

AUGUST 14, 1986

It sure was hard to get on schedule after I got back from China. The only thing that kept me from drowsing off on the road with jet lag were the awful coughing fits from the final stages of Beijing distemper. I was eager to go see my family and my compadres, but I was afraid to drive on the highway unless the coughing spasms were close enough together to keep me awake.

I'd set the stage for a big homecoming, having sent a lot of fancy post cards and bought over \$50 worth of souvenirs. In this age, if you don't flat bribe people with cards and trinkets, they'll get so involved with their t.v. shows and their v.c.r. movies, they'll forget your name except monikers that rhyme with the television commercials. Also, my old ranch house is so far off the highway that I could go into hiding for a year without causing a manhunt.

The most noticeable change was the way my associates seemed to be paying more attention to what I was saying than they had before I'd left the country. At first I thought it was because of the way the Oriental sun had aged my facial features. By accident, I'd learned that those old Chinese guys you see pictures of with their faces all squinched up with wisdom and age, wearing pointed chin whiskers and straw hats, aren't over 28 years old in some cases.

The sun in the East seasons and wrinkles the skin until the subjects look ancient and philosophical. A U.S. Customs officer recommended that I get my passport picture updated before I left again. Had it not been for the oval shape of my eyes and the color of my hair, he said that he'd have held me on the suspicion of being an imposter.

But after I caught on to how bad economic conditions were in the Shortgrass Country and the whole state, I realized why everybody was making a better hand at listening. Depressions do that to people. The first bank I visited was so quiet that their clocks ticking sounded like the gongs clanging in the old time amateur shows. About the only segment of the population, in fact, that was making any noise were candidates for the November elections. But short of rolling a rock the size of the one at Gibraltar on them, I guess there's not much that will keep them from blabbing.

My hopes were to be hailed and honored as an expert on the People's Republic. On the plane from Seattle to Midland, I visualized a small party of State Department people meeting my plane with a few cameramen and reporters discreetly waiting for an interview. However, other than an offer for the attention afforded the elderly, the scene was the same. I don't know when I'll get the nerve to go back to the bank. It seems like a good time to stay at the ranch.