

Alvin Tan Teck Heng

Building an Empire



Article by Anna O'Loughlin and Mark Valenzuela

A mountain of ceramic rice bowls, red at its peak and descending to shades of yellow and white. In *Building an Empire*, Alvin Tan Teck Heng reflects on his own personal and ancestral history as a means for exploring the Chinese diaspora in the Asia Pacific region.

Exhibited at One East Asia (Singapore) in August 2015 and at Nexus Arts (Adelaide, Australia) in December, *Building an Empire* presents a single installation, made up of more than 1000 ceramic rice bowls. Teck Heng, a second generation Chinese Singaporean, explains his decision to focus on this simple form: "The rice bowl is of great significance in Chinese culture; it is about feeding the clan, it is about feeding the family. There is a Chinese saying that can be translated as 'the people place food as high as the heaven', meaning that food is of the utmost importance."

Teck Heng attributes this in part to the long periods of famine in China, resulting from war, drought and political turmoil. Food, or lack thereof, has been a critical factor in shaping China's recent history. The

rice bowl is also central to Teck Heng's own family history; his grandfather travelled to Singapore not only to build a better life for his immediate family, but also to support his extended family in China. As Teck Heng states, "travel or migration was a way of bringing food to the table", a means for ensuring that family members in China could survive the insecurities of the times. Many who migrated during this era did not intend to live permanently in a foreign country, but hoped to return one day to the 'motherland'. Teck Heng's grandfather chose not to settle in Singapore, but moved back and forth between the two countries throughout his life and never stopped reminding his children that their home was China. Teck Heng's father, who moved to Singapore in 1920, raised his children in the same manner and so today Teck Heng identifies as both Singaporean and Chinese, maintaining a strong connection with his ancestral background.

Rooted in his own family history, Teck Heng's interest lies in the broader issues relating to the Chinese diaspora in the Asia Pacific region. A prolific



traveller throughout his life, Teck Heng has been in a position to observe positive and negative effects of Chinese migration and foreign direct investment in the region. He is particularly critical of 'dirty money' as a motivating factor for Chinese foreign investment. Despite his criticisms concerning corruption, Teck Heng is concerned that there is a growing resentment towards Chinese migrants among local communities and is wary of feeding into inaccurate stereotypes. While China's economic growth and foreign direct investment may be unprecedented, we need only consider recent history to gain an insight into the dangers of scapegoating. Post-colonial Southeast Asia was followed by a range of social and political responses to the economic successes of Chinese minority populations, from economic policies that placed restrictions upon Southeast Asian Chinese communities to the devastating violence of the anti-Chinese riots in Indonesia following the Asian Financial Crisis. As such, Teck Heng is careful to balance his criticism by also acknowledging the positive effects of Chinese migration and investment.

Through *Building an Empire*, Teck Heng confronts the viewer with a mass of repeated forms and a smattering of bright red amidst a sea of yellow. The work seems straightforward enough; if the red bowls are taken to represent China then the yellow bowls can be understood as the Chinese diaspora. *Building*

All photos are from Building an Empire. 2015. 1000 wheel-thrown stoneware glazed bowls and wood. Dimensions variable.

All photos by Alvin Tan Teck Heng

an Empire, however, is deceptive in its simplicity. In China, the colour yellow can symbolise royalty and power, an association based on the legendary Yellow Emperor. With this and the exhibition title in mind, the mass of yellow bowls expanding from the red core takes on an imperialist overtone. Is imperial expansion Teck Heng's concern? Or is he playing with our perceptions, forcing underlying fears and stereotypes to the surface in order to confront them? In Western societies, the colour yellow has commonly been used as a racial stereotype for Chinese people, and for Australian audiences it is likely to bring to mind a time when the 'Yellow Peril' was accepted ideology, underlying the Australian Government's 'White Australia Policy'.

The stark contrast between the red and yellow initially distracts from the smaller variations in colour amongst the yellow bowls. The gradual shift from vibrant yellow to near white can be seen as a reference to the westernisation of Chinese culture and values. Teck Heng believes that the contemporary context for Chinese migration is considerably different to that of his grandfather's era; that many Chinese migrants no longer look back to the 'motherland' but towards idealised visions of the West. With the yellow bowls becoming lighter and more diluted





Above: Alvin Tan Teck Heng.
Below: The artist's signature.

the further their distance from the red core, the expansion of Chinese culture through migration is countered by its apparent westernisation. It is not clear who is winning the battle for cultural and economic influence (if indeed it is a battle) and Teck Heng's position remains ambiguous.

If the simplicity of *Building an Empire* is deceptive, then so too is its uniformity. The repeated form of 1000 rice bowls brings to mind the commercial factory-made ceramics that are widely produced in China and exported worldwide. Closer inspection, however, reveals irregularities among the pieces, slight variations in size, form and the application of glaze. Each bowl has in fact been wheel-thrown and hand glazed by Alvin Tan Teck Heng. What appears at a distance to be a homogenous group is in fact a collection of perfectly individual objects. The implications of this shifting perspective are not difficult to determine.

Anna O'Loughlin and Mark Valenzuela are the founders of Boxplot, an alternative arts project aimed at supporting collaborative opportunities between Australian and Southeast Asian artists. Valenzuela, curator of *Building an Empire*, is a visual artist whose work is a combination of paintings, drawings and ceramic sculptures and installations. A recipient of the Cultural Center of the Philippines Thirteen Artists Award for 2015, Valenzuela has exhibited widely in his home country of the Philippines and throughout the Asia Pacific region.

