

I Hotel: The Illustrations of Leland Wong



On view at:

Chinese Culture Center
San Francisco, CA
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San Francisco Arts
Commission Galleries
at Cafe Valor
July-September 2019

Curated by Alice Wu

I Hotel: The Illustrations of Leland Wong

I Hotel is a suite of Chinese ink illustrations by San Francisco Chinatown born and raised artist Leland Wong. The illustrations were commissioned for celebrated author Karen Tei Yamashita's groundbreaking book, *I Hotel* (2010, Coffee House Press, MN.) In 2019, Wong's original artworks were exhibited for the first time: at the Chinese Culture Center, sited just steps away from the titular I Hotel, and then by invitation of the San Francisco Arts Commission Galleries at its satellite exhibition space, Cafe Valor. The exhibitions were organized by independent curator Alice Wu.

Leland Wong grew up above his family's store in San Francisco's Chinatown. With Manilatown in close proximity, Wong witnessed both the heyday and then the injustices surrounding the International Hotel, known casually as the I Hotel. Founded in 1854 and rebuilt in 1907 after the prior year's devastating San Francisco earthquake, the I Hotel was a 104-unit low-income single-occupancy resident hotel that primarily served the Asian population, and in particular the growing Filipino community. As San Francisco grew and "urban renewal" took hold, eviction notices were issued in 1968, a decade of protests and negotiations ensued, and the residents were forcefully removed amidst 3000 protesters on August 4, 1977.

Karen Tei Yamashita's *I Hotel* is an epic, genre-defying work of fiction that takes the form of ten novellas, one for each year of I Hotel resistance. Yamashita spent nearly a decade doing research and interviews in preparation for writing *I Hotel*. The book was a National Book Award finalist and was recently reprinted for its 10th anniversary. Leland Wong created illustrations for each of the novellas, remarking of the I Hotel years: "It was a crazy and confusing time, and my hope is that people will look at my work and have a better understanding of what happened."

Leland has described each image in his own words:



“1968: *The Eye Hotel* is the first novella in the book. This illustration is about the San Francisco State University Strike. You can see SF State President S. I. Hayakawa's famous tearing down of the speakers on the truck during the strike.”

The Black Student Union and a coalition of other student groups known as the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) led the strike, which began Nov. 6, 1968 and ended March 20, 1969. Clashes between the strikers and San Francisco Police tactical squads made national news. Students, faculty and community activists demanded equal access to public higher education, more senior faculty of color and a new curriculum that would embrace the history and culture of all people including ethnic minorities. - Denize Springer, [SF State News](#), 9/22/08

“1969: I Spy Hotel (Uncle Sam) is about espionage during those post McCarthyism days. Here, Uncle Sam is flanked by a narc and a policeman.”

Wong painted each illustration using Chinese brush and ink; the paper size is about 9 x 12”.



1970: "I" Hotel is about how Asian Americans identified and played a role with the Black movement. Here we have an Asian American posed like Huey P. Newton of the Black Panther Party.





