

King monument criticized on artist selection

WASHINGTON (AP) - The selection of a Chinese sculptor to carve a three-story monument to Martin Luther King Jr. on the National Mall is raising questions about what part of his legacy should be celebrated.

King promoted peace and understanding among all people. His primary fight, however, was to win particular opportunities for Blacks in the United States by juxtaposing the plight of an oppressed people against a message of freedom and democracy.

A loose-knit but growing group of critics says a Black artist — or at least an American — should have been chosen to create the King memorial between the Lincoln and Jefferson memorials in the nation's capital. They have been joined by human rights advocates who say King would have abhorred the Chinese government's record on religious and civil liberty.

"They keep saying King was for everyone. I keep telling people, 'No, King wasn't for everyone. King was for fairness and justice,'" said Gilbert Young, a Black painter from Atlanta who has started a website and a petition drive to try to change the project.

"I believe that Black artists have the right to interpret ourselves first," Young said. "If nobody steps up to the plate to do that, then certainly pass it along to someone else."

The memorial foundation directing the project seems surprised at the criticism. Ten of the 12 people on the committee that chose the sculptor, Lei Yixin, are Black. Lei is working closely on the design with two Black sculptors in the U.S., organizers said, and the overall project is being directed by a Black-owned architecture firm.

The foundation also points to King's preaching — in a quote that will be incorporated into the monument — that to achieve peace, humans must "transcend race, our tribe, our class, and our nation; and this means we must develop a world perspective."

"The bottom line is Dr. King's message that we should judge a person not by the color of his skin but by the content of his character," said Harry Johnson, the foundation's president and chief executive.

"In this situation, we're talking about the artistic character."

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Lei, designated a master sculptor by the Chinese government, is one of nine artists in the field who are considered national treasures in China. He has carved monuments to many of the country's national figures, including Mao Zedong, father of communist China.

In a telephone interview Friday from Hunan province in central China, Lei said he was honored to have been chosen and was aware of the controversy.

"I deeply understand because Martin Luther King is a hero for Black Americans," he said.

But, Lei added, "Martin Luther King hoped that everyone would be brothers and sisters, no matter the color of their skin or their social status, that they would all enjoy the same opportunities and rights. ...I want my sculpture to show that Martin Luther King fought for democracy."

Ann Lau, a Chinese native who lives in Los Angeles, bristles at the suggestion of democracy in her home country and said King would never condone Beijing's policies.

The granite used for the statue probably will be mined

by workers laboring in unsafe and unfair conditions, the human rights activist said.

Lau, Young and others plan to present their online petition to lawmakers in Washington next month in an effort to force the foundation to reconsider the project. Although the \$100 million project is financed with private donations, they said citizens should have a say because the monument is being built on public land.

"The whole thing is wrong," Lau said. "We are going to be permanently con-

necting Dr. King with someone whose ideology is totally opposed to Dr. King's ideology."

But Johnson, the foundation president, asked why the foundation should hold Lei accountable for his government.

"I think you have to take this away from the government," he said. "We didn't question Lei about his politics or his ideology. We questioned him about whether he could do the work."

The King monument is scheduled to be completed in 2009.

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