

Free thinker takes on China's neo-Maoists

By Yvonne Su

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BEIJING - With frustration growing in Chinese society over ever an expanding wealth gap created by economic reform and opening up, the firm belief in liberalism and the free market still being express by some quarters provokes anger among neo-Maoists or new leftists. This has particularly been the case with the work of engineer-turned-economist Mao Yushi.

Last summer, the 83-year-old posted a blog titled "Judging Mao [Zedong] as a Man", a critical re-evaluation of Chairman Mao's legacy. In response, some of the late communist leader's supporters called for Mao Yushi's arrest - others threatened to beat him up. The economist managed to survive the harassment, but only after he followed advice from the authorities to keep a low-profile and stop writing anything more about the late leader.

A year on, and Mao Yushi's persistence in advocating the importance of liberty has won him the Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty from the Washington-based Cato Institute. He plans to travel to the United States in May to accept the prize.

A self-trained economist and a mentor of several leading Chinese liberal economists, Mao strongly believes in the powers of free market, equal rights and democracy. Unlike the majority of Chinese, he didn't spend most of his time before the 1990s toeing the party line. Working as a railway engineer in Heilongjiang province since 1950, he was involved in developing solutions to improve the efficiency of trains while increasing his professional knowledge and learning languages.

"He thinks on his own. He is an independent thinker. ... Being smart is a common quality. But many people are not willing to think as an individual thinker," said Vaclav Smil, a Switzerland-based Czech energy and environmental expert.

Mao Yushi's experiences under China's social-political movements 20th century make his independent thinking even more unusual. In 1958, amid the nationwide "anti-Rightist movement", he was labeled as a Rightist, a term used to refer to liberal intellectuals who appeared to favor capitalism and against collectivization. Afterwards, he remained a target of political campaigns launched by Mao Zedong.

Amid the "Great Famine" between 1958 and 1961, he was sent to receive "re-education through labor" in a village in Shandong province and ended up suffering from 10 months starvation. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), Mao Yushi's home was searched by the Red Guards, he and his wife were both shaved bald and criticized and denounced before mass gatherings. He and his father were once whipped until they bled.

"I became cautious just like a dog tucking his tail down his legs after I was labeled as a Rightist ... Those experiences enable me to hold on when attacked by others," Mao Yushi recalled later in

his books.

His starving experience made him so curious about the total deaths during China's Great Famine that he even came up with a mathematics formula to gather statistics on the famine. Based on his tabulation, 36.34 million Chinese died of starvation between 1959 and 1960.

When asked to compare the difference between physical and psychological tortures, Yushi said in an interview, "No one wanted to die amid the famine era. Everybody was fighting for survival. But so many people committed or wanted to commit suicide during the Cultural Revolution."

Mao Yushi's fate started to change when the Cultural Revolution came to an end with Mao Zedong's death in 1976. He was assigned to do research on transport economics at the China Academy of Railway Sciences. During this period, his research interests evolved into microeconomics and eventually led him to formulate his famous economic theory, "Principles of Optimal Attribution." His academic research career leaped forward after he joined the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' (CASS) Institute of American Studies in 1984, as he started traveling around the world for academic exchanges.

Georges-Marie Schmutz, a Lausanne-based history teacher and Mao's neighbor at Harvard, said he found him very different from his Chinese peers in a time when China just about to kick off its economic reform.

"It was often boring to speak with Chinese scholars about China, because we could never know if the conversation was sincere ...On the contrary, I always found Mao very critical about some aspects of China's developments but also very realistic about China's achievements," said Schmutz.

Another friend of Mao, Clement Tisdell, an economics professor at the University of Queensland, echoed Schmutz's view saying that he was surprised to read about Mao's research paper on free market in 1987 and he invited Mao to teach in Queensland in 1990. "He is not afraid of speaking out his views," he said.

As an academic researcher who is always interested in embracing new ideas, in 1993 after he retired from CASS, Mao and four other economists founded the Unirule Institute of Economics, one of China's very first independent think tanks, to promote privatization, market rules establishing, land property system reform etc. Due to a shortage of continuous funding, the Unirule Institute's operation wasn't smooth in the beginning and Mao was forced to invest his family's own savings to keep it going.

In the past few years, Unirule has received financial support from the New York-based Ford Foundation, which new leftists say is a front for "funding from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)." Unirule denies the accusation.

As an active economist, Mao also pioneered in private charity in 1993 by launching a micro-loan program in a small village of Shanxi province where running water wasn't available, to finance villagers' agricultural production, education and medical care. The project has expanded to Sichuan and Beijing and has granted more than 10,000 loans around China.

He also jointly founded the Fuping (Poverty Alleviation) Development Institute in 2002 with Tang Min, a former Asian Development Bank economist, to train peasants to provide domestic services in Beijing. By the end of 2011, the Institute has trained more than 20,000 workers from underdeveloped provinces, such as Anhui and Gansu.

Du Xinmei, a 25-year old college student who joined the Fuping program after she left Gansu in 2005, said that the program really changed her life. "Without the program, I would have probably become an ordinary mother back home now."

Despite being 83, Mao Yushi still travels frequently to different provinces to give speeches and inspect his projects. When he is not travelling, he spends most of his time tweeting, writing, reading and thinking. After the incident triggered by his criticism on Mao Zedong, he still actively criticizes the government's economic policies and popular social trends by publishing articles and posting blogs.

When the government shut down the famous new leftist website, Utopia - which led the harassment against Mao Yushi last summer - Mao Yushi criticized the government for suppressing freedom of speech, even though he didn't agree with the portal's new-leftist views.

Aside from advocating more free market solutions for China, Mao has also started promoting morality in China, worrying that the greedy pursuit of commercial interests will eventually jeopardize China's developments. As part of the effort to correct China's corruption practice, Mao said "The first move is to abandon privileges given to officials."

Mao Yushi is scheduled to leave for Washington to receive the award on May 2, but he remains unsure if the government will allow him to leave the country. He said he has finished the writing of his speech script, in which he will talk about liberty in China - what there is and what there is still lacking.

"The fact that I can win the prize reflects the progress of China," he said, "There were some mistakes, but the accomplishment of the reforms is magnificent."

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