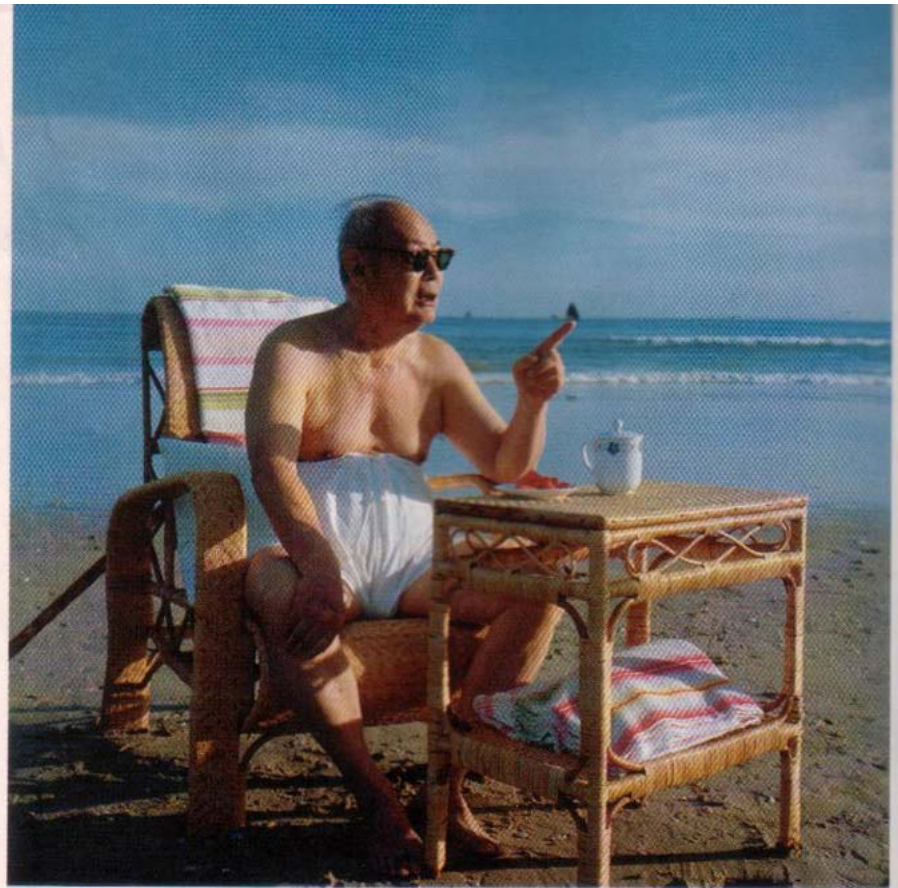


By ALEXANDRA A. SENO

**I**N 2001, WHEN THE INTERNATIONAL Olympic Committee awarded Beijing the right to host this summer's Games, Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer Liu Heungshing began thinking there was a China story that needed to be told. Picturing the hundreds of thousands of Olympic athletes and tourists who would descend on the Chinese capital, Liu says he wondered: "How many people—including the young generation of Chinese—appreciate the journey that China has traveled since 1949 to arrive at this central position in the world? A lot has been achieved and a big price has been paid."

So he decided to document that journey in "China: Portrait of a Country" (424 pages, Taschen), a landmark compilation of primarily vintage images by 88 of the most important Chinese photographers. Conceptualized and edited by Liu, who was born in Hong Kong, educated on the mainland and America, and now lives in Beijing, "China" will be published on Aug. 1, a few days before the Olympics' opening ceremony. On large-format pages, Liu presents what he calls a "visual history of contemporary China." As a pictorial record,



## A Photographic Journey

the work is informative, stunning and unusually comprehensive. But it goes well beyond that, providing a thoughtful reflection of the shifting function of the photographic image on the mainland.

Underscoring Liu's training as a photojournalist, formerly with the Associated Press, the book begins with documentary images done in the "straight shooting," pre-Photoshop style. Arranged chronologically, they highlight many pivotal moments for China under the Communist Party. There are definitive pictures of Mao Zedong by his official photographer, Hou Bou, as well as rare images of personalities and events that remain highly controversial—including Mao's political rival Lin Biao, who is usually airbrushed out of "authorized" historical pictures; Mao's wife, Jiang Qing; the Cultural Revolution, and the bloody 1989 student protests in Tiananmen Square. Because of such images, the book will not be available on the mainland. Though Liu is optimistic that it might someday be sold there, Chinese distributors have told the publisher, Taschen, that it is "not suitable." Small shipments of the work have been impound-

Chinese officials detain some shipments of a new book containing controversial images.

ed by Chinese Customs officials in Beijing. To be sure, just compiling the pictures proved quite a feat. The Chinese government does not allow full access to its photo archives, and comprehensive private picture agencies don't exist. To get around those problems, Liu traveled around China for four years, meeting with many photographers who gave him access to their personal troves of prints and negatives, often haphazardly stored in shoe boxes. "This book is a tribute to the Chinese photographers," says Liu. "They have self-censorship and state interference all the time, but they recognized the event when it happened, even if the photos would not be published." Up to a third of the book's images have never been seen in print before.

The selection encompasses not just documentary photos but also propaganda shots like scenes of Mao amid bountiful harvests, which underscore how the Communist Party manipulated the genre to further its cause. As the photos become more contemporary, they grow increasingly artistic, reflecting how globalization and China's booming economy have opened up the country creatively as well. In one black-and-white image by the well-known photographer Rong Rong and his Japanese-born wife, Inri, Rong Rong stands at the beginning of the Great Wall in Gansu, with the Yellow River behind him. Liu found that picture compellingly representative. "It is the whole conjecture of the Han race in that kind of self-expression," he says. It crystallizes the journey that the photographic image has made along with the country: from visual record of the past, to the service of the Party, to creative commentary about the future. ■

**MOMENTS IN TIME:** Former general Ye in 1973 (above), art photography from 2007