



China Immortalizes ‘Pillar of Shame’

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The People’s Republic of China expanded its attacks on Hong Kong’s liberties this past fall by menacing a statue at Hong Kong University commemorating the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. But all its aggression against the work of art may have done Beijing’s authoritarian agenda more harm than good.

“Pillar of Shame,” a 13-foot bronze piece by the Danish sculptor Jens Galschiøt, was installed at the university under the auspices of the Hong Kong Alliance in 1997 and has been an irritant to Beijing ever since, as Chinese authorities have worked to purge any record of Tiananmen. The upcoming Winter Olympics likely made the statue a more urgent problem for Beijing; the pillar was the focal point of pro-democracy protests around the time of the 2008 Summer Olympics. With most of the Hong Kong Alliance detained after the recent crackdown on dissent earlier this year, China finally moved against the statue. On Dec. 22, uniformed thugs put screens around the pillar, wrapped it in plastic, and carted it away to an unknown fate.

Yet the removal of the Hong Kong pillar may undercut the effort to erase Tiananmen from history. Other casts of the statue already exist in Rome, Mexico and Brazil, and Mr. Galschiøt can make more. These could be placed in any number of public locations inconvenient to Beijing—the plaza in front of the Chinese embassy in Washington, for example. Prior threats to the statue had already prompted its defenders to document its shape digitally, and this version can be disseminated online endlessly.

History shows that the attempt to suppress a work of art may end up preserving it. The disappearance of the “Pillar of Shame” may recall the fate of the 4,000-year-old “Head of Sargon.” Unearthed by British archaeologists in 1931, the Akkadian head was somewhat imaginatively surmised to be of Sargon II, the greatest ruler of ancient Mesopotamia. When the statue was mutilated by persons unknown centuries after it was made, the head was thrown into a trash heap as an insult—an insult that ironically allowed its eventual rediscovery and display as one of the most important surviving works of ancient art.

Sometimes, Beijing may find, if you strike an artwork down, it only becomes more powerful.