasising the complexities surrounding both its establishment and the role of the nuns who founded it on multiple levels. They were first and foremost from a Christian religious order that was formed upon the basis of a traditional European convent. Hudd also reminds us that these nuns had arrived from a predominantly French-speaking world to a multilingual environment where English was gradually emerging at the centre of the colonial stage. The convent schools that the French sisters were tasked with managing were explicitly intended to be conducted in the medium of the English language, as the land they travelled to was under the jurisdiction of British colonial rule. These shifts across various borders led to them functioning simultaneously as a site of spiritual refuge and intellectual development, veering between veneration and estrangement, propelled by cultural negotiations and exchanges through the movement of ideas, languages, and traditions. Part of this divergence from the original French objective may also stem from the influence of the English convent school on its overall development. Many English convent schools primarily focused on preparing their students to become "good Catholic wives and mothers" (Walker, 2003, p. 140).

Hudd's (2016) study remains a leading exploration of the IJ Sisters' convents, tracing their evolution from 1854 to their transformation over time, from a cloistered space to vibrant hubs, housing schools, an orphanage, and a women's refuge. She highlights the repurposing of the convent in Singapore from a sacred sanctuary to a vibrant social hub, now home to pubs and clubs (Hudd, 2016, p. 3). Hudd (2019) has also examined the IJ Sisters as pioneers of modern education and social services, highlighting their role in reducing child mortality, educating local girls, and empowering women in Singapore. However, Orientalist overtones emerge in her depiction of Singapore's early conditions, characterised by overcrowded tenements, disease, poverty, and social struggles (Hudd, 2019, p. 30). Yet, as much as change and evolution rest at the centre of most of Hudd's scholarship on the convent, her focus centres for the most part on the transformation of the physical sites of the institution—tracing their evolution from sites of veneration to hubs of commercialisation.

In this paper, we seek to expand the conversation on the convent in Malaysia to illuminate the hidden dimensions of its history, examining patterns of mobility in relation to both the evolution of the convent itself and its foundational ideologies through shifting discourses that have been shaped by broader sociocultural forces. Central to this inquiry is an exploration of what we

term the changing covenants of the convent from the moment of its inception as English medium schools at the hands of French nuns in a British colonial protectorate in the Far East.

METHODOLOGIES OF MOBILITY IN THE TRANSGENERATIONAL VOYAGE OF THE CONVENT

In many ways, the French nuns were not just courageous female voyagers of the nineteenth century—they were also "linguistic voyageurs" (Heller, 2006, p. 3). The term 'linguistic voyageurs' was first employed by Monica Heller to refer to the early fur traders of the 17th to 19th centuries who were instrumental in shaping French Canadian identity, voyageurs who traversed Canada's waterways, securing European political and economic dominance. Heller then proceeds to extend the term beyond its historical context, to draw in embedded notions of freedom, an authentic connection to nature, and the capacity to transcend boundaries and forge new identities. It is the last aspect that is especially central to our argument. In this paper, we draw on Monica Heller's framework on the linguistic voyageur and expand its dimensions to examine the shifting ideologies that travelled through the transmission of the convent of the Charitable Sisters of 19th-century France.

Heller's conceptualisation of linguistic voyageurs foregrounds adaptability in navigating diverse cultural and linguistic landscapes, as well as challenging and reshaping traditional notions of identity, language, and belonging. Similarly, the idea and ideology of the convent school that the European nuns brought over to Asia became a site that transitioned across time, geography, and cultural contexts. Their identities as European institutions took on new roots and were inevitably redefined, caught between the tractions of the familiar and the foreign. Such changes impacted the European nuns as well, being integral to the administration of the convent. As Hudd shows, their initial presence took some getting used to. While their attire of black woollen habits symbolised reverence and piety in France, in Malaya, they evoked an aura of mystery and the uncanny, bordering on the frightful. The inherent complexities of the convent as a site of cultural and ideological contrasts in nineteenth-century Malaya intersect closely with the mobilities turn in sociolinguistics. This is especially in relation to linguistic mobilities as discussed by Sheller and Urry (2006), as part of their broader "new mobilities paradigm," which emphasises the movement of languages, discourses, and linguistic practices across transnational spaces and contexts. They especially foreground how mobility—both physical and linguistic— ultimately impacts and reshapes identities, power dynamics, and cultural exchanges. In particular, linguistic mobility generates the shifting of meanings and social valences of language across contexts, through the circulation of signs, discourses, and symbolic capital. As it travels across diverse sociocultural terrains, a sign becomes semantically reconfigured—its meaning reshaped by encounters with global actors, structures, and belief systems.

