CHAPTER 10

THE OPENING BANQUET

The rightist was now in Beijing. The first night of the visit, Chou En-lai invited Nixon, as the Chinese always did special guests, to a banquet given in his honor at the Great Hall of the People, that monstrous Stalinist structure that ran along one side of Tiananmen Square. Banquets, toasts, the exchange of gifts—all have been part of diplomacy as far back as anyone can remember. The Chinese Communists took such protocols as seriously as their predecessors had. “Their whole idea,” said Winston Lord, Kissinger’s assistant who would later return to China as the American ambassador, “is to inculcate in outsiders coming to the Middle Kingdom a sense of obligation for their hospitality and friendship. In effect, they seek to create ties of alleged friendship. They want us to feel that friends do favors for other friends.”

The Americans—all of them, from the President and Mrs. Nixon to the crew of their aircraft—gathered in the foyer of Nixon’s villa at the Diaoyutai, along with Chinese protocol people and translators, before the motorcade took them into the center of the city. At the Great Hall, they walked into an enormous lobby two stories high with polished floors and massive chandeliers, where Chou En-lai and his colleagues waited to greet them. (Mao did not come out to such occasions.) The guests made their way up a huge grand staircase for a series of photographs, carefully posed according to rank, and then were ushered into a massive, somber hall filled with round tables and decorated with Chinese and American flags. It could hold up to three thousand people for a banquet; this evening there were perhaps a thousand. As the Americans entered, a Chinese military band started playing a medley of American folk songs. (In imperial China, officials had always believed in using music to soothe visiting barbarians.)

Mao himself had apparently approved the guests on the Chinese side. While there were representatives from the Beijing revolutionary committee, one of the new organs created during the Cultural Revolution, none of the leading radicals was present, not even Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing. (She later told the Nixons that she had been too ill to come.) The Chinese who were assembled were largely officials, from the government, the Communist Party, and the People’s Liberation Army. Ye Jianying, one of the four marshals who had written the bold reports urging China to rethink its views on the world, was present, as was Ji Pengfei, the ineffectual foreign minister, and his much more competent deputy, Qiao Guanhua.

On the other side of the world, Americans watching the morning television shows saw the band play the Chinese and American national anthems and the banquet begin. The Nixons and the top-ranking Americans sat with Chou En-lai at a large table for twenty, while everyone else was at smaller tables of ten. Each person had an ivory place card embossed in gold English and Chinese characters and chopsticks engraved with his or her name. The Americans had all been briefed on how to behave at Chinese banquets. Everyone had been issued chopsticks and urged to practice ahead of time. Nixon had managed to become reasonably adept, but Kissinger remained hopelessly clumsy. The distinguished television reporter Walter Cronkite shot an olive high into the air. “The Chinese take great pride in their food,” said a White House memo, “and to compliment the various courses and dishes is also recommended.”

As the band played on—“Oh! Susanna,” “Turkey in the Straw,” and that Cultural Revolution favorite “Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman”—teams of waiters brought dish after dish. Nixon, who had once ordered a banquet at the White House timed by stopwatch and who had been delighted when it came in under an hour, had no complaints this evening as the two former enemies celebrated a new relationship and the American networks covered it live for four
hours. The huge lazy Susans at each table spun, laden with duck slices with pineapple, vegetarian ham (according to the English menu), three-colored eggs, carp, chicken, prawns, shark fin, dumplings, sweet rice cake, fried rice, and, in a nod toward Western tastes, bread and butter.

