

A Little Ball Propels the Globe: How Ping-Pong Diplomacy Transformed Twentieth-Century Geopolitical Dynamics

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PROPELLED BY A FORWARD SERVE, the ping-pong ball landed on the other side in one graceful arc before it was sent zooming back by another racket swing. This quick-paced sport, bilateral exchanges achieved through skill and control, captivated the eyes of thousands at the 1971 World Table Tennis Championships. Behind the scenes, another match—ping-pong diplomacy—unfolded on a grander stage. Since 1949, the United States and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) maintained mutual hostility. By the late 1960s, changing geopolitics compelled the leaders, Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong, to seek rapprochement in pursuit of geopolitical benefits and political agendas. In addressing intranational opposition, the leaders maintained strict secrecy to minimize the influences of political debates; through diplomacy, they mitigated public antagonism and established cooperation. Publicly, Nixon and Mao diverted attention away from Sino-American disputes and cultivated symbolic friendliness through media. Privately, they made pragmatic compromises without ideological homogenization. Ping-pong diplomacy was politically circumscribed but historically significant. Although unable to resolve political disputes such as those on Vietnam and Taiwan, ping-pong diplomacy’s use of ambiguity successfully built Sino-American cooperation, transformed twentieth-century geopolitics, and established the framework for contemporary Sino-American diplomacy.

Frozen Isolation

In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), with support from the Soviet Union (USSR), triumphed over the Nationalists in the Chinese Civil War and established the PRC.¹ The US, having backed the Nationalists,

moved its Chinese embassy to Taiwan and refused to recognize the PRC.² With the escalation of Sino-American confrontation during the Korean War, then-Vice President Nixon identified the PRC as a force of “slavery and totalitarianism” and imposed a policy of isolation and containment against it.³ In response, Chairman Mao fostered strong hatred and contempt toward the US. Mao denounced the US as “American Imperialists,” naming them as the PRC’s foremost enemy.⁴

This state of mutual hostility continued until the late 1960s when a series of political and military conflicts between the PRC and USSR resulted in the Sino-Soviet Split, directly incentivizing American and Chinese leaders to improve relations in pursuit of geopolitical benefits and political agendas. American power and prestige had waned throughout the costly Vietnam War. With an established Soviet-American rapprochement through détente and an escalating Sino-Soviet split, Nixon sought to introduce the PRC to the Soviet-American dichotomy by establishing a trilateral relationship in which the US could use the alliance with one communist state to pressure the other.⁵ Nixon also hoped to address a pressing political agenda—Vietnam. Strong anti-war activism at home drove Nixon to pursue rapprochement with the PRC in hopes of gaining negotiation leverage over North Vietnam.⁶ Across the Pacific, Mao was unsettled by the simultaneous Sino-Soviet split and Soviet-American détente—a combination that threatened geopolitical isolation. This trend compelled Mao to seek Sino-American rapprochement to offset the PRC’s hostility with the USSR. Additionally, Mao wished to achieve his political agenda of strengthening the PRC’s international recognition over Taiwan.⁷

Although both Nixon and Mao intended to establish rapprochement, they needed to overcome intranational political debates. In January 1970, American and Chinese diplomats Walter Stoessel and Lei Yang met in Warsaw to exchange olive branches and discuss possibilities for higher-level emissary meetings.⁸ However, the State Department argued that Sino-American rapprochement would damage other American alliances. During meetings, the State Department opposed Nixon’s desire to send a presidential envoy to Beijing because they believed that high-level meetings could only occur after the PRC made additional concessions. This debate persisted for weeks, and future Warsaw talks were twice postponed and eventually canceled.⁹ Nixon thus realized that his government did not “speak with a single voice”;¹⁰ thenceforth, he worked solely with National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger and kept their plans secret from the State Department. Debates also occurred within the CCP, though they were far less impactful to Mao given his absolute power. For example, Jiang Qing, Mao’s wife, condemned efforts to connect with the US, arguing that the PRC “must concentrate on [Black] friends, small

friends, poor friends”¹¹—which included third-world countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Overriding Jiang, Mao pursued rapprochement with the Americans and appointed Premier Zhou Enlai as the primary spokesperson for his policies.