The convent in Malaysia can be perceptibly viewed through such a lens. We begin with the very notion of discursive mobilities (Pillai, 2020, 2025), especially the mobility of meaning attached to the discursive concept of the convent as it was first encapsulated in Europe and the ways in which it was reshaped through transoceanic journeys. As it moved across cultural boundaries, it became not just a place of spiritual refuge but also a site of intercultural negotiation, embodying the dualities of veneration and estrangement. It became ultimately a site where meanings and identities evolved, in line with Sheller and Urry's mobilities paradigm, challenging static notions of language and tradition. Initially dedicated to promoting educational egalitarianism

among the less fortunate, the convents gradually adapted to local contexts, shaping identities and nurturing generations of young women. Furthermore, the inhabitants of European convents were transformed from novices of pious quietude into 'convent girls' distinguished by intellectual refinement and social poise—figures emblematic of the elite status these schools came to represent, ultimately eclipsing their foundational mission of promoting social mobility and equality.

As such, the conventions of Malaysia stand as complex reflections of various mobilities. From an establishment that emerged from pillars of French Catholic religious traditions, relocated within the framework of a British protectorate in Southeast Asia, they underscore the interplay of colonial influence, cross-cultural exchange, and local adaptation. Yet crucial questions remain largely unanswered. What was the impact of travel and mobility on the cultural ideology of the French convent and its founders? In what ways did the transplantation of French convents into British colonial environments lead to a simultaneous transformation and estrangement in communal perceptions of the Sisters of the Infant Jesus as well as their convents? How did the mobility factor contribute to the shift from the original mission of educational egalitarianism to the creation and perpetuation of the trope of the elite 'convent girl' identity? We especially interrogate the cultural materiality of central tropes tied to the image of the convent in the hope of dismantling the monoliths of elitist discursivities and bringing to the fore the pluralities that lie hidden deep within its grains.

We do this through a methodology that centres on sociolinguistic mobilities and the transgenerational discursivities of the convent in the Malaysian cultural imaginary. The discussion will primarily delve into an analytical investigation of the inherent dialectics of the convent in Malaysia as a material and symbolic site of pluralities in nineteenth-century Malaya. This will be established through a framework that incorporates Heller's (2016) concept of linguistic voyageurs as well as Sheller and Urry's (2006) critical insights on linguistic mobilities. It will examine the transformations to the discursivities of the convent, from its historicity as a hub for education, missionary work, and cultural exchange, to a site steeped in elitism and elitist discourses, and of the many generations schooled in Eurocentric cultural pedagogies. We do this by taking into account the transnational journey of the emboldened founding figures of French nuns as they set up educational institutions in a British colonial context; the convent as an embodiment of discursive mobility particularly through the etymological transformations engendered from its transplantation across the seas; the broader evolution from a site of seclusion and religious devotion to a more dynamic, participatory institution propelled by cultural negotiation, intellectual exchange, and active societal engagement. Finally, we reflect on the creation and perpetuation of the trope of the elite 'convent girl' identity that overshadowed the original mission of educational egalitarianism.

To understand the changing covenants in the discursivities of the convent, especially in terms of how languages and ideologies travel, adapt, and transform, the discussion will proceed to focus on three key areas: material symbolism, ideological shifts, and power dynamics. The material symbolism approach will involve examining the changes in the linguistic repertoire of the material culture of the convent across the writings of women across generations. These will be discussed in connection with the French European Catholic foundations of the convent and its "charitable Sisters." The analysis will also address the evolving social, political, and religious contexts that have shaped the transformation of the convent's trope over time. Finally, it will reflect on the role that the pluralities of power dynamics play in the development and transgression of the convent trope.

The discussion examines the works of three Malaysian writers who identify as convent-educated women from different generations: Shirley Lim, Chen Yen Ling, and Beth Yahp. The selected writers represent three distinct eras. Shirley Lim was born in the 1940s, Chen Yen Ling was born in the 1950s, and Beth Yahp was born in the 1960s. Notably, upon reviewing their works, it became evident that they uniquely portray the convent experience with significant prominence. Although Shirley Lim does not have an entire work dedicated to convent education, relevant themes are explored in two of her short stories: *The Touring Company* (1990) and *Pomegranates and English Education* (1996). Chen Yen Ling's *Lessons from My School* (2019) offers a contemporary perspective, while Beth Yahp's *Crocodile Fury* (1992) contributes another generational viewpoint. Together, these texts allow for a comprehensive exploration of how the convent school experience has been articulated across different periods.

