



Tear out a new

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Photos by Melody Chu

Little did 64-year-old Lee Sing-man realise that tearing a piece of paper 25 years ago would turn his ordinary life into something unusual. Regarded as a local “Master of the paper-tearing art”, Lee Sing-man, usually referred to as “Uncle Man”, is an expert in turning paper into Chinese characters by tearing the paper with his bare hands.

Lee demonstrated while telling his story. The subjects ranged from the names of *Varsity* reporters to his masterpieces. He tore out the spaces, leaving the strokes which link the characters together. Never making a drawing before tearing the paper, he can tear the characters into different types of calligraphy.

Although Lee now devotes himself to the art wholeheartedly, how paper-tearing entered his life was purely incidental. It was during the Lunar New Year in 1983, when he made his first paper-tearing work out of boredom.

page of life

"I spotted two symmetrical Chinese words on the flowerpot in my mother-in-law's home. Then I just picked up a paper and started tearing to imitate the words," Lee recalled. It was two Chinese characters *Tai Gut*, which was a blessing with an auspicious meaning.

With no particular background in fine arts, Lee is completely self-taught in the art of paper-tearing. However, he did not think of making another piece afterwards as his first attempt was only a random trial.

Not until six years later did Lee tear his second piece. He was attracted by a red paper printed with golden Chinese characters meaning "A million gold pieces" on the street. He then imitated the words using white paper.

His friend thought it was pretty and suggested him to use red paper instead. Lee then gave the remade piece to his friend as a gift. It was greatly admired by all who saw it. More and more people asked Lee to tear lucky messages for them and he started to put more effort into this art.

Lee was greatly encouraged by stationery retailers when he was working as a debt collector for a stationery wholesale company then.

"My artworks made from waste paper were posted in every stationery store on the Wellington Street in Central," Lee described the popularity of his artworks.

Through his artworks, Lee demonstrates that waste paper can also be transformed into pieces of art. "This way I can create art while being environmentally friendly," he said.

Lee carefully collected every single piece of paper he tore out during his demonstration for *Varsity* as they

can be made into another artwork. He always encourages children in his lessons to recycle waste paper and transform it into art. "Any paper that can be torn into pieces can be used," he said.

Ever since he started to "tear paper", he grasps every chance to practise his skills. He would start tearing whenever he picked up a piece of waste paper. He practises while waiting for lifts or travelling. He also became more attentive to the form of Chinese characters.

His skills improved from only being able to make symmetrical Chinese characters to any word, figure or pattern.

Tearing a paper and making it into art is as easy as pie to Lee, and he thinks it is a skill that everybody can take up. "How difficult is to tear paper? Like learning a musical instrument, you have to keep practising after lessons and make the most of your own creativity to make good pieces," he said.

It is why he named his paper art *Sze Ngai*, meaning "paper-tearing art" in Cantonese, which also means thinking and determination respectively. Lee considers them the essence of the paper-tearing art, which requires a long process of

continuous thinking to achieve the goal.

Lee demonstrated his artwork to visitors in Kowloon Walled City Park nearly every day since he moved to the neighbourhood in 2000. The turning point of his life came when he met a park tour guide who helped put his art in the public eye.

The tour guide appreciated Lee's artwork and suggested him to apply for a stall at the Arts and Crafts Fair. She even took the application forms for him. His application was finally accepted on his third attempt.

"The tour guide was even more excited than me. She jumped for joy and said to me 'I've already told you that you could (make it)!'" Lee recalled.

Lee started to run his stall outside the Cultural Centre in Tsim Sha Tsui in 2003. He could still remember the first art piece he made there.

It was four Chinese words *Mo Yin Kam Gig*, which expressed his immense thankfulness to the tour guide and to everyone who has appreciated and promoted his paper art.

To earn a living, he set prices of his art pieces. But the prices remained low. It costs \$10 for each small piece with one Chinese character. For larger pieces, there were no fixed prices.



