

The hottest ticket at museums around the country during the 1990s was a traveling exhibition of artifacts recovered — some critics at the time said “looted” — from the sunken ocean liner Titanic.

The shows, organized by a for-profit company called Premier Exhibitions, made millions and helped raise flagging museum attendance.

The hottest ticket of this decade is for traveling exhibitions of preserved human bodies. Like the Titanic show, the bodies exhibitions (several are currently touring) are a profitable, if somewhat uneasy, mix of science, sensationalism and controversy.

Premier Exhibitions' entry in that category, called [“Bodies ... The Exhibition,”](#) is scheduled to make a stop at the St. Louis Galleria mall in Richmond Heights from Oct. 2 to Jan. 31. The bodies won't be in public spaces — you'll need a \$22 ticket to see them — but [the controversy](#) already has arrived.

**At issue is the origin** of the bodies. At least some were unclaimed corpses obtained from the Chinese police. China [executes more of its citizens](#) than any other nation. Some of the people executed in China were people whose only offense was a political crime.

A lawyer for Premier Exhibitions says the company has absolutely no evidence that any of the corpses it exhibits are those of political prisoners or victims of torture or execution.

But that's not to say it knows exactly where the bodies come from and under what circumstances they were obtained. In recent years, China has become the home of a [ghoulish mini-industry in preserved corpses for export to the West.](#)

**The industry is centered** in the coastal city of Dalian, where German anatomist Gunther von Hagens — inventor of a process to preserve bodies for display — established a workshop in 1999. Mr. von Hagens' “Body Worlds 3” drew more than 100,000 customers when it played the St. Louis Science Center in 2007.

Mr. von Hagens, dubbed the “Walt Disney of death,” moved his workshop to China after stinging revelations in the European press. The German magazine *Der Spiegel* claimed that some bodies he was exhibiting were obtained under unethical circumstances.

In 2008, [the ABC News program “20/20” reported similar allegations about corpses provided to Premier Exhibitions.](#)

The program interviewed a source who claimed that a thriving black market in bodies and body parts — including those of recently executed prisoners — had sprung up in Dalian.

Brian Wainger, an attorney for Premier, disputes the charges. “Premier conducts intensive due diligence,” Mr. Wainger told us. “We have never, ever seen any sign of trauma or abuse. So it (the allegations) are creating a controversy that is not based in fact.”

**It's a fact** that thousands of political executions have occurred in China over the past decade. It's a fact that some involve practitioners of the spiritual movement [Falun Gong](#). In 2006, [an international fact-finding group reported evidence](#)

that as many as 41,000

[Falun Gong](#)

practitioners were killed between 2001 and 2003 so their organs could be used for transplantation.

Given all that, the idea of using “unclaimed corpses” as the raw material for a commercial exhibition — “Bodies ... The Exhibition” previously has appeared at such prestigious educational institutions as the Luxor casino in Las Vegas — is distasteful at best.

Last week, U.S. Rep. Todd Akin, R-Town and Country, [introduced legislation](#) to forbid the importation of preserved bodies from China for commercial display in the United States.

This page often disagrees with Mr. Akin, but he is absolutely correct on this issue. [Displaying the bodies](#)

of

political prisoners or of anyone who did not give full and informed consent, is reprehensible.

St. Louis Galleria's management should rethink the

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*BY the St. Louis Post-Dispatch Editorial Board*