

Mitchell, James -TAPEI -GR

From : Alwyn Austin [alwyn@yorku.ca]
Sent: May 19, 2001 1:11 AM
To: Judith NAGATA
Cc: james.mitchell@dfait-maeci.gc.ca
Subject: Re: it's ours!!

Hi Jimmy,

Just a museological addendum to Michael's note concerning Mackay's stuff.

1) Mackay was collecting on the eve of the Japanese invasion of Taiwan - he sailed to Canada in 1893, and was in Canada when the Japanese occupied the island. As far as the aboriginal artifacts are concerned, he knew he was saving the material culture of a dying civilization, "brands from the burning" as he would put it. Indeed, by 1900 the Japanese rulers were actively working to eradicate aboriginal culture, at least its most extreme aspects (i.e. headhunting, which meant the whole religious structure surrounding this practice).

2) There is nothing intrinsically rare or valuable in the Mackay collection. This is not the Elgin marbles or the loot from the Summer Palace, or any number of monumental "art" collected in other countries. His purpose was to collect ordinary things - clothes, baskets, implements, religious paraphernalia, Christian teaching tools - to show the daily life of the people. What makes his collection rare and valuable now is that this daily-life culture has long since been destroyed: the collection is a snapshot of one moment frozen in time.

3) Mackay did not collect intentionally to bring his "loot" to Canada. He set up his museum at Oxford College first of all to teach Taiwanese students and others to "see" themselves and their island with "new eyes," and included western technology (microscopes, etc). He brought a representative sample of his study collection - the 16 crates he could transport - to Canada to teach Canadians about Taiwan, then an unknown place. He toured Canada in 1893-95, as events spiralled out of control in Taiwan with reports of persecution and execution of his pastors and converts, and used his little idols to help Canadians visualize and understand what was happening. In other words, he and his artifacts were "witnesses" to the destruction of Qing Taiwan.

4) Mackay left the bulk of his collection in Oxford College. In other words, he collected primarily for Taiwan, intending to leave his collection to the Taiwanese people. It was not his fault that the Oxford College collection was destroyed by the vicissitudes of the 20th century. In fact, it is his glory that Taiwan survived far from home, like a collection in exile.

5) The Taiwanese government has recognized this by signing an agreement not to repossess the artifacts.

That's my thoughts.

Cheers, and have a wonderful time on 2 June. Michael will be helping here with the plaque unveiling. Alwyn.

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