

FEATURE

Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial

ARTIST LEI YIXIN FACED CONTROVERSY

Protested against for not being African-American and later for not even being an American

By Lisa Chiu

Lei Yixin stands next to a model of the new Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial currently being planned.

After more than twenty years of fund-raising and planning, the Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial Project finally picked a sculptor for the statute that would stand between the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials on the National Mall in Washington D.C.

On January 15, 2007, the Project Foundation announced the selection of master sculptor Lei Yixin, who will be responsible for carving King into the "Stone of Hope" that would be the centerpiece of the memorial.



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But almost immediately after Lei was picked, he was protested against for not being African-American, and later for not even being an American.

Lei, a Chinese national skilled in working with large public statutes prominent in China and other nations, was selected precisely for his experience with large pieces — the King sculpture is expected to be 28 feet tall, taller than the statues of Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson also on the Mall.

Criticism for not being African American

Gilbert Young, an Atlanta sculptor, created an online petition called "King Is Ours," that is against the fact that the project went to a Chinese artist and not an African American. But he later told the Washington Post: "I would have no complaints if this was done in the United States by anyone who knows our culture, like the Asian woman who designed the Vietnam Wall."

Incidentally, that Asian woman is Maya Lin, who took a lot of heat for being of the same race of people that the United States invaded in Vietnam.

African-American sculptor Ed Dwight was also quoted as saying that because Lei is not black, "he doesn't know how black people walk, how they stand, how their shoulders slope."

Further Controversy

In May 2008, Lei faced further controversy when the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, voiced concern that the planned statue appeared more like a socialist leader than an

American known for non-violent protest. The Memorial organizers needed the Commission's permission before it could begin construction.

The Commission said the sculpture was too confrontational adding, "the colossal scale and Social Realist style of the proposed statue recalls a genre of political sculpture that has recently been pulled down in other countries." The \$100 million memorial is being financed by mainly private funding.



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The Commission recommended that the sculpture be reworked using inspiration from previous examples of figures emerging from stone by Michelangelo and Rodin.

Memorial planners responded that they based the statue on a photo by Bob Fitch of King with arms folded. What's more, Lei wasn't the designer of the concept, just the artist tasked to carry the plans out.

Lei has said that complaints that his work is Socialist in style is unfounded. From his Changsha, China studio, he told the Washington Post: "The art of statues originally came from the West. What is the difference in the style in the socialist countries? It's like ballet. We Chinese can boast that our ballet is among the best in the world. Do not think it is different because it is Chinese."

Project consultants, artists James Chaffers and Jon Lockard, who are both African-American, also said they want to retain the "power and inspirational image" currently found in Lei's life-size model. Chaffers said he wanted the statute to show King as a warrior for peace, not a placid pacifist.

But in response to the Commission's recommendations, planners have instructed Lei to make the sculpture a bit kinder and gentler, by softening his expression and making the rock that King is emerging from less defined. In September 2008, they got the go-ahead from the Commission.

The statue is expected to break ground in early 2009 and be completed by 2010.

Criticism of Socialist Realism Art

The changes have not prevented some to still bristle at the fact that Lei comes from communist China.

Washington Post writer Blake Gopnick wrote that socialist realism "speaks of immovable authority and unquestioned propaganda sent down from on high." He likened the form of art to turning back the clock to an age when "blacks had to sit at the back of the bus."

Post columnist Marc Fisher has added that King was "never an arms-folded kind of man." (Really?)

Fisher wrote: "Nowhere do I find King depicted the way a sculptor in China is interpreting him... Nowhere is King seen in the arrogant stance of a dictator, clad in a boxy suit, with an impassive, unapproachable mien, looking more Uke an East Bloc Politburo member."

Fisher continued: "It is simply wrong to have outsourced both the sculpting and quarrying of the granite — and especially to China, a country whose government during King's Lifetime called him a "reactionary running dog" for his advocacy of nonviolent protest."

In response to all these criticisms, Harry Johnson Sr., the memorial foundation's chief executive, said when they were looking for a sculptor, they wanted someone with experience working with granite on a very large scale.

Lei was chosen, Johnson said, not because of his country of origin, "but because he could do the work."

That sounds a lot like King's dream - to be viewed by the content of one's character and not the color of their skin or their nationality.

This article was reprinted-courtesy of Lisa Chiu from Chineseculture.about.com