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US think tank honours economist for support of market reforms

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Prominent liberal economist Mao Yushi has received a prestigious prize in the United States for his support of a market economy and other efforts to promote freedom.

Mao, who blames Mao Zedong for the deaths of 50 million people during his rule, accepted the Milton Friedman prize for advancing liberty from the **Cato Institute** in Washington on Friday.

The award committee cited the economist's push for "an open and transparent political system" in China, and his work in creating private charities and self-help programmes that fostered individual empowerment. He also will receive US\$250,000.

Accompanied by his granddaughter Mao Shangbin, the 83-year-old told US media the award showed the progress of the liberal movement in China. He said the freedom rooted in individual rights could not be bestowed by the government, and the public must strive for it.

Mao said his most important work in recent decades had been raising awareness about the principles of a market economy among the public at a time when the world's most populous country is shifting from a planned economy.

The ceremony was interrupted at one point, by an Asian protester, who called Mao a traitor in "service for the rich in America", the BBC reported.

Mao infuriated many leftists in China last year after publishing an article that said Mao Zedong should be officially held responsible for the number of people that died as a direct result of his policies. He estimated the death toll at 50 million.

Mao also spoke to Washington-based Foreign Policy magazine about the cases of blind activist Chen Guangcheng and ousted Chongqing boss Bo Xilai .

Bo's downfall "had a big connection to politics", he said. "Bo wanted China to return to Mao Zedong's time and this I don't approve of. But many Chinese did."

About Chen, Mao said both the United States and China were using the activist's attempt to seek American protection as an occasion to attack each other.

"China has used this to say: 'You interfere in my internal politics, and need to apologise'," Mao said. "Many Chinese government officials say America wants to destroy us, but so many Chinese come to America to study abroad."

"When they have trouble in China, they flee to American embassies," he said.