"I" HOTEL



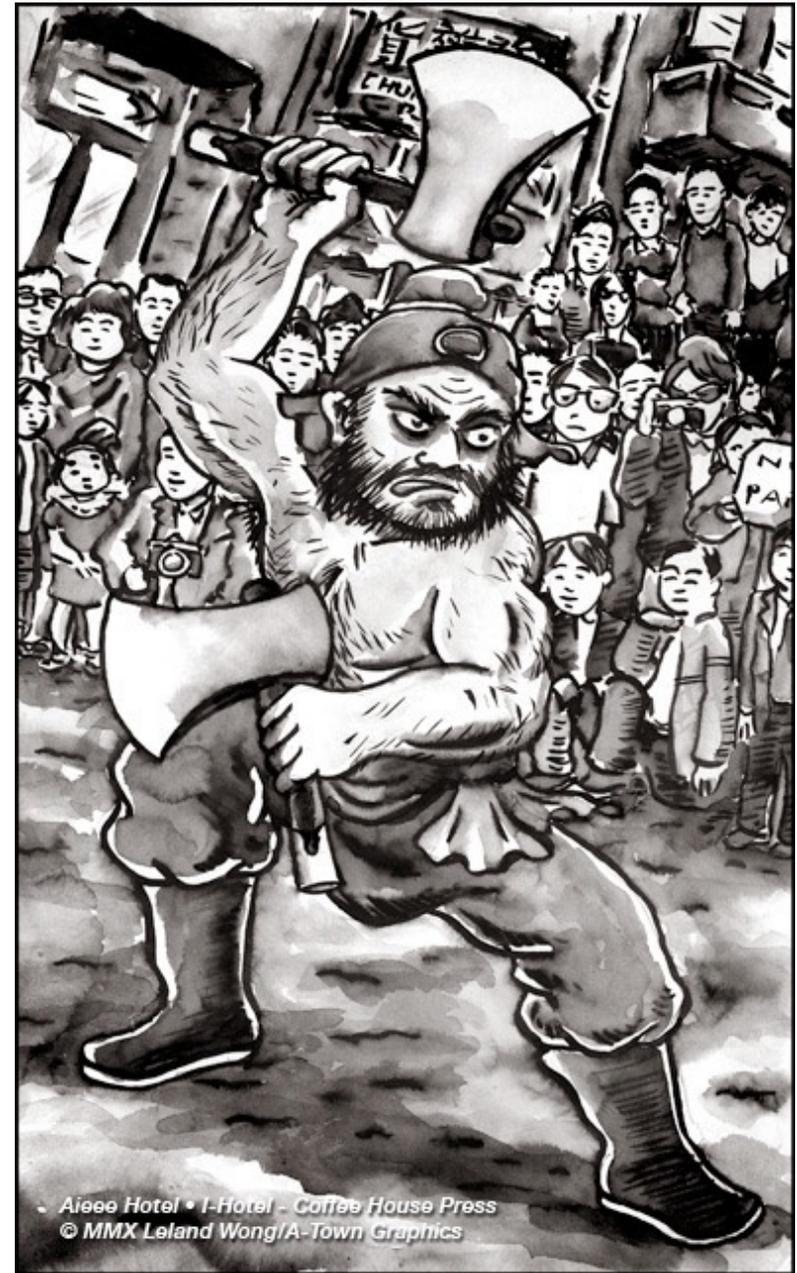
"I" Hotel 2nd Draft Rough

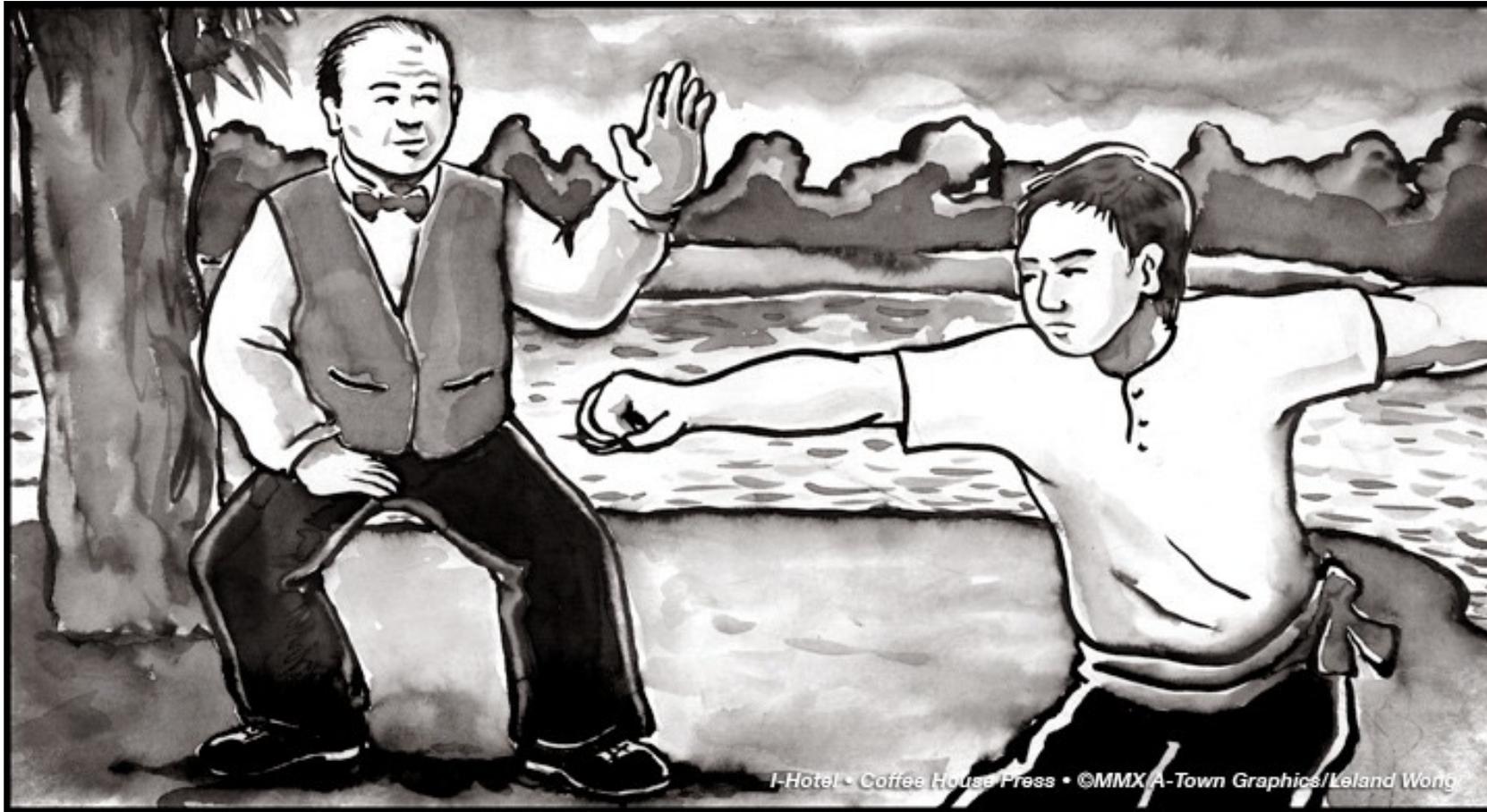
Leland Wong created a few concept drawings for this section; while these two were not ultimately selected for the book, they were shown in the exhibition.

