

## Rhyme of the times

*A poet with political conscience, Sitok Srengenge now prefers to talk about love – and his daughter, who's already out-selling him, writes Yenni Kwok*



Sitok Srengenge. Photo: Yenni Kwok

Sitok Srengenge is well known among Indonesian activists as a sympathetic artist who's always ready with a protest poem. His activism began when he joined the underground pro-democracy movement as a student.

"I was invited to many illegal discussions and lectures," says Sitok.  
"Because I was a poet, they asked me to compose and read a protest poem."

A stocky man with a booming voice, Sitok delivered many such verses spontaneously at street rallies in the years before and after the fall of Indonesian president Suharto in 1998.

He plays down the importance of his activist poetry, saying he felt it was his duty as a citizen. None was ever included in his published collections.

"I try to separate my civic involvement from my writing activities," says the 40-year-old author of six poetry collections and a novel who recently attended Hong Kong Baptist University's International Writers' Workshop.  
"I don't want my political activities to interfere with my literary freedom."

"There may have been times when the politics flowed into my creative output," he says. "But it's no problem, so long as it's a result of a genuine contemplation and not used as a political medium."

It's clear from Sitok's recently published English-Indonesian anthology, *On Nothing*, that he's passionate - whether romantically or politically motivated.

It includes poems about politics and love - some gentle and romantic; others drenched in erotic images and metaphors. It's tempting to liken his work to that of Chilean Pablo Neruda, whom he admires. But Sitok's style - derives from the Javanese oral tradition in which he grew up.

Born Sitok Sunarto, he was raised in a poor farming village with a high illiteracy rate in central Java. "Parents forbade children to go to school," he says. "Classrooms were empty. Village elders even chased the children away from school.

"The villagers were poor and they knew that, without any connections or money to bribe officials, they couldn't advance. You'd earn more money farming or raising cattle than sitting in a classroom."

This humble background was the key to his development as a poet. "It's a village with a strong oral tradition," he says. "Telling folktales and singing *tembang*, or Javanese folk songs, was part of everyday life.

"We have a strong sense of rhythm. Our verses use alliteration and symbolism. I included these elements in my poems without knowing their significance in literature theory."

Despite the obstacles, Sitok got through school, winning a scholarship to finish elementary level and then going on to secondary school and university.

His literary career and activism took off when he moved to Jakarta in 1985. He joined Bengkel Teater (Theatre Workshop), led by poet-dramatist Rendra, an outspoken critic of social injustice.

"At that time, Rendra was a hero," Sitok says. "I admired what he said: that arts should be a true path of one's life; that artists should have a strong discipline and ideology; and that we should side with the truth and the weak. We were taught to be strong, uncompromising and idealistic."

Rendra gave him the name Srengenge when he was accepted into Bengkel Teater. Sitok Srengenge means "the only sun". The change of name is also a Javanese custom that signifies adulthood.

Sitok published his first poetry collection, *Wild Coupling*, in 1992, funded by musician friend Iwan Fals. *Bastard* followed eight years later.

"*Wild Coupling* was to counter the rise of religious poetry that was popular among young writers," he says. "Suharto's political control and the lack of freedom had pushed many people to pursue religious expression.

"But these poets were young. I didn't believe they could be so religious. I was a young man, and I was full of anger, passion and immaturity. I published *Wild Coupling* as a provocative rejection of this trend."

*Bastard* is a statement about the confusion of his generation, which experienced both the traditional life and the economic boom in the 1970s and 80s. "Tradition and modernisation met in a careless encounter," says Sitok. "Like an illegitimate union, it produced a generation of cultural bastards."

The banning of *Tempo* and two other news magazines in 1994 unleashed protests and dissident movements driven by middle-class urban intellectuals.

Through the then-chief editor of *Tempo*, Goenawan Mohamad, Sitok met other activists. In 1997, they founded an alternative arts community called TUK. Sitok is now a curator at TUK - a job he juggles with managing his own publishing house, Katakita, and writing.

He's also the father of a budding writer. *Nothing But Love*, the debut novel of his only daughter, 17-year-old Laire Siwi Mentari, became a best-seller in 2004.

"I initially didn't care much about 'teen-lit'," Sitok says, referring to the teenage literature that has become popular in Indonesia in recent years. "But, after reading Laire's manuscripts, I realised this child has talent.

"Of course, I'm proud of her. And the reality is," Sitok says with a smile, "her books sell well, while serious works like mine don't. Haha..."

*The interview was published in the South China Morning Post daily ([www.scmp.com](http://www.scmp.com)), 12 February 2006.*