

Coming home to affluence

Coming down through thin clouds somewhere over Maryland, we reached the end of the 20,000-mile China odyssey. There was an endless plain of incandescence. Streetlights, neon signs, car lights, home lights, all gulping energy from America's thick river of power. I thought of the night flight from Peking to Hangchow only a few days before, and the lights across that vast land—a dot here and a flicker there, great black deserts between them.

So here we were. Surely one of the dividends of freedom was warmth and light, and horsepower to do the work. And yet I was struck with faint guilt. Damn, I thought, my old Presbyterian soul rising up again, calling to mind all those self-sacrificing missionaries that I used to hear about along with the brimstone.

The Pan Am 707 touched earth at Andrews Air Force Base and applause erupted among those of us inside. Then it was time to gather together the baggage. Down the aisle went the American reporters, their pockets stuffed, their satchels bulging, with more packages under their arms—rugs, jade, gold, silver, silk, sculpture. Still plundering China, I suddenly thought, recalling some of the books I'd read about the way the West dealt with the Orient in the old days. There was a little twinge of inner pain.

With a short jog across the tarmac to the floodlit hangar, the twinge passed. Fifteen thousand people waited there for the President and Mrs. Nixon to arrive aboard the *Spirit of '76*. There were acres of automobiles parked on the landing field. Men, women and children, in luxurious coats and sweaters, jostled closer. Glistening jets sat silently in rows in the distance. The wives of the dignitaries were elegant in furs and tailored coats, their hair meticulously tended, jewels sparkling in the intense light. I remembered my diminutive interpreter for eight days in China, Mrs. Lin Shang-chen, wife of an official in the defense ministry. At 6 or 7 every morning she was on hand in her blue cloth coat and black pants, no jewelry, answering my questions patiently

and adjusting to my idiosyncrasies without any complaint, going all day. I never saw her eat. She hovered over me, worrying, as I wrote past midnight, and then saw me off to bed before disappearing into the bleak gray of Peking. I remembered wondering why she had to suppress her femininity. Chairman Mao and his joyless scripture was one reason, but surely there was another. Style takes energy. In China there is no energy to spare, not yet. Mrs. Lin talked only about helping the people, always the people, those others off there somewhere.

Here at Andrews, Vice-President Spiro Agnew was the master of ceremonies. He was flawlessly tailored, combed, manicured, polished. There was about him the smell of power, position and possessions.

The *Spirit of '76* roared up to its assigned place, the door was pushed back, and there were ruffles and flourishes from the army's special heraldic trumpets, followed by *Hail to the Chief*. A journalist next to me turned away. "My God," he muttered, "it's like the arrival of the king." Others apparently had the same readjustment problems.

I remembered how the small figure of Chou En-lai had greeted Nixon in silence eight days earlier. The effect of that understated welcome was shattering. Chou had sent Nixon off quietly, too. A joke or two on the ramp, a handshake, a wave. No band, no crowd. I'd thought then that I saw in Nixon's face something akin to gratitude for the simplicity.

But these thoughts were swept away as Nixon began shaking those pudgy official hands. Then he was on the podium, bathed in special lights calibrated at 3,200° Kelvin to render true skin tones for the national TV audience. "I want to express my very deep appreciation and the appreciation of all of us for this wonderfully warm welcome . . ." More memories from the past days crowded my mind. In Peking's timeless and graceful Forbidden City, gently powdered with new

