

Detained artist a further blow for China quake parents

By [James Pomfret](#)

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HANWANG, [China](#) (Reuters) - Chinese farmer Liu Jiuchuan is perhaps an unlikely supporter of activist and artist Ai Weiwei, whose detention last month on suspicion of economic crimes sparked uproar around the world.

But for 50-year-old Liu, the bearded and burly Ai was a champion of a shared cause for justice over the collapse of dozens of shoddily-built schools during a massive earthquake in Sichuan province on May 12, 2008, killing more than 5,000 children.

"If he is freed I will be extremely happy. He should be freed because he helped speak the truth," said Liu, whose 19-year-old daughter, Liu Yi, died in one of the collapsed schools.

"Every minute we are thankful that he made everyone know about this .. Not many people did, and for that I'm very grateful," added Liu, who heard about Ai's detention through the region's wide network of bereaved parents.

Ai was detained last month and is being investigated on suspicion of economic crimes, though authorities have given few other details.

He had spearheaded a high-profile campaign to gather and publicize the names of the schoolchildren who perished in Sichuan's "tofu dregs" schools, so-called because of the ease at which they crumpled.

Three years since the Chinese village of Hanwang was struck by the earthquake that leveled several schools and killed many of its children, the scars still run deep.

Too old to have another child, the Lius now lead a quiet life living off their land, scraping by with a modest income of around 5,000 yuan (\$770) a year selling potatoes, rice and beans.

"We only have each other now," said Liu, looking at his rosy-cheeked wife. "This society is not just. Good people are blamed as bad people. Now that he (Ai) can't help us, our hearts hurt ... he is truly someone who cares about the people, like a mother."

SOCIAL MEDIA

Ai, who was very active during the second anniversary of the quake last year, deploying social media like Twitter to publicize the deaths, would have wanted to keep up the pressure on Beijing this year too, his sister, Gao Ge, said.

"He has said before that as a part of society, he will continue his investigation and will keep on raising the problem until the government responds," Gao told Reuters by telephone.

Ai is not the only activist involved in the Sichuan quake's aftermath to have fallen foul of the authorities.

The writer Tan Zuoren, who launched a probe into the students' deaths, was jailed for five years last year on a vague subversion charge.

"We feel very disappointed now to learn they've (Tan and Ai) been arrested, but we cannot do anything for them. We do not have the ability to do anything for them," said Yang Guilin, another parent whose child perished in a school in Beichuan.

The high death toll for children in the disaster cast an awkward and embarrassing spotlight on local officials who were accused of having skimped and squandered public money that should have been used on building better quality schools.

Officials have repeatedly stonewalled family members, blocked investigations or independent inquiries into the deaths, while stifling lawsuits and silencing activists speaking up on their behalf, some parents and activists say.

"I want a fair explanation. They haven't even given us this," said Liu, who said he did not fear recriminations from local officials who have repeatedly warned him not to speak out or cause trouble.

"My daughter was everything. It's just not right to lose our children like this," said Liu. (\$1 = 6.492 yuan)

(Additional reporting by [Sui-Lee Wee](#); Editing by [Ben Blanchard](#) and [Alex Richardson](#))

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/05/12/us-china-quake-schools-idUSTRE74B2FD20110512>