

American / Chinese



Ping Pong Diplomacy

Nixon and Mao: The Week That Changed the World

By Margaret Macmillan

The following are excerpts on Ping Pong Diplomacy from Ms. Macmillan's best seller (pages 176-180) published by Random House in 2007.

On April 6, 1971, The Chinese government suddenly invited an American table tennis team, which was competing in the World Table Tennis Championship in Japan, to visit China. The decision to initiate what became known as “ping-pong” diplomacy had been made at the highest levels, indeed by Mao himself, after chance encounters brought Chinese and American table tennis players together. Chinese athletic teams, which had been condemned during the wildest days of the Cultural Revolution as “sprouts of revisionism,” were only just starting to take part in international events again. The tournament in Japan was the first one that had seen a Chinese team for several years. Mao had agreed that the Chinese could take part, but the team was sent off with orders to report back to Beijing three times a day and issued strict instructions as to how to behave: “During the contest, if we meet with officials of the US delegation, we do not take the initiative to talk or exchange greetings. If we compete with the US team, we do not exchange team flags with them beforehand, but we can shake hands and greet each other.” Early on in the tournament, when an American player casually said at a banquet, “Hi, Chinese, long time no see. You guys played well,” the incident was immediately reported. And when the Americans asked jokingly about why they had not been invited to play in China along with Mexico and Canada, the lights burned late in Beijing as the Chinese tried to work out what his meant. Chou En-lai submitted a cautious report to Mao that reflected the views of both the Foreign Ministry and the State Sports Commission that the time was not yet ripe to invite an American team to China, although there might well be opportunities in the future. The Americans could leave their addresses, said Chou, but it must be made clear to them that the Chinese people were firmly opposed to “the conspiracy of ‘Two Chinas.’” (The People’s Republic always insisted that there was only on China that that Taiwan was part of it.)

On April 4, 1971, as the tournament was winding down, a pair of players, one American, the other Chinese, caused a fresh incident to perturb Beijing. The American competitors were generally clean-cut athletes, “the kinds of Americans that you pray to be involved in something like this,” an American diplomat remembered. Glenn Cowan, thought, the U.S. junior champion, came from California and liked to considered himself part of the counterculture. “He’s apt to wear a purple passion shirt with tie-dye leopard-

like pants,” a long-suffering team official recalled. “He has long Dartaganian [sic] locks, he [has] a floppy hat that he wears and he’s sort of a hippy.” By chance, Cowan found himself out at the practice center without a ride back to the main tournament hall. A Chinese player beckoned him toward a bus, where he found most of the Chinese team, all smiling at him. Cowan was babbling cheerfully on to the uncomprehending Chinese about how they were all oppressed when Zhuang Zedong, a world champion and one of the Chinese stars, came forward and presented Cowan with a silk brocade scarf. When 2-2-2

the head of the Chinese team tried to stop his player, Zhuang brushed him aside, saying, “Take it easy. As head of the delegation you have many concerns, but I am just a player.” As the players got off the bus, a crowd of journalists recorded the scene. To his embarrassment, Cowan did not have anything to give in return. He managed to find a red, white, and blue shirt with a peace emblem and the words of the Beatles’ song, “Let It Be,” and he present it the following day, with maximum publicity, to the Chinese athlete. “Hippy opportunist,” said the American official.

Mao, who had been following the events in Japan with intense interest, sat chain-smoking for the next two days in Beijing while Chou’s report lay on his desk. The tournament in Japan would be over on April 7, and he still had not made up his mind on whether or not to invite the Americans to China. On April 6, he approved Chou’s recommendation that they do nothing. That night, as usual, his nurse read him the news stories about the tournament. Mao said approvingly, “Zhuang Zedong not only plays good Ping-Pong but knows how to conduct diplomacy as well.” At midnight, after he had already taken his customary heavy dose of sleeping pills, he suddenly sat up and order his nurse to contact the Foreign Ministry at once with orders to invite the Americans. It was only after she made the call that he allowed himself to fall asleep. As Mao subsequently described his decision, the small ping-pong ball could be used to move the large ball of the earth.

The invitation that reached the Americans the next day had more than a ring of the Middle Kingdom about it. Since the Americans had requested an invitation “so many times,” China had agreed to accede to their request. “If they are short of traveling expenses, we can render them assistance.” The first American diplomat to hear on the ground in Japan replied simply that if the team decided to go, it would not be against current American policy. He then dashed to his records and found, with relief, several of Nixon’s statements expressing hope that contacts would be resumed between China and the United States. In Washington, the desk officer at the State Department had the same reaction: “Go for it, do it.” He then went home and told his wife that if he was wrong, he would be out of a job.

Neither man lost his job. Nixon and Kissinger were surprised but delighted at the invitation. A rather bewildered group of players and officials from the U.S. Table Tennis Association head for China filled with last-minute advice from American diplomats and laden with cameras and tape recorders reporters had pressed on them, as well as all the American pens the embassy in Tokyo could find to give as presents. The team, which

was the first American delegation into China since 1949, arrived in Canton by train and then flew north to Beijing and, later, Shanghai. Everywhere they saw the giant portraits of Mao, the cartoons with a pygmy Nixon and a great Chinese, and the signs that said, "Down with the U.S. imperialists." On the streets the locals started at them with amazement, especially at Glenn Cowan, with his long hair, and a teenage player in her miniskirt, and the Americans stared back. One young American girl spent much of the

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time in tears because she would not eat Chinese food; finally the Chinese made her a hamburger and French fries.

Chou oversaw all the detailed arrangements for their reception and even had a Forbidden City, which he had closed to save it from the Red Guards, reopened for sightseeing. The trip, "an international sensation," in Kissinger's words, received huge publicity in the world press. The handful of foreign journalists stationed in Beijing were joined – and this was another breakthrough – by reporters from the big American news services. In China itself, all the matches were broadcast live on the television and radio. Chou ordered the Chinese players to let the Americans win some of them.

On April 14, Chou held a lavish reception in the Great Hall of the People for the visiting teams. In alphabetical order, the teams from Canada, Columbia, Great Britain, Nigeria, and the United States climbed up the great staircase that Nixon would ascend a year later. Chou was a charming host, chatting with all the players, posing patiently for photographs, and deprecating his own ability at ping-pong. He made jokes about the weather with the British and talked to the Canadians about his admiration for Dr. Norman Bethune. His most significant words were, of course, directed at the Americans. To the president of the U.S. Table Tennis Association, he quoted a Chinese proverb about the joy of having friends from afar. "Your visit," he said as he toasted the Americans, "has opened a new chapter in history of the relations between Chinese and American peoples." And he went on: "With you having made the start of people of the United States and China in the future will be able to have constant contacts."

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