Some of the Americans, including John Holdridge from the State Department, spoke Chinese well, and a few of the Chinese spoke English. Otherwise, conversation was through interpreters. At the head table, Nixon and Chou En-lai exchanged desultory remarks through Mao’s favorite interpreter, Tang Wensheng, also known as Nancy. William Rogers told long stories about his hero, the great golfer Sam Snead, to the Chinese foreign minister, a tough old revolutionary who had no idea what golf was. Mrs. Nixon chatted away politely, asking her Chinese hosts such questions as how many children they had.5

Chou En-lai, who was smoking Chinese cigarettes, turned to Mrs. Nixon and gestured to the picture of two pandas on the package. “We will give you two,” he said. According to Chinese sources, Mrs. Nixon screamed with joy. Although the Americans had dropped some hints, the Chinese had been noncommittal on the pandas. Like banquets, the exchange of presents has always been important in diplomacy, and giving the right presents, not too lavish and not too simple, has been an art, one that the Chinese had traditionally excelled at. In imperial China, the emperors had sent gifts—silks, brocades, or porcelain, for example—to other rulers as a mark of imperial favor and, often, to keep them quiescent. Communist China had continued to send gifts abroad—often, as before, porcelain or cloth but now, as an indication of its revolutionary nature, to peoples and not rulers. In special cases, it also sent pandas, just as its predecessors had. Placid bears that spend most of their time eating or sleeping, they were perhaps meant to signal a placid relationship. The famous Empress Wu sent a pair to the emperor of Japan in the seventh century, and Chiang Kai-shek gave a pair to the United States during the Second World War. After 1949, the Communist sent pandas to the Soviet Union and North Korea as marks of friendship. Ling-Ling and Hsing-Hsing were now destined for the National Zoo in Washington.6

The presents issue had caused much anxiety in the White House, both as to what to expect from the Chinese and what to give them. On Kissinger’s secret trip in July 1971, he had taken along a piece of rock brought back from the moon by American astronauts. The Chinese received it much as the Qianlong emperor had received British woolens brought by Lord Macartney—with a certain amount of disdain. This time, medals in Lucite were considered and dropped, and finally ceramic models of American birds were made for senior officials, while more junior ones got silver bowls, cigarette lighters, or cuff links with the presidential seal. Nixon also presented a pair of musk oxen and two large redwood trees from California. The trees, in particular, proved awkward to transport; once in China, one promptly got worms and languished, while the other flourished. (The Canadians, when they cemented their new relationship with China, chose to send their national animal. A pair of beavers were loaded into an Air Canada washroom to splash about on their way to China.)7

At their places at the banquet, each person had three glasses: one for water or orange juice, one for wine, and one for China’s famous mao-tai, “white lightning” to the American journalists or, as Dan Rather put it, “liquid razor blades.”8 At their table, Chou En-lai said proudly to Nixon that mao-tai, with its alcohol level of more than 50 percent, had been world famous since the San Francisco World’s Fair of 1915. Chou took a match to his cup, saying, “Mr. Nixon, please take a look. It can indeed catch fire.” (Back in the United States, Nixon tried a similar demonstration by setting a bowlful on fire; he nearly burned down the White House.) Nixon said he understood that Red Army soldiers had once drained dry the town where mao-tai was produced. “During the Long March, mao-tai was used by us to cure all kinds of diseases and wounds,” Chou answered primly. “Let me make a toast with this panacea,” said Nixon. (Alexander Haig, who had experienced mao-tai on his advance trip to Beijing in January, had worried about its effect on the notoriously weak-headed Nixon: “under no repeat no circumstances,” he had cabled, “should the president actually drink from his glass in response to banquet toasts.”)9

“At banquets,” the White House had warned, “the wine and Mao Tai are for toasting only. These glasses should not be raised without
toasting one of your Chinese friends.” He was a teetotaler, tried repeatedly to explain to his incredulous hosts that he could not drink alcohol. John Holdridge found himself playing an old drinking game of counting fingers with the minister of electric power. The loser had to drain his glass to a shout of “ganbei.” Aided only in part by the mao tai, Holdridge remembered, “the atmosphere in the Great Hall was electric. Surely everyone there, and every TV watcher, must have sensed that something new and great was being created in the U.S.-China relationship.”

