

50 Years Ago: Ping-Pong Diplomacy Changed the World

By Mike Revzin

Table tennis is played with a ball that weighs a mere ninety-five thousandths of an ounce, but the sport has had a weighty impact on U.S.-China relations.

April is the 50th anniversary of the start of what became known as “ping-pong diplomacy.” When 15 U.S. table tennis players, officials and spouses entered China from Hong Kong on April 10, 1971, it was the first official U.S. delegation to set foot in that country since the People’s Republic of China was formed in 1949.

In the years since 1949, the U.S. and China had not had diplomatic relations or trade, and China and the U.S. had fought on opposite sides of the Korean War. In 1971 China was in the midst of the Cultural Revolution, which included anti-American wall posters and propaganda, and the U.S. was fighting North Vietnam, which received support from China.

Reasons to Reconnect

Despite all this, both nations had reasons to want to reconnect with each other. China saw better relations with the U.S. as a counter to China’s tense relations with the Soviet Union. The U.S. believed a rapport with China could help in peace negotiations with North Vietnam, and could give the Soviet Union an incentive to improve U.S.-Soviet relations. Even before



Ping-pong diplomacy and news about China made the covers of magazines in the U.S. and China in 1971. (Photos by Mike Revzin)

becoming president, Nixon had written, “We simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations.”

An opportunity for a breakthrough took place in Nagoya, Japan, where the table tennis teams of China and the U.S. were among those participating in the 1971 World Table Tennis Championships.

After a practice, 19-year-old U.S. player Glenn Cowan boarded a shuttle bus carrying the Chinese team. The Chinese were reluctant to interact with him. But the star Chinese player, Zhuang Zedong, eventually shook his hand and gave him a silk picture of China’s Huang Shan (Yellow Mountain). The next day, Cowan gave Zhuang a T-shirt with a peace symbol and the Beatles’ lyric “Let It Be,” a moment that drew media attention and led to the Chinese government inviting the U.S. team to visit China after the tournament.

A Spontaneous Encounter?

Officially, the meeting on the bus was described as a chance

encounter. But in the book *Ping-pong Diplomacy: The Secret History Behind the Game That Changed the World*, Nicholas Griffin writes that the meeting was no accident. It quotes Cowan as saying, “I was invited actually to board the Chinese bus with the team, which shocked me of course.”

Whether that encounter was spontaneous or not, it led to the invitation that stunned the world. The next year, the Chinese team toured the U.S., and President Richard Nixon made his historic trip to China, where he met Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai.

Nixon called his trip “the week that changed the world.” Writing about the visit years later, Nixon noted that the Chinese leaders “took particular delight in reminding me that an exchange of ping-pong teams had initiated a breakthrough in our relations,” History.com reported.

The U.S. team’s trip to China received extensive news coverage.

The cover of the April 26, 1971 *Time* magazine had a photo of the team on the Great Wall, with the headline “China: A Whole New Game.”

The U.S. team included self-described hippie Glenn Cowan, who had long hair



Zhuang Zedong presents a silk picture to Glenn Cowan in Japan.

In 2004, Glenn Cowan died of a heart attack at age 52 while undergoing bypass surgery. Upon hearing the news, Zhuang Zedong called from Beijing to express sympathy. Three years later, Zhuang met Cowan’s mother during a visit to the U.S., calling never being able to see Cowan again “the greatest regret of my life.” Zhuang himself died in Beijing in 2013, at the age of 73. — *China Daily*

and wore a big yellow hat and tie-dyed pants; a college professor, a Guyanese immigrant and two high school-age girls.

One of the members of the team was Connie Sweeris, the reigning U.S. national champion at the time of the China trip. In 2011, she told *Smithsonian* magazine, “At the time we were in China, we knew our trip was pretty newsworthy because of all the reporters wanting our stories. However, I do not think any of us realized the history we were making and how important it would be to future relations between the U.S. and China.”

Meeting Zhou Enlai

Zhou Enlai hosted a reception at the Great Hall of the People for several visiting table tennis teams. When he shook hands and chatted with the U.S. delegation and three American reporters, Zhou said, “We have opened a new page in the relations of the Chinese and American people,” *Time* reported.

“Even two weeks ago, the prospect would have seemed incredible,” the *Time* cover story proclaimed. “After years of xenophobia and anti-American fulminations, after an era in which China seemed as tightly closed to Americans as the Forbidden City ever was to outsiders—here was the Chinese premier being amiable to Americans. Here, after years of hearing that Americans were foreign devils, were masses of schoolchildren smiling and waving to U.S. visitors.” About the time that Zhou was greeting the visitors, the U.S. announced that it was removing most aspects of its 20-year embargo on trade with China.

One of the three American journalists allowed into China to cover the visit was John Roderick of the Associated Press. The others were NBC reporters John Rich and Jack Reynolds.

Roderick and Rich had reported from China in the 1940s. Roderick would later reopen the AP bureau in Beijing when American journalists were first allowed to reside there in 1979.

Roderick had been in the U.S. Army in World War II, assigned to the Office of Strategic Services in Kunming, China. He stayed in China after the war, and spent seven months covering Mao, Zhou and other Communist guerrilla leaders at their headquarters in caves in Yan’an in Shaanxi province.



Americans and Chinese play ping-pong under a banner that “Warmly Welcomes the U.S. Ping-Pong Team.” American players in the photo are Olga Soltesz (front table, left) and George Braithwaite (back table, right). Photos provided by Judy Hoarfrost.



The U.S. table tennis delegation meets Premier Zhou Enlai.

In 2006, looking back on the 1971 trip, Roderick wrote, “The accepted wisdom at the time was that the visit was engineered by the urbane, international-minded Zhou, who wanted to establish diplomatic ties with Washington as a hedge against Soviet expansionist plans.” But Roderick added that in the book *Mao: The Unknown Story*, by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, the authors say it was Mao, not Zhou, who decided to invite the Americans.

Goodwill Ambassadors

“From their arrival April 8 through their 10 days in China, the American ping-

pong players proved superb diplomats just by being themselves. Wherever they went—the Great Wall, the former imperial Summer Palace—they touched off spontaneous cheers and applause,” Roderick wrote. “*Meiguo ren hen hao*” (Americans are great), the crowds shouted.

“The cheers mounted as they played exhibition matches before 18,000 spectators, revealing a reservoir of good will among Chinese which no amount of anti-American propaganda had been able to suppress,” Roderick added. 友