

WARWICK
THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

Tash Aw Hon DLitt

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At Warwick, we take pride in our internationalism – in the makeup of our student body and our staff, our global outlook, our partnerships with universities around the world. We currently have more than 9,000 non-UK students, around 10% of whom come from Southeast Asia, and we have links with many academic institutions in the region.

This morning we celebrate these connections by honouring one of the most respected literary figures in Southeast Asia: the acclaimed writer and Warwick alumnus, Tash Aw.

Born in Taiwan, to Malaysian parents, Tash Aw grew up in Kuala Lumpur, speaking Malay, Mandarin, Cantonese and English. He studied law at Cambridge and at Warwick, moving to London and working as a lawyer for four years while pursuing his ambition to write. In 2002, he enrolled on the University of East Anglia's creative writing course, and by the end of the academic year had sold his first novel – *The Harmony Silk Factory*, published in 2005. This work won the Whitbread First Novel Award and the Commonwealth Writers Prize, and was longlisted for the 2005 Man Booker Prize. His second novel, *Map of the Invisible World*, was released in 2009 to equal critical acclaim, and *Five Star Billionaire*, 2013, was also longlisted for the Man Booker Prize. His first work of non-fiction, *The Face: Strangers on a Pier*, 2016, was a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. He has also won an O Henry Prize, and been published in prestigious publications such as *The London Review of Books* and the landmark *Granta* 100.

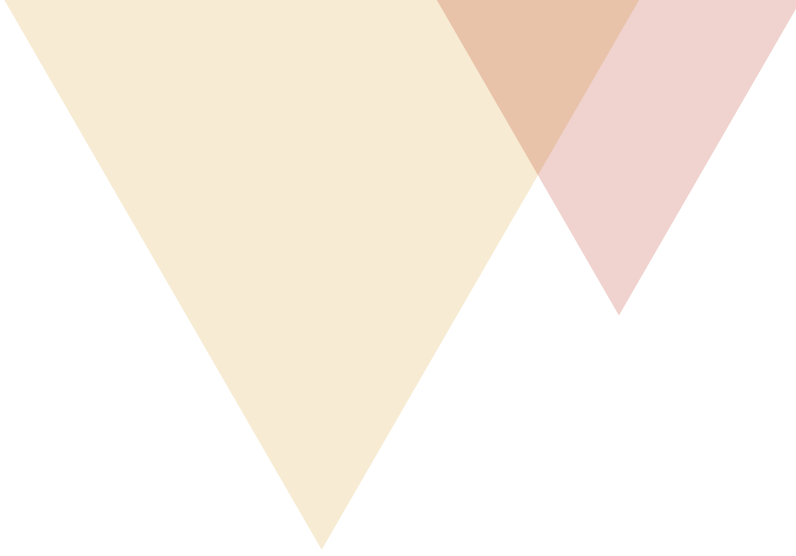
Tash Aw's novels are set in Southeast Asia and in 21st-century China, cutting across national and historical boundaries. He uses multiple narrators and non-linear narrative: we see the same event, or the

same character, from different viewpoints, making us question how we know something to be true. Critics have commended his 'matchless descriptive prose' and his 'immense intelligence and empathy'; Doris Lessing describes *The Harmony Silk Factory* as 'unputdownable'.

His themes are suggested by his own observations and experiences. For instance, *Five Star Billionaire* charts new migration patterns that draw ethnic Chinese people from Southeast Asia back to China. In this novel – which Aminatta Forma has called "*The Way We Live Now* for our times" – the characters are Chinese Malaysians seeking their fortunes in Shanghai. To understand their new situation, Aw himself lived in Shanghai for two periods between 2009 and 2011. In *The Face: Strangers on a Pier*, (written in an autobiographical mode that recalls Pico Iyer) Aw plays with ideas of identity and belonging and his own ability to 'blend in'. 'It has to do with my face,' he writes. 'My face blends into the cultural landscape of Asia: east of India, my identity becomes malleable, molding itself to fit in with the people around me.'

Tash Aw's prize-winning writing presents a distinctive view of Southeast Asia, a 'remapping' of the region for readers of English, while at the same time considering issues that are of global interest – his work has been translated into 23 languages. It is a great pleasure to welcome him back to Warwick.

Chancellor, in the name of the Senate, I present to you for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*, Tash Aw.



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