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**China: Portrait of a Country**  
 edited by Liu Heung Shing  
 Taschen, hb, pp424, £29.99



It's difficult to get excited about yet another photo book on China, but this one really is different. In contrast to the deluge of books by Western photographers – look at China's beautiful landscapes, look at China's amazing new architecture, look at the 'funny Chinese people' wearing their pyjamas – this is a collection of photographs by 88 Chinese photographers, and opening it up is like hearing the quiet man sat at the table finally speak.

To put it together, Liu Heung Shing, a Chinese Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist, spent four years tracking down photographers across China, sifting through their dusty boxes of negatives and unearthing images that had never been

seen before. The result is a visual biography of China from 1949 to the present day told by the people who actually lived through the changes. The story begins in a strange, dark place, with toddlers holding up little red books and shouting 'Long live Mao', and Buddhist monks holding placards that read 'F\*\*k Buddhist scriptures, they are nothing but dog farts'. But, as China relaxes into the 1980s, the mass parades of grins are replaced by the shy smiles of couples kissing in parks; Mao suits are superseded by perms and mirrored sunglasses.

Scattered throughout the pages are quotes from cultural figures ranging from fourth-century Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi to *Wild Swans* author Jung Chang. And at the back is a chronology of China's big political events and short biographies of all the major players

Despite pictures of Tibetan sky burials and the aftermath of the massacre at Tiananmen Square, the images are often personal rather than iconic. But in a country where iconic imagery has usually been associated with propaganda, that feels like a good – and honest – thing. **Olivia Edwards**