

FINDING FRANCIS

A Poetic Adventure

Edited by

Eriko Ogihara-Schuck

and

Anne Teo

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This new edition of Francis P. Ng's *F.M.S.R. A Poem* (1937) ultimately became possible upon the confirmation from the poet's descendants that he had passed away more than seventy years ago and hence the copyright of this poem had expired. Throughout the clarification process of this long forgotten book's copyright status, we received assistance from numerous people.

Our first and most sincere thanks go to Akshita Nanda at *The Straits Times* and Samuel Chia. In response to her February 22, 2015 article in *The Sunday Times*, "Do You Know Teo Poh Leng?", about Eriko Ogihara-Schuck's discovery of the poet's actual name, Samuel Chia promptly contacted her, suggesting that the late Benedict Teo Kah Leng, a former teacher at the Holy Innocents' English School, was the poet's brother.

This contact enabled us—the researcher Eriko Ogihara-Schuck and Teo Poh Leng's niece and Teo Kah Leng's daughter, Anne Teo—to meet and collaboratively work toward the publication of this book. We are grateful to Akshita Nanda for agreeing to write in search of the poet's descendants and copyright holders, and we would like to give special recognition to Samuel Chia for revealing a previously unknown poem by Teo Kah Leng, "I Found a Bone". This poem would eventually prove

to be the only locatable public record that links Teo Kah Leng and Teo Poh Leng as brothers and confirms Poh Leng's death. Our republication of *F.M.S.R.* was made possible by Samuel Chia's vivid childhood recollection of his sister's reciting of "I Found a Bone" when it appeared in the 1955 issue of the *Holy Innocents' English School Annual*.

Archival research that followed Eriko Ogihara-Schuck's discovery in 2013 of Teo Poh Leng's name produced scant information, as many pertinent records had been lost during the Japanese occupation of Singapore between 1942 and 1945. Despite this initial lack of success, one year of intensive research inside and outside of Singapore resulted in encounters with many people who shared an interest in the poet. Among them were Francis Dorai and Stephanie Pee who agreed to publish the findings in *BiblioAsia*, the quarterly magazine of the National Library Board of Singapore, in January 2015. Their willingness to provide space to this unusual story as well as their adept inclusion of attractive visual materials and sophisticated editing enabled an effective presentation. With their permission, we have incorporated portions of the *BiblioAsia* article, "On the Trail of Francis P. Ng: Author of *F.M.S.R.*" (Vol. 10 No. 4, 2015), into this book.

We also owe a great deal to the young Singaporean poet Alvin Pang who discovered *F.M.S.R.* a decade ago and oversaw our project. His appreciation of the poem was most encouraging and his insightful advice at crucial stages enabled our smooth progress towards publication. Our book builds upon his prior strenuous efforts to bring public attention to the poem.

We are grateful to Walter Grünzweig and Randi Gunzenhäuser at Technische Universität Dortmund, Germany, and Jahan Ramazani at the University of Virginia, U.S.A., for reading and commenting on our manuscript. As specialists in literature from English-speaking nations, they recognised the dense complexity of *F.M.S.R.* as well as the significance of our project for the history of Singaporean literature.

Roby Johnson's solid conviction about both the literary and historical importance of *F.M.S.R.* served as a driving force from the beginning of archival research. After each disappointing moment in the course of this research, Roby helped contrive new approaches so that all possible routes to finding the poet's biographical information could be explored. His support for our decision to collaborate cemented the idea of bringing together the two brother-poets. Benefitting from his creative suggestions, sharp feedback, and most important of all, constant optimism, the republication of *F.M.S.R.*, together with other poems, has finally materialised.

Extensive community support was significant as this project spanned diverse historical periods, continents, and cultures. We received valuable input from the following people: Alex Abisheganaden, Jacintha Abisheganaden, Ernst Bochnig, Blake Bronson-Bartlett, Ruth Chia, Linda Chua, John Clammer, Anita Conceicao, Joe Conceicao, Adrian Danker, Robbie Goh, Mary Harris, Hirofumi Hayashi, Michelle Heng, Irene Hoe, Philip Holden, Catherine Koh, Koh Tai Ann, Terence Kumpf, Catherine Lim Suat Hong, Janet Lim, Juliana Lim, Lim Peck Lin, Lim Siah Chuan, Lim Su Min, Freddy Litten, Matt Lockaby, Loke Sui Har, Richard Martin, Jonathan Moffatt, Ng Ching Huei, Sina Nietzsche, Ann Ebert Oehlers, Rajeev S. Patke, Ramasamy Lokanathan, Amy Ridgeway, Hanna Malina Rodewald, Valerie Siew, Doug Slaymaker, Yoneyuki Sugita, Ivana Takacova, Etsuko Taketani, Alex Tan, Andrew Tan, Fiona Tan, Peggy Tan, Wesley Tan, Marion Nicole Teo, Michelle Teo, Edwin Thumboo, Tim Yap Fuan, Medona Walter, Wang Gungwu, Richard Angus Whitehead, Magdalene Wong, Lloyd Yeo, and Ina Zhang.

Special thanks also go to our families. With two small children, Eriko Ogihara-Schuck was able to conduct archival research in Singapore in the summer of 2014 only because her husband Christoph accompanied her, and her parents Sadako and Tsugio Ogihara flew from

Japan to assist them. Anne Teo's contribution was warmly supported by the encouragement of her husband and children. We are especially thankful to her daughter Joanne Har Ling Mei for creating the cover image of this book.

Finally, this book is dedicated to the brother-poets Paul Teo Poh Leng and Benedict Teo Kah Leng. While they cannot experience their reunion, they have left us with an invaluable story. Their brotherly bond through poetry truly fascinated us with the timeless power of this genre. Through the recovery of their life stories and works, we would like to contribute a new page to the history of Singaporean literature.

