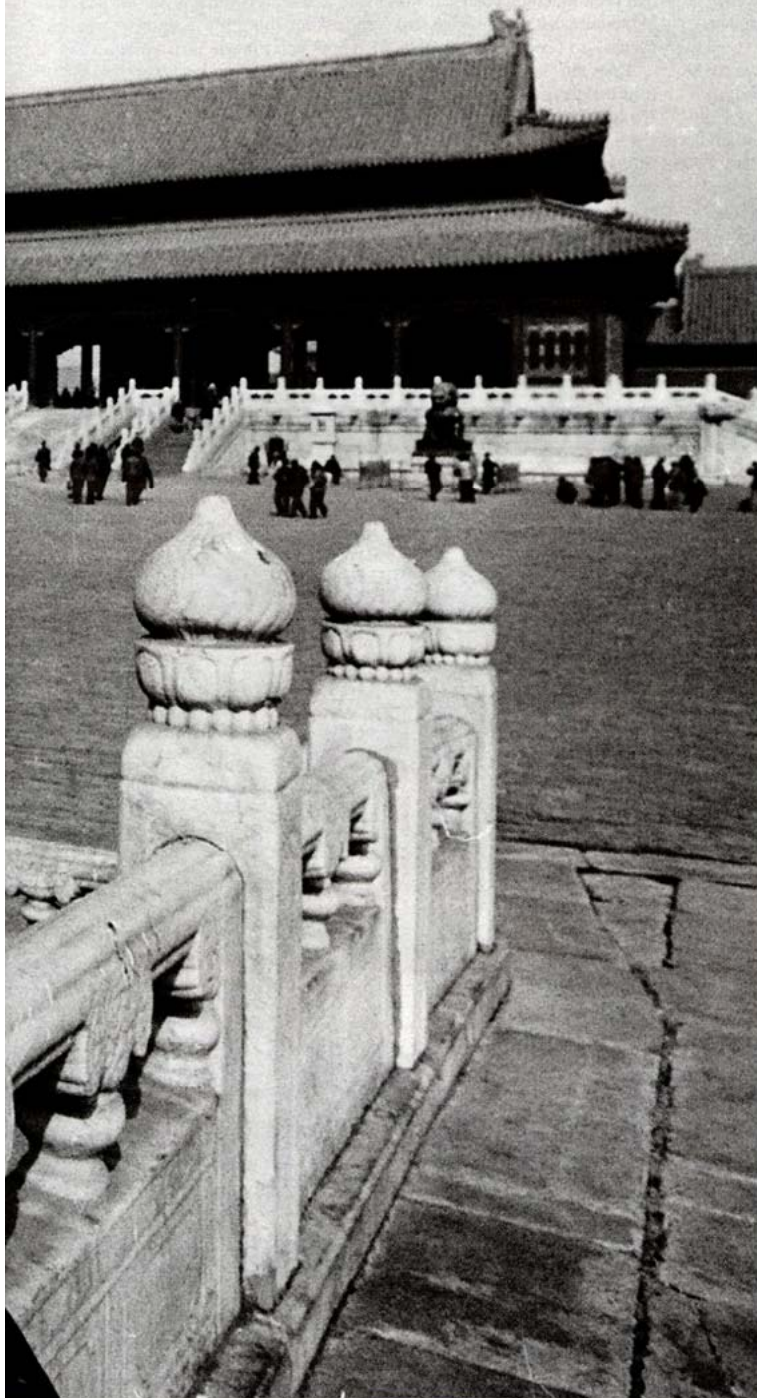


# The view from



PostMagazine

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As Beijing prepared to welcome the world to its Olympic Games, award-winning photographer Liu Heung-shing felt driven to compile a visual summary of the mainland's most recent history, writes **Winnie Chung**.

Feature

**T**n 2003, when the mainland began looking to the future and the Olympic Games it had just been awarded, Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer Liu Heung-shing found himself thinking about the past.

"One of the questions I asked myself was, 'What happens when all these people come to China for the Olympics? How much will they know of the journey that the country has travelled to get where it is today?'" says Liu from Beijing, where he lives. "This book is as much for the local Chinese [as for the tourists]. So many are not aware of the past. At the high level you hear them extolling China's 3,000 years of glorious history but how can you talk of that when you can't even talk about the most recent 60 years?"

