



## Critic of Mao persists in documenting China's turbulent past

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BEIJING – As China's Cultural Revolution descended into mob violence, teenage Red Guards dragged Mao Yushi and his father, two proud and bookish engineers, out of their home to sweep a boulevard as a crowd watched and jeered. The pair were then lashed with a copper-flecked whip until their backs were flayed. When Mao later stumbled into work, he didn't know blood was still seeping through his shirt until colleagues pointed it out.

"I was whipped through my skin, but I didn't feel pain because in my heart I was so scared I would be beaten to death," Mao recalls. "Every day they pulled dead bodies through ... the market on flat-bed tricycles. A piece of cloth covering every tricycle, just like that."

Fifty years later, the prominent economist's campaign to document China's turbulent past and hold the ruling Communist Party accountable continues to win him enemies among die-hard acolytes of Mao Zedong, who unleashed the Cultural Revolution in 1966 a bid to destroy his political foes and revive his radical egalitarian agenda.

The life and career of the 87-year-old economist, who is not related to the late leader, traces the twists of modern China's tumultuous history. He survived near starvation in the late 1950s and persecution during the Cultural Revolution only to battle a concerted campaign by neo-Maoists to vilify him today.

"The one who brought calamity to an entire nation still hangs in Tiananmen Square and is still found on the banknotes we use every day," Mao wrote in a 2011 essay that placed him firmly in the crosshairs of the neo-Maoists. "China's tragicomedy still hasn't had its curtain call."

Mao's ordeals have only emboldened his criticism of a restrictive political system that gave rise, he says, to a climate in which rampaging teenagers could publicly whip him into a bloody heap five decades ago, and which continues to impose one-party authoritarian rule over an increasingly prosperous and diverse society.

A former scholar with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and co-founder of free-market think-tank Unirule, Mao's arguments for market reforms and individual rights have brought him an international following, and won him accolades including the 2012 Milton Friedman Prize from the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington, D.C.

Yet, interviewed one recent afternoon in their west Beijing home, Mao and his wife, Zhao Yanling, said they are still paying the price for his widely circulated 2011 online column criticizing Mao Zedong as a power-obsessed sociopath whose legacy continues to warp Chinese society.

Neo-Maoists have left death threats on his voicemail, held protest rallies outside his public lectures and signed petitions seeking his arrest. One man threw a shoe at him at a lecture in eastern China; another barged into a speech in Washington to denounce him as a traitor to the Chinese people. The government has warned him to be less outspoken but has not employed harsher methods it has used on others critical of the leadership.

With this year marking the Cultural Revolution's 50th anniversary, the couple feels particularly under siege. In recent weeks police have intercepted suspected Maoists seeking to confront them at home, said Zhao, who dreads the sound of her own doorbell.

"She lives in a state of constant fear," Mao said. "So do I."

Mao was born in 1929. His father and an uncle were engineers trained at Purdue University in the United States. Mao moved 13 times in a dozen years as he followed the work assignments of his father, a high-ranking railway planner.

Although a strong supporter of the Communist Party following its violent 1949 takeover, Mao began openly questioning the planned economy while pursuing his own career as a railway engineer. Amid a far-reaching crackdown on dissent, he was labeled a rightist in 1957 and lost several pay grades.

Worse was to come. In 1960, he was sent to rural Shandong province to be re-educated, where he discovered the horror of the massive famine that resulted from Mao Zedong's headline drive to collectivize agriculture and build up industry. Mao Yushi and others survived by eating insects and birds, while all but one in a family of 12 in his village succumbed to starvation. An estimated 30 million or more are believed to have died over three years in an event that remains little discussed in the country.

Eventually reinstated to a comfortable life in Beijing, Mao's existence was again upended on a steamy August evening in 1966 soon after the start of the Cultural Revolution. A neighbor directed a band of Red Guards to the Mao home, denouncing the family as capitalists and intellectuals who were ripe targets for class struggle.

"Don't speak," one of the boys, no older than 16, warned as he led the family outside, adding ominously: "If you speak, I'll dig another hole in the ground."

The thuggish youths carted away furniture, jewelry and clothes and burned the family's ration coupons, leaving just enough cash for a handful of meals. In the following weeks, they returned

to whip both the father and son and shave the head of Zhao, Mao's wife, as a particularly bitter form of humiliation.

Mao Yushi was soon banished to a locomotive factory in distant Shanxi Province while Zhao stayed in Beijing, leaving a portion of their monthly salary in a milk box outside to fend off the roving gangs. Mao's father managed to keep his position in Beijing.

Mao returned to visit his wife and two children a few times a year until Mao Zedong's death in 1976 finally put an end to the decade-long paroxysm of violence and chaos, in which an estimated 1 million Chinese died from persecution, execution or by killing themselves.

Amid the 1980s economic reforms instituted under Deng Xiaoping, Mao turned to economics. He grew increasingly critical of the party following the bloody crackdown on the 1989 student-led pro-democracy protests focused on Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

Armed with his laptop and several blogs, Mao continues to give his opinions on everything from state enterprise reforms to efforts to regulate the housing market.

"All of the mistakes this country has made have been because there is no freedom of thought or freedom of expression," he said. "That's why things look dangerous right now."