

Ping-Pong Diplomacy's Return Leg: A Transnational Encounter in the U.S.-China Rapprochement

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Further details regarding my talk will be released on my Twitter feed during the virtual conference in June.

Abstract:

Ping-pong diplomacy is perhaps the most famous example of transnational sporting diplomacy in history. When the American table tennis team was invited to visit the People's Republic of China in April 1971, a group of amateur athletes found themselves at the forefront of rebuilding the Sino-American relationship after two decades of mutual hostility. What is not widely known is that, one year later, China's world championship team in turn travelled to the United States for a return leg of the sporting contest in what was a further crucial moment in the early stages of the US-China rapprochement of the 1970s. This trip was the first official visit by People's Republic of China (PRC) citizens to the United States and occurred just two months after Nixon's historic visit to China.

Ping-pong proved the ideal medium for the PRC to refashion the US Cold War narrative about their country. A sport played in American garages and yards, and that hardly required daunting physicality, was one that allowed for Sino-American competition that was unthreatening and easy to embrace. The return visit was a performance from beginning to end, by the Chinese guests but also by their hosts. The PRC players presented themselves as dignified and modest ambassadors in interviews on prime-time television and in face-to-face meetings with ordinary Americans in factories, hospitals, and at Disneyland. Meanwhile, Americans welcomed the Chinese to the United States with speeches that celebrated (self-perceived) virtues of the United States — egalitarianism, productivity, diversity — that were portrayed as common values with China. Other Americans and, indeed, ethnic Chinese spoke up to challenge these narratives, however: anti-communist protestors dogged the tour and harassed the team with anti-Maoist chants, while pro-Taiwan overseas Chinese bought tickets by the hundred to have the chance to implore their ethnic brethren to defect to the free world.

This paper, which draws on a chapter from my forthcoming book, *Below the Summit: How Physicists, Acrobats, and Seismologists Remade US-China Relations, 1969–1978* (under contract with Cambridge University Press), makes use of newly released Chinese and US documents regarding this visit, as well as oral history interviews with surviving participants, to reconstruct the course of the visit. It analyzes the tour as a moment of transnational reconciliation between American and Chinese people, a spectacle in the early US-China rapprochement, and a form of cultural performance, on the part of both hosts and guests.

The book that this paper draws on is due out in early 2022.