



*For immediate release*

## **Finding culture and identity in Southeast Asia**

**Acclaimed writer Tash Aw speaks about migration and family origins  
in special talk**

**Singapore, March 16 2016** – In a bracing talk, award-winning novelist Tash Aw will attempt to interrogate the origins of where we come from in Southeast Asia, so that we can understand where we are heading. The talk is organised in conjunction with the launch of his latest book *Strangers on a Pier*, a collection of personal essays about his family history of migration and his experiences as a Malaysian Chinese living in the West and Asia.

Co-presented by The Select Centre and National Gallery Singapore, the talk is held on 31 March, 7.30pm at the National Gallery Singapore.

Tash Aw will explore in his talk the panoramic cultural vitality of Southeast Asia through his own complicated family story of migration and adaptation. From a taxi ride in present-day Bangkok, to eating Kentucky Fried Chicken in 1980s Kuala Lumpur, to his grandfathers' treacherous boat journeys from mainland China in the 1920s, Aw weaves together stories of insiders and outsiders, images from rural villages to megacity nightclubs, and voices in a dizzying variety of languages, dialects, and slangs.

He says: "I want to pause and take stock of all the crazy changes that have taken place in Southeast Asia over the last 20 years – we live such fast-paced lives, our entire narratives are based around notions of success and progress, but we don't really know what these things mean, or what we have sacrificed to



achieve them. I wanted to interrogate our origins, in order to make sense of where we are heading."

He hopes that through the talk the audience will reflect on and question their histories, both personal and national, so that they can understand better their present and future aspirations. He adds: "I'd like people to stop for a second and ask, 'Who am I? Where do I come from, and where am I headed?' These are the simplest notions, but in a region of myriad cultures and dizzying growth, there has never been a better time to ask these questions."

The talk is open to the public. Admission is free by registration.

Tash's book *Strangers on a Pier* will be on sale at the event.

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**Strangers on a Pier: A Talk by Tash Aw**

31 March 2016, Thursday, 7.30pm

National Gallery Singapore

Auditorium, City Hall Wing, Basement 1

Singapore 178957

Free admission by registration, <http://peatix.com/event/153664>

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For more information, please contact:

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## Annex A: Biography

### About Tash Aw



Born in Taipei to Malaysian parents, Tash Aw grew up in Kuala Lumpur before moving to Britain to attend university. He is the author of three critically acclaimed novels, *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005), *Map of the Invisible World* (2009), and *Five Star Billionaire* (2013), which have won the Whitbread First Novel Award, a regional Commonwealth Writers' Prize, and twice been longlisted for the Man Booker prize; they have also been translated into 23 languages. His short fiction has won an O. Henry Prize and been published in *A Public Space* and the landmark *Granta 100*, amongst others. His latest book is *The Face: Strangers on a Pier* (2016).

An excerpt from *Strangers on a Pier*:

“Sometimes, when I arrive in New York or Shanghai—old harbor cities that have drawn generations of immigrants—I find myself reimagining my grandfathers’ arrival at the docks in Singapore, an unknown place whose sights and sounds must have been inexplicably comforting nonetheless. The temperature: hot and humid, exactly the same as the long summers of their homelands. There will be no cool season here, no brief respite from the heat and the rain, but they do not know this yet. The landscape: broad-leafed evergreen trees and waterways, the proximity of the sea. Again, much like home. The smell: of wet earth and rotting vegetation; of food, of possibility. But, above all, it is the people who make them feel that they can live here. This is a British colony, but it is a city of free trade,



then as now. Foreigners arrive easily, they find work easily; they stay. Built on the eighty years of Chinese immigration since the establishment of British administration and the development of natural resources by the colonial government, Singapore is full of Chinese—laborers, dockside coolies, descendants of indentured workers in Malayan tin mines and plantations, but also merchants and tradesmen, artists, writers. There are Chinese newspapers, Chinese shops with Chinese signs painted in elegant traditional characters, Chinese schools, even a Chinese bank—the Overseas Chinese Bank. My grandfathers are not alone, and in fact they are several generations away from being pioneers.

“From here they seek out the person whose name and address they have been given. They keep it on a piece of paper, their dearest possession. All the other people on the boat have a similar piece of paper bearing the name of a relative, or maybe a person from their village who has left some time in the past and established a home somewhere in Nanyang. But where to go, how to find these contacts? No one is sure of the geography of this foreign but familiar place yet; no one knows how far Kota Baru is from Singapore, or whether Jakarta is closer to Malacca than Penang. Bangkok is somewhere north of here, but how far? They stand by the docks, figuring out where to go next.

“Strangers, lost on a pier.”



## **Annex B: About The Select Centre**

The Select Centre is a not-for-profit organisation based in Singapore. Firmly rooted in Southeast Asia, our aim is to advance the interflow of ideas and knowledge between different languages, cultures and disciplines through translation, adaptation and other forms of intercultural practice.

We have three strategic thrusts:

1. Capacity Development: To develop writers and translators through intercultural and interdisciplinary programmes;
2. Advocacy & Outreach: To promote intercultural practice among various stakeholders, including policy-makers, schools and the community; and
3. Internationalisation: To develop Singapore as a regional hub and gateway of ideas and knowledge to the world.

We believe that Singapore's multicultural nature and multilingual heritage are unique strengths that have yet to be fully tapped. We believe that Singapore can leverage on these advantages to bolster its status as a hub of ideas and a bridge between East and West. We aim to be an innovative organisation at the forefront of bringing different languages, cultures and disciplines together to advance human progress.

The Select Centre is a recipient of the National Arts Council's Seed Grant the period from 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2018. For more information about Select, please visit [www.selectcentre.org](http://www.selectcentre.org).