Initially, the question arose regarding the predominance of Malaysian Chinese writers in this context. However, a historical examination of convent schools in Malaysia offers a clear explanation. When convent schools were first established as Christian missionary institutions, they were largely situated in urban areas along the west coast, where commerce, tin mining, and rubber plantations flourished. These locations attracted large immigrant populations, especially Chinese labourers, who formed the primary student body (Cooke, 1966, pp. 369–370). Religious restrictions prevented proselytising among Malays, while Indian communities, concentrated in plantations, attended their own Tamil schools. Consequently, the first convent students were predominantly Chinese, making it fitting that the writers selected for this study—Lim, Chen, and Yahp—reflect this demographic pattern. Moreover, as women spanning three generations of convent education, their texts provide valuable insights into the pluralities of the convent school experience.

The framework of mobilities will be specifically implemented in terms of unpacking the ways in which transgenerational discursivities of the convent emerge in each of the reflections of the three generations of convent-educated women. We especially interrogate the cultural materiality of central tropes tied to the image of the convent in the hope of dismantling the monoliths of elitist discursivities and bringing to the fore the pluralities that lie hidden deep within its grains. We then explore thematically how these writings articulate the trope of the convent as both a symbol of cultural exchange and a site of ideological contestation. A focal point of interest is to determine the ways in which transgenerational discursivities emerge as each of the women writers navigates diverse sociolinguistic and sociocultural contexts of the trope of the convent, while simultaneously reflecting their own personal experiences. This inter-generational comparison will be useful to reveal the modulations in the perception of the convent as a symbol of confinement, liberation, or transformation. Through this methodology, the paper aims to chart the ideological evolution of the convent across temporal boundaries in the context of Malaysian Chinese women's writings and an understanding of the intersection between language, place, and ideology in general. In other words, we reflect on how sociolinguistic mobilities play out in the discursivities of these three women writers as they: a) navigate the cultural ideology of the French convent and its founders; b) establish new perspectives on the convent; and c) mediate the dialectics between educational egalitarianism and the elite 'convent girl' identity.

FOUNDING COVENANTS: TRANSNATIONAL VOYAGEURS OF SPIRITUAL AND EGALITARIAN MOBILITIES

Chen Yen Ling (2019) portrays the convent in a discursive style that blends memoir and historical documentary, shaped by her lived experience as one of the impoverished children given access to education through the founding covenants of egalitarianism held by the IJ Sisters. We begin with her narrative as of the three, Chen presents the genealogies of the stories of the founding moments of the convent, often overlooked and hidden away in archival storehouses in both Malaysia and France. Her narrative is also significant as it presents the convent as a dynamic space of educational inclusion, historical plurality, and cultural negotiation, shaped by transnational exchanges and the transformative journeys of its founders. In this way, Chen reveals the convent's rich and complex history beyond its conventional representations.

Of particular importance is Chen's portrayal of the influence of travel and mobility and the inevitable changes to the cultural ideology of the French convent as well as its founding mission. Such seeds of adaptability were already sown in France, for as Chen relates, through her piecing together of the initial chapters that led to the journey of the nuns across the vast oceans dividing Europe and Asia to British Malaya: '*The administrators of the Paris Foreign Mission Society (MEP) who made the recommendation on age perceived that younger minds were more receptive to learning and at a faster speed. They would also be more robust in health'* (Chen, 2019, p. 79). Receptiveness would prove to be central in their overseas mission, which would see them circumnavigate various complex transitions that would redefine the very essence of their mission. Their departure from France was to provide education for young girls through their convent schools and spread Catholicism.' (Chen, 2019, p. 78) was simultaneously a marked departure from the French communal setting that they were accustomed to, in terms of climatic, linguistic and cultural shifts. Chen meticulously captures each transition these French voyageurs undergo with a deep sense of veneration that progressively intensifies throughout her work, presenting them as powerful parables of resilience and transformation. This appears to be largely due to her own personal history as one of the impoverished young girls educated within the convent corridors, which in turn generates a narrative imaginary with a deep affinity to the ideological influence imparted by the Charitable Sister Teachers through the Catholic mission. Consequently, Christian motifs are an influential presence in Chen's narrative imaginary.

The cultural intersections evident in the foundational stages of their first convents are framed through the lens of Christian charity, echoing the parable of the Good Samaritan, where kindness extends beyond religious boundaries. Chen relates that local royal families provided not only physical space for the setting up of premises, but also extended both financial assistance and moral encouragement (Chen, 2019, p. 61). Such instances of charitable benefaction serve to reaffirm Christian principles of faith and communal generosity, though they simultaneously obscure the intricate challenges that would have arisen as the sisters navigated linguistic barriers. These complexities are instead framed within the narrative as 'warm relationships' and 'blessings' (Chen, 2019, p. 61), duly emphasising the message of missionary impact.

Chen constantly accentuates the religious aspect in the foundation of the convent and augments the deep, unwavering faith and spiritual conviction of the nuns as they constantly believed in '*divine providence*' (Chen, 2019, p. 145) to deliver them from the many hardships that they endured in the early days of setting up the convents. She provides valuable insights into the significant financial challenges faced in sustaining the operations of convent schools during their early years of administration. Chen poignantly relates the ways in which the nuns were put to the

test and their tenacity in overcoming this, especially as they became budding female entrepreneurs of the nineteenth century. She relates how their determination saw them adopting practical strategies to generate income, as seen in this description:

> The early sisters would utilise their recreational hours to earn money to cover expenses. They were known for their dexterity – superb craftsmanship, especially in embroidery. These beautiful speciality products were sold to rich ladies such as the wives of Chinese merchants. Very often, they would work deep into the night under the flickering lights of their oil lamps.
>
> (Chen, 2019, pp. 144-145)

Here we see mobilities on a number of levels. Firstly, there is the reference to the change in the structure of convent life, where recreational hours, often dedicated to gardening or domestic chores, were dominated by economic pursuits for the long-term sustainment of the institution they were in charge of. Such actions then led to engagement with the multi-ethnic community outside the convent, in particular the more affluent. It also foregrounds the transformation of domestic settings, shifting from communal ethnic material traditions to the intersection with and eventual incorporation of European artefacts, a significant chapter in changing colonial contexts of cultural hybridity. Most significantly, the excerpt also accentuates Chen's deep admiration for the sisters by emphasising their tireless dedication and unwavering commitment to their mission. This is particularly evident in the symbolic image of the oil lamps, which illuminate their perseverance and position them as pioneering figures who forged new paths despite adversity. Chen stresses that "*the sisters had their faith in divine providence. They would find generosity and good Samaritans who would bail them out of critical situations.'* (p. 145). Additionally, the reference to the Biblical trope of the Samaritans accentuates the intercultural dialogues and negotiations that these French sisters engaged in as they crossed multiple boundaries, as much as it also highlights the Christian tropes of charity, providence and benevolence. This latter aspect, in turn, is exemplified in her constant portrayal of convent ideology and the sisters with utmost reverence and almost hegemonic acquiescence, highlighting the noble mission above all else. As Teoh (2020, p. 250) notes, Chen is deeply admiring and personal rather than analytical or impartial. Such reverential overtones are particularly evident in the following:

> I now realise why it was so important to the sisters and teachers that we remained clean and neat during my early days at St. Anne's Convent School. I was from a working-class background, and during my first few years, there were indeed some of us who had lice in our hair and unsavoury odour emitting from our clothes and bodies. These were surely repelling factors to those around us.
>
> (Chen, 2019, p. 162)

As much as the excerpt emphasises the dichotomy between the rich and the poor, Chen's rationale is that such rules and regulations central to the convent ideology were to ensure that all were equal, for as she asserts "When the pupils were polite, clean and well-groomed, it could then be argued that the rich had no reason to segregate themselves from the poor, rough and crude" (Chen, 2019, p. 162). Ultimately, Chen's discursive imaginary constantly reinforces her stand that such ideological formations "had *been the most important goal originating from the founding charitable sisters' crusade* from *Rouen, France, to Penang, Malaya.' (p. 267)*. This would then be the leading factor in the rise of elitism in convent culture that remains central to its status in the Malaysian educational landscape.

SHIFTING DISCURSIVITIES ENGLISH AND THE RISE OF ELITISM IN CONVENT CULTURE

In this section, we examine Shirley Lim, the second author in our inquiry into convent discursivities, as she explores the earliest articulations of convent schooling in Malaysian literature. Shirley Lim's short stories *The Touring Company* (1968) and *Pomegranates and English Education* (1996) offer insights into the ideological functions of the convent school, particularly through the lens of English language acquisition, behavioural discipline, and internalised cultural ambivalence. Although Lim does not frame her stories explicitly around the convent institution, the values and practices instilled through convent-style education—especially its emphasis on Englishness and social refinement—are visible in the background of both narratives. These stories offer a useful point of entry into the initial phase of what this paper identifies as the shifting discursivities of the convent.

Born in 1944 and educated in a convent school during the final decades of British rule, Lim's works selected here reflect the layered cultural experiences of students who inhabited both colonial and vernacular spaces within the institution. The narratives offer subtle but incisive commentary on identity, language, and belonging, as opposed to the deeply romanticised and wistful socio-religious vision of Chen seen previously. Though autobiographically inflected and grounded in specific sociocultural settings, Lim's mode is quieter and more reflective—yet the ideological tensions are no less present. Her position as an early voice is crucial, especially in understanding how the convent's colonial legacy was absorbed and re-articulated by women writers of her generation.

In *The Touring Company*, the narrator recalls being trained to act in English plays, describing how she and others were "drilled to pronounce our lines properly, with 'English' accents" (Lim, 1968). While English fluency enabled access to symbolic and social capital, it also led to a sense of dislocation. At one point, the narrator reflects, "I felt as though I were wearing someone else's skin," indicating a tension between outward performance and inward identification. In this way, English is both a tool of empowerment and estrangement, and the narrator's experience points to the early formation of a "convent girl" identity shaped by linguistic performance rather than cultural comfort.

This duality is more directly explored in *Pomegranates and English Education*, a semi-autobiographical story that reflects on the narrator's experience as a student in an English-medium school. The contrast between her home life and school environment is highlighted through everyday imagery. Her mother, for instance, packs pomegranates in her schoolbag, but the narrator feels ashamed, noting that "their bright red skins embarrassed me. They smelled too strong in class" (Lim, 1996, p. 139). This seemingly minor detail captures the broader tension between familial culture and institutional norms, where the embodied traces of home life are incompatible with the expected discipline of the classroom. These early moments of conflict reflect how the convent school system, while offering girls from working-class backgrounds the chance for mobility, also demanded emotional and cultural negotiation.

Lim's stories show how the convent's emphasis on English not only elevated certain students but also drew boundaries between what was considered refined and what was seen as inappropriate. The narrator of *Pomegranates and English Education* states: "We learned to keep our legs crossed and our backs straight. We learned to recite Tennyson and drink tea without slurping" (Lim, 1996, p. 141). These bodily instructions reflect the larger cultural expectations embedded in convent education. They suggest how moral and physical discipline were integrated

into an overarching ideology of self-control, modesty, and upward respectability—traits often associated with the image of the "elite convent girl."

However, Lim complicates this image. Despite the appearance of accomplishment, the narrator notes that "People thought I was special because I spoke English so well. But I didn't feel special. I felt split" (Lim, 1996, p. 146). The word "split" signals the internal contradictions produced by English education—enabling success while also distancing the narrator from her cultural and linguistic origins. This sense of "splitness" may be read as an early iteration of the ideological estrangement this paper identifies as central to the convent school experience across generations.

This tension between aspiration and dislocation reflects broader shifts in the ideological mission of the convent school. While the original aim of the IJ Sisters in France was to provide education to impoverished girls and promote social uplift, their transposition into British Malaya saw that mission evolve within the frameworks of colonial language policy and class-based educational stratification. Lim's narratives suggest how these shifts were internalised at the individual level, producing students who were linguistically adept but emotionally divided. The promise of mobility through English was thus accompanied by an estrangement from cultural roots.

What distinguishes Lim's work is her restrained and introspective tone. Unlike the overt political critique often seen in postcolonial writing, her focus is on the personal impact of institutional conditioning. This subtlety allows for a more complex reading of the convent experience—not as a site of pure oppression, but as one that enabled growth while simultaneously producing dissonance. Her characters do not repudiate the institution outright; instead, they live through its contradictions. In doing so, Lim provides a literary space where the early elite convent girl identity is not yet fully crystallised, but already shaped by contradictions in language, posture, food, and voice.

In this sense, Lim's stories mark the beginning of the transformation of the convent as a symbolic site. While the French IJ Sisters initially sought to empower poor girls through education, Lim's work reflects how this mission evolved in a British colonial context. Here, English functioned not simply as a medium of instruction but as a cultural system of value. The convent, though no longer explicitly present in Lim's stories, still leaves its imprint—in how her characters think, speak, act, and remember.

Thus, Lim offers an early, foundational perspective on the transgenerational discursivity of the convent. Her work does not attempt to romanticise or vilify the institution, but rather reflects on its subtle, long-term effects. Through the figure of the girl who speaks English fluently but feels emotionally divided, Lim presents a portrait of the convent school legacy that is as much about aspiration as it is about internal contradiction, establishing the foundations of a literary tradition in Malaysia that continues to revisit the convent not only as a historical institution but as a symbolic space marked by mobility, memory, and negotiation. Given that the convents portrayed in Lim's texts are the very ones established by the French IJ Sisters, we witness the impact of their role as linguistic voyageurs. By setting up English-medium schools, they aligned with British rather than French colonial policies, prioritising English for education. This decision led to shifts in intellectual and social landscapes, as ideas, languages, and traditions moved across colonial borders, highlighting the dynamic mobilities that shaped their mission.

While Lim presents these aspects in quiet ambivalence, the next section presents a perspective that shows the more subversive elements of this voyage in a total metamorphosis of the discursivities of the French convent, deconstructing and rupturing its foundational Eurocentric pedagogical and Catholic religious frameworks.

MISSION AND MOBILITIES OF MEANING: THE METAMORPHOSIS OF THE FRENCH CONVENT IN BRITISH MALAYA

Among the three authors, Beth Yahp presents the most estranged perspective of the convent, depicting it as a space marked by unsettling transformations and ideological changes. Her representation diverges significantly from those of Lim and Chen, whose portrayals, though distinct, maintain a more conventional engagement with convent life. The shifting visions of the convent in Yahp's work emerge through the interplay of satirical humour, irony, and the metonymy of detachment, underscoring the institution's evolving role within broader sociocultural and historical contexts. Central to this ideological metamorphosis is Yahp's narrative strategy that draws heavily on and magnifies the Gothic in substantially unsettling depictions of the convent at every turn. Our first impression of the convent is one of chaos rather than composure, and irreverence instead of veneration:

> The convent is on a hill on the edge of the city, next to a jungle reserve which swallows and spits out trucks full of soldiers every day. In the jungle is a tribe of monkeys headed by a one-armed bandit, which leads forays into the staffroom to steal food. Although the teachers are used to this, they run screaming whenever monkeys swing through the doors. Seeing their example, girls run screaming too, at every opportunity. Convent girls are known as the Screaming Nuns.
>
> (Yahp, 1992, p. 1)

This ideological transformation accentuates a distinctly postcolonial narrative imaginary. As Grace Chin has argued, Yahp's novel foregrounds the intersection of colonialism and patriarchy in shaping the lives of women in convents, portraying them as instruments of cultural and social control (Chin, 1999). Through such revisionist strategies central to postcolonial reimagining of the past, the convent, a distinctively colonial construct, is transported within a prism of metonymic displacement or transposition as meanings shift and slide in discourse (Lacan, 1996, p. 425). Yahp consistently turns the imperial gaze onwards onto itself, mocking that "epic intention of the civilising mission" and *re*produces "a text rich in the traditions of trompe l'oeil, irony, mimicry, and repetition" (Bhabha, 1984, p. 126). Through such sociolinguistic mobilities, older colonial discourses of the nuns and the priests emerge in a "discursive process" that ruptures and transforms them into "partial presence" (Bhabha, 1984, p. 127). The imperial linguistic and discursive practices that once elevated their status evolve as they voyage across transtemporal and transnational boundaries, influencing power dynamics and exchanges central to Sheller and Urry's mobilities paradigm (Sheller & Urry, 2006). This is consistently reinforced throughout the novel, as the trope of the convent—and, by extension, its inhabitants—undergoes various sociolinguistic transformations.

We witness the transition from the convent's foundational commitment to educational egalitarianism—rooted in its French origins—as it is superseded by the Victorian principles of the English convent, which prioritised the cultivation of students for conventional Catholic roles as devoted wives and mothers, as observed by Walker (2002). In the changing covenants of the convent in Yahp's discursive imaginary, we are told that young local girls deemed "too noisy or

boisterous or too bossy or unladylike or too disobedient or worldly" (Yahp, 1992, p. 2) were sent to the convent in the hopes of being conditioned to become humble and composed young women of social decorum. This included being taught to "cross their knees when sitting, to play netball and poach perfect eggs". Yet, certain Catholic tenets remain at the centre, as they are also instructed "to bob when they see the nuns and the priest, and to know Jesus to love Jesus and to serve him in this world and the next" (Yahp, 1992, p. 2). Yet because satirical discursivity takes centre stage, the transformed mission materialises as a fragmented presence through metonymic displacement, hearkening to "the screaming nuns" at every turn—constantly in a state of panic and anxiety, in direct opposition to the ideals of restraint they are meant to embody.

There are also subtle revisionings of key Christian tropes. At one point, when the convent is besieged by a young man constantly referred to as "the Lizard Man" who runs amok, Yahp describes the state of the Convent classrooms "like fish baskets in which convent girls thrashed and flipped. Their panic glimmered fishtail silver from one end of the convent to the other" (Yahp, 1996, p. 126). Nestled at the core of this image lies an allusion to the biblical parable of the loaves and fish, reinterpreted in a manner that presents two sides of the same coin—some may perceive it as sacrilegious, while others may emphasise its role as a narrative device within the postcolonial revisioning of the mission and its civilising project. It is in the latter that the text by Yahp underscores the estrangement of the institution's foundational mission of empowering impoverished girls.

Such estrangement is particularly pronounced in the allusion to abandoned children, depicted as the "hard-to look-at girls are kept in special dormitories and fed, and taught to do sewing and weaving" (Yahp, 1992, p. 2). Historically, convents in Malaya (and other parts of the world) were known to take in abandoned children, often left at their doors. Yahp's portrayal reinterprets the often idealised and romanticised depiction of European convents, challenging the notion that their care for children was purely humanitarian. It complicates the established colonial narrative that the quality of care was consistently lauded by visitors, as reflected in local newspaper accounts, such as that referenced by Hudd (2019, p. 31). The convent administration may allocate space for constructing "wings specifically designated for abandoned orphans" (Yahp, 1992, p. 2), yet these are kept separate and thus estranged from its foundational egalitarian values. The figure of "the bully," a young orphan, embodies tensions between the convent's founding ethos of equality and its erosion by elitism. Restricted to lessons like catechism, needlework, and history, her schooling is overshadowed by endless chores. She shuttles from kitchens reeking of stew to toilets of disinfectant and storerooms with cobwebs staining her exercise book (Yahp, 1996, p. 25). Despite the passage of time, she remains unchanged—trapped in an endless cycle of servitude, perpetually on the margins. Through her, Yahp reconfigures the mission's counter-narrative, exposing its darker, more unsettling dimensions through a distorted and displaced gaze. These depictions of the convent contribute to the broader Manichean allegory in Yahp's text, positioning the convent simultaneously as satirical rather than sacrosanct, and fearsome rather than venerable.

CONCLUSION

The writings of Chen, Lim, and Yahp reveal distinct interpretations of the convent experience, shaped by personal sentiment and socio-historical context. Chen portrays the Sisters with deep reverence, linking their faith and resilience to her own social mobility, echoing the egalitarian ideals of nineteenth-century France. Lim, by contrast, depicts the convent as a site of both cultural elevation and estrangement, highlighting the ambivalence of English education that fostered empowerment while distancing students from their ethnic roots. Yahp, writing from a later generation, reimagines the convent through a satirical and gothic lens, emphasising its contradictions and unsettling transformations. Taken together, these divergent narratives illustrate how perceptions of the Sisters of the Infant Jesus and their institutions shifted across time, from their founding mission of egalitarianism to associations with elitism, and finally to postcolonial critiques of their cultural authority.

Yet, all these pluralities that shaped the pillars of these complex institutions have largely faded into historical memory, much like their founders, the nuns of the Holy Infant Jesus. The convent presently occupies a contested space within the Malaysian sociocultural imagination, both in its physical presence and in the discourses that surround it. The Christian foundations of these institutions, situated within a Muslim-majority country and a changing educational system, have significantly contributed to their gradual erasure from the contemporary national landscape. This process has been further accelerated by the historical placement of many convent schools in the heart of emerging towns during the nineteenth century. As these urban centres expanded, these institutions came to occupy prime land, increasingly seen as obstacles to capitalist-driven development and urban restructuring.

The forces of globalisation and economic progress often prioritise financial gain over preserving cultural and communal heritage. As travel and mobility once enabled the establishment of these convents, today, similar forces—driven by commerce, urban expansion, and profit—lead to their demolition, replacing them with structures that symbolise economic efficiency rather than historical continuity. The convents, which once served as spaces for education, refuge, and community-building, are now being overshadowed by commercial interests that reshape urban landscapes. As such, this paper has been an attempt to bring both the foundations of the institution as well as its French female foundresses out of the shadows of communal memory, reflecting the complex intersections of colonial influence, social mobility, and evolving notions of belonging and rupture that echoed through numerous corridors, shaping its growth from one generation to the next.

REFERENCES

Baernstein, P. R. (2002). *A convent tale: A century of sisterhood in Spanish Milan*. Routledge.

Bhabha, H. K. (1984). Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse. *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis*, *28*(Spring), 125–133.

Chen, Y. L. (2019). *Lessons from my school: The journey of the French nuns and their convent schools.* Clarity Publishing.

Chin, G. (1999). Angry ghosts: The furious power of the marginalized other in Beth Yahp's The Crocodile Fury. *Outskirts: Feminisms Along the Edge*, *4*.

Cooke, D. F. (1966). The mission schools of Malaya, 1815–1942. *Paedagogica Historica*, *6**(2), 364-399. https://doi.org/10.1080/00309236600602O2

Goodrich, J. (2019). 'Low & plain stile': Poetry and piety in English Benedictine convents, 1600–1800. *British Catholic History*, *34*, 599-618.

Hallett, N. (2012). Philip Sidney in the cloister: The reading habits of English nuns in seventeenth-century Antwerp. *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 88-116.

Harris, B. J. (1993). A new look at the Reformation: Aristocratic women and nunneries, 1450–1540. *Journal of British Studies*, *32*(2), 89-113.

Heller, M. (2006). *Linguistic minorities and modernity: A sociolinguistic ethnography* (2nd ed.). Continuum.

Hudd, S. (2016). *The Site of the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus in Singapore: Entwined histories of a colonial Convent and a nation, 1854–2015*. Amsterdam University Press.

Hudd, S. (2019). Revisiting Christian missionaries in the Straits Settlements: Blurring the boundaries between empire, mission and development. *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, *92*(1), 21–40. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26928023

Kelly, J. E. (2020). *English convents in Catholic Europe, c.1600-1800*. Cambridge University Press.

Lacan, J. (1996). *Écrits: A selection* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Routledge.

Lim, S. G. (1990). The Touring Company. In *Life's mysteries: The best of Shirley Lim* (pp. 19–25). Times Books International.

Lim, S. G. (1996). Pomegranates and English education. In *Among the White Moon Faces* (pp. 101–120). Times Books International.

Lowe, K. J. (2003). *Nuns' chronicles and convent culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy*. Cambridge University Press.

Murphy, E. K. (2019). Language and power in an English convent in exile, c. 1621 – c. 1631. *The Historical Journal*, *62*, 101-125.

Pillai, S. (2020). French and diasporic Tamil Catholic mobilities in colonial Malaya. *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia, 35*(2), 217–242. https://doi.org/10.1355/sj35-2b

Pillai, S. (2025). In pursuit of the Malaysian Catholic communal story across multiple sites of discursivities. In A. Del Percio (Ed.), *Handbook of language and mobility* (pp. 53-72). De Gruyter Mouton.

Raftery, D. (2015). From Kerry to Katong: Transnational influences in convent and novitiate life for the Sisters of the Infant Jesus, c. 1908–1950. In M. O'Donoghue (Ed.), *Education, identity and women religious*, 1800–1950 (pp. 31–42). Routledge.

Rogers, K. M. (1985). Fantasy and reality in fictional convents of the eighteenth century. *Comparative Literature Studies*, *22*(3), 297-316.

Sheller, M., & Urry, J. (2006). The new mobilities paradigm. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, *38*(2), 207–226. https://doi.org/10.1068/a37268

Sierra, H. (2009). Convents as Feminist Utopias: Margaret Cavendish's The Convent of Pleasure and the Potential of Closeted Dramas and Communities. *Women's Studies*, *38*(6), 647-669.

Strasser, U. (2003). *State of Virginity: Gender, Religion, and Politics in an Early Modern Catholic State*. University of Michigan Press.

Sullivan, K. (2021). Room to grow: The Convent in Graffigny, Riccoboni, and Gouges. *The French Review*, *89*, 161-174.

Teoh, K. M. (2020). Lessons from my School: The Journey of the French Nuns and their Convent Schools by Chen Yen Ling. *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, *93*(2), 248-250.

Townshend, D. (2017). 'Love in a convent': Gothic and the perverse father of queer enjoyment. In A. Smith & W. Hughes (Eds.), *Queering the Gothic* (pp. 11–35). Manchester University Press.

Walker, C. (2003). *Gender and politics in early modern Europe: English convents in France and the Low Countries*. Palgrave-McMillan.

Waller-Peterson, B. M. (2016). The convent as coven: Gothic implications of women-centered illness and healing narratives in Toni Morrison's Paradise. *Gothic Landscapes: Changing Eras, Changing Cultures, Changing Anxieties*, 147-168.

Watkinson, C. (2012). English Convents in eighteenth-century travel literature. *Studies in Church History*, *48*, 219-231

Yahp, B. (1992). *Crocodile Fury*. Angus & Robertson.

Yee, Y. J., Osman, S. A., & Mei, K. S. (2025). Reorienting Christina Rossetti's Christian feminist poetics in The Convent Threshold and A Royal Princess. *3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature*, *31*(1), 197-210.