

Dwight Newton

No Dancing In Peking

Network coverage of the President's arrival in Peking began last night with strikingly impressive scenes of massive Tien An Mien Square (94 acres) where honored friends of China traditionally have been greeted by hundreds of thousands of dancing, cheering, flag-waving, jubilant Chinese comrades.

This time, save for a few cyclists and pedestrians, a passing lorry, and an auto or two, the world's largest public square seemed as empty as 10 vacated football stadiums.

Forty-five minutes later when President Nixon was driven through Tien An Mien Square, it was still all but empty. The President's car whizzed through at 45 or 50 miles an hour. Scarcely no one even turned his head curiously. And that's the last we saw of the President as he headed for Government Guest House and a three hour rest.

The U.S. television press corps was rather rattled. "The Chinese play it very cool, very correct and very unenthusiastic," commented John Chancellor, sharply.

"No explicit curiosity is shown by anybody," observed Walter Cronkite, sagely.

"It could have been an organized reception," pouted Barbara Walters.

"The Chinese obviously are able to contain themselves," reasoned Harry Reasoner.

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THE SATELLITE pictures were fine — as clear as those sent from Japan during the Olympics. But our freshly arrived network correspondents seemed to be corresponding from Outer Darkness. Cronkite and Eric Sevareid confessed first day difficulties. Chancellor and Miss Walters confessed nothing.

Indeed, even as President Nixon was about to deplane, Chancellor and Miss Walters conjectured that Premier Chou En-lai would not appear and that if he didn't it "would be very close to almost rudeness."

Edwin Newman, 11,000 miles away, abruptly broke in to state: "We in New York have been informed Chou En-lai is there." He surely was — up front, and first in line to greet the President.

On Day One of the China Trip, the TV people in New York seemed better informed than correspondents on the scene.

The most important televised scene on arrival was the handshake between President and Premier, between capitalist and communist.

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THE HANDSHAKE may turn out to be memorable around the world, but it was not seen around the world. The President's arrival was not televised inside China. It was strictly an upper echelon handshake, not a time for ticker tape.

For the first time in history, U.S. viewers saw and heard a Chinese military band play "The Star Spangled Banner" with a Hangchow beat, followed by the Chinese anthem, "March of the Volunteers."

The opening program's most informative commentary came, strangely, from New York where Howard K. Smith and Charles Collingwood separately talked with China experts. Most of the talk was serious. Some levity seeped through.

As President Nixon deplaned, he was seen to start to clap hands (as is the custom in Russian when acknowledging applause), and then suddenly stop. Howard K. Smith tried to read the President's mind: "Since this is Sunday, it must be China, and I better stop this."