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## From oppression to expression

### MU professor Lampo Leong looks to the East and the West for artistic inspiration

January 20, 2005

Lampo Leong creates traditional Chinese calligraphy on rice paper only to violently rip it, reconstruct it and then manipulate the images with computer design programs. The distorted black lines and curves are printed on canvas, then splattered with deep colors of paint.

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The canvasses are almost as large as the murals Leong painted as a 17-year-old for the Chinese government. Leong was one of those chosen over 2,000 of his high school schoolmates in Guangzhou, China, to illustrate the Communist poetry, slogans and other propaganda that covered almost every visible surface on the school's property, including stadium walls.

“Everywhere there was something to offer,” he says.

He would be called to paint at least twice a month. The words were not his own, but it was his job to communicate through his painted images the ideas set forth by the government.

“It depends on how you take advantage of things,” Leong says. “One can use that opportunity to learn art or just waste a lot of time doing propaganda. I am one of those who always try to get the most out of any situation, no matter how difficult.”

Leong grew up during the height of China's Cultural Revolution. The universities were closed, and the government suppressed individual expression.

“The whole country was chaotic,” he says. “The schooling was easy at that time. I’d finish my homework and had time every night to paint. I found my enrichment in other places than my schoolwork.”

Every week throughout high school he attended two to three nights of additional art lessons with his high school art teachers. His art training also included one-on-one instruction on the weekends with professional artists. His paintings were selected for many city and provincial art exhibitions, and local newspapers began to publish his work.

After high school he wanted to continue his art education at the university level. At the time the universities were just reopening after having been shut down by Mao Zedong for more than 10 years, and the admission examinations were competitive. Ten years’ of high school graduates were applying in the same year.

## The Cultural Revolution

**1964-1966:** As China is reeling from a disastrous program of forced industrialization, Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong and his wife, Jiang Qing, begin a campaign of anti-intellectualism.

**1966:** Mao and Jiang Qing organize a student group, the Red Guards, to purge the country of “intellectuals and imperialists.” The Red Guards quickly move from creating propaganda to vandalizing museums and holding public executions.

**1967:** Jiang Qing replaces the People’s Liberation Army with the Red Guards.

Out of more than 10,000 applicants, Leong was one of 32 admitted that year by the Guangzhou Fine Arts Institute. The institute was considered to be one of the top eight art colleges in China. Without ever seeing any original masterpiece from the Western world, Leong continued to learn about classical realism, Greek sculpture and the Renaissance through poor reproductions in textbooks.

Leong left China in 1983 to attend graduate school at California College of the Arts in Oakland. The following year, he bought a \$200 bus ticket and embarked on a month-long trip across the country. He stopped at major cities to visit the art museums for the day and then boarded the bus again, eagerly anticipating the next city’s collections. He started the solo adventure in San Francisco and then weaved through the art museums and galleries in Salt Lake City; Kansas City; Chicago; New York; Boston; Philadelphia; Washington, D.C.; Atlanta; Dallas; Phoenix and Los Angeles.

Using both his formal training and cultural influences, Leong draws from both Eastern and Western arts and cultures to create something completely new.

Leong says he is driven to share his passion for art through teaching. His teaching career started at San Francisco State University. The town still has many reminders of Leong. One is a 26-foot-wide granite inset medallion he designed for a city park. In 1999 the city’s mayor, Willie Brown, declared November 19 Lampo Leong Day. Museums in the Bay Area, such as the Asian Art Museum and Stanford Museum of Art, have Leong’s work in their collections. Leong has been featured in approximately 200 group exhibits and more than 45 solo shows worldwide.

**1968:** A massive campaign is launched to elevate Mao to god-like status. The authority of the Red Guards is ended, and the army regains control.

**1969:** Mao declares the revolution to be over.

**1971:** Lin Biao, Mao's self-chosen successor, attempts an unsuccessful military coup. He and his family perish in a mysterious plane crash, and Mao retains power.

**1976:** Mao dies on Sept. 9. Huo Guofeng, Mao's successor, orders the arrest of Jiang Qing and three of her compatriots ("The Gang of Four"). Most historians consider this the true end of the revolution.

— Margy Fischer

In 2001 Leong joined the faculty of the MU Art Department.

"I think formal art training is very important for the success of an artist," Leong says. "There is always a foundation that is necessary whether they stay with it or eventually go against it. That is why here at the university students have to learn the foundations of art and reach their own expressions on top of classic foundations."

Leong divides his time among his teaching responsibilities, his studio and advocating for Chinese arts and culture. He keeps himself busy because he thinks life is short, and there is much to accomplish.

"One could have a lot of commercial success in art or in life," he says. "But that is not what I am looking for. If there is one thing that I'd really like to say when I die, it would be that I have not wasted my life. My idea is different from most people, because many people think I work too hard and why? What's that for? One can't carry any of these successes to the tomb. But for me, I never want to get anything from this world. I want to leave a legacy behind either through my art or my teaching."

Leong cites Michelangelo's work as an example of art that transcends its time and place.

"We look back to Michelangelo's work, and no matter how time changes, it is still good," he says. "It is always good. To me, I want to be an artist who creates something that is unique and significant. And it also has the lasting quality that after hundreds of years, people still think it is quality work and it represents a time in the history."

He stumbles to correct himself as he describes what gives him the most joy in life. "My work — I mean my art. Painting is my interest, and when I paint or am creating art, I'm not feeling like I am working. I am very happy that I have the time to paint. So, for me, maybe I am not working so hard, just playing. That may be the most satisfactory element of being an artist. I am fascinated with the processes of creation."

— Margy Fischer