Eriko Ogihara-Schuck and Anne Teo
October 2015

INTRODUCTION

Eriko Ogihara-Schuck

Francis P. Ng's *F.M.S.R. A Poem* (1937)¹ is a long poem unfolding a train journey between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur on the Federated Malay States Railways (FMSR). It has often been declared as the first notable work of English poetry produced by a Singaporean writer, but the dictates of history have conspired to keep it hidden from general readership. Specifically, the author's use of the pseudonym Francis P. Ng and his publisher's loss of publication information in the chaos of World War II prevented the poem's further distribution and reception; *F.M.S.R.* thus became an "orphan work" without identifiable copyright status, making a full reproduction legally difficult. A recent survey showed that the poem is available only in the form of original copies at five libraries worldwide.²

This biography of the poet, the assessment of his poems, and the full republication of *F.M.S.R.* together with three shorter poems, became possible as a result of the discovery of the poet's real name, Paul Teo Poh Leng. I found this name in the footnote to the seventh section of *F.M.S.R.* According to the footnote, this section, as an independent poem titled "The Song of the Night Express", had appeared earlier in the spring 1937 issue of *Life and Letters To-day*; I found that "The Song of the Night Express" was authored by "Teo Poh Leng"³ (Figure 1). Subsequent archival research and interviews with the poet's niece, Anne

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Figure 1: Section VII of *F.M.S.R.* retitled as "The Song of the Night Express" by Teo Poh Leng, was published in the 1937 spring issue of *Life and Letters To-day*, a British literary magazine. *Life and Letters To-day*, (Vol. 16, No. 7).

Teo, turned the poet into a real person. The abundant sources pertaining to Teo Poh Leng which must have formerly existed, were destroyed during World War II, yet fragmented pieces of surviving sources, along with family recollections, have permitted the construction of his life story as well as his poetic persona. What follows is the story of a

forgotten Singaporean pre-World War II pioneer-poet and his notable creation of Malayan modernism.

Rediscovering Teo Poh Leng's life story

Paul Teo Poh Leng was born in 1912 in the Crown Colony of Singapore in the Straits Settlements.⁴ As the trade post of British Malaya, Singapore had established itself as one of the most cosmopolitan cities in Asia, consisting mostly of Chinese, Malays, Indians, Arabs, Jews, Eurasians, and Europeans.⁵ Chinese were the majority constituting three-fourth of the Singaporean population and Teo belonged to this group—he was the youngest son of a Teochew family, a dialect group originating from Southern China.

Teo, however, belonged to the minority of English-educated non-Europeans.⁶ As an offspring of devout Catholic parents and thus as a member of the Christian minority,⁷ he studied at St. Joseph's Institution (SJI), a Catholic English-medium school established by French missionaries, and further continued his studies at Raffles College, an elite British teachers' training college.⁸ After receiving a Liberal Arts degree in 1934, like many of his non-European college mates, such as the late prominent musician Paul Abisheganaden, he took a teaching post in an elementary school.⁹ There he remained until he fell victim to the Sook Ching massacre on February 28, 1942 at the onset of the Japanese occupation of Singapore.¹⁰

In his brief life, Teo Poh Leng was extremely active and highly devoted to politics, education, and social welfare. While in his early 20s, together with the prominent banker and philanthropist Seow Poh Leng, who was almost thirty years his elder, Teo served as an elected office bearer of the Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA).¹¹ The SCBA was the most prominent, politically-driven organisation of early 20th century Singapore that exerted extensive influence on the British colonial government.¹² Founded in 1900 by Tan Jiak Kim, Seah Liang

Seah, Lim Boon Keng, and Song Ong Siang with initially about 800 members, the SCBA strove to elevate, in a variety of ways, the social status of Straits Chinese, or King's Chinese, while maintaining loyalty to the Crown.¹³

At Raffles College, the precursor of the University of Malaya, Teo contributed extensively to *Raffles College Magazine*, serving as its Editor during his final school year 1933–34. Under the guidance of the young lecturer Graham G. Hough who later became a renowned D. H. Lawrence scholar,¹⁴ Teo actively put his concerns into print and disseminated, in the form of essays, blunt commentaries on the modern state of Malaya and modern society in general. In the 1933 editorial note, “The Learning of Advancement”, he deplored Malaya’s lack of appreciation for art and culture at the brink of industrialisation and Westernisation and its entry into the world economy. For him, one way to overcome this situation was the reform and development of Raffles College, eventually “a Singapore or Malayan University”,¹⁵ into “the cultural centre for the cosmopolitan races of Malaya”.¹⁶ As a man with a strong faith in the enormous impact that the college could have on Singapore and eventually on all Malayan society, he strongly advocated systematic enhancement of college education.¹⁷

Teo also provided leadership in his Catholic community. As a highly educated layperson, he worked through various Catholic organisations for the improvement of education and social welfare in Singapore. At the Catholic Young Men’s Association (CYMA) of the Tamil Indian church, the Church of Our Lady of Lourdes, Teo served as the Vice-President in 1932.¹⁸ As the only official with a Teochew background, he oversaw the organisation’s implementation of its library, public lecture events, art and music performances, and sports activities.¹⁹ At the CYMA of the Church of Sts. Peter and Paul, which was then a church for Teochews, he was the Honorary Librarian from 1935 to 1937 and participated in its Study Class.²⁰ In 1935 when the Catholic weekly newspaper *Malaya Catholic Leader*, the forerunner of *The*

Catholic News, was founded by Bishop Adrien Pierre Devals, he served as a special correspondent.²¹

While passionately engaging in political, intellectual, and religious organisations, Teo was an active and enthusiastic school teacher until his death. In his time, it was common for non-Europeans in Singapore to start teaching as an assistant teacher, and Teo may have done so before graduating from SJI. According to *The Blue Book*, he entered civil service almost a year before taking the Cambridge School Certificate Examination at SJI.²² Perhaps he was in the midst of teaching-practice when he was admitted to Raffles College in 1931.²³

