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Sunday March 3, 2013

## A third from Tash

By BERVIN CHEONG  
[star2@thestar.com.my](mailto:star2@thestar.com.my)



Hard birth: This might be his third book but it hasn't got any easier to produce them, says bestselling author Tash Aw.

**The Malaysian author talks about his third novel, telling of the inspiration behind it and of questions it raises.**

I SEE this as a book about the people of my generation," says 42-year-old Tash Aw when asked to describe his new novel. He explains that the story will particularly resonate with Malaysians who have – or once had, when growing up in this post-modern era – aspirations of going abroad in pursuit of riches or just to escape their humble roots.

"*Five Star Billionaire* focuses on the dreams and ambitions of being wealthy and successful. It also questions what a person does with all that, and asks whether or not those dreams and ambitions are all there is to life," Aw explained when we met in Kuala Lumpur after the launch of his book in Malaysia last Saturday.

The contemporary novel tells the story of five Malaysians who go to Shanghai to seek fame, fortune and new opportunities. When they get there, and as their lives criss-cross, each of them soon realises that what is more important is actually the past they have left behind in Malaysia.

This is the third novel from Aw. His first, *The Harmony Silk Factory*, was published in 2005 to international acclaim. In that year, the novel made the longlist for the Man Booker Prize and won the Whitbread First Novel Award as well as the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Novel (South-East Asia and South Pacific Region). In 2009, Aw completed his second novel, *Map Of The Invisible World*.

All three novels have a Malaysian connection through their characters – which is not wholly surprising, as it is in Malaysia that Aw grew up after all. Aw was born in Taipei to Malaysian parents but spent his childhood and teenage years living in Kuala Lumpur before moving to Britain at 18 to study law. He worked as a lawyer for four years while writing *The Harmony Silk Factory* and also undertaking the University of East



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Anglia's famed creative writing course. He then famously set the publishing world abuzz when he was paid £500,000 (RM2.35mil at today's rates) for his very first manuscript.

Since then, Aw has been writing full time and travelling the world to promote his work. So could *Five Star Billionaire* have been influenced by the success he has found abroad? But no, says Aw, it is based on different people he met during his travels as a writer.

"No, I don't think what I'm writing about is a reflection of my life. I'm only a writer. I'm not that famous. No one really cares about writers anyway," he states.

Aw actually made several trips to Shanghai in the past few years, staying in the city for varying lengths of time. It was then that he did his research for the book.

"I lived there on and off for about a year. I quite like living there. Although I found the city to be too fast-paced sometimes, I think that for a single man living in Shanghai, it can be quite an exciting place."

The title of the book itself has a personal story behind it, it seems: "Everyone in China is obsessed with billionaires. It's no longer millionaires. The five star thing? It has, so much, a traditional connotation of luxury. Five-star hotels or five-star airlines, for example.

"I also noticed the Chinese flag flying over the building of a very glamorous bar at the Bund in central Shanghai once. What I observed was that the communist flag has five stars on it and I immediately thought of the contrast.

"It was a powerful message: I was in a communist country with five stars of its flag flying above, and underneath were these people leading five-star lives."

At the moment, Aw is based in Singapore. He is currently a writer-in-residence at the Nanyang Technological University where he acts as guide and mentor to the university's creative writing students.

"I'm taking a break after this. I'm just researching, trying to find ideas for a new book. But I'm not writing anything big at the moment. Nothing is planned."

He needs the break because, despite this being his third novel, it had not been any easier to write *Five Star Billionaire* than it had been to complete his first or second book. He explains that for him, every book is difficult to write.

"I don't think the writing gets any easier. That should be the way. If I could suddenly write books very easily I would wonder why that was. If I find it easy, I would probably find something else to do. I would get bored of it. I think I like challenges. Writing is always a challenge for me."

While moralistic narratives are not his cup of tea – not for him books with "messages" in them – he does hope that reading his new book will prompt readers to question what it means to have big ambitions.

"I guess people always imagine that to have a big ambition, it means that you must eventually have a huge success on a financial or fame scale. I want my readers to question whether or not that is the real meaning of success.

"I don't have answers. But if you do scrutinise most people who are very rich or successful, you'll realise that there's still something missing in their lives," concludes Aw.

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