“1971: Aiieeee! Hotel has four images about gung fu styles and martial arts. It was kind of fun doing these illustrations. By then I was in my creative space and the art just flowed.

Here's Li Kui, also known as Black Whirlwind from the story Water Margin. He is seen here performing his double axe form in front of a crowd on Grant Avenue in San Francisco.”

Both Leland Wong and his father have been lifelong martial arts practitioners. Water Margin is one of the best-known and enduringly influential classical Chinese novels, attributed to 14th century writer Shi Nai'an (1296-1372). Leland and his family lived in the Loft of his father's curio shop on Grant Avenue, one of the oldest streets in San Francisco Chinatown.





“This illustration is about the Xingyi and White Crane styles. The setting is Spreckle's Lake in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. I learned the Chen Taiji there.”

The man in the vest references Leland's father, who came from China and was first employed as a personal cook for a household in the Pacific Heights neighborhood; he then opened an herb shop in Chinatown, followed by the curio shop.



“Here's the Praying Mantis and the White Eyebrow style. This scene is set at the Shaolin Temple at Songshan. I had the movie Kill Bill in mind when doing this one.”

“1972: The Inter-National Hotel novella deals with the radical politics of the time. Groups became focused on political ideology which brought about much debate and struggles within radical organizations. All this happening amidst people falling in love, since they were all just young college students at the time.”





“1973: The Int'l Hotel novella is about these three people boarding a boat called the Turtle to bring food and supplies to the Native Americans occupying Alcatraz Island on a foggy night.”

This novella centers around the The Occupation of Alcatraz (November 20, 1969–June 11, 1971), in which Native Americans from different tribes and non-Native supporters occupied Alcatraz Island to demand the return of land to Native Americans, bring national awareness to Native issues, and protest federal policies harming Native Americans. In Yamashita’s text, the three individuals form “a group self-identified by their Asian features.”

“1974: **I-Migrant Hotel** novella is about the manongs, the Filipino elderly. Many with a rich history of struggle. Working as domestics, longshoremen, farmworkers. Their role in labor organizing as well as boxing. That's Al Robles back there with the pig roast.”

In Filipino culture, elders are commonly addressed as manong. Al Robles (1930-2009) was a beloved Filipino American poet and activist, San Francisco born and raised, and deeply associated with the International Hotel struggle.





“1975: The Internationale Hotel novella is about communism and the red scare of the McCarthy inquisitions. What better way to illustrate that than with a Godzilla representing this huge monster from one's imagination devouring and killing everyone and everything in its path. In the sky is Mothra and the accompanying twin goddesses. I wanted the look of a 1950's pulp fiction magazine.”

“1976: The **Ai Hotel** novella is about love and sex. Heavily influenced by the Summer of Love. That's supposed to be Al Robles sitting on the lotus. With an aura of purifying flames.”





“1977: I-Hotel (Chang and Eng Twins) is about the final eviction of the International Hotel in August of 1977. Police with batons and horses broke up the human barricade that surrounded the hotel. The fall of the I-Hotel signified an end to the decade of the Asian American movement. Oh...that's Eng and Chang, the famous Siamese Twins in the middle.”

For the exhibits at [Chinese Culture Center](#) and [San Francisco Arts Commission Galleries](#), Leland Wong customized the inside covers of six secondhand copies of *I Hotel* with his signature ink drawings. These specially customized books were offered for sale.

To learn more about Karen Tei Yamashita's book:
<https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/ihotel-novel-karen-tei-yamashita-review/>

<http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2010/3/14/karen-tei-yamashita/>

To learn more about The International Hotel:
<http://www.ihotel-sf.org/>



About the Artist:

Leland Wong's (b. 1952) artwork has been part of the Bay Area's Asian American community for more than forty years. Wong first began designing posters and handbills for street fairs and local Chinese community events. These emerging interests led to his enrollment in San Francisco State University, where he earned a BFA in 1975. During the 1970s, he was involved with Kearny Street Workshop, a Chinatown/ Manilatown community art group, where he produced posters and conducted workshops in screen-printing and photography. Wong designed his first Nihonmachi Street Fair poster in 1974, inaugurating a highly popular series that has continued for over three decades. Additionally, Wong's prints and photography have been widely published and exhibited in both national and regional venues including: The Corcoran Gallery (Washington, D.C.), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Oakland Museum of California, the de Young Museum, National Japanese American Historical Society, SOMARTS Gallery, and the Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco. (text by Margo Machida)