

TV: Camera in Peking Shows Affairs of State

Networks Bring First Pictures From China

By JOHN J. O'CONNOR

Once again, in recording President Nixon's trip to China, television is demonstrating that its impact and power are unique, perhaps still beyond full comprehension. This is particularly true in the medium's live coverage of a historic event.

In terms of immediacy, unexpected detail, size of audience, and camera-awareness of the central performers, TV's "surrogate image" carries ramifications that lure both spectator and performer into a hall of mirrors, a hall in which everything is recognizable and is in a constant process of changing.

Not too long ago, the public might wait days for reports on major events. Gradually that delay was reduced to hours in the printed press and, then, radio brought direct "eyewitness" reports.

Television, however, is immediate, thrusting the main characters onto central stage in homes around the world. Those characters are forced to perform both for themselves and for a diverse audience of millions.

For American viewers the transitions may still be abrupt but evidently are never unsettling. The first live pictures from Peking appeared briefly on each of the commercial networks shortly after 8:30 P.M. Sunday evening.

On the National Broadcasting Company network this followed by seconds the end of the spectacular chariot race in "Ben Hur." After Charlton Heston strode victoriously out of the Roman arena, John Chancellor was seen glancing warily around the main square in Peking.

The Columbia Broadcasting System began its coverage of the President's arrival at 9:30, combining studio interviews with live and recorded

material from Peking.

After getting remarkably clear pictures from Peking, the network ran into technical problems at home. At one point, the ominous words of a commercial were warning: "You are about to see a team of pickpockets at work. They are so slick, many people don't even know they're working."

That's about par for the course in ominous commercials but, as it happened, the picture on screen was still filled with C.B.S. correspondent Charles Collingwood and three China experts sitting in the New York studio. None, it should be stressed, looked anything like a pickpocket.

All three networks and some independent stations carried the on-target 10:30 P.M. arrival of Mr. Nixon. Most correspondents were unable to conceal their initial disappointment with the scope of the welcome—a small delegation, albeit headed by Premier Chou En-lai, no flowers, no banners, no cheering crowds. But the reporting emphasis quickly switched to words such as cordial, polite, proper, sincere.

The viewer, however, was afforded a fascinating glimpse of Chinese society in controlled operation. As millions watched from most other parts of the globe, small groups of Chinese on bicycles passed the official motorcade with hardly a passing nod. A world event on television consisted in the recording of a public nonevent in the streets of Peking.

This, in turn, at least locally, was punctuated with sometimes startling instances of American commercial ingenuity. One commercial for a New York bank featured a handsome continental-type man earnestly noting that "it all started with a Ping-Pong game. . . . There are no lasting enmities or affiliations only lasting interests. . . . And as the U.S. expands its interests in Asia. . . ."

Ending at about 11:30, live coverage resumed again at 6 A.M., with the viewer being told of a delay in the Great Hall banquet because of a surprise meeting between President Nixon and Chairman Mao Tse-tung.

The Nixon party finally arrived at the Great Hall at 6:55, allowing plenty of time for Barbara Walters to deliver

Ben Hur and Chopsticks Are Abruptly Mixed

what seemed to be an exclusive report on the planned banquet menu and for Harry Reasoner to issue a warning to tourists on the Chinese tradition of toasting with homemade wine.

Coverage of the banquet ran, with occasional interruptions, until about 8:30 and, here again, television proved many of its incomparable abilities.

Some images were simply beyond words or still photographs: Mr. Chou taking group portraits with every group in sight; Mr. Nixon observed means he is "obviously in a good mood"; *spuq siy siun l'pəuunə* Mr. and Mrs. Nixon carefully wielding chopsticks; Premier Chou's official toast, followed by the band playing "Sailing the Seas Depends Upon the Helmsman"; President Nixon's official toast, accompanied by a close-up of Mr. Chou and the brief appearance of a twitch on his cheek; President Nixon ebulliently touring the room and individually toasting just about every Chinese official there.

In the past, most of this might have been reported by a discreet eyewitness. Yesterday morning it was seen directly by millions. A year ago, the event would have been unthinkable. Yesterday morning the President was seen and heard by the world while talking about "a long march" involving both the U.S. and China. With the TV cameras trained on them, the President and the Premier were talking less to each other than to the rest of the world.

Some talks, of course, will be off camera. But more is being put on camera than ever before. And the future of diplomacy, and history, will no doubt reflect that profound change. At the moment, for the long-range sorting, the curious student can ponder the strange mixture—concocted over several secret hours—of heads of states, Ben Hur, chopsticks, pickpockets and twitches.