From their tables at the far end of the hall, the journalists, most of them American, stood on their chairs and used field glasses to see the historic scene. Nixon wanted them there, just as he wanted the live television coverage, because he understood their power so well. He always read the thick daily summaries of press coverage and filled their margins with comments and orders. He wanted the journalists’ attention but not too much; as he told Haldeman, his image should be “more aloof, inaccessible, mysterious.” Yet he also delighted in showing the press his boorish side; as he once told an aide, “So much for their fucking sophistication.”

Nixon despised most journalists as “clowns” who were irredeemably liberal in their bias. And he was convinced that they hated him in return “because I have beaten them so often.” They had been wrong and he had been right on a whole range of issues, from Alger Hiss to what the American people wanted. (Early in his presidency, he ordered his senior staff to prepare lists of friends and foes among the press; the latter was much the longer list.) He intended to circumvent what he saw as the liberal establishment in the media and reach out directly to Middle America, where his support lay. With the powers of the presidency he could make news, whether by creating photo opportunities or going on the networks with major policy statements. (He could also, and did, place wiretaps on reporters to see where they were getting their stories.) The camera, Nixon believed, was more effective for him than print. As Kissinger said unkindly, “Television in front of the President is like alcohol in front of an alcoholic.”

In Haldeman, he found the man he needed. With his background in advertising, Haldeman was quick to see the possibilities of television. As he told Nixon in the run-up to the presidential election, the time had come “to move out of the dark ages and into the brave new world of the omnipresent eye.” With Haldeman’s help, Nixon reorganized, creating a new office of communications and a separate office for television. The White House generated a stream of material. A presidential photographer and a navy film crew stood by to catch Nixon being presidential or playing with his dog, King Timahoe. Staff writers sent editorials and news releases not just to the major papers but to thousands of small-town papers across the United States. Washington reporters complained that they no longer had access to the president and no way of finding out what that remote and isolated figure was thinking. That was the way Nixon and Haldeman wanted it. When the press criticized the president—over his failure to bring the Vietnam War to an end, for example—the administration fought back. In late 1969, Vice President Spiro Agnew was unleased; in a series of speeches overseen by Nixon himself he excoriated the media as “a tiny, enclosed fraternity of privileged men elected by no one.”

Journalists seen as particularly hostile found they were no longer included on presidential trips or given background briefings. In some of the worst cases, the tax people or the FBI turned up to investigate them.

Though Chou En-lai had suggested to Kissinger, in their discussions on the president’s visit, that ten journalists might be about the right number to accompany Nixon, the Americans had negotiated the number upward until they got permission to bring approximately ninety. When some two thousand applications came into the White House press office, the White House announced criteria for selection. In fact, Nixon himself picked the journalists, making sure that the television networks got many more spaces than print journalism. He also took great pleasure in refusing places to papers like the New York Times. (On his first trip to China, Kissinger managed to warn Chou En-lai obliquely about talking to James Reston from the Times, who was about to arrive in Beijing.) A reporter from the Long Island, New York, paper Newsday who had just written a series investigating the complicated financial relations between Nixon and Bebe Rebozo,
and who apparently met the criteria for going, was told simply “no room.” Several of the top network brass managed to get themselves accredited as technical staff, much to the annoyance of the beleaguered print journalists. Few of them, apart from the writer Theodore White, had ever been to China or had any particular knowledge of it.

Nixon, for all his distrust of the press, understood how important it was that his visit receive favorable coverage. With public opinion for so long hostile to Communist China, Americans still had to be persuaded that their president was doing the right thing in opening up relations. Nixon, as always, was also conscious of his own place in history. When Kissinger made his second, public, trip to China in the fall of 1971, part of his mission was to discuss press coverage. Staff from the White House whose job it was to prepare for presidential visits reviewed the schedule and checked out possible sites for photo opportunities. At the beginning of 1972 Alexander Haig, Kissinger’s assistant, spent a week in China working on the final arrangements with a party of technical experts. On February 1, an advance party of nearly one hundred staffers arrived in China to prepare for Nixon’s visit. One of their most pressing tasks was to set up the communications that would make live press coverage possible.

