

# HYPERALLERGIC

## How Books Get Banned

Xiaoze Xie's humble books and photographs are quiet survivors that still hide in the shadows even when they are bathed in museum light.

Kealey Boyd February 15, 2018



Xiaoze Xie, "Objects of Evidence (Modern Books)" (2017), mixed-media installation, (photo by Jeff Wells, courtesy of the Denver Art Museum, Chambers Fine Art and the artist)

DENVER — Artist Xiaoze Xie has made book bindings the subject of his paintings since the 1990s. Pockmarked by bookworms or charred from war (such as the Tsinghua University collection that survived the Anti-Japanese War of Resistance), the books he painted seemed to carry their own epic journeys. In Xie's new work he unpacks the history of book banning in China. This conceptual inversion of the artist's relationship with form and content reveals China's ideological shifts by showcasing what regimes made invisible rather than what they promoted.

*Eyes On: Xiaoze Xie* is accomplished in three parts: a display of modern books, ancient books, and the screening of a documentary. Starting in 2012 the artist collected over 500 banned books, and "Objects of Evidence (Modern Books)" includes 293 of those volumes. The long display table is organized by books banned by the Nationalist Party of China during the era of

the Republic (1911-1949), the 1950s, the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and from 1980 to 2010. The top shelf of the display case has stacks of first editions. The books published during the Cultural Revolution, include hand-copied volumes, commonly called yellow cover or gray cover books, Western literature, and books by authors who did not conform to the party's politics, and thus were labeled "poisonous weeds." Below that glass shelf another display of books echoes the ones above or fill in its gaps with second editions. These editions were printed outside or inside China after the prohibition was lifted. By finding first editions and second editions for comparison, Xie could isolate a single sentence that was removed or find the causes for censure.



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Ancient books are difficult and expensive to find on the market so library archives are Xie's main resource. "For Scrutiny (Ancient Books)" 24 life-size photographs with black backgrounds and a large, metal ruler at the base of the book make for peculiar mug shots. The yellowing pages of maps, calligraphy, or courtyard drawings betray few hints of anything nefarious. "The Peony Pavilion" from the late Ming dynasty was banned in the Qing because it challenged feudal morality, meaning the protagonists in the story chose their own spouses. In the documentary of Xie's research, *Tracing Forbidden Memories*, Peking University philosophy professor Pingqiu An notes:

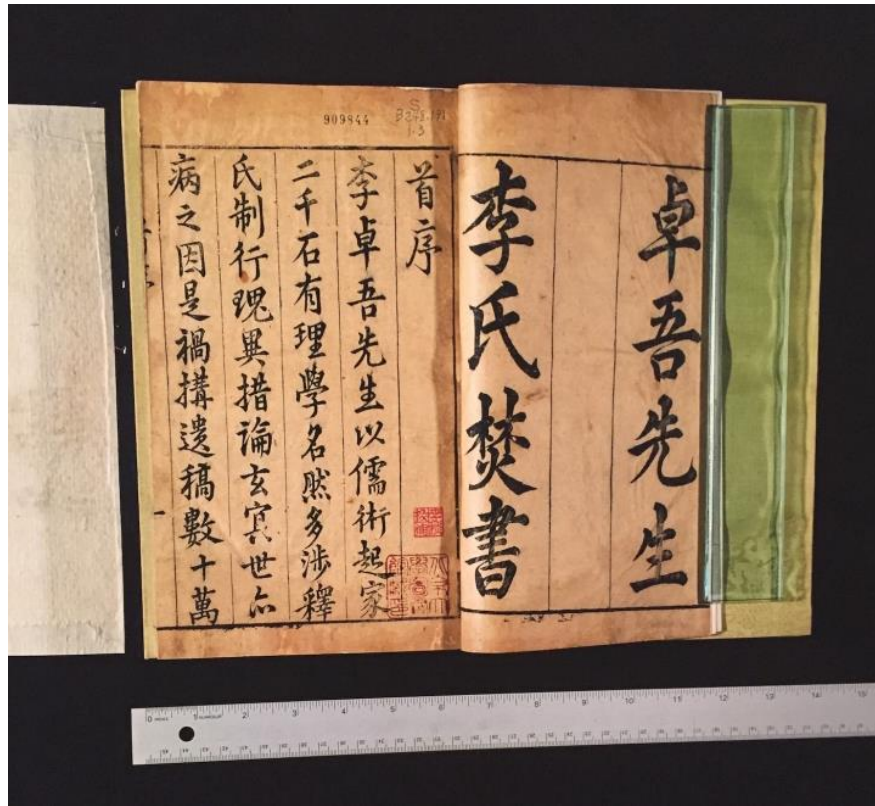
When you mention banned books most people think of pornographic novels, but over China's long history it hasn't been that kind of book. It's political and philosophical material mostly ... I think the motivation of rulers throughout history is pretty constant. It's all about consolidation of power ... to bring order to people's minds, to give the people a unified ideological goal.



Xiaoze Xie, "Objects of Evidence (Modern Books)" (2017), mixed-media installation, (photo by Jeff Wells, courtesy of the Denver Art Museum, Chambers Fine Art and the artist)

The reasons for a book being banned in the modern period were not different from the reasons for the same during the dynastic eras. In the era of the Chinese republic, a book advocating Marxism or Communism would be censored, but the 1949 Communist Revolution reversed that book's status just as a dynastic change did. In both periods, the author of the book could be deemed dangerous even if the content were benign. For example, in the 1950s the editor of several poetry and literary journals, Hu Feng was accused of being a capitalist and bourgeoisie. Writers that corresponded with the editor were blacklisted along with their essays, poems, novels, and even children's books.

How does book banning function in the digital space? In *Tracing Forbidden Memories*, author Chen Guanzhong highlights his book *Heyday* (2009) which was set in the near future, 2013, allowing him to speak more freely. An imported version could be purchased in online bookstores, but then someone put a free electronic version on the internet in simplified Chinese. Six months later, *Heyday* was removed from online bookstores and the electronic versions were taken down. The book vanished without ever being officially banned.



*A Book to Burn*, by Li Zhi (1527-1602), this edition from Ming dynasty, Wanli reign, block-printed; detail from Xiaoze Xie, "For Scrutiny (Ancient Books)" (2017), archival inkjet prints (photo by Kealey Boyd)

Xie's installation, photographs, and documentary do not recall the romantic and noble renderings of texts in his paintings. Nor are they a triumphant resurrection of the banned book often evoked in other contemporary works about censorship such as *The Parthenon of Books* by artist Marta Minujin. Xie's humble books and photographs are quiet survivors that still hide in the shadows even when bathed in museum light. Their presence proves a future regime change will bring some figures out of the dark only to select others to take their place. Although the case he presents is Chinese, Xie invites a global audience to question the source of the available information and what stories are missing and why.

Eyes On: Xiaoze Xie continues at the *Denver Art Museum* (100 W. 14<sup>th</sup> Avenue Pkwy, Denver) until July 8, 2018.