Simultaneously, American and Chinese public sentiments remained antagonistic. A 1967 American poll showed that 70% of respondents saw the PRC as the greatest threat against America, more than three times the number of people who indicated the USSR (20%).¹² Indoctrinated by years of propaganda, the Chinese public also maintained hatred towards the US. As part of the Cultural Revolution, during which young students fanatically persecuted anyone with connections to western culture and ideals, this attitude escalated.¹³ For Nixon, establishing Sino-American rapprochement meant mitigating American hostility towards the PRC; for Mao, it meant dismantling the anti-American fervor he previously created.

Breaking the Ice

The catalyst that propelled open Sino-American rapprochement came in April 1971, during the 31st World Table Tennis Championships in Nagoya, Japan. The protagonists were Chinese player Zhuang Zedong and American player Glenn Cowan. On April 4, “a young foreign athlete with long hair jumped onto our bus,” recalled Zhuang.¹⁴ By the time Cowan realized that he was on the wrong bus, the vehicle had already departed. Seeing “USA” printed on the back of his jacket, no one dared to approach him. Cowan’s one-sided conversations fell flat with tension and silence. The awkwardness continued until Zhuang decided to break the ice; he picked up a silk embroidery as a gift and approached the American. Cowan was surprised and moved. “His smile was so lovely and innocent,” described Zhuang, “I still remember it even now.”¹⁵

A group of reporters waited for the Chinese team outside the Aichi stadium, but they did not expect to see an American standing among them. Stepping off, Zhuang and Cowan grinned happily and shook hands.¹⁶ The sincere quality of their exchange was astonishing, and shock soon turned into hungry waves of camera flutters. Cowan later “gave me a big hug and an American shirt,” recounted Zhuang.¹⁷ This back-and-forth was quickly picked up by the American Associated Press and made headlines around the world.¹⁸ One newspaper even went as far as proclaiming that “the U.S. and China [had] approached!”¹⁹

As reporters speculated about impending changes in Sino-American relations, the news arrived in Beijing.²⁰ “This Zhuang Zedong,” Mao praised, “is not just a good ping-pong player. He’s a good diplomat as well.”²¹ However, hesitation surrounded whether to approve the American

ping-pong team's request to visit the PRC. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Central Committee for Physical Culture and Sports believed that the moment was not ripe enough for such a bold move. Despite the debate, Mao decided to take a risk. On April 6, Mao approved the American team's request to visit China.²²

This invitation shocked the world. "I had never expected that the China initiative would come to fruition in the form of a Ping-Pong team," recorded Nixon delightedly in his memoir.²³ He immediately approved of the visit, and the US team arrived in Beijing on April 12. Premier Zhou Enlai personally shook hands with all American players, treating them like friends. An 18,000-person audience watched the friendship matches between American and Chinese teams.²⁴ "These people-to-people exchanges form friendships," remembered American player Connie Sweeris with a smile.²⁵ While the Chinese greeted the American team with hospitality, Nixon took his own steps toward mitigating Sino-American tensions. On April 14, he terminated a twenty-year-long trade embargo and eased currency and shipping controls over the PRC.²⁶

This groundbreaking visit dominated American headlines: five *New York Times* and eight *Time* articles appeared immediately after the first day; notably, these articles were under international news sections that were usually reserved for foreign policy coverage, indicating the significance of this ping-pong exchange.²⁷ The photo taken of the grinning American players at the Great Wall was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine,²⁸ announcing this new, friendlier relationship between the US and the PRC. These first demonstrations of symbolic friendliness broke the ice of decades-long antagonism and set grounds for higher-level diplomatic communications.

Thawing Relations

On July 9, 1971, Kissinger secretly arrived in Beijing to meet with Zhou to discuss the rapprochement.²⁹ The PRC's concern was Taiwan: Mao wanted recognition as the sole Chinese government and worried that American troops would aid Taiwan against the mainland.³⁰ Kissinger promised recognition of the PRC during Nixon's second term and that American troops would not fight for Taiwan. However, Kissinger cited American domestic debates, explaining that the US must maintain some of its connections with Taiwan.³¹ Hearing this condition, Mao agreed; for the pursuit of cooperation, pragmatic concessions were allowed.³²

On the other hand, the US worried that the PRC might fight in support of North Vietnam. Zhou reassured Kissinger that the PRC did not aim to be involved in the war and agreed to urge North Vietnam towards

peace. Nonetheless, Zhou added that the PRC would not meddle in North Vietnam's decisions.³³ "Nothing was resolved," Kissinger's aide, Dick Smyser, concluded.³⁴ Indeed, the US did not concede Taiwan, nor did China hand North Vietnam over to the US, with both countries adhering to their ideologies. Nevertheless, this meeting affirmed their commitment to prioritize immediate cooperation and their willingness to compromise on secondary political agendas in private. The leaders maintained strict secrecy over Kissinger's meeting to eliminate opposing influences of political debates in each country.