Thus was born *China: Portrait of a Country by 88 Chinese Photographers*, a 424-page photographic history covering the past 60 years on the mainland. "What I tried to do was to tell China's history through the daily lives of its people, through its visual references. China's past is uniquely suited to photojournalism. Had I written the book, it would have been even bigger," says Liu.

Born in Hong Kong in 1951, the photojournalist spent his early years in Fujian province, before emigrating to the United States, where he graduated from New York's Hunter College with a degree in political science and journalism. An apprenticeship with renowned *Life* magazine photographer Gjon Mili deeply influenced the young Liu, who returned to the mainland, first on assignment for *Time* magazine for five years and later as a correspondent for Associated Press (AP). »

Left: drinking Coca-Cola in the Forbidden City. The soft-drink company set up its first Chinese plant, in Beijing, in 1980, following China's announcement of economic reforms aimed at raising rates of foreign investment. Below: emerging from icy waters in Heilongjiang province after a traditional New Year's swim.



Left: Liu Heung-shing, 1981. Right: Wang Fuchun, 2005

He covered major events such as Mao Zedong's death in 1976 and the bloody crackdown in Tiananmen Square in 1989. In 1992, Liu and AP colleagues in Moscow won the Pulitzer Prize for spot news photography for their reportage on the collapse of the Soviet Union.

His experience of working with western media outlets – he has also worked for Time Warner and News Corp – has given him an excellent perspective on the dramatic changes that the mainland has been undergoing but producing the book as an outsider would have difficult.

"It would have been hard to access the archives here," says Liu. "Also, I felt that [foreign editors] tended to have either a very dark or a very romantic picture of China. Western perception of China is slightly contextual. The Americans tend to worry more about communism versus capitalism whereas the Europeans tend to dwell on religion and human rights more than anything else."

To be included in the book, Liu says, photographs had to satisfy two criteria. "One, this was a book about photography and I had to consider aesthetically what made a good photograph but, two, aesthetics were not necessarily enough if it didn't help the narrative."

Through friends and contacts, Liu spent four years tracking down the 88 photographers, who made their dusty collections readily available to him. Liu says he was fortunate that *China After Mao* (Penguin, 1983), a book of his pictures that received no distribution on the mainland, had been an underground success and had earned him credibility in artistic circles. "They took me in and were surprisingly very open."

The pictures chosen for *China: Portrait of a Country* represent the familiar and the novel. Some shots from the 1970s and 80s will jog the memory – young Red Guards, Mao meeting US president Richard Nixon

and tanks rolling across Tiananmen Square – but many will open a window on the daily lives of mainlanders, and even the leaders, away from Beijing.

With the mainland changing so rapidly, representing the past decade was a particular challenge for Liu; even as the book was going into print, he managed to slip in photos from the Sichuan earthquake and the Olympic torch relay up Mount Everest.

"This is a collective memory of China. It's important that it's done now. In the course of doing this book, three of the photographers included have passed away. It will get more difficult," he says.

Like *China After Mao*, *Portrait of a Country* will probably struggle to get an official release on the mainland, although Liu is hoping to persuade the authorities to allow a Chinese version ahead of the 60th anniversary of the People's Republic of China, in October next year.

"I once met [former] foreign minister Li Zhaoxing and he told me they had been watching what I had been doing, but his comment was that, as a photojournalist, I seemed to have covered everything and not just certain events – so I seemed [acceptable]," Liu says with a laugh.

Does the fact Liu has decided to stay in Beijing mean he has faith in the future of the nation? "Yes," he says. "China is the best place to be in now. It's active and it's engaged." ■

*China: Portrait of a Country (HK\$510), edited by Liu Heung-shing, will be published by Taschen (www.taschen.com) on Friday. Liu will be at Kelly & Walsh (Exchange Square, Central) at 3.30pm on Saturday and at Metro Books (Elements, Tsim Sha Tsui) at 2pm on Sunday. He will give a luncheon talk at the Foreign Correspondents' Club the following day.*



Clockwise from right: surrounded by security guards, Deng Xiaoping strolls along the beach at Beidaihe, the summer resort in Hebei province where politicians hold informal sessions; couples lock lips at a kissing contest in Sichuan province; the DJ at a disco in Shanghai; former members of a women's militia group that operated during the Cultural Revolution reunite in Jiangsu province; the first instinct for victims of a traffic accident is to reach for their mobile phone.



Clockwise from left: Kou Shanqin, 2003; Huang Yimin, 2005; Yang Shaoming, 1980; Qiu Haiying, 2007; Ge Xin, 2006.