2-24-2009

James Hevia on Summer Palace Relics

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With disputes relating to looted Chinese objects in the news, we asked Professor James Hevia of the University of Chicago, author of an important book called *English Lessons*, which includes analysis of foreign military actions in China from the 1860s through the post-Boxer occupation of 1900-1901 and was cited in our earlier post on the topic, if he had any thoughts on the subject to share with our readers. Already quoted briefly in a useful *Christian Science Monitor* article on the issue, here’s what he had wrote in response to our query:

The recent announcement by Christie’s of yet another auction including Summer Palace plunder continues the long tradition of corporate and national indifference to the depredations of European armies in Africa and Asia in the nineteenth century. Imperial and colonial warfare always resulted in plunder. This is not news, but does need to be remembered in a form other than the public sale of stolen artifacts. More importantly, no one has yet been able to arrive at a formula for addressing what are obviously understood by the descendents of victims of these events as ongoing forms of humiliation. It does not help the situation to read a Christie’s statement claiming that “for each and every item … there is clear legal title.” That is not simply preposterous, but Orwellian. How can there be clear legal title to looted objects? That bit of mendacity is further compounded by Christie’s claim that they also adhere to international law on cultural property. There was no international law in 1860 dealing with cultural property, which requires, I think, another way of thinking about the status and ownership of the objects in question. The same could be said for the museums like the Victoria and Albert, the British Museum, the Guimet in Paris, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and numerous military museums and officer’s messes in Europe and North America that hold objects taken in and around Beijing in 1860 and 1900-1901. Insofar as they are capable, the animal heads on sale at Christie’s stand in for this vast amount of plunder. Turning them into commodities only makes matters worse.

There is also a certain irony in all of this. Since 1997, when Hong Kong was returned to China, the Yuan Ming Gardens in Beijing was the site of the “Never Forget National Humiliation” memorial wall. There inscribed on numerous plaques was the sordid history of European and American incursions into China, of opium dealing, and the imposition of unequal treaties that made up the “century of humiliation.” For reasons that are unclear, the monument was taken down last year. Perhaps it had something to do with the Olympics. But given this recent reminder of the violent behavior of Westerners in nineteenth century China, I would not be too surprised to see a new monument, one that might be titled “Never ever forget national humiliation.”

**Tags:** China Report, James Hevia, Summer Palace