While studying at Raffles College, Teo probably expanded his teaching experience—the college was founded to train local teachers for secondary schools and required students to teach in local schools during their college years under the supervision of qualified teachers.²⁴ After graduation in 1934, he was very likely posted to a primary school as not many secondary schools existed then.²⁵ Records of where he taught have not been located, although in 1937 he described himself as “a master in a government elementary English school”.²⁶

Receiving and giving Anglophone education, Teo was fluent in English and also a polyglot. At home he was raised bilingually in Teochew (a Chinese dialect) and English;²⁷ at school he learned French as a foreign language;²⁸ as a Catholic he should have understood some Latin. Common to many Straits Chinese, he probably spoke some Malay.²⁹

Very likely, in his 20s Teo learned Mandarin, the official Chinese language, at the Singapore Chinese Mandarin School. Founded in 1930, shortly after the establishment of the Nationalist Kuomintang government in Nanjing, it offered night classes for adults who wanted to learn Mandarin as non-native or Chinese dialect speakers. Its 1937 register lists Teo’s name although the romanised form of his last Chinese character seems to be misprinted (Figure 2).³⁰

Maintaining a close tie to the Chinese government, the Singapore Chinese Mandarin School aimed at “bringing about unison and better

Tan Yiang Poh	陳仰偉	34, Perak Road	Teo Siong Moh	張松茂	14, Hill Street
Tan Peng Whee		43, Boundary Road	Teo Teng Quee	張廷柱	898-B, Simon Rd.
Tay Mai Hsing	鄭蓮華	524, East Coast Road	Teo Kim Song	張錦松	1-A Campbell Road
Tay Eng Swee		162, Serangoon Road	Toh Cheng Kiat		315, Bukit Timah Rd.
Try Tiang Wah	鄧天華	66, Cross Street	Toh Kim Chong	卓金存	173, Paim Road
Tay Teon Chye	鄧棟材	58, Waterloo Street	Toh Yew Beng	梁友孟	39-1, Kerbau Road
Tay Kim Tong	鄧錦堂	18, Cavangah Road	Toh Heng Hew	杜慶輝	20, Upper Perah Rd.
Tay Yang Huat		53, Emerald Hill Road	Teh Gim Bah	杜金容	c/o Mr. Lee E. Keng
Tay Soo Lan	鄧思南	131, Moulmein Road	Miss Toh Sau Keng	杜秀經	Kreta Ayer Clinic
Tay Swee Choon	鄧瑞祿	Govt. Survey Office	Tah Cheng Kiat	陳清吉	315, Bukit Timah Rd.
Tay Liang Whatt	鄧雨軒	65, Rowell Road	Tjioe Tian Tjaj		191, Serangoon Road
Toh Yong Eh		285, Beach Road	Ten Yoon Fong		Medical Hostel, Moulmein Road
Teng Ah Kow	鄧亞九	134 Tanjong Pagar Rd	Thong Choy Tse	湯才仕	300, Orchard Road
Tay Koy Swee	鄧國瑞	44, Duxton Hill	Than Hein Foo		6, Lor. 4, Geylang Rd.
Tay Wooi Lum	鄧錫南	38, Craig Road	Tang Thien Chee		90, Robinson Road
Theo Thiam Swee	張添水	184, Bukit Timah Road	Thoo Kwee Heng		591-A, Serangoon Rd.
Thomas Kevin		8, Battery Road	Tong Kim Cheong	董金宇	Tyrwhitt Road
	Milean		Toong Siew Kwong		53-A, Tiong Bahru Rd.
Teo Seng Kong	陳成功	Medical College	Thio Keng Hong		47, Circular Road
Teo Chin Thian	陳青天	13, Peng Nguan St.	Teh Choon Keat		Prevention of Cruelty to Animals' Dept.
Teo Kan Phua	張嘉釗	c/o Municipality	Teng Song Toh		465, Beach Road
Teo Kam Guan		43-1, Dickson Road	Teng Kim Hock		Raffles Insitution
Teo Ah Kow	張亞九	16, Hock Lam Street	Tang Chin Seng	唐景星	99, Albert Street
Teo Cheng Kee	張清基	45, Cross Street	Tang Chwee Hoe		Govt. Analyst Dept.
Teo Way Kow		Eastern United Asse. Corp., Ltd.	T. B. Yeow		c/o P.O. Box 25, S'pore
Teo Poh Ling	張寶陞	930, Up. Serangoon Rd.	T. C. Tan		6, Surrey Road
Teo Lam Chye	張南財	67-1, Prinsep Street	Tham Ying Thim	譚應泰	1st Magistrate's Court
Teo Beng Chye	張明財	207, Geylang Road	Tham Seng Leong	譚勝亮	木律
Teo Choon Eng	張春英	Govt. Survey Office			

Figure 2: This 1937 students' list of the Singapore Chinese Mandarin School contains the name "Teo Poh Ling". Although the last Chinese character of his name is romanised as "Ling" instead of "Leng", I speculate that this "Teo Poh Ling" with the address "930, Up. Serangoon Road" was the poet Teo Poh Leng. In the mid-1930s, this address was also the residence of "James Teo Hong Nghee". According to the *Malaya Catholic Leader*, in 1935 he celebrated his 71st birthday at this address. Possibly this "James Teo Hong Nghee" was Teo Poh Leng's father although misprinted. According to Anne Teo, her grandfather's name was "John Teo Hong Ngee". See "Around the Parishes". (1935, March 2). *Malaya Catholic Leader*, 17. The author wants to thank Catherine Koh for locating the above register. *Singapore Chinese Mandarin School: Special issue for the 7th-year anniversary*, p. 18. Courtesy of NUS Central Library.

understanding among the Chinese”.³¹ Envisioning that Mandarin would soon become “the Lingua Franca of all Chinese in British Malaya”,³² it mainly targeted Chinese who spoke only dialects and those who were educated in English-medium schools.³³ Obviously, the school’s belief in the importance of inculcating in Chinese a common language grew along with the Japanese invasion of China. In 1937 at the seventh anniversary of the founding of the Mandarin school, the medical doctor Chen Su Lan reminded his audience that “the rise of Japan in power followed the nationalisation of her language”,³⁴ suggesting the necessity for the Chinese to cement their national language in order to confront Japan.

