

Star Tribune article July 26, 2017

St. Paul to give 'Peanuts' statues to Chinese sister city in exchange for model pavilion



By Sarah Jarvis , Star Tribune
July 26, 2017 - 9:38 AM

After years dotting the Twin Cities' landscape, Charlie Brown and the gang are packing their bags for China.

St. Paul is giving five Peanuts statues to its Chinese sister city of Changsha in exchange for a replica of Changsha's Aiwan Pavilion, to become the central fixture of a Chinese garden at Phalen Park next summer.

After getting official word about the replica pavilion late last year, Linda Mealey-Lohmann and other members of the Minnesota China Friendship Garden Society began thinking of what St. Paul might offer in exchange.

"Traveling around China, you see a lot of 'Peanuts' icons everywhere," she said. "We proposed [the statues] to them, and they were very excited about that."

Alice Messer, project manager for the Chinese garden, said the statue of Lucy will be painted by a local Hmong artist in traditional Hmong dress. Snoopy's doghouse, which will be painted by a local Chinese artist, will feature Minnesota icons, Messer said.

Mealey-Lohmann is co-founder of the Garden Society, which has raised about \$40,000 of the \$46,000 needed to fund the gift. She visited Changsha in 2015 when a sister park relationship was established between St. Paul's Phalen Park and Changsha's Yangshu Wetland Park, which is where the statues will go.

She said sculptor Lei Yixin — who designed both the Martin Luther King Jr. memorial in Washington, D.C., and a sculpture already in place at Phalen Park — "quietly, secretly" told her that he was working on the pavilion to give to St. Paul.

The pavilion coming to Phalen Park will be the same size as the Aiwan Pavilion in Changsha, about 25-by-25 feet. Messer said the goal is to have workers assemble the replica in China, take it apart and then reassemble it next summer on the 30-year anniversary of St. Paul and Changsha's sister city relationship.

"It's going to be super cool to watch that come up," Messer said.

The St. Paul Changsha China Friendship Garden, which was approved as part of the Phalen-Keller Regional Master Plan in 2011, will be constructed along with the pavilion. Mealey-Lohmann said that she and other members of the nonprofit society have visited at least 10 different Chinese gardens in the United States that are sister projects with Chinese cities.

The garden in Phalen Park, she said, will be "open, really blending into the natural surrounding" like gardens in Changsha do. It will include a stream, a lakeside pavilion, a rock garden and a bridge over a stream, according to a flier from the garden society.

Mealey-Lohmann said the garden also will include a "Hmong Embroidery Wall" with engravings of cultural symbols such as embroidery, a necklace and the qeeg — a Hmong instrument. She said the wall will be an important part of the garden because Minnesota Hmong claim Changsha as their ancestral home.

She said the garden will be a great place for members of the Hmong and Chinese communities to bring visitors, and for all residents to learn about different aspects of those cultures.

"It's to help build bridges between people, to bring peace and to make this world a better place," Mealey-Lohmann said.

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