

Still so inscrutable

As the world spotlight turns from Beijing, **Gavin Engelbrecht** is enthralled by a photographic record of China's past

CHINA: PORTRAIT OF A COUNTRY, edited by Liu Heung Shing (Taschen, £29.99)

THE opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics, with a countdown by 2008 choreographed drummers followed by an awe-inspiring fireworks display, will remain imprinted in the collective consciousness for many years. Colourful pageants culminating in the dramatic lighting of the flame in the Bird's Nest stadium encapsulated the pride of a nation that has taken a central position on the world stage barely two decades after the Tiananmen Square slaughter brought pariah status. Yet, Google the Olympic ceremony and there seems to be more reference than any to the child singer revealed as a fake, as party bosses endeavoured to present a picture-perfect image to the world.

Such are the remaining contradictions of China.

This lavish publication timed to coincide with our renewed interest in China captures the contrasting images of the last 60 years of the country's history, taking the reader on an unparalleled visual journey of the People's Republic.

Edited by the celebrated photo-journalist Liu Heung Shing, the tome contains the work of 88 of the country's most important photographers, highlighting the country's beauty, its failures and its achievements.

The Chinese authorities were not as forthcoming with photographs from its archives, forcing the author on a four-year journey around the country to meet the photographers, who gave him access to their prints and negatives. Up to a third of the photographs in this book have never been published before.

The book, with a succinct and informative text, opens with the birth of the People's Republic in 1949, after the Long March. Mao Zedong began immediately with purging of the old system and with land reforms. The book contains stark images of the denunciation of landlords and goes on to chronicle Mao's Great Leap Forward, when the entire nation was galvanised to contribute to steel production. Every scrap of metal was consigned to furnaces, much of it useless. There is a poignant portrait taken during this period of the last emperor of the Qing dynasty sewing his own shoes in a reform camp.

Because the fields were left unattended, more than 30 million people went on to die of starvation by 1962, in what became more familiarly known as the Great Leap Backward.

Mao was sidelined by moderates for five years, before making his comeback with the calamitous Cultural Revolution. Fostering a personality cult, Mao unleashed his co-



orts on "corrupt" administrators in 1966. Some of the most haunting photographs show ousted party bosses with dunce caps and signs around necks being subjected to countless public humiliations. All over the country youths took part in sycophantic dances and millions crammed into Tiananmen Square with their Little Red Books to catch a glimpse of Mao.

The Madness continued in the 1970s with the emergence of the Gang of Four under Mao's wife Jiang Qing, who as cultural commissar introduced model operas. Following Mao's death and the jailing of the Gang of Four, Deng Xiaoping set in train the economic reforms leading to its 21st Century success story.

The book takes the reader through the clubbing revolution of the 1990s to the social changes of recent years. This is a remarkable portrait, warts and all, of a country which has emerged from its dark past – though not necessarily from state control – and is rushing to join the modern world. A gold medal effort from Liu Heung Shing.

Gavin Engelbrecht



TIME OUT: Marshal Ye Jianying holds court on the beach. Ye played a key role in arresting the 'Gang of Four', which effectively ended the chaos of the Cultural Revolution. Photographer: De Xiuxian, 1973