

Reporter's Notebook: All Peking's a Stage

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PEKING, Wednesday, Feb. 23—It was the Nixon's evening at the theater yesterday, and there was the First Lady sitting beside Chiang Ching (Mrs. Mao Tse-tung)—both women with modest stage experience — watching the flaming red banners triumph in ballet over the black running dogs of capitalism and the Nationalist Chinese.

Was the world meant to be entertained and enlightened by this smartly cadenced Girl-Scout epic or was it meant to watch who was watching out front?

Miss Chiang was the radical mentor of the Chinese arts during the recent Cultural Revolution. She was also the inspiration for radical challengers who are thought to have opposed Premier Chou En-lai during much of that revolution. But last night, strutting purposefully and graciously into the auditorium of the Great Hall of the People, she was the hostess for the couple from Whittier, Calif., whose taste in ballet and politics had not been pointing all these years

toward the saga of Wu Ching-hua in the den of the landlords.

Henry A. Kissinger, the refugee from Nazi Germany, who had made a specialty of European politics in the service of Nelson A. Rockefeller, was also seated in the front rank and he strolled from the theater at intermission and at the end in animated and jesting conversation with Premier Chou, whom he had personally guided toward this fateful week of negotiations with Richard M. Nixon.

And the leading men of America and Asia were there applauding the dancers, while the dancers on stage, having just smitten the oppressor classes, were applauding the spectators. So the Chinese riddle remained—who was performing for whom?

There are so many performers and audiences in this spectacle that it is impossible to sort them out.

There is the mammoth American television audience,

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apparently off on another international romance, and not to be deterred by a Presidential party that warns of only minimal results from a week that started in such high spirits and multiple toasts to the Communist leaders.

There is the vast population of China, which remained obediently aloof when the Nixons drove into town but which jammed the sidewalks straining for the newspapers and pictures yesterday when the Government let on that there was a big show in town after all.

whom the Chinese want to make uncomfortable, and worse, by this Peking display of camaraderie, and whom the Americans want to make uncomfortable—in hopes of softening them up for major agreements later this year.

And if the advance expectations of the American delegation prove reliable, there are multiple audiences right inside the secret summit conferences. Both President Nixon and his hosts were thought to be preparing fairly formal statements on their many differences, so as to reassure nervous allies—in okyo or Hanoi—and to leave a record about which they could honestly say that no deals were made at anyone else's expense. But they were also expecting to address each other more flexibly and informally, by gesture, innuendo, implication and perhaps only by omission.

This particular part of the drama will be played out not only this week but also for many months, with speeches made and not made,

with emissaries sent, with background briefings in Washington and with seasonally adjusted new slogans in Peking's Square of the Gate of Heavenly Peace.

Any setting will do for this sort of thing. Mrs. Nixon went to look at the Summer Palace of the imperial Manchus in the western suburbs yesterday and as she passed through the Gate of Longevity and Goodwill she laughed and said, "That's prophetic."

Moving along with the usual cluster of aides, hosts and press people, the First Lady wandered near Kun Ming Lake and through the rooms of the last empress, Tzu Hsi, and talked about the small dining room, the need for such a large mirror in the bedroom, and her attitude toward incense ("I would not burn it, I would put it in a drawer").

She offered to climb up Longevity Hill to the central pagoda that dominates the landscape, but her hosts demurred, saying it would be a strain. And so the party drove on to the Peking Zoo for a quick look at pandas of the kind that will be presented to an American zoo by the Chinese Government. Mrs. Nixon said "Hi there," to one of the animals, but she made no contact with any of the Chinese sightseers who happened to be on her route.

At the apparently deserted Peking Hotel in the morning, Mrs. Nixon watched the preparation of dozens of Chinese dishes. She chatted easily with her guide through the kitchens, the head of the hotel's revolutionary committee, and with newsmen, and performed briefly with chopsticks before an American television crew.

Told that it takes three

years to train a cook here, and 10 years to make him an excellent chef, Mrs. Nixon said, "I've been trying all my life to cook and I'm still not a very good cook."

The reporters admitted to China with the President but shut off from the substance of his talks with the Chinese leaders have also taken to the tourist trail. They have been offered choices of communes, schools and other selected activities, most of them places that have welcomed Western visitors in recent years. And they have not yet heard about many of their requests to visit specific individuals for interviews, newspaper offices and other agencies of the Government.

But the results of the early touring are not always as intended, nor are all the experiences routine.

Yesterday morning one group went to a showcase secondary school where the children performed with such intense ritual and declared themselves so consistently ready to do the bidding of Chairman Mao, with no private desires of any kind, that several reporters described themselves as "shaken" and "depressed" by the experience. They said they wished the official party could be exposed to the drill.

Those who signed up to visit a neighborhood committee, expecting some exposure to local government, got much more than they bargained for and more than most resident foreign correspondents have achieved—a visit to several Chinese homes.

In the memory of the Chinese, they have reason to be prod of the blocks of five-story brick houses in the Hopinli District just outside the old city wall in the northwest. But sitting on the hard

beds of some families in the Hsing Hua Chi neighborhood, the visitors were free to sense at once that the best of lives here remain simple and bare.

Mrs. Yao Chun-lan, a bright-eyed woman in her fifties, directs the neighborhood revolutionary committee and her presentation of the basic facts on apartments, budgets, nurseries and work projects showed her to be an engaging but shrewd and firm politician of whom there seemed to be so many here in the most remote corners.

She showed the workshops where neighborhood mothers sew bathing suits for sale to a factory while their children are cared for in another room of the same apartment. A third room has been turned into a clinic for acupuncture treatment of the arthritic older citizens of the community by retired workers with a few weeks of medical training.

Mrs. Huang Ssu-fang willingly showed her apartment when the designated model became too crowded. She and her husband and three children live in one room, while a family of five occupies two other rooms, beside the communal kitchen and washroom.

The Huangs own a huge bedboard, slightly padded by blankets and attractively decorated with piled up colored blankets and pillows. What seems to be two smaller beds were in the room but they were covered with cloths, atop which were more blankets, a teapot and cups, and an alarm clock with huge bells for ears. A small transistor radio and a giant thermos jug stood on a dresser. A clothesline ran across the room from the ample window to the door some 16 feet away.