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Vaclav Havel Library Foundation
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**Vaclav Havel Library Foundation
Announces Liao Yiwu as the 2018 Winner
Disturbing the Peace,
*Award for a Courageous Writer at Risk***

The **Vaclav Havel Library Foundation** announced today that the winner of the 2018 *Disturbing the Peace, Award for a Courageous Writer at Risk* is Chinese author, reporter, musician and poet – **Liao Yiwu** (aka Lao Wei). As a vocal critic of China’s Communist regime, he spent four years in prison after publicly reciting his poem “Massacre” in memory of the victims of the Tiananmen Square military on June 4, 1989. He currently lives in Germany, under asylum but will be attending the award ceremony at The Bohemian National Hall in New York on **September 27, 2018**.

The award, which includes a \$5,000 cash prize, supports talented individuals who embody Havel’s legacy while drawing attention to the many writers worldwide who bravely fight human rights violations. He will receive his prize from the President of the National Endowment for Democracy, **Carl Gershman**, during a [Gala event](#) in honor of **The Honorable Madeleine Albright**. This event is presented by [The Vaclav Havel Library Foundation](#) and the [Bohemian Benevolent and Literary Association \(BBLA\)](#) and is open to the public.

The jury members for 2018 included:

- Novelist **Burhan Sonmez**, a human rights lawyer who was severely beaten and left for dead by security forces while taking part in a

demonstration in his native Turkey in 1996. He was the recipient of the ***Disturbing the Peace, Award for a Courageous Writer at Risk*** in 2017.

- **James Ragan**, the author of the poetry collections *In the Talking Hours* (1979), *Womb-Weary* (1990), *The Hunger Wall* (1995), *Lusions* (1997), and *Too Long a Solitude* (2009). Ragan directed the University of Southern California Master of Professional Writing program for 25 years.
- **Deborah Treisman**, New Yorker fiction editor and host of the New Yorker Fiction Podcast, was the third member of the committee. Before joining The New Yorker in 1997, she worked at other magazines, including The *Threepenny Review*, *The New York Review of Books*, and *Grand Street*.

Their joint feedback in support of the Liao Yiwu nomination stated:

“Writing on the most sensitive political topic of his lifetime, the Tiananmen Massacre, Liao was arrested and imprisoned. Like Havel, he knew government pressure from an early age, as his father was branded a counterrevolutionary. Though he lives in Germany under asylum, his works have been shared underground inside China, where he remains known.”

James Ragan added that, “Like Havel, Yiwu spent 4 years in prison. Like Havel, who authored Charter 77, Yiwu signed China's Charter 08 replicating Havel's call for reforms. Like Havel, his international awards and profiles in major world journals has spotlighted attention on all "courageous writers at risk."

Burhan Sonmez concluded that, “Liao Yiwu’s life has been an example of persistent struggle for freedom of thought. He has been an underground writer, a prisoner, and an exile. His literary creativeness is the base of his resistance for freedom.”

The Vaclav Havel Library Foundation will also be bringing *Disturbing the Peace* nominee, **Liu Xia** to NYC to join **Liao Yiwu** at the award ceremony. After

substantial pressure from German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the international community, Liu Xia was finally given her freedom to leave China. She arrived in Berlin on July 10, three days before the anniversary of the death of her husband, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo, who had been under unofficial and illegal house arrest for eight years. Although never charged with a crime, Liu Xia lost her freedom due to her husband's 11-year prison sentence for drafting a petition calling for democracy and human rights in China.

The two Courageous Writers at Risk, along with Andrew Nathan - Professor of Political Science at Columbia University, will be part of a panel discussion moderated by Carl Gershman during ***The Rehearsal for Truth Theater Festival***, in honor of Vaclav Havel, at The Bohemian National Hall. (Date and Time TBC)

The other three nominees for 2018 included Ahmet Altan (Turkey), Ketty Nivyabandi (Burundi/Canada) and Patrice Nganang (Cameroon/USA).

About the Award Process

Nominations for the award are collected each year from international institutions prominent in literature and human rights. A short list is prepared by the VHLF Award Committee and forwarded to three jurors, who select the awardee. The previous recipients of the Disturbing the Peace Award are Kurdish novelist Burhan Sönmez (2017) and Burmese writer Ma Thida (2016).

In 2018, the VHLF consulted with the following organizations:

- Freedom House
- PEN International
- Vaclav Havel Library
- Words without Borders

About Liao Yiwu

Liao Yiwu also known as **Lao Wei**, (born 16 June 1958 in Sichuan), is a Chinese author, reporter, musician and poet. He is a critic of China's Communist regime, for which he has been imprisoned. His books, several of which are collections of interviews with ordinary people from the lower rungs of Chinese society, were published in Taiwan and Hong Kong but are banned in mainland China; some have been translated into English, French, German, Polish and Czech.

