

The President in China

Reprinted from Saturday's late editions

"Live—from Peking," announced Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) correspondent Charles Collingwood, whose voice was coming from New York.

"Here we are at the airport in Peking, China. I'm John Chancellor, NBC News."

"This is Harry Reasoner," said the American Broadcasting Company's (ABC) correspondent in Peking.

It was one of television's biggest achievements — live coverage of the landing of the American President halfway around the world in the capital of China — but it did not rank as one of the medium's most dramatic. The fault was in the welcome, which was understated to the point of being almost humdrum, and not in the cameras or the commentators.

Like Chinese art, which often gives greater weight to voids than to spaces which are filled, the fascination was with what was nowhere to be seen. And that posed a difficult problem for the television medium.

ABC

ABC's coverage (on Channel 7) remained low-key throughout the arrival at the airport. It was plain that Harry Reasoner, who remained off-camera, suffered the same lack of preliminary information that plagued all the networks.

He seemed to go out of his way to remind American viewers that the absence of crowds was not to be considered "a snub of the American president."

"This is a touchy visit," he said at one point, "and it may be that Dr. Henry Kissinger and President Nixon are just as glad that a full dress panoply is not being staged."

Reasoner experienced some difficulty picking up

the identification of the Chinese leaders as Mr. Nixon moved down the reception line. Occasionally his interpreter's voice filled the silence, furnishing a kind of identification, any way.

Reasoner, as probably befitted the occasion, spared his audience long-winded descriptions of what it was seeing. He commented periodically on the presence of "the extremely handsome" troops of the People's Liberation Army and at least twice on the "thousands of trees" visible in the airport area.

"It is clear," he remarked as the automobile caravan moved towards Peking, 20 miles away, "that no major turnout of half a million people waving tiny American flags is going to happen."

It was the only light moment that Reasoner permitted himself in a correct, understated treatment of what he called "an historical moment."

—John Carmody

CBS

On CBS (Channel 9), first of the networks on the air, the magic words, "Live from Peking" came at 9:30 p.m. Excellent color pictures came by satellite and conversation between Charles Collingwood in New York and the various Peking reporters was clear and flawless.

For an hour before the President's plane set down, CBS reporters chatted, with very little to show and nobody to interview. Walter Cronkite speculated his badge in Chinese said "Press," but confessed he didn't know—neither did he know where he would spend the night.

Bernard Kalb explained the airport, and this was not stupid at all, since it didn't

look much like one. Collingwood said the two great nations had long pretended they could go it alone, and what counted was this gesture of meeting.

In short, there was nothing to see and nothing much to hear. Nothing much happened except the President got off a plane and shook a few hands. But many Americans must have sat galvanized through all of it.

The fact of a man getting off a plane, and a lot of money and time spent to relay this fact—that is nothing.

An opening of civility or at least meeting, between China and America—that is a great deal.

—Henry Mitchell

NBC

On NBC (Channel 4), which began its coverage at 10 p.m., the lack of pomp and panoply left John Chancellor and Barbara Walters in Peking, and Edwin Newman in New York, searching for things to talk about until the President's arrival. There were long pauses while the camera panned the troops and the otherwise empty airport.

At 10:25, three minutes before the President's jet touched down, Walters announced breathlessly, "There is no red carpet, Ed (Newman), we've just received word." There did appear to be a small carpet, just outside Mr. Nixon's plane, but in a figurative sense the female star of NBC's "Today" show was right. With the empty airport and the empty streets, the place did not look on television to be a land of teeming millions, the most populous country on the globe. For the moment, China's 800 million people appeared to be out to lunch.

—Don Oberdorfer