

Economist's call for the poor to share toilets stinks, netizens say

He Hulfeng in Shenzhen

A renowned mainland economist has been under fire in the two weeks since he suggested on his blog that government-subsidised flats should have communal rather than individual toilets.

Academic Mao Yushi, 80, of the Beijing-based Unirule Institute of Economics, said communal toilets would deter officials and their families from abusing policy loopholes to snap up subsidised homes.

"Low-rent housing should not have private toilets. In this way, rich folk won't want to buy such flats," he said, contending that the better-off would not settle for a communal

toilet if they could afford not to. He claimed in the posting that one of his friends had abused his official power to buy a subsidised home for himself.

But netizens reacted strongly to Mr Mao's suggestion, saying he was an advocate of discrimination against the poor.

Of more than 73,000 respondents to an ongoing online survey since Thursday, nearly 70 per cent were against the idea, saying a private toilet was an essential right for every human being, including the poor.

"In Mr Mao's world, civilisation has gone backwards. In modern society, you hardly ever hear of the poor having to do without a private toilet," one netizen said.

Another asked Mr Mao: "Are you telling the world that this is about socialism with Chinese characteristics? Do you mean our nation is just somewhere the poor deserve nothing but a room without a private toilet?"

In response to the online uproar, Mr Mao posted another article on Monday, saying that lower construction standards for cheap flats were also discrimination against the poor but also benefited them.

He said low-cost housing should come without private toilets to prevent some rich and influential people from buying cheap housing intended exclusively for the poor.

"If living conditions are bad in low-rent housing, rich folks won't

occupy such apartments and would instead turn to commercial apartments."

But analysts said it would be unfair for the poor to buy subsidised housing without private toilets and that such property might still be sought by the rich.

Liu Kaïming, founder of Shenzhen's Institute of Contemporary Observation, said Mr Mao lacked understanding and concern for people.

"If he visited the delta and talked to people, he would see that a private toilet is a basic requirement and right for everyone, including migrant workers and the poor. We would call a factory a sweatshop if it did not have enough individual toilets," Mr Liu

said. "He also misunderstands why the rich buy low-cost housing. We see many officials and their rich friends own subsidised housing through abuse of power or bribes. They will try anything to get the flat, no matter whether it has a private toilet or not. They won't live in the apartment, they will just sublet it to the poor."

Gao Haiyan, a researcher in urban development at the Shenzhen Academy of Social Sciences, said that only transparency and supervision could stop corrupt officials from occupying low-cost housing.

He said that making officials declare their assets would help to kick the rich out of such housing, not building flats without toilets.