The exiled Chinese writer Liao Yiwu is the son of schoolteachers in Sichuan Province who were persecuted during the Cultural Revolution. Mr. Liao left home at the age of 10, took a succession of jobs and eventually became involved in avant-garde poetry. In 1990, he was arrested after publicly reciting his poem "Massacre" in memory of the victims of the Tiananmen Square military crackdown on June 4, 1989, and spent four years in prison. After his release, he wrote several books under pseudonyms, all of which were banned in China but sold well on the underground market. His "Interviews With People From the Bottom Rung of Society" was published in Taiwan in 2001 and became his first book to appear in English, in 2008, as "The Corpse Walker: Real Life Stories, China From the Bottom Up." A memoir of his prison years, "For a Song and a Hundred Songs," was published in English in 2013.

Bibliography in English

For a Song and a Hundred Songs: A Poet's Journey Through a Chinese Prison 2013. Published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

God Is Red: The Secret Story of How Christianity Survived and Flourished in Communist China 2012. Published by Harper Collins.

The Corpse Walker: Real Life Stories: China From the Bottom Up. Published by Pantheon Books

About Liu Xia

Liu Xia is a poet, artist and founding member of the Independent Chinese PEN Center. Her husband, poet, literary critic and human rights activist Liu Xiaobo was serving an 11-year prison sentence for “inciting subversion of state power.” In 2010, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Two months before the awards ceremony, Liu Xia disappeared under extralegal house arrest, where she has remained with no access to phone, Internet, or mail, and where around-the-clock security prevented her from seeing visitors. When her husband was diagnosed with late-stage liver cancer in June 2017 and released on medical parole, Liu Xia was reportedly able to visit him. However, since his death in July, she has not been seen in public for several months. In May 2018, Liao Yiwu, the Chinese author and poet living in Germany and friend of Liu Xia, reported, with Liu Xia's permission, that she was suffering debilitating clinical depression, after the Beijing government had broken multiple promises that she would 'soon' be free to travel, including, in early April 2018, an arrangement made by Heiko Mass, the German Foreign Minister, to facilitate her travel to Germany.

English translations of Liu Xia's poetry by Ming Di and Jennifer Stern have been published by PEN America, Chinese PEN, the BBC, the Guardian, the Margins for the Asian American Writers' Workshop, Poetry, the Poetry Society of America, and Words without Borders. Liu Xia's photographs have appeared in galleries throughout the world.

About Vaclav Havel

Vaclav Havel (1936-2011) was a playwright, essayist, political dissident, and, after 1990, president of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic. In the 1960s Havel's plays *The Garden Party* and *The Memorandum* were widely performed around the world. But in the climate of political orthodoxy that followed the 1968 uprising in Czechoslovakia, Communist authorities forbade the publication and

performance of Havel's works. Havel refused to be silenced and continued to write on behalf of the unjustly oppressed. He became an outspoken human rights advocate and in the 1970s was an author of Charter 77, the manifesto of the Czechoslovak dissident movement, which called on the government to honor its human rights commitments under the Helsinki Accords. During the next two decades Havel was arrested many times for alleged anti-state activities and was sentenced to more than four years in prison. Havel's seminal essay, "The Power of the Powerless," written in 1978, had a profound impact on dissident and human rights movements in Eastern Europe and around the world.

About Vaclav Havel Library Foundation

The Vaclav Havel Library Foundation is a nonprofit organization established in the United States to honor, preserve, and build upon the legacy of playwright, dissident, and former President of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, Vaclav Havel.

The Bohemian Benevolent and Literary Association (BBLA)

The Bohemian Benevolent and Literary Association (BBLA), established in 1891, was founded as an umbrella organization representing approximately eighty Czech and Slovak cultural, educational and athletic community groups and clubs.

About Carl Gershman

Carl Gershman is President of the National Endowment for Democracy. In addition to presiding over the Endowment's grants program in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union and Latin America, he has overseen the creation of the quarterly *Journal of Democracy*, International Forum for Democratic Studies, the Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellows Program, and the Center for International Media Assistance. He also took the lead in launching in New Delhi in 1999 the World Movement for Democracy, which is a global network of democracy practitioners and scholars. Mr. Gershman is currently encouraging other democracies to establish their own foundations devoted to the promotion of democratic institutions in the world.

Members of the VHLF Award Committee are:

- Elizabeth Littlefield, governor, Off-The-Record
- Pavla Niklova, VHLF executive director
- Martin Palous, former ambassador of the Czech Republic to the United Nations and the United States, and president, VHLF board of directors
- Bill Shipsey, chair, Art for Amnesty, Amnesty International, and member of the VHLF board of directors
- Lise Stone, member of the VHLF board of directors
- Salil Tripathi, chair, Writers in Prison Committee, PEN International
- Marilyn Wyatt, consultant and member of the VHLF board of directors