The Chinese expected to work with the advance team on the trip, but they were amazed by the detailed planning it undertook to make sure, among other things, that the president would get maximum press coverage. At the Beijing airport, for example, the Americans carefully worked out the best place for Nixon’s plane to land so that it would stop at the right distance and the right angle for good shots of Nixon’s descent toward the waiting reception party. The runway was carefully measured and marked up with paint.

Because of China’s relative isolation, the Chinese had not kept up with the sort of technology the Americans took for granted. When Kissinger flew in on the president’s plane for his October 1971 visit, the Chinese took over the controls for the flight from Shanghai to Beijing. The Chinese pilots glanced at the inertial navigation systems in the cockpit and then ignored them completely, flying visually, with one making hand signals to the other. The Chinese had never seen a Xerox copier and were fascinated by the one the American advance party brought. (When the Americans realized that the Chinese were copying all their documents out by hand, they arranged to leave their copier behind.) China did not have the facilities to transmit to satellites or ways to ship film quickly out of the country. Nor were the Chinese media expected to get stories out quickly. The senior Chinese journalist (one of only a handful) who was assigned to cover the Nixon visit remembered being struck by how quickly American journalists worked, how they used news flashes for a breaking story, and how one would write a lead paragraph and others finish up a story. “We will have to compete in speed,” she told herself. “We will have to make some reforms in the way we do things.” She also looked longingly at their equipment, the portable telephones and the microphones on long sticks.

While the Americans were prepared to bring in whatever they needed, they found that they had to be careful of Chinese sensitivities. On his October 1971 visit, Kissinger raised the issue of a ground station for satellite transmissions. Perhaps, he suggested, the necessary equipment could be flown in on a Boeing 747, which could then act as a self-contained unit. Chou offered to buy the plane, equipment and all, adding, “If we cannot buy it, we will rent it from you.” The compromise reached was that the Chinese would put up a suitable building (which they did in record time) and rent it to the Americans. The Americans would provide the equipment, which the Chinese in turn would rent. (The negotiations proved difficult because the Chinese became convinced that the Americans were undercharging them and insisted, to the confusion of American officials, on paying more than the asking price.) Chou also expressed a certain skepticism about the American hope that the visit would enhance Nixon’s image as a world leader. “This we find difficult to understand,” he told Haig. “The image of a man depends on his own deeds and not on any other factors. We do not believe that any world leader can be self styled.”

In the three weeks before Nixon arrived, the advance party worked around the clock to set up press facilities, figure out camera angles at all the places the president and Mrs. Nixon might visit, and make sure that the Chinese knew what they needed. Could they get a telex going? Were there going to be phone lines at the Great Wall?
Were there forklifts in China capable of unloading heavy equipment? The Chinese were bewildered but cooperative. Their technical experts fell on unfamiliar new technology with enthusiasm and asked to copy all the manuals into Chinese. Huge U.S. Air Force planes flew into Shanghai to disgorge tons of equipment, including gallons of chemicals for developing film. As the first plane landed and the first big network control truck rolled out, Tim Elbourne, the White House staffer responsible, stood with his astonished Chinese colleagues and wept with pride.

Back in the United States, the administration continued to try to add names to the list of journalists who would be arriving with the president. The lucky ones received special briefings. Beijing was cold in the winter, they were warned; many journalists rushed off to buy special fur coats and long underwear. They should look after their health; if they went into a Chinese hospital, they might never come out. They must expect to work very long hours, because they would have far fewer staff than they were used to.

