

# Mary Mazur, Historian

TED RALSTON, SPECIAL TO KP NEWS

Mary Mazur of Longbranch is well-known on the Key Peninsula for her civic and community activities in the 1990s and 2000s. What is less well-known is her role as a scholar in the 1970s. Her work underscored the role of history in uncovering why human events and actions occur, their significance to the collective human future, and how to confront that future.

When asked why in her 40s she took up Ph.D. studies in Chinese History, Mazur did not hesitate in answering: "To realize a small girl's dream."

The result was one of the most important books written in the 20th century about the causes and costs of political upheaval; a monumental work whose shadow reaches into our own times.

Born in 1931 in Detroit, Mazur graduated from Carleton College with an undergraduate degree in biology and went to work in a research lab in the greater Chicago area. She roomed in a boarding house with three other young women who worked at the lab. She and her co-workers would take the bus to the lab—until a young man who also worked there offered to give them rides. Mary would end up getting married to the young man, Robert Mazur, in 1954.

The couple came to the Key Peninsula in 1996 when Robert retired from a distinguished career as a research chemist. They had raised three children and were attracted to the Puget Sound after family camping and hiking vacations, and because their children lived out West.

The 40 years from Chicago to Longbranch were eventful ones for Mary Mazur. She began taking classes at some of the local Chicago colleges and was increasingly drawn to history. Partly through the influence of Asian art, Mazur began to read and take classes in Chinese language. She found she wanted to know more about the history, culture, politics and society of China, which in the mid-1970s was becoming more open to Americans.

Mazur was accepted to the Ph.D. program in Asian history at the University of Chicago in 1970, one of the premier history departments in the U.S. Excelling at research, her doctoral thesis proposal was to write a biography of a Chinese historian named Wu Han.

Largely unknown to the West, Wu Han was a major intellectual figure during the time of the 1949 Chinese Revolution and subsequent consolidation of the commu-



Photo: Lisa Bryan, KP News

nist government of the People's Republic of China. Twenty years later, in 1969, Wu Han became the first victim of the Cultural Revolution, when Chairman Mao Zedong turned on his former allies and colleagues and purged most of them. It also became one of the most terror-filled social and political upheavals in world history—a 10-year period of arbitrary imprisonment, torture, public humiliation, forced labor, harassment, seizure of property, and executions, ultimately accounting for some three million deaths and misery for many millions more.

The result of Mazur's research was a dissertation of extraordinary scope, depth and erudition published as a book entitled "Wu Han, Historian: Son of China's Times." It is regarded by many China experts as the quintessential piece of scholarship on the birth of modern China.

Mazur's book exemplifies how history can delve into the actual life of a famous figure, rather than rely on myths and second-hand recollections, to tell a larger-than-life saga. Mazur spent years in China throughout the 1980s conducting a large number of in-depth interviews with Wu Han's remaining family, neighbors, colleagues and politicians who lived through the Cultural Revolution. She enjoyed a


degree of access almost unparalleled for Western scholars.

In telling Wu Han's personal story, the historian in Mazur captures the monumental upheavals and fundamental changes in China as it passed from 2,000 years of imperial rule to first becoming a republican democracy in 1912 and then a communist dictatorship in 1949. In describing the details of Wu Han's life story, the human being in Mazur brings to life the historical and political ferment of those years in greater relief than typical historical narrative or reportage, explaining this era in China's history in very human terms.

Mazur does more than chronicle the story of the early 20th century civil war and revolution in China. Through incredible research and interviews with many of the key participants, she tells the fascinating story of Wu Han's life as he lived it in a society undergoing fundamental change. She tells the story of an autonomous life lived in the cauldron of what Mao would undoubtedly call "interesting times." More than that, Mazur's story of Wu Han teaches how to understand the winds of change, whether they blow across the northern Chinese steppe or across Case Inlet to Purdy and beyond.

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