



独立中文笔会

Independent Chinese PEN Center (ICPC)

A Brief Biography of Liao Yiwu

Liao Yiwu (廖亦武), aka Lao Wei (老威), is a renowned Chinese author, poet, reporter, and musician.

Lao was born in Yanting County, Sichuan Province in western China on August 4, 1958, *the same* year as The Great Leap Forward, soon leading into the greatest man-made disaster under communist rule in China. During the consequent famine that last for 3 years when over 30 thousands of people were said to have died of hunger, he suffered from oedema and was close to dying. In 1966, his father was branded a counter-revolutionary class enemy during the so-called Great Cultural Revolution. Liao's parents filed for divorce to protect the children. His mother was arrested for attempting to sell government issued coupons on the black market. As a result, he became homeless for a few years.

Liao started to compose poetry at middle school. Before his graduation in 1976, he was briefly detained for his "reactionary poems". Each year in 1977 – 1980, he took the national examinations for university entrance but failed to be accepted. In the end of 1980, he became a truck driver for transportation. In 1982, his poems were getting published in literary magazines, and many of them became popular and won him over 20 awards. In 1985-1987, he was criticized for his rebellious poems and put under police surveillance for his founding an underground poetry magazine. During a period, he was forbidden to publish any works or opinions. In 1998, he was recommended by a prominent author to enter a writers' class at Wuhan University but expelled in 3 months.

In Spring 1989, two magazine companies took advantage of the relaxed politics and carried Liao's long poems "The Yellow City" and "Idol." In the poems, he criticized the system, calling it paralyzed and eaten away by a collective leukemia. The poems were deemed anti-communist and he was questioned and detained and his home was searched. After hearing about the Massacre in Beijing on June 4, 1989, Liao composed a long poem entitled "Massacre," and recited the poem into an audiotape for a Canadian sinologist to send abroad. In March 1990, he and his friends made a poetry movie "Requiem", the sequel of Massacre and soon he was arrested with over 20 others including his pregnant wife, all of whom were arrested also. Two years later, Liao was sentenced to four years imprisonment on "counter-revolutionary propaganda and incitement. While in prison, due to torture and abusive punishment, he suffered several mental breakdowns and twice attempted suicide. From a fellow prisoner, an elderly monk, he learned to play the Xiao. He then began to interview other prisoners about their lives, besides composing poems.

When he was released from prison, his wife and their daughter had left him, and his former literary friends kept their distance. He lived for a while as a homeless street musician in Chengdu, collecting stories.

In 1998 he compiled *The Fall of the Holy Temple*, an anthology of underground poems from the



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1970s, mainly from Chinese dissidents, and published next year. One of China's vice premiers called it a "premeditated attempt to overthrow the government, and is supported by powerful anti-China groups."

In 2001 his two-volume *Interviews with the Lower Strata of Chinese Society* was published under his pen-name Lao Wei. The book consists of transcribed interviews with people on the margins of Chinese society, from "hustlers to drifters, outlaws and street performers, the officially renegade and the physically handicapped, those who deal with human waste and with the wasting of humans, artists and shamans, crooks, even cannibals." At once, the book became very popular and reported and discussed by over 50 news media and literary magazines. He was interviewed and invited to make presentations at the symposium on his book. Then the book has been banned ever since like all of his other works. He was arrested several times for conducting "illegal interviews" and for exposing the dark side of the Communist Party.

In 2001, he joined founding the Independent Chinese PEN center, a branch of PEN International, became its board member until 2005, received its Free to Write Award in 2007 and its honorary directorship in 2009.

Over the last ten years, Liao's personal freedom was largely restricted, and prohibited to travel abroad 15 times except for once being allowed to visit Germany in 2010. After Liu Xiaobo, his long-time friend, was awarded Nobel Peace Prize in the same year, he was denied to leave his country until he succeeded in crossing the border with Vietnam to arrive in Germany in July, 2011.

Although his works have been banned in China mainland, Liao has been continuously writing and got his books published in Hong Kong, Taiwan and USA. Eventually he has been well recognized internationally as a leading writer with many of his books translated into various languages, including English, French, German and Japanese. In 2011, he was awarded Geschwister-Scholl-Preis in Germany.

List of works

1. *Massacre (大屠杀, 1989)*; German version: *Massaker: Frühe Gedichte. hochroth Verlag, Berlin (2011)*.
2. *The Fall of the Holy Temple (沉沦的圣殿), an anthology of underground poems from the 1970s in China, Xinjiang Youth Publishing House, China (1999)*.
3. *Interviews with the Lower Strata of Chinese Society(中国底层访谈录), 2 volumes, Changjiang Publishing House, China (2001, soon banned by the Propaganda Department of Chinese Communist Party Central Committee and the PRC Government's Publications Office); 3 volumes, Maitian Publishing House, Taiwan (2002); French edition: L'Empire des bas-fonds, trad. Marie Holzman, Éditions Bleu de Chine (2003); English edition: The Corpse Walker: Real Life Stories: China from the Bottom Up, hardcover: Pantheon (2008), trade paperback: Anchor; Reprint edition (2009); German edition: Fräulein Hallo und der Bauernkaiser: Chinas*



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Gesellschaft von unten. Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt (2009).

4. *China's Unjust Court Cases (中国冤案录) 2 volumes, Laogai Foundation, Washington, D.C. (2003, 2005).*
5. *Testimonials (证词), Hong Kong (2004); expanded German edition: Für ein Lied und hundert Lieder: Ein Zeugenbericht aus chinesischen Gefängnissen, Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt (2011).*
6. *China's Petitioner Villages (中国上访村), Mirror Publishing Co., USA(2005).*
7. *The Last of China's Landlords (最后的地主), 2 volumes, Laogai Research Foundation, Washington D.C. (2008)*
8. *Poèmes de prison : Le grand massacre - L'Ame endormie, Éditions L'Harmattan (2008).*
9. *Earthquake Insane Asylum(地震疯人院), Asian Culture Co., Ltd., Taiwan (2009); French edition: Quand la terre s'est ouverte au Sichuan : Journal d'une tragédie, Éditions Buchet/Chastel (2010).*
10. *God is Red (上帝是红色的), HongKong (2011) ; English edition: God is Red, Harper Collins (2011).*