Two chartered planes carried the reporters, camera crews, and their support staff, along with their briefing books and equipment, to China just ahead of Nixon. The journalists, including television stars such as Walter Cronkite and Eric Sevareid, the writer James Michener, and William F. Buckley Jr., a conservative the White House was wooing, traveled together on one plane. A young Barbara Walters, one of only three women in the group, was annoyed to find herself relegated to what was nicknamed the Zoo Plane, which carried the photographers and technicians.

On the way out to China, the journalists practiced, just as the official party was doing, using chopsticks on the airline food. They also played cards for the Chinese currency they had all been issued. According to the reporter Helen Thomas, some of her colleagues even gave up drink and immersed themselves in their books and papers on China and their guidebooks. As she said, in what was a common metaphor used by most Americans from Nixon on down, visiting China was like going to the moon. Even the most experienced and worldly-wise old hands rushed to their windows to take their first pictures of China as the planes crossed into Chinese airspace.

In Beijing, the press corps was housed near Tiananmen Square, in the cavernous Soviet-style Minzu Hotel (Nationalities Hotel, in English). In the rooms, plainer than most of the journalists were used to, boxes of candy, fresh fruit, tea, and stamps had been thoughtfully laid out. In the bathrooms the wooden toilet seats had been freshly lacquered; unfortunately, the extract of sumac in the lacquer brought out painful boils on those who were allergic to it. (The advance party had already encountered what they’d nicknamed “Baboon bottom.”) Next door was a new building with a basketball court and bowling alley, thrown up in a matter of weeks after one of the Americans in the advance party had mentioned that the journalists might like to exercise.

Chinese, many of them journalists themselves, were assigned to each American, as interpreters, guides, and minders. A young student brought in from a local university was deeply impressed by the Americans’ dedication to their work; he consequently decided to become a journalist. Many of the Chinese, although the Americans never knew it, had been brought back from the countryside, where, as intellectuals, they had been undergoing thought reform. The Chinese were invariably polite and openly curious about American ways of doing such things as filing stories, as well as exposures and film speeds. Sometimes the Chinese had to admit that they were baffled. “I understand almost everything you are saying,” said one to a television producer. “The feed, the uplink, the standup, but there is one thing you keep saying that I don’t understand. Please explain what is ‘the Fucking Audio?’”

Partway through the banquet, Chou En-lai stepped up onto the stage on one side of the hall. Speaking through his personal interpreter, he welcomed President and Mrs. Nixon on behalf of Chairman Mao and the Chinese government. The president, Chou went on, was visiting China “at the invitation of the Chinese Government.” This innocuous phrase had caused much difficulty on Kissinger’s first, secret, trip; the Chinese had wanted to make it look as though Nixon had asked to come to China.

The banquet, like Nixon’s trip itself, was about symbols, about
handshakes and the exchange of toasts between leaders whose countries had for decades treated each other with suspicion. It was about status, about fears of being snubbed as Dulles had once snubbed Chou, and about losing or maintaining prestige in the eyes of the world or, equally important, in the eyes of the Chinese and the American peoples. It also carried echoes of the long and sometimes difficult relationship between the Chinese and foreigners. No matter whether or not China really was the kingdom at the center of the world, Chinese governments down through the centuries had used rituals that implied that their emperor was chosen by heaven to rule the world and that all other rulers were his inferiors. Presents sent to the Chinese emperor and trade with China were both described as tribute. It may not have been a realistic view of the actual relationships between China and foreign nations, but it was a very powerful one. Inferior rulers—in other words, all those outside China—had to ask for permission to enter the emperor’s lands; they were not invited by the emperor, because that would have implied a relationship of equals.

