

Peking atmospherics

It is already conventional wisdom that the effects of the China visit won't be known or understood for a long time (we said so, too, last week), but that's not going to stop the lively market in current assessments. Some current uses being made of the trip also bear looking at:

► Professionals (including foreign diplomats) mostly approve of the change in U.S. policy but would have been more reserved about the methods. Henry Kissinger himself used to scorn summit meeting "atmospherics" as harmful to the sensible and steady pursuit of foreign policy. Probably still does.

► Since "atmospherics" was largely what Americans got out of it, most people seemed to find the Nixons more sympathetic than heretofore: their tourist small talk was sometimes gratingly banal, but their behavior was both human and dignified.

► Peking won the battle of the communiqués, conceding nothing, while the U.S. formally accepted Taiwan as part of China and tactfully failed to mention our defense treaty with Taiwan (though it was afterward said to be still in force). A sense of the U.S. as the supplicant lingers in the air.

► Correspondents and commentators, naturally awed by their discovery of this overwhelming, incomprehensible and highly disciplined society, were

frequently mindful of how wrong it was of the U.S. to have ignored or isolated China all those years. True, but China's real isolation from the world, which persists, is largely its own doing.

► The President's airport welcome home was an elaborate mixture of salute to the Chief of State and the head of the party. Plainly, Nixon sees good politics in his trip. But American foreign policy in the near future may partly hang on how much Nixon feels under campaign pressure to do things that keep making the Peking trip look "successful."

► The trip was done Nixon-style—closely guarded methodical preparation leading to audacious action—and this too may have consequences of its own. One of them is the humbling of the State Department. Its own experts felt ignored; allies and friendly countries weren't properly briefed beforehand, and on the trip the genial secretary of state was given No. 3 assignments while Nixon-Kissinger made the important rounds. "There were no secret deals of any kind," said the President, but how soon will the substance of all those private hours of talk be conveyed to those in government whose business is foreign relations? The State Department at an earlier period paid a heavy price in morale for the judgments of some of its experts when the Chinese Communists came to power. It's ironic that this time, should something go wrong, the State Department will be able to plead ignorance.

► In the months to come, President Nixon, with his weakness for simplistic hyperbole ("the week that changed the world"), can be expected to milk for all they're worth the short-term political effects and the as yet shadowy promise of "a generation of peace." His political rivals praise his trip, and only the anguished right has found anything to fault him with. In a political year, that says a great deal. The President feels confident, as he is entitled to, that for the long term his trip to Peking was a good thing and, on the whole, well carried out.