Six days after Kissinger's visit, Nixon accepted an invitation to visit the PRC on national television. "There can be no stable peace...without the [PRC] and its 750 million people," proclaimed Nixon.³⁵ However, he emphasized that he was under no illusion that "twenty years of hostility... was going to be swept away by one week of talks."³⁶ Under the influence of prior demonstrations of Sino-American friendship, the antagonistic attitudes of the American public had turned curious and more positive. Nixon's announcement was met with praise and anticipation.³⁷

On February 21, 1972, Nixon and his party arrived at the Beijing airport. Walking down the airstairs, Nixon greeted Zhou with outreached hands, and the two men shook hands for an entire minute. Groups of American journalists captured footage of this historic moment, which was televised back home before the eyes of millions.³⁸ "Your handshake came over the vastest ocean in the world—twenty-five years of no communication," Zhou later told Nixon.³⁹ Indeed, through this carefully executed handshake, Nixon communicated a message to the world: the US and the PRC had built diplomatic connections across time, space, and ideological disputes. This was the beginning of a new era.

These opening moments established the central message for the rest of the visit: despite lingering Sino-American ideological disputes, both countries would prioritize pragmatic cooperation. Intentional media coverage, meticulously arranged by Nixon and Mao, strengthened this message. The CCP newspaper *People's Daily* did not report on any political topics that were discussed; instead, it printed a photograph of Nixon and Mao shaking hands on its front page, announcing that the PRC prioritized building partnership over fixating on Sino-American ideological disputes.⁴⁰ Likewise, American journalists, excluded from political discussions, could only capture snapshots of the daily lives of common Chinese folks.⁴¹ Their coverage mitigated the American public's negative perceptions of the PRC and contributed to the normalization of Sino-American relations.

The most important product of Nixon's visit was the Joint Communiqué of the United States of America and the People's Republic of China. Commonly termed the Shanghai Communiqué, this document stated that,

although there were “essential differences between China and the United States,” the two sides would “conduct their relations on the principles of... mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence.”⁴² The communiqué reiterated the key idea that pragmatic cooperation could be built despite ideological disputes. Skillfully worded, the communiqué preserved just the right amount of ambiguity to achieve agreements without addressing unresolved issues. When referencing the Taiwan dispute, the US acknowledged that “all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China.”⁴³ This phrase gave no straightforward declaration of which was the rightful Chinese government, neither openly opposing nor conceding to the PRC. Through skillful diplomacy, Nixon and Mao thawed the ice in Sino-American relations and established rapprochement without ideological homogenization.

Lasting Legacy

Ping-pong diplomacy, like the sport it takes its name from, was a game of adept bilateral exchanges. Publicly, Nixon and Mao diverted attention away from ideological disputes and used non-political scenes to promote friendliness. Privately, both sides made pragmatic concessions and ensured strict secrecy to minimize political debates. Through ambiguity, the leaders avoided direct ideological confrontations, which made it possible to establish a cooperative relationship and retain disparate ideological stances. Utilizing these diplomatic strategies, Nixon and Mao achieved success.

Although it established immediate Sino-American cooperation, ping-pong diplomacy was limited by unresolved ideological and political disputes. Nixon’s political goal of pulling out of the Vietnam War through the PRC was unsuccessful. While rapprochement decreased some of North Vietnam’s international support, Beijing’s talks with Hanoi did not bring an enduring peace settlement.⁴⁴ The PRC was unwilling to forsake its political stance and socialist alliances. Just as the PRC did not concede Vietnam, the US did not explicitly acknowledge which Chinese government would be recognized as rightful. For years following the rapprochement, Taiwan continued to be a point of dispute.

Despite these political limitations, ping-pong diplomacy brought geopolitical benefits to both sides and transformed twentieth-century geopolitics. For Nixon, ping-pong diplomacy strengthened Washington’s leverage over Moscow. The USSR, considerably pressured by the Sino-American rapprochement, moved further towards détente: in May 1972, the US and the USSR signed the first Strategic Arms Limitation Talks Agreement, a breakthrough after more than two years of unsuccessful discussions.⁴⁵ This balance of Soviet-American détente and Sino-American

rapprochement secured Washington's edge over Moscow and continued to keep checks on Beijing. For Mao, with American support, the PRC gained international standing. It, rather than Taiwan, was admitted into the United Nations in October 1971. Within eight months after the Cowan-Zhuang encounter, the PRC had established diplomatic relations with eighteen new countries, more than half of what it gained throughout the twenty prior years.⁴⁶ Ping-pong diplomacy introduced the PRC as a third-world power, transforming the prior Soviet-American dichotomy into a trilateral relationship. Most importantly, ping-pong diplomacy built the foundation for formal Sino-American diplomacy, which persisted after the dissolution of the USSR.