It seems, however, that Teo’s motive was non-political. Studying together with European expatriates such as the Raffles College professor Alexander Oppenheim,³⁵ who would later become the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Malaya and a world-famous mathematician, Teo was probably interested in learning Mandarin out of personal interest, to be able to communicate in Mandarin and read Chinese literature in the original. The fact that his father was a Mandarin teacher could have been a motivating factor as well.³⁶

A political tie to China was probably not the reason why Teo eventually became the target of the Sook Ching operation. His unfortunate death was more likely caused by his sincere devotion as a teacher.³⁷ On February 28, 1942, together with many other persons in Singapore whom the Japanese considered as potentially subversive, he was detained and never heard from again.³⁸

Teo Poh Leng’s poetry

Teo’s passion for poetry may have started in his early childhood. According to Abisheganaden, poetry was then a popular genre taught at Anglophone schools from the primary level onward.³⁹ Perhaps Teo was writing poems while attending SJI. Along with its competitors, the Raffles Institution and the Anglo-Chinese School, SJI published

an annual school magazine, *St. Joseph's Magazine*, that served as a publication platform for the literary production of teachers and pupils. While no record of any literary works by Teo appears here, the presence of such a magazine suggests that teachers encouraged pupils to write poetry and that Teo would have had the opportunity to publish his works starting at an early age.

The earliest record of Teo's poetry dates from his first year at Raffles College. On September 14, 1931, from the address 700 Serangoon Road, Teo submitted four poems to the American poet Harriet Monroe for publication in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* in Chicago (Figure 3).⁴⁰

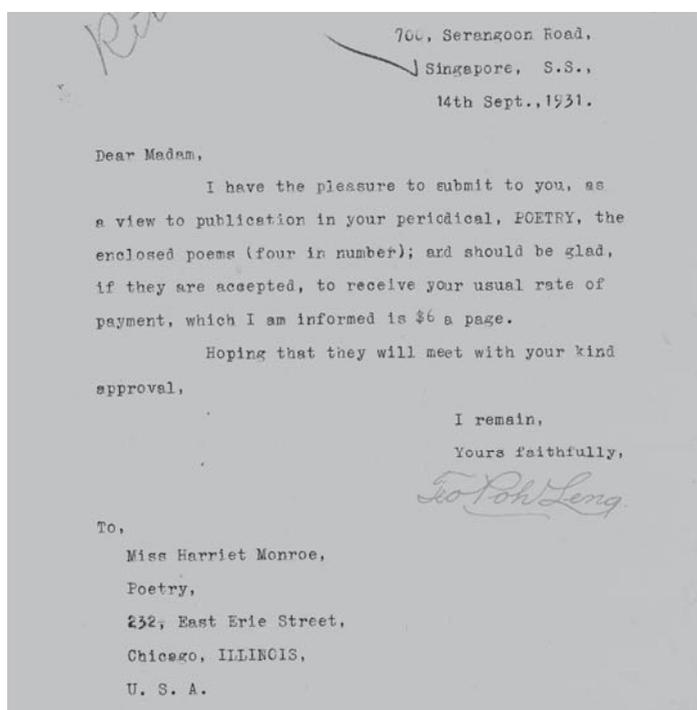


Figure 3: On 14 September, 1931, in a letter addressed from 700 Serangoon Road which may have been his residence, Teo posted four poems to American poet Harriet Monroe for consideration for publication in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. Courtesy of Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

These poems went unpublished and their manuscripts are missing.⁴¹ But his submission of these poems at a relatively young age to a prestigious monthly poetry magazine attests to his ambitious and passionate commitment to poetry writing.

After graduating from Raffles College, he approached several British literary magazines which accepted his poems. One of these poems, “Time Is Past”, appeared in the January 1936 issue of *The London Mercury*, a prestigious monthly literary magazine that had published works by Joseph Conrad and W. B. Yeats.⁴²

Teo’s second poem, “The Song of the Night Express”, appeared in the spring 1937 issue of *Life and Letters To-day*, another prominent British literary magazine of the 1930s which published works by E. M. Forster, Thomas Hardy, D. H. Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf.⁴³ The publication of this one-page poem, an excerpt from his longer, book-length work *F.M.S.R.* with some slight changes, was part of the magazine’s attempt to introduce international literary works. This issue credited Teo as being “A Chinese poet writing directly in English”⁴⁴ and published him together with the Greek author Lilika Nakos. The advertisement for *Life and Letters To-day* that appeared in the Shanghai-based English and Chinese literary magazine, *T’ien Hsia Monthly*, selects and introduces Teo’s name together with other prestigious international authors such as Thomas and Heinrich Mann, André Gide, C. Day Lewis, the later Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom, and Pa Chin, a Chinese poet also known as Li Fei-kan.⁴⁵

There is a strong possibility that Teo published more poems in other British literary magazines. According to “Notes on Contributors” in the spring 1937 issue of *Life and Letters To-day*, his other poems had earlier “won the approval of, among others, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Ronald Bottrall”⁴⁶

His masterpiece, *F.M.S.R. A Poem* (1937), was printed in the United Kingdom under the pseudonym “Francis P. Ng”, a combination of his second Christian name and his maternal family name.⁴⁷

The London-based publisher Arthur H. Stockwell undertook the publication of this book-length poem that was based on a nine-hour journey between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur on the FMSR.⁴⁸ Not much information can be obtained about this publishing firm as its records were destroyed during the World War II bombing of London.⁴⁹ However, the publisher's books show that he published numerous genres and was particularly interested in publishing poems of high quality. In his book, *101 Markets for Poems* (1937), Stockwell denounced writers who "expect any short verses, usually hastily scribbled on the backs of envelopes, to sell" and appreciated "The versifier who takes his verse seriously".⁵⁰

While Teo was enthusiastic about publishing in London for the British market, he was a poet grounded in Singapore. His last known poem, "The Spider" (1941), was published in *Chorus*, the annual magazine of the Singapore Teachers' Association. The poem appeared only a few weeks before World War II came to Singapore with the Japanese bombing on December 8, 1941. Shortly afterwards the poet was murdered.