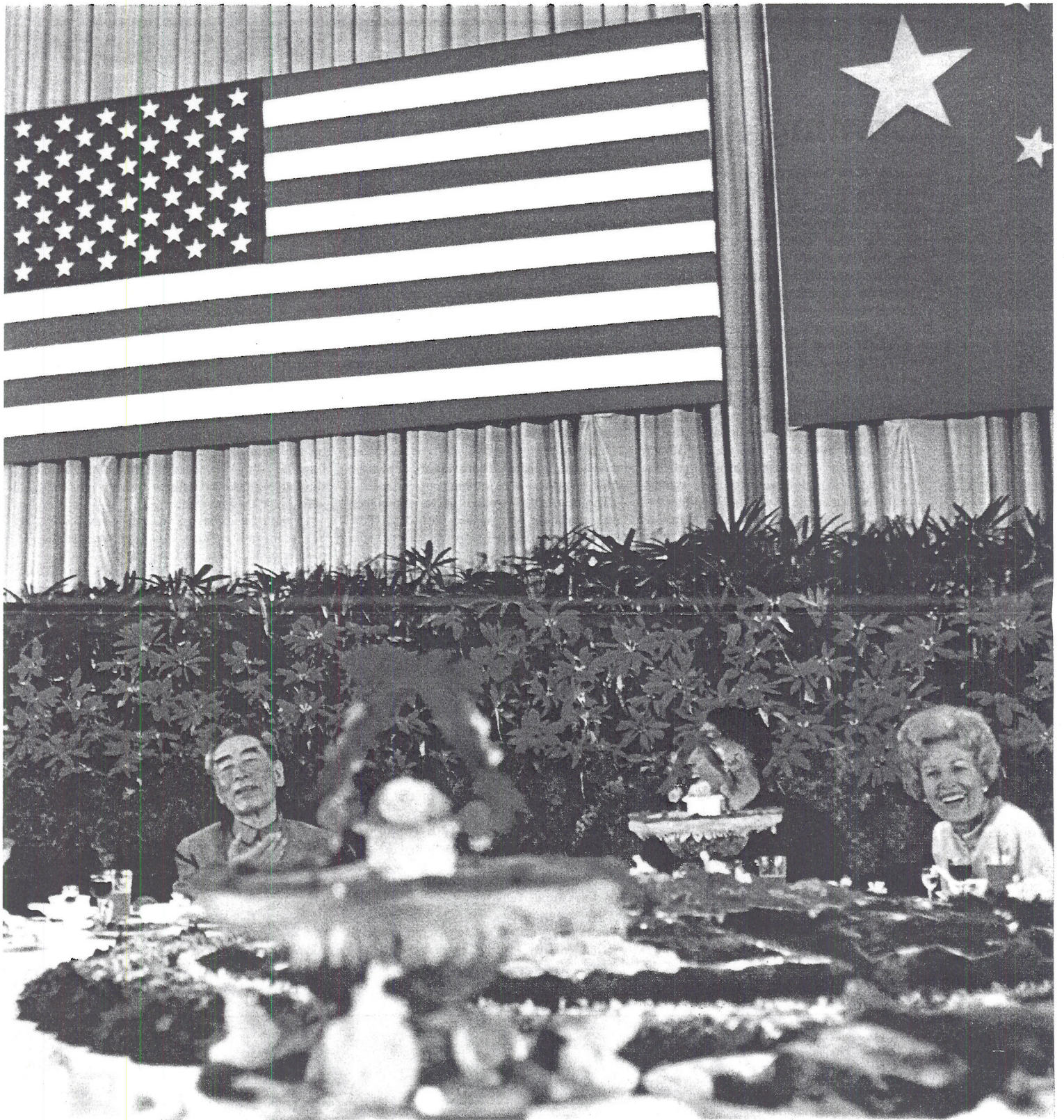
snow, Nixon had observed: "It snows like this in Chicago." His host, Marshal Yeh Chien-ying, vice-chairman of the Military Affairs Commission, saw the same sight and said, "The snow has whitewashed the world." At the end of the tour, which included a museum filled with priceless objects, Nixon joked with his guide: "You ought to search everybody now to make sure they don't have anything in their pockets." On that occasion the marshal said: "We hope that the people of the two countries and of all the world will enjoy peace and good harvests." Perhaps it was boilerplate, but the contrast was painful. How, I asked myself, can inner beauty survive in the grayness of Peking, the repression by the state? And how, with our own heritage of simple eloquence, from Jefferson through Lincoln to Truman, can we end up with silver trumpets?

Leaving the air base, I sat in a massive traffic jam for half an hour. China was there with me again, disturbing the quiet purr of the 245 horsepower up front. My dinner companion at the last banquet in Peking had been a 40-year-old magazine editor, Meng Chi-ching, father of two, living in two rooms, owner of a bicycle. Did he have a dream? I'd asked him. Wasn't there something he would like to do, or be, or some place he'd like to go? Wouldn't he like to own a car so that he could take his children to see their grandmother in Shanghai or show them China on the holidays? He paused, and looked at me with something near pity. "I never have thought about it," he said. "I have enough. My bicycle is good. I live near my work."

Driving up to my home near midnight, I had to park in the driveway. The second car's place in the garage was blocked by sleds, skis and bicycles. It occurred to me, as I looked at that beloved patch of Maryland suburbia washed in bright moonlight, that Meng should have a little of what I've got and I should have a little of what he's got. The same might even be true for Chou and Nixon.

To the sound of a fanfare, the Nixons emerge from the *Spirit of '76* upon arrival at Andrews AFB after flying from China





With President Nixon back from China, two pictures seemed to sum up that extraordinary venture. One, taken during a banquet in Hangchow, exemplified the open warmth and

amiability marking the public contacts between the Nixons and their host, Chinese Premier Chou En-lai. The other, taken as Chou listened to Nixon speak (left), pointed up the

private seriousness. Widely different needs and desires still separate the U.S. and China, and they were especially apparent as the presidential party returned home (next page).

