

**CHINA: PORTRAIT OF A COUNTRY BY 88 CHINESE PHOTOGRAPHERS**

Edited by Liu Heung Shing

Taschen Publishers, \$59.99, 424 pages, illus.

REVIEWED BY J. ROSS BAUGHMAN

Alexander the Great would have liked to have conquered the entire world, but found his limitations on the doorstep of east Asia. Centuries later, Napoleon knew his own military ambitions would fall short of the same frontier, and supposedly muttered "China is a sleeping giant. But when she awakes the whole world will tremble."

Sigmund Freud, who had a lifelong fascination with ancient Oriental art, also found this metaphor irresistible, except that the father of modern psychology saw in the sleeping giant China's potential for rage, born out of a deep-seated repression of ego and individualism.

Mao Tse Tung, the Marxist revolutionary, with an image of the "sleeping giant" in mind, promised his people that "All that the West has, China will have."

And now, in a book using the work of 88 of his fellow photographers, Liu Heung Shing — also imagining the "giant" — stacks up 412 pictures into a monumental history of the last 60 years in China. And conscious of the metaphor or not, here he has selected more than a few images of the Chinese people asleep.

For instance, a company of the People's Liberation Army in 1954 does not commandeer civilian homes in Henan province, as their rifles might have allowed, but instead lean against buildings in the street and nod off. Flash forward to 2007, as hundreds of pairs of nervous parents sleep on the floor of a school gymnasium while their only children take the all-important final examinations. The scores of these tests will determine the future economic success of each family.

Mr. Liu, the editor and photographic contributor, opens his written recollections with warm and heartfelt candor. He escaped the throes of a three-year famine, from 1960 through 1962, that killed 30 million of his fellow Chinese, only because his father pulled strings, relocating the boy to British-controlled Hong Kong.

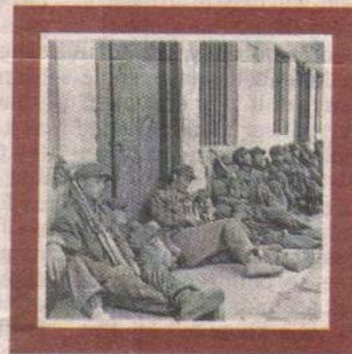
In 1970, he left for the chance to study at Hunter College in New York. One semester under the mentorship of Life magazine photographer Gjon Mili changed his life, leading to an internship, and the chance to become the



PHOTOS FROM THE BOOK CHINA

Hundreds of parents camp out on the floor of a school gymnasium while their children take a high-school examination in 2007. Soldiers (below) sleep on a street in Henan province in 1954.

# THE SLEEPING GIANT STIRS



first Western correspondent sent to Beijing by Time magazine. He went on to share in the Pulitzer Prize awarded in 1992 to a group of photojournalists who covered the fall of the Soviet Union.

China's photographers slam the door on most editors from the West. A long cultural tradition there causes mistrust of any outsiders, but because of the especially painful last century, they don't readily trust one another either. Mr. Liu traveled to far-

to pull dusty old shoe boxes full of negatives out from under their beds and back closets.

Many had heard of the fate of other photographers during the Cultural Revolution who were denounced, broken and imprisoned for taking politically incorrect pictures. Such a fate even befell one of Mao's personal photographers. Understandably, some were quite reluctant to let these images be seen for the first time in the light of day.

his fellow contributors James Kynge and curator Karen Smith, with running translation in English, German and French. Few publishers other than the German Benedikt Taschen seem willing to produce such challenging visual content as this, especially in the form of a beautifully printed, colossal volume of 424 oversized pages.

Thorough essays recap China's political power plays, set off with revisionist titles for

"Suspicion, Subversion, and Continued Madness" and "China Joins the World."

With her expertise as an art critic and museum curator, Ms. Smith analyzes the peculiar place of image-making in Chinese cultural history. Cornerstones of faith described in the Tao praise harmony, especially the ways in which people should meet nature with full respect. For thousands of years, they have illustrated this in landscape painting, and Chinese photography often applies the same aesthetic; but it goes beyond visual formalism and includes the implicit visual message as well. "Scandal and ugliness in the family should not be told outside the home," warns a bit of common wisdom.

By and large, the camera remained virtually unknown in most of China up until the middle of the 20th century, and when it did arrive, it was seen as partly magical but mostly as a utilitarian machine.

In 1942, Mao gave a speech at the Yan'an Forum on Arts and Literature, and forecast how all forms of creative expression would have to be placed into service of the Chinese Communist Party.

The cover image taken in 1971 came out of this philosophy, courtesy of Mao's wife Jiang Qing. She assumed the office of China's cultural czar, commissioning a blend of traditional Chinese opera, modern dance and revolutionary fervor. To Western eyes today, it resembles the lighting and all of the hokey production values of Cindy Sherman pretending to be Che Guevara.

Mao's prophecy about all that China would have has now come true in ways that would have left his Red Guard reeling. Mr. Liu's colleagues unflinchingly show us China's nightmarish pollution, transvestites and hookers galore. Victims of a traffic accident sprawl on the asphalt, stoically dialing their cell phones, in hopes of an ambulance. The country's first millionaire seems about ready to fall asleep on the hood of his Mercedes Benz, and daydreams about the future.

• A full portfolio of photos from this book can be seen online at [www.washingtontimes.com/media](http://www.washingtontimes.com/media).