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A view of the East

The Great Leap forward and kite-flying might seem odd bedfellows, but two new books make the connection as the world's eyes increasingly turn to China

China: The Portrait of a Country

With China hosting the 2008 Olympics this year, the Asian superpower is gaining an increasing amount of media exposure. Taschen's recent publication, *China: The Portrait of a Country*, both joins and slightly bucks the trend, by collecting together images by more than 80 Chinese photographers, much of which has never been published before. Edited by Pulitzer-prize winning photojournalist Liu Heung Shing, the sizeable volume traces China's political and cultural transformation over the last 60 years, from a rural state into one of the 21st century's most powerful and urban nations.

Within this wider framework, the book chiefly focuses on Chairman Mao Zedong and his notorious Great Leap Forward in the 1960s – a poorly planned 're-education' scheme that resulted in nationwide famine and the death of 30 million people. In contemporary photographs, the Great Leap is represented by endless masses of enthusiastic, supportive faces. The faith evoked in his supporters' faces at these, and other rallies, epitomise both China's strength and vulnerability. From this tumultuous period we travel to the equally shocking Tiananmen Square incident of 1989, and towards the present, apolitical, financial boom.

The images of the new millennium present a seemingly entirely different world from Mao's Marxist regime. Having entered the international community, the country can be seen transforming itself – but the gap between the rich and poor mounts. Affluent yuppies pass their days in luxury, while less wealthy neighbours battle with local officials to save their homes from new development

plans. One of the more curious signs of the changing times is a photograph of couples participating in a bold public kissing contest.

Change in China seems to be advancing at an alarming rate, but its remarkable past clearly remains an important part of its identity. And, as these photographs show, although the country is changing rapidly, colour and vibrancy have always been part of that self-image.

Lisa Lee

The Joy of Kites

No one is quite sure, but it's thought that kites were invented in China in the 4th Century BC. According to ancient Chinese texts, master Mo Do invented a flying wooden replica of a bird of prey – paper was invented much later. Taking their name from the vultures that hovered above battlefields, kites were originally made in the shapes of monsters and dragons in order to intimidate enemy forces, and to pass messages across battle lines.

These days they're created for more peaceful purposes, with colourful kites in every conceivable shape and size featuring at every major Chinese event. And, as Hans Silvester's book shows, kites have travelled far from their birthplace. His images show kites in every conceivable country, from India to Indonesia, Guatemala to Germany, and the texts included describe the extensive variety of uses to which these simple, yet ingenious, creations have been put.

In Bali, for example, kites are used to make offerings to the gods, while in Guatemala they are used to commune with dead souls on the Day of the Dead. In France kites were used to mount the newly-invented camera at the



Top: 'In the trend towards art photography that gathered momentum in the early 2000s, incongruity is all the rage: a child is dressed in the ornate costume of a Beijing opera performer.' © Zhang Peng. Above: *China*, a Chinese kite © Hans Silvester/Rapho.

tail end of the 19th century, and formed an important part of aerial reconnaissance in World War One – so much so that in 1940 the Nazis banned kite flying over France. In the US, in 1752, Benjamin Franklin used kites in a somewhat different way. Flying a kite into a storm, he channelled electricity down its rain-sodden string, sparking off a very different revolution. In Afghanistan, meanwhile, kites are flown for the sheer fun of it but on a scale, and with an intensity, that almost surpasses China.

As Silvester's images show,

kites are pleasing objects of simple beauty, combining a pleasing pointlessness with an at times breath-taking understanding of aerodynamics. And though not a photography book per se, his publication also demonstrates how a simple concept, appealingly illustrated, can gain publishing deals and audience figures that other photographers can only dream of. Rather like a kite, it's a lightweight but attractively eccentric creation.

Diane Smyth

In print

China: Portrait of a Country edited by Liu Heung Shing, is published by Taschen (ISBN: 978-3-8365-0569-7), priced £30. For details visit www.taschen.com

The Joy of Kites by Hans Silvester is published by Thames & Hudson (ISBN: 978-0-500-54361-0), priced £17. For details visit www.thameshudson.co.uk