(above) English words can also be made into a paper-tearing art.



(Right) Chinese characters in symmetry representing prosperity.



Lee explains how a paper-tearing art is made and shares his experience.

“Art is priceless,” Lee said. He let visitors set the price they were willing to pay. Sometimes he even gave his art pieces to visitors as gifts.

He remembers a time when a foreigner insisted on paying for the artwork after watching his demonstration at his stall.

He explained to the foreigner: “If someone orders my art piece, I will accept the money according to the market price. However, if I invite a visitor to watch my demonstration, I see no reason to charge him money.”

At last, the foreigner accepted his gift with both hands and bowed at 90 degrees to express his gratitude. His reaction prompted a burst of applause from the crowd.

To Lee, promoting his paper art is more important than earning money from it.

After running his stall in the Arts and Crafts Fair, Lee’s paper art started to catch media attention. He also had more chances for public performance, such as performing in universities and company dinners.

The most remarkable performances would be the two in front of the presidents of Latvia and Romania during their respective visits to Hong Kong in 2003.

“I was so happy to perform in front of the celebrities and I was surprised that I could get a travelling allowance as a reward,” he said. He could not be more delighted to know that his demonstration was particularly liked by the first lady of Romania.

He was later told by the security guard that his masterpiece *Fook Luk To*, a combination of words and graphics which depict a good fortune and prosperity, won a grin from the first lady of Romania, who seldom smiled.

His paper art received more recognition when he held an exhibition at the Sun Yuen Long Centre early this year. Ninety of his art pieces were framed and exhibited. Lee was even interviewed by a Japanese magazine and China Central Television (CCTV).

In spite of the fame of his paper art, Lee does not have a stable income. He became a full-time artist to promote his art when he retired from his previous job as a courier two years ago. He was unable to continue his stall in the Arts and Crafts Fair after rental fees were charged.

Unable to support himself financially and pay for his accommodation, he had to apply for the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) Scheme.

He quoted a sentence from an article about him which was an echo of his heart – “What Lee desires is support but not financial aid”. He hopes the government could give more support to local artists like him.

Lee’s wife and daughter left him nine years ago. He treats this misfortune as his destiny, one which paved the way for the success of his paper-tearing art.

“If my family hadn’t broken up, I would not have moved to South Wall Road, which enabled me to discover the beauty of the Kowloon Walled



(Left) Lee shows the photos of his other artworks.

(Below) Having been a daily visitor to the Kowloon Walled City Park for many years, Lee is familiar with every part of the park and is able to tell their stories behind.




CHARLOTTE WAT

City Park and meet the tour guide,” Lee said.

With his easy-going character, Lee has made a lot of acquaintances in the park. People of all ages constantly greet him as he walks around.

He met a mother and her little boy, with whom Lee gives an individual lesson in the park every Sunday. “His mother told me that he never concentrated on his studies until he learned the paper-tearing art with me,” he said.

Lee was enthusiastic about teaching the art of paper tearing. He once taught in a secondary school where there was only one participant. “Even if there is only one student, I would still go no matter how far it is,” he said.

Lee now gives lessons on both a regular and irregular basis, teaching students of all ages. He has a strong determination to promote his paper-tearing art. “I would like to promote my art to every part of the world,” he said. 

Steps of tearing a paper art

Fook Luk To, one of Lee’s masterpieces, represents happiness and prosperity in Chinese. It drew smiles from the first lady of Romania and the applause of countless audiences.

Here Lee gives a demonstration of how to make this artwork:



1-3: Firstly, he folds the red square paper into eight portions. After tearing the Chinese character of happiness, *Fook*, he then tears the shape of a bat at the corner. In Chinese pronunciation, the word “bat” is homonymic with *Fook*.



4-5: Finally, he tears the shape of a coin at the centre, which represents *Luk*, meaning prosperity. *Fook Luk To* was then finished with eight characters of *Fook*, four bats and a Chinese coin shown on the bright red paper when it is unfolded.