The issues of *Chorus* demonstrate that he was one of many educators who devoted themselves to creative writing. The magazine contains numerous poems and prose works by both expatriate British and local teachers, much like the magazines published by SJI and other schools. In the case of Singapore, educational settings provided a rich soil for the creation of a Singaporean literature. Although Teo pursued publication in the United Kingdom and the United States, his poetic achievements were inevitably the product of a distinctive local literary environment.

The Creation of Malayan modernism

All of Teo's poems are part of Western literary modernism that permeated European and American literature in the first half of the twentieth century. His poems' pessimistic tones remind one of

the authors of the “Lost Generation” who were disillusioned by the unprecedented mass destruction of World War I (1914–18) and became enamoured with the theme of the living dead. Suggesting the American and British modernist poet T. S. Eliot’s seminal work *The Waste Land* (1922), *F.M.S.R.* urges, “Bury the living dead, / Bury the dying lives”.⁵¹ In “Time Is Past” (1936), the narrator describes a ghostly afterlife: “I move upon an earthless plane, / At last!” yet “perplexing and profound I seem” and this mental state is like “the ravine” which “makes me pale”.⁵² The poem “The Spider” (1941) deplores the “deathless discipline” of continuously weaving a web only for it to be blown away as it “deadens me” and “I sigh”.⁵³ All these poems can be read as a distillation of Teo’s distrust of contemporary society, which he called “a wild beast”.⁵⁴

In the context of 1930s colonial Singapore, the Great Depression which started in 1929 was a significant period for that “wild beast”; Teo observed that British Malaya had been “swept by the cataclysmic current of world economic depression”.⁵⁵ According to the historian C. F. Yong, the Great Depression was “a heavy blow to many Chinese enterprises in Singapore as the island was overdependent on international trade and banking systems”.⁵⁶ For example, it strongly affected Tan Kah Kee, the prominent Chinese millionaire and philanthropist whose wealth was built mainly on rubber growing and manufacturing of rubber goods in the early decades of the twentieth century. The sharp decline of consumer demand as well as the overstocking and underpricing of goods were the main reasons which forced him to close his massive business empire, resulting in the unemployment of about 4,500 workers.⁵⁷ Directly responding to such an unstable economic context of the first half of the 1930s, *F.M.S.R.* despairingly paints the life of poverty in Singapore in which “Sickness and pauperity surround”⁵⁸ although “Poverty is [...] in the State a crime in lurch”.⁵⁹

Such an exposition of despair was, however, far from a helpless and passive cowering in front of “a wild beast”. It was an active response, a

participation in the “revolution of the arts”⁶⁰ as led by Eliot and other modernist poets and artists. In his 1936 essay “Prolegomena to the Modern Poets” published in *Raffles College Magazine*, Teo expressed his admiration of these artists and absorbed their attempt to “seek new forms, new rhythms” in order to overcome “a moribund language” and “the fear [in the post-World War I era] that the language is dying”.⁶¹ Teo’s critical approach to contemporary society was part of this novelty. Against the backdrop of traditionalist poetry, he embraced the “great courage” of modernist poets to try to “record the effects of the mighty march downward of civilisation, the collapse of culture, sometimes within the compass of less than 500 ‘tabloid’ lines”.⁶²

According to “Prolegomena”, Teo particularly appreciated the complexity of modernist poetry. Objecting to the opinion that poetry must be “simple and the sense easily followed”,⁶³ he advocated modernists’ dense poetic style, calling their poems “hieroglyphics” that required the reader “to be mentally agile in order to attempt to decipher”.⁶⁴ His assertion was that poetry is destined to become more and more difficult, agreeing with the British literary critic F. R. Leavis’s prediction that “the more important poetry of the future is not likely to be simple”.⁶⁵

Along with Eliot and other modernist poets such as G. M. Hopkins, Ezra Pound, and W. B. Yeats, the Cornish poet Ronald Bottrall inspired Teo’s use of a dense poetic style. Teo, in fact, wrote “Prolegomena” in order to defend Bottrall whose poetic style was facing severe attacks in a newspaper dispute.⁶⁶ Directly confronting a reader who considered Bottrall’s poems deficient, Teo passionately credited the density of Bottrall’s poetical works in *The Loosening and Other Poems* (1931) and *Festivals of Fire* (1934): He recognised them as works necessitating multiple readings for better assessment, eventually generating “divergent reactions of desperation, toleration, comprehension and admiration”.⁶⁷

In fact, Bottrall was Teo's professor at Raffles College. After a two-year fellowship in Princeton, Bottrall arrived in Singapore in 1933 to become the Johore Professor at Raffles College where he taught until 1937.⁶⁸ It is likely that Teo first encountered Bottrall only during his final college year from 1933 to 1934, but Bottrall, as a literature professor and a poet, apparently influenced him. Bottrall may well have helped him to become acquainted with modernist literature. There is an extensive overlap between the literary texts Bottrall assigned to his students and the authors Teo discussed in his *Raffles College Magazine* essays.⁶⁹ Bottrall was highly esteemed in Great Britain and most likely the key person to promote Teo's entry to British literary circles. Thus, as mentioned earlier, *Life and Letters To-day* recognised Bottrall as one of the established literary figures who had praised Teo's poems. Bottrall perhaps contributed to Teo's completion of *F.M.S.R.*: Although published in 1937, Teo wrote this poem between 1932 and 1934 when he would have had the chance to ask Bottrall to read and comment on his work (Figure 4).⁷⁰

F.M.S.R. is Teo's theory of modernist poetry put into practice. It contains dark social criticism and a complexity that arises partly from its complex symbolic structures. The poem exemplifies the experimental nature that is characteristic of modernist poetry. The application, according to the "Note" to *F.M.S.R.*, of "varying metres so as to express the varying rhythms of the railways"⁷¹ is one such example. Challenging conventional poetry that uses regular metres, *F.M.S.R.*'s irregular metres result in a creative expression of the sensory experiences that accompany a train journey.