Continuing his toast, Chou En-lai sounded a more modern note. In a reflection of the Chinese Communist view that the masses of the world would one day unite, he said that the Chinese people sent cordial greetings to the American people. Both peoples wanted a normalization of their relationship: “The people, and the people alone, are the motive force in the making of world history.” All present there knew why there had been a twenty-year freeze between their two nations. Thanks to efforts on both sides, contact had been reestablished. Of course, it was not going to be easy: “The social systems of China and the United States are fundamentally different, and there exist great differences between the Chinese Government and the United States Government.” Neither side wanted war, though, and both were willing to work together on a basis of mutual respect. “We hope,” Chou concluded, “that, through a frank exchange of views between our two sides to gain a clearer notion of our differences and make efforts to find common ground, a new start can be made in the relations between our two countries.” He lifted his glass in a toast to the Americans and Chinese in the room and to friendship between the Chinese and American peoples. Coming down from the stage, Chou circled the tables of the official party, toasting each person in turn. One of the Americans noticed that he only touched his lips to his glass each time.

After a few more courses, it was Nixon’s turn to reply. He wanted his toast to appear spontaneous even though he and his staff had been working on it for weeks. This had led to an awkward scene with Charles Freeman, his young interpreter from the State Department, just before the banquet. Freeman, who came from an old New England family, was an immensely civilized, cultivated, and witty man with, among other abilities, a great gift for languages. He had learned Chinese in the United States and Taiwan and spoke an elegant fluent Mandarin studded with allusions to classical literature. Although both Nixon and Kissinger did not like to use State Department interpreters for fear they might leak information, Freeman was told earlier that evening that he would be interpreting for Nixon. When he asked for the prepared text of the toast, Dwight Chapin, the appointments secretary, said that there wasn’t one. Freeman pointed out that he had worked on earlier drafts and that he also knew Nixon was planning to quote some of Chairman Mao’s poetry. “And if you think I’m going to get up in front of the entire Chinese Politburo and ad lib Chairman Mao’s poetry back into Chinese, you’re nuts.” Fortunately, Ji Chaozhu, who was Chou En-lai’s interpreter, agreed to fill in, and Mao’s poetry was translated back into Chinese correctly. Nixon glowered at the unfortunate Freeman throughout the dinner, making him so nervous that he took up smoking again. Two days later, after Freeman had shown his usefulness in interpreting, Nixon offered a tearful apology and said fulsomely to Chou En-lai that Freeman might well be the first American ambassador to China. “It was odd,” thought an embarrassed Freeman as Chou muttered something that sounded like “That’ll be the day.”

Nixon’s reply to Chou started with compliments to his hosts for their hospitality. The food was “magnificent,” as was the army band. “Never have I heard American music played better in a foreign land.” Like Chou, he admitted that there were many differences between China and the United States. Nevertheless, together both peoples
the last course. The guests hurried to the cars, and the journalists rushed to file their stories. A famous American television reporter ran after a bewildered Qiao Guanhua, the vice foreign minister, trying in vain to get an exclusive interview. "I'm Eric Severeid," he announced to a man who had probably never heard of him. John Burns, a Canadian journalist, took Nixon's chopsticks as a souvenir. Although a New York dealer sent a cable with an offer of $10,000, Burns kept them.  

Back at his guesthouse, a euphoric Nixon called Haldeman and Kissinger into his bedroom for an hour to go over the events of the first day in China, from the arrival to the meeting with Mao and finally the banquet. To Nixon's pleasure, Haldeman was able to report that the press coverage so far had been very good: "P. finally decided to fold up for the day after we reviewed the schedule for the week again, and that's the end of a very memorable day in American history."  

Not everyone shared Haldeman's pleasure. "The effect," according to William F. Buckley, "was as if Sir Hartley Shawcross had suddenly risen from the prosecutor's stand at Nuremberg and descended to embrace Goering and Goebbels and Doenitz and Hess, begging them to join with him in the making of a better world." On the other side of the world, Enver Hoxha, the Albanian dictator whose country had been one of China's few friends in the dark days of the 1960s, wrote in his diary, "The orchestra at the banquet played 'America the Beautiful'. The beautiful America of millionaires and multimillionaires! America, the center of fascism and barbarous imperialism!"  

According to Chinese custom, the banquet ended abruptly with