Malaysian novelist Tash Aw will teach at Nanyang Technological University for half a year and launch his third novel here.

Award-winning Malaysian novelist Tash Aw (right) is looking to paying forward an old favour during his ongoing six-month residency at the Nanyang Technological University. As NTU's international writer in residence, he will stay on campus and teach and mentor creative writing students in the English division. He takes over a post held last year by Irish-American novelist Timothy O’Grady, which comes with a salary on the academic scale and a research grant of up to $10,000.

Apart from working with NTU students, he will also give public readings, first at the university's upcoming literary festival in March.

Aw, 41, is looking forward to this outreach and credits his writing career to the encouragement of British travel writer Colin Thubron. When he was a law student at the University of Warwick, he sent Thubron some "completely hopeless" writings and received feedback in return. In part because of those kind words, he eventually decided to give up a law career and write full time.

He used his savings to do a master's in creative writing at the University of East Anglia in 2003, and there finished his first novel, The Harmony Silk Factory.

"I think writers thrive on generosity. When you're a young writer, it's very important to feel there's someone who cares," says Aw.

The Harmony Silk Factory was published in 2005 by HarperCollins. The story about a Malayan textile merchant was longlisted for the Booker Prize and won the Whitbread Book Awards (now Costa) First Novel Award.

It was followed by the critically acclaimed Map Of The Invisible World, a tale of two separated brothers set in 1960s Indonesia. A much-anticipated third novel, Five Star Billionaire, will be launched on Feb 27 by HarperCollins' imprint 4th Estate.

"I started writing with this idea of how Asia is on this super-fast track to multi-riches. When I was growing up, people who were rich beyond call were millionaires," says Aw, who was born in Taipei but brought up in rural Malaysia. He now lives in London and is single. "This term 'millionaire' is redundant now. You go to India and China, the term is billionaires."

The book follows the rich and aspiring in the mega-city of Shanghai and the title is rich in irony. While five-star hotels and five-star airlines are synonymous with wealth and luxury, communist flags also sport five golden stars. The contents page reads like a manual for getting rich quick, with the opening section titled Foreword: How To Be A Billionaire.

One way would be not to become a writer, says Aw, though he was once reported to have received a half million-pound advance for his first novel.

"I'm so tired of that," he says when asked about it, "I spent 10 years denying that but people want to believe in the sensational, not in the ordinary."

He adds: "I think Asia has this obsession with wealth and quite often the illusions that people set for themselves exceed the reality."

The first chapter is headlined Move To Where The Money Is, echoing his observation that people see China as the new land of opportunity.

On recent visits to his parents' home in Malaysia, he heard stories of how vegetable sellers and hair salon workers were leaving their old jobs to seek their fortune in Beijing. "Even my cousins working in a Singapore factory were relocating. It made me wonder what's going on there."

Two writing fellowships helped him find out — first a two-month residency in Shanghai in 2009, funded by the Shanghai Writers Association, followed by another stint in the same city under the inaugural M Literary Residency Programme founded by the M Restaurant Group in 2010.

Comparing Shanghai to other parts of China, he says just moving from Guangzhou to Shanghai "was like stepping forward two centuries". "Shanghai seemed absolutely uniformly developed even compared to Singapore," adds Aw.

In Shanghai, he met and spoke to residents from businessmen to waiters, taxi drivers and foot-massage specialists. Some had been through the hardship of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, and he was curious how they felt about the city's relentless movement towards modernity.

"It was clear that a lot of them were absolutely delighted," he says.

For the rest — the curious are encouraged to read the book, which will be in stores here in March.

aksitian@sph.com.sg

Five Star Billionaire will be published on Feb 27.