In the coming years, the tactics and limitations of ping-pong diplomacy continued to characterize Sino-American diplomacy. In 2001, with American backing, the PRC entered the World Trade Organization.⁴⁷ In exchange, American corporations gained access to Chinese markets and currently use political ambiguity to retain them despite ideological disputes. Concurrently, unresolved disputes, such as Taiwan, remain. The American Institute in Taiwan, a de facto embassy but intentionally not thusly named, embodies the awkward position the US finds itself in—conducting unofficial diplomacy with Taiwan while dealing with the PRC's continued insistence that Taiwan is not independent. The greatest value of ping-pong diplomacy was not resolving socio-political differences, but providing a way through which countries with such differences could cooperate—compromising through a screen of ambiguity.

Notes

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2. Department of State, "A Guide to the United States' History of Recognition, Diplomatic, and Consular Relations, by Country, since 1776: China," Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/countries/china>.

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4. Zhen Li, "建国后毛泽东对'美国帝国主义'的认知和应对," Central Party History and Documentation Research Institute, last modified December 5, 2019, <https://www.dswxyjy.org.cn/n1/2019/1205/c423725-31492201.html>.

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10. *Ibid.*, 1830.
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15. *Ibid.*
16. See Appendix A.
17. “Ping Pong,” video.
18. Nicholas Griffin, *Ping Pong Diplomacy: The Secret History Behind the Game that Changed the World* (New York, NY: Scribner, 2014), 449. Overdrive Edition.
19. “Ping Pong,” video.
20. Griffin, *Ping Pong*, 449.
21. “《国家记忆》20161101《中美1972》系列 第二集 乒乓外交,” video, YouTube, posted by CCTV中文国际, November 1, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gyo5t6j_uv0&t=16s.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Richard M. Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York, NY: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 1385. Overdrive Edition.
24. Murray Greig, “Ping-pong, Ali and Yao: Wow!,” *China Daily*, last modified October 1, 2019, <https://www.chinadailyhk.com/articles/115/159/194/1569908239318.html>.
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27. Griffin, *Ping Pong*, 501.
28. *Time*, April 26, 1971, <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19710426,00.html>.
29. See Appendix B.
30. “Memorandum of Conversation, 23 February 1972, 9:35 a.m. - 12:34 p.m.” (unpublished typescript, July 29, 1971), <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB106/NZ-4.pdf>.
31. Hu, “Danger and Opportunity,” Digital Georgetown.
32. “Memory of a Nation 20161102,” video, YouTube, posted by CCTV 中文国际, November 2, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qAh8SVFYp30>.
33. “Memorandum of Conversation.”
34. James Mann, *About Face: A History of America’s Curious Relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 34.

35. "Transcript of Nixon TV Address to Nation," *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), July 16, 1971, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/07/16/archives/transcript-of-nixon-tv-address-to-nation.html>.
36. Margaret MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao: The Week that Changed the World* (New York, NY: Random House, 2007), 33. Overdrive Edition.
37. Mann, *About Face*, 38-39.
38. "Assignment: China – 'The Week That Changed The World,'" video, YouTube, posted by USC US-China Institute, January 25, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uyCZDvec5sY>.
39. MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao*, 94.
40. See Appendix C.
41. "Assignment: China," video.
42. University of Southern California, "Joint Communiqué Of The United States Of America And The People's Republic Of China, February 27, 1972 (Shanghai Communiqué)," USC US-China Institute, <https://china.usc.edu/joint-communicu%C3%A9-united-states-america-and-peoples-republic-china-february-27-1972-shanghai>.
43. University of Southern California, "Joint Communiqué," USC US-China Institute.
44. MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao*, 697-698.
45. Nixon, *The Memoirs*, 1554.
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Appendix A



American player Glenn Cowan shakes hands with the Chinese player Zhuang Zedong after getting off a bus for Chinese players at the 31st World Table Tennis Championships in Nagoya, Japan, on April 4, 1971. 1971. Photograph. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/bus-ride-opened-long-road-to-beijing-ln7mxzp6q>.