This does not mean, however, that *F.M.S.R.* completely dispenses with conventional poetical structure. Resonating with Eliot's style, this poem is remarkable in its merger of irregular metres with rhymes. The poem begins with such a merger: "Millionaires from the New World with nothing else to do / Wander the Old World like wandering Jews; / Call here to buy wooden shoes".⁷² The blending of rhymes



Figure 4: This faded graduation photograph of the Raffles College graduates of 1934 contains Ronald Bottrall (the second from the left in the first row) and Paul Abisheganaden (the ninth from the left in the middle row). Teo is supposedly in this picture as well but remains unidentified. *Raffles College Union Magazine* (1934). 4(10). Courtesy of NUS Central Library.

with irregular metres continues throughout this critical stanza about American millionaires' materialistic cravings in Singapore; consequently it generates a sense of bewilderment in the reader not used to the co-existence of these two poetic schemes.

Another experimental feature of *F.M.S.R.* is repetition. At first glance its effect seems simple. One of its functions is to emphasise the narrator's emotion, as in the lines, "Bury and bury and bury, / Hurry and hurry and hurry".⁷³ Repetition also assimilates a section of the poem to a song, as in the seventh section starting with "For he chants of the wheels, / Of the wheels revolving, revolving; / Of the places where he was sojourning, sojourning".⁷⁴ This section was titled "The Song of the Night Express" when earlier published separately from the main poem.⁷⁵ Moreover, repetitions, when coupled with syncopation, generate a jazz rhythm and hence a likeness to the jazz poetry of the African American

poet Langston Hughes: “Night the undertaker mutters: / Dancing in the three Worlds, / Jazzing in their cabarets / Whirling in a drunken pace, / With a drunken grace”.⁷⁶

The function of repetition in *F.M.S.R.* becomes more complex when probing into additional examples. The repetition of words, sometimes in slightly different forms such as “Wander” and “wandering” in the poem’s opening lines, frequently occurs in the description of objects and settings across separate stanzas. Teo’s experiment with repetition culminates in his intertextual strategy, borrowing lines from other literary works that was popularised by Eliot among others. The second line from William Blake’s “The Tyger” (1794) is repeated to express the interminable night scenery of forest in Southern Malaya: “*Tiger, tiger burning bright / In the forests of the night, / In the forests of the night*”.⁷⁷

Such a use of various styles of repetition constitutes *F.M.S.R.*’s larger attempt at formulating a distinctive soundscape. In fact, this poem is most remarkable in its intricate experiment with sound, and the interplay between noise and silence runs as a coherent thread through the whole poem. One example of such an interplay manifests itself between two different sets of travellers: American millionaires travelling the globe and a single traveller, perhaps a Singapore resident like the poet himself, on the northbound train. Millionaires are silent and slow: They walk like “wandering Jews” and seek heavy “wooden shoes” and “malacca canes”⁷⁸ unlike dwellers in Singapore who with “sandalled feet” create “the click-clack rhythm on the street”.⁷⁹ On the contrary, the train passenger is associated with speed and noise, riding in a speedy train and concentrating on its sound and the quick change of scenery. The symbolic meanings of the noise and silence in the light of the then new conceptions of time and space brought by scientific and technological developments add another layer to the poem’s density.

Lastly, the use of the Asian city Singapore as the predominant setting adds a special touch to this modernist poem. Although a British colony, the scenery of this “Lion-City”, according to *F.M.S.R.*, is full of Asian objects and icons and so are other locations seen from a train travelling to Kuala Lumpur. Ultimately, Asia’s encounter with the West, be it in the form of fusion, tension, or repulsion, looms large as the poem’s overarching theme. The same is true with Teo’s shorter poems. Both “Time Is Past” and “The Spider”, while borrowing Western modernist techniques and utilising the English language, portray the so-called Asian perspective of life. Both poems transcend the notion of time which Christianity considers insurmountable and see life’s journey as cyclical rather than linear.

In “Prolegomena to the Modern Poets”, Teo lamented that “Modern poetry has not received a fair chance to prosper”⁸⁰ and that modernist poets interested in “evoking new forces, new forms, new harmonies, new rhythms” are “regarded as freaks and bedlams”.⁸¹ He deeply embraced this genre, however, with an assurance that “to-morrow [these poets] will be hailed as the saviours of a dying art”.⁸²

Rooted in Singapore, Teo devoted himself to this modernist literary enterprise for the purpose of creating Malayan art and culture. Lamenting a Malaya that culturally “resembles the debris left on the shore of world events”⁸³ and that the “main menace of the infiltration of Western cultures into Eastern lands lies in that oriental propensity to retain their dregs”,⁸⁴ he found it important that Malaya is “well cultured ere she attempts industrialisation”.⁸⁵ He thus wrote poems with a strong vision for the advancement of Malayan society at large. Although he died at a young age and left only a few poetic works, his courageous creation of Malayan modernism left a lasting literary legacy.

Endnotes

- 1 The book actually does not indicate this publication date; its note only says that Ng completed the poem between 1932 and 1934 and the preface in 1935. Publication of advertisements and reviews begins in 1937, suggesting that the book was published in that year. See Poetry review supplement. (1937). *Poetry Review*, 28, xi; As I was saying. (1937, December 18). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 8; Notes of the day. (1937, December 21). *The Straits Times*, 12.
- 2 According to the WorldCat database, *F.M.S.R.* is currently available only at the National Library Board of Singapore, the British Library, the University of Oxford, the National Library of Scotland, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
- 3 See Teo P. L. (1937). The song of the night express. *Life and Letters Today*, 16(7), 44.
- 4 Teo, A. (2015, August 10). Personal communication. The year of his birth is also mentioned in Notes on contributors. (1937). *Life and Letters To-day*, 16(7), ix. The Immigration & Checkpoints Authority (ICA) of Singapore has located neither his nor his brother Teo Kah Leng's birth certificate; their baptismal records have not yet been found.
- 5 Turnbull, C. M. (2009). *A history of modern Singapore, 1819–2005*. Singapore: NUS Press, 110.
- 6 According to the Census of 1911, 17 out of every 1,000 of the population in the colony of the Straits Settlements spoke English as the principal language.
- 7 Teo, A. (2015, April 16). Personal communication. According to the Census of 1911, 388 out of every 10,000 of the population in the colony of the Straits Settlements were Christians.
- 8 Examination results. (1930). *St. Joseph's Magazine: Chronicle for 1930*, 29; 1931. (1993). *Raffles College 1928–1949*. Singapore: Alumni Affairs and Development Office, National University of Singapore, 92; Raffles College. (1934, March 21). *The Straits Times*, 7.
- 9 Chua, C. H. (1993, March 28). Interview with Paul S. Abisheganaden.

- Reel 7. Oral History Centre. *National Archives of Singapore: Archives Online*, 86.
- 10 Teo, A. (2015, April 16); Teo K. L. (1955). I found a bone. *The Holy Innocents' English School Annual*, 2(1), 22–23. This poem is the only remaining printed record of Teo Poh Leng's death as the ICA has not located his death certificate. *The Blue Book for the Straits Settlements* records Teo's salary from 1934 to 1939.
 - 11 Seow Poh Leng died on a ship when it was bombed by the Japanese in February 1942. Lim S. M. (2014, November 2). Personal communication.
 - 12 Chua A. L. (2008). Imperial subjects, Straits citizens: Anglophone Asians and the struggle for political rights in inter-war Singapore. In M. D. Barr & C. A. Trocki (Eds), *Paths not taken: Political pluralism in post-war Singapore*. Singapore: NUS Press, 18.
 - 13 Turnbull, 115.
 - 14 *Raffles College Union Magazine*, 4(8), 1.
 - 15 Teo P. L. (1933). The learning of advancement. *Raffles College Magazine*, 3(7), 10.
 - 16 *Ibid.*, 10.
 - 17 Teo's advocacy of the enhancement of the college education corresponds to Seow Poh Leng's proposal to establish a university in Singapore that Seow introduced three years later in 1936 at the SCBA. See Education in English, restriction will be avoided. (1936, November 21). *The Straits Times*, 13.
 - 18 Untitled. (1932, September 9). *The Straits Times*, 12.
 - 19 The CYMA at the Church of Our Lady of Lourdes was a social action organisation founded in 1928 by Tamil Catholics. Teo became the Vice President immediately after the organisation started to accept both Tamil and non-Tamil Catholics throughout Singapore as members. Before becoming a CYMA member, Teo had already given a public lecture at the organisation. See Catholic Young Men's ASSN. Annual report for Singapore. (1932, September 4). *The Straits Times*, 3; Liew, C. (2008). Conceiving ethnic-dialectical church communities: A mission growth

- strategy from 1888–1935. *BiblioAsia*, 4(1), 14; Untitled. (1932, May 11). *The Straits Times*, 12.
- 20 The CYMA at the Church of Sts. Peter and Paul derived from the Chorister's Society of S. Cecilia; the society was renamed CYMA and inaugurated in 1933. See Catholic Young Men's Association Singapore. (1935, March 2). *Malaya Catholic Leader*, 19. As for Teo's activities at the CYMA at the Church of Sts. Peter and Paul, see C. Y. M. A.: Church of St. Peter and Paul (Singapore). (1935, March 9). *Malaya Catholic Leader*, 16; "Catholic Young Men's Association: The study class". (1936, October 3). *Malaya Catholic Leader*, 13; Catholic Young Men's Association. (1936, November 28). *Malaya Catholic Leader*, 13; Church of SS Peter and Paul: Catholic Young Men's Association Singapore. (1937, February 6). *Malaya Catholic Leader*, 18; Church of SS. Peter & Paul. (1937, February 13). *Malaya Catholic Leader*, 19; Around the Parishes. (1938, January 1). *Malaya Catholic Leader*, 18. The author wants to thank *The CatholicNews* for permitting her to access all issues of the *Malaya Catholic Leader* up to 1941.
- 21 Catholic Young Men's Association Singapore. (1935, March 2). *Malaya Catholic Leader*, 19.
- 22 *The Blue Book for the year 1938: Straits Settlements* (1938). Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 398.
- 23 His college mate, Paul Abisheganaden, recollected that some of his fellow students had been on the three-year teacher training before pursuing college education. See Chua, C. H. (1993, March 28), 94.
- 24 Chua, C. H. (1993, April 2). Interview with Paul S. Abisheganaden. Reel 8. Oral History Centre. *National Archives of Singapore: Archives Online*, 100–1.
- 25 Chua, C. H. (1993, March 28), 86.
- 26 Notes on contributors. (1937), ix.
- 27 Teo, A. (2015, August 30). Personal communication.
- 28 University of Cambridge local examinations syndicate: School certificate examination (1929, December). The author wants to thank the SJI Archives for providing this material.

- 29 Teo, A. (2015, August 30).
- 30 Lists of students' names and addresses. (1937). *Singapore Chinese Mandarin School: Special issue for the 7th-year anniversary*. Singapore: Chinese Mandarin School, 18. http://libapps2.nus.edu.sg/sea_chinese/documents/Southeast%20Asian%20Chinese%20Historical%20Document/List%2018-21/list%2019/xin_jia_po_hua_qiao/xue%20sheng%20tong%20xun%20chu.pdf
- 31 Lingua franca of Chinese: Hopes for Mandarin. (1936, April 12). *The Straits Times*, 4.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 33 While the first largest group of students were clerks, the second largest were students at English-medium schools. See Students' occupations. (1937). *Singapore Chinese Mandarin School: Special issue for the 7th-year anniversary*. Singapore: Chinese Mandarin School. http://libapps2.nus.edu.sg/sea_chinese/documents/Southeast%20Asian%20Chinese%20Historical%20Document/List%2018-21/list%2019/xin_jia_po_hua_qiao/ge%20xiang%20bi%20jiao%20biao.pdf.
- 34 Lingua franca of Chinese, 4.
- 35 Lists of students' names and addresses, 12.
- 36 For the same reasons, his elder brother Teo Kah Leng wanted to learn Mandarin. However, he, unlike his unmarried brother, could not procure time for that. Teo, A. (2015, August 22). Personal communication.
- 37 Teo, A. (2015, August 22). According to her father, anyone who was a teacher was taken and killed. He guessed that the Japanese were afraid that teachers might instigate problems.
- 38 Teo, A. (2015, April 16). The Sook Ching massacres started on February 18, 1942 and took place in numerous areas in Singapore. Teo Poh Leng fell victim to the Punggol Beach massacre which targeted at residents in the Serangoon area. Also see Teo K. L. (1955), 22–23.
- 39 Chua, C. H. (1993, March 9). Interview with Paul S. Abisheganaden. Reel 2. Oral History Centre. *National Archives of Singapore: Archives Online*, 22.

- 40 Teo P. L. (1931, September 14). Letter to Harriet Monroe. *Guide to the Poetry: A Magazine of Verses records 1895–1961*. Administrative files, series 1, box 25, folder 11. Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago.
- 41 Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago. (2013, October 18). Personal communication.
- 42 Teo P. L. (1936). Time is past. *The London Mercury*, 33(195), 275. This poem attracted the attention of *NOVAE TERRAE*, a private science fiction magazine and the forerunner of *New Worlds*, the leading magazine of that field. The magazine's British reviewers gave a distinction to this work calling it a "science fiction poem". See Science fiction this side of the Atlantic. (1936, March). *NOVAE TERRAE*, 1(1), 4.
- 43 Teo P. L. (1937). The song of the night express. *Life and Letters To-day*, 16(7), 44.
- 44 Notes on contributors. (1937), ix.
- 45 Life and Letters To-day. (1938). *T'ien Hsia Monthly*, 6(1), 5.
- 46 Notes on contributors, ix.
- 47 Teo, A. (2015, April 16).
- 48 For the timetable and condition of the journey between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur in the 1930s, see Willis, A. C. (1936). *Willis's Singapore guide*. Singapore: Advertising and Publicity Bureau, 106–109.
- 49 Arthur H. Stockwell Ltd (2013, July 9). Personal communication.
- 50 Preface (1937). *101 markets for poems: An invaluable and official list*. London: Arthur H. Stockwell.
- 51 Philip Holden credits *F.M.S.R.* as "one of the first of many efforts to tropicalize T. S. Eliot, transposing 'The Waste Land' to a Singapore landscape". See Holden, P. (2009). Introduction: Literature in English in Singapore before 1965. In A. Poon, P. Holden & S. G-L. Lim (Eds.), *Writing Singapore: An historical anthology of Singapore literature*. Singapore: NUS Press; National Arts Council Singapore, 10.
- 52 See p. 35 of this book.

- 53 *Ibid.*, 38.
- 54 Teo P. L. (1933), 4.
- 55 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 56 Yong, C. F. (2008). *Tan Kah Kee: An Overseas Chinese legend*. Jimei, China: Committee of Jimei Schools, 74.
- 57 *Ibid.*, 69; 75.
- 58 See p. 43 of this book.
- 59 *Ibid.*, 44.
- 60 Teo P. L. (1933), 5.
- 61 Teo P. L. (1936). Prolegomena to the modern poets. *Raffles College Magazine*, 6(1), 14. Rajeev S. Patke evaluates this essay as a rare up-to-date comprehensive sketch on modernist authors. See Patke, R. S. (2009). Canons and questions of value in literature in English from the Malayan Peninsula. *Asiatic*, 3(2), 44.
- 62 Teo P. L. (1936), 19.
- 63 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 64 *Ibid.*, 8.
- 65 *Ibid.*, 8.
- 66 This article directly responds to the March 23, 1936 *Straits Times* article, "Worse than Empson" (10). It introduces the British journalist Ivor Brown's criticism of Bottrall's poetry as worse than the British poet William Empson's which, according to Brown, contains "an intolerable deal of rhyme and not a ha'p'orth of reason". The dispute over the quality of Bottrall's poetry started when on March 2, 1936 the journalist initialled D. S. W. published an article in *The Straits Times* praising Bottrall as a "leading modern poet" and introduced his 1935 poem, "To a Chinese Girl" (10). Another criticism of Bottrall figured as an attack on this poem's artificiality in R. P. S. Walker's March 7, 1936 article in *The Straits Times*, "Ronald Bottrall: Criticism by Siegfried Sassoon" (16).
- 67 Teo P. L. (1936), 6.

- 68 Bottrall arrived in Singapore on December 8, 1933 and resigned as the Johore Professor of Raffles College on October 2, 1937. See College notes. (1934). *Raffles College Magazine*, 4(9), 48; College chronicle. (1938). *Raffles College Magazine*, 8(1), 63.
- 69 English language and literature. (1935). *Raffles College Singapore: Calendar 1935–1936*. Singapore: Malaya Publishing House, 12–14.
- 70 See p. 39 of this book.
- 71 *Ibid.*, 39.
- 72 *Ibid.*, 40.
- 73 *Ibid.*, 51.
- 74 *Ibid.*, 47.
- 75 Teo P. L. (1937), 44.
- 76 See p. 43 of this book.
- 77 *Ibid.*, 48.
- 78 *Ibid.*, 40.
- 79 *Ibid.*, 43.
- 80 Teo P. L. (1936), 9.
- 81 *Ibid.*, 14–15.
- 82 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 83 Teo P. L. (1933), 5.
- 84 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 85 *Ibid.*, 6.

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