In Pursuit of Success

By Shreya Gopi (Year-4 English)

What are modern Asia’s new benchmarks for success?

NTU-National Arts Council international writer-in-residence Tash Aw explores this question and the lives of migrants in his new novel *Five Star Billionaire*, which was released on the 21st of February at its first international launch. In his third novel, Mr Aw traces the lives of five Malaysians who migrate to Shanghai in a bid to start life afresh.

Held at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences-NTU, amongst those who assembled were: Professor Freddy Boey, Provost of NTU; Professor Alan Chan, Dean of the College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, Professor Liu Hong, Chair of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences; Associate Professor Neil Murphy, Associate Dean (Undergraduate Studies) at NTU’s College of Humanities, Arts, & Social Sciences, and Head of the Division of English; and Assistant Professor Jennifer Crawford, coordinator of the Creative Writing Programme in the Division of English; as well as other faculty members and students from NTU.

The Division of English hosts the NTU-National Arts Council Singapore Writing Residencies, where critically acclaimed international and local writers teach and act as mentors to our students during their residency. The presence of these major writers are an inspiring force for students enrolled, and contributes to the continuing development of the vibrant creative writing programme at NTU which is swiftly developing a major international profile.

“This is the most personal book I’ve written so far,” said Mr Aw, who was born in Taipei to Malaysian parents, grew up in Kuala Lumpur and went on to study in England. “The exaggeration of success markers in the novel’s title is a reflection of current conditions in modern Asian societies. Being extremely forward-thinking, cities such as Shanghai only give importance to the future”, he added.
For the migrants in his novel, however, the past is what drives them. “We don’t realise our identity till we leave home,” said Mr Aw, explaining how the characters have to live in Shanghai’s extreme environment of progress-obsession before they realise how much they are anchored in the past. At the meaningful book launch, he also raised his concerns about the role of his generation of Asians to the audience at a breezy café at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences.

In seeking a new life, his characters attempt to reinvent themselves and embody identities they cannot take on at home. “Handbags are more than just leather,” explained Mr Aw. A climax of the story is when an expensive bag is stolen, which is extraordinarily painful for the owner because of the status that the bag confers.

Mr Aw described the people of his generation as the first to have the privilege of higher education overseas. “What have we done with the dreams of our generation? Have we taken the path of easy materialism or are we changing society?” he questioned.

Mr Aw sees his job as a novelist as not judging societal values, but posing questions and allowing his readers to think for themselves. But his readers are not limited to people of his generation.

“Both [Malaysia and Singapore] have complicated relationships with their past. This results in a tendency to look forward, which is less complicated than trying to make sense of our recent histories,” he said.

Mr Aw added, however, that “being sensitive and questioning is something that can occur at any age” and that many young people are aware of the importance of home and history in forming one’s identity.

*Five Star Billionaire* has been reviewed in a number of international publications including *The Guardian*, *Telegraph*, and *The Independent*. 