

Singapore's unofficial poet laureate Edwin Thumboo talks to **David Evans** about a life of civilised disagreements

Poetry emotion

Edwin Thumboo leans forward in his chair and under his breath uses a four-letter word to describe Queen Elizabeth.

The multi-award-winning Singaporean poet is a mellower version of the one arrested in 1954 for sedition (and subsequently acquitted) by the British colonial government. So the description of the former ruler of his home is not a personal attack; it forms part of our discussion on the state of free speech in modern Singapore.

He says describing the queen thus in England could land you in serious trouble, whereas at home using a similar word to describe a senior politician would be acceptable – as long as you didn't call him a liar. Fortunately for Thumboo, we are at the Edinburgh International Book Festival in Scotland, where English monarchs have suffered worse than mere name calling.

Thumboo was 21 and on the editorial board of the radical *Fajar* magazine, published by the University of Malaya, where he was studying English literature, when it ran an article calling for independence from Britain. He and several fellow students were arrested following a clash between students and police a few days later.

His feelings of that time are captured in the poem *May 1954*, which includes the lines: *We ask you see, The bitter, curving tide of history, See well enough, relinquish, Restore this place, this sun, To us ... and the waiting generations. Depart white man.*

"After the sedition trial, I wrote a few poems and kept only one, *May 1954*. I've got no hard feelings," he says. "In fact, the guy who arrested me, we used to meet at his club in London years later. When he arrested me he said, 'I'm just doing my duty'.

"I don't want to have controversy now. Life is too short. I've had fights and I used to enjoy them because civilised disagreements are a source of good adrenaline."

The son of a Tamil schoolteacher and a Chinese housewife, Thumboo, 75, enjoys academic life these days, having become an emeritus professor in the National University of Singapore's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences in 1997. He began writing poetry at 17 and published his first collection, *Rib of Earth*, in 1956, as an undergraduate.

Thumboo is regarded as a pioneer of English literature in Singapore and is often referred to as the city state's unofficial poet laureate because his poems contain many nationalistic and mythical themes.

He is currently attached to City University's Department of Chinese Translation and Linguistics, where he will spend two months analysing his poems with students – a departure for him.

"I've refused to do this from years ago," he says. "Poems want to



Photo: City University of Hong Kong

Asia Specific

disclose themselves to the reader in the way the reader is able to enter the poem, and I didn't want to talk about the poems because there is this tendency among students to see the poet as authoritative, and that is wrong," he says.

"Now I've changed. I say this is the way I see it, and the poem doesn't mean the same thing to me as when I first wrote it, because I have changed. I have grown."

Thumboo has published seven poetry collections, including *Ulysses by the Merlion* in 1979 and *Still Travelling* last year, alongside an extensive body of work that has included editing several poetry anthologies and numerous articles and papers.

A scholar with a passion for English-language classics, such as novels by E.M. Forster, D.H. Lawrence and Joseph Conrad, he believes a wider audience for poetry from Asia has been held back by a lack of good translation. He points to the domination of early Western literature by works in Greek and Latin by way of example.

"Every culture, German, French, Russian, Norwegian, English or

Scottish, you had to contend with the great works in Greek, then Latin. It was only after the Renaissance that the literatures of these countries were translated for each other.

"The world up to now, whether you like it or not, Europe has been the centre. We are only now beginning to take an interest in each other. And translation grows from interest, and needs drive that interest," he says.

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For now, Thumboo is content to concentrate on his academic work and has no plans to publish a collection in the near future. Yet once a poet, always a poet and he says he is far from ready to put down his pen.

"Poetry can't keep you in the smallest of things," he says, referring to the difficulty of making a living from writing poetry. "But at my age I still want to do a few things before the sun sets."