Appendix B



Premier Zhou Enlai meets Henry Kissinger in Beijing in July 1971. Kissinger was then US President Richard Nixon's national security adviser. July 1971. Photograph. https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2011-06/24/content_12765224_2.htm.

Appendix C



People's Daily Front Page. Photograph. February 21, 1972. http://en.people.cn/200202/21/eng20020221_90734.shtml.



President Richard Nixon Shaking Hands with Chairman Mao Tse-tung. February 21, 1972. Photograph. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/194759>.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

“Airgram A-84 From the Embassy in Poland to the Department of State, February 21, 1970.” Unpublished typescript, February 21, 1970. <https://static.history.state.gov/frus/frus1969-76ve13/pdf/d4.pdf>.

This airgram documented the meetings between American diplomat Walter Stoessel and Chinese diplomat Lei Yang at the Warsaw Embassy, which was one of the first olive branches exchanged between the US and the PRC since 1949. I used this meeting as evidence of the two sides’ intentions of reaching rapprochement. The inability of these talks to continue was partially due to the internal debates within the Nixon Administration.

American player Glenn Cowan shakes hands with the Chinese player Zhuang Zedong after getting off a bus for Chinese players at the 31st World Table Tennis Championships in Nagoya, Japan, on April 4, 1971. 1971. Photograph. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/bus-ride-opened-long-road-to-beijing-ln7mxzp6q>.

This is the image captured by reporters during the Table Tennis Championships when Zhuang and Cowan exited the bus. This vivid scene illustrates the power of a friendly encounter, especially between Chinese and American athletes amidst the backdrop of a twenty-year-long mutual hostility between the two countries, which is why I included it in my paper.

Harris, Louis. “Nixon’s Trip to China.” The Harris Poll. Last modified February 23, 1972. <https://theharrispoll.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Harris-Interactive-Poll-Research-NIXONS-TRIP-TO-CHINA-1972-02.pdf>.

This 1972 public poll is a representation of the American public’s attitude towards Nixon and his trip to the PRC; evidently, his popularity and credibility as a president and diplomat were strengthened by the rapprochement with the PRC. This significantly contributed to his success in the presidential election later that year and was a personal success for Nixon. I used this as direct evidence of the American public’s changing attitude towards the PRC and the rapprochement.

Kissinger, Henry. *White House Years*. N.p.: Little, Brown and Company, 1979. Overdrive Edition.

This is Henry Kissinger’s memoirs of his years serving under the Nixon administration. Kissinger provided detailed and chronological records of how the rapprochement with the PRC unfolded on the American side. I gained a lot of good primary accounts of Nixon’s goals and the political debates with the State Department. I used this source when I talked about the intentions that motivated Nixon to seek rapprochement.

“Memorandum of Conversation, 23 February 1972, 9:35 a.m. - 12:34 p.m.” Unpublished typescript, July 29, 1971. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB106/NZ-4.pdf>.

This is a transcript of the secret conversation between Kissinger and Zhou following the ping-pong encounters between American and Chinese athletes. This source gives me a thorough understanding of the important priorities of each country and how Kissinger and Zhou exchanged reassurances and made pragmatic compromises. Using this source, I extrapolate the key goals and concerns on each side, which I have identified in my essay.

The New York Times (New York City, NY). “Transcript of Nixon TV Address to Nation.” July 16, 1971. <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/07/16/archives/transcript-of-nixon-tv-address-to-nation.html>.

A transcript of Nixon's acceptance of the PRC's invitation for a visit on national television was published in *The New York Times*. Nixon outlined the central message conveyed by leaders of both the US and the PRC: although there exist fundamental differences between the two countries, pragmatic cooperation was necessary and beneficial. I used this as primary evidence to show how while Nixon supported the rapprochement, he was careful to emphasize to American viewers that this change in foreign relations would not change American ideology and interests.

Nixon, Richard M. *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*. New York, NY: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978. Overdrive Edition.

This is Richard Nixon's memoirs, which gave me primary accounts of his thoughts, plans, and goals in the process of reaching the Sino-American rapprochement. One example of this is his written reaction to Mao's invitation of the American ping-pong team to visit the PRC. I cited his writing as primary source evidence of Nixon's goals/intentions throughout and attitudes towards the rapprochement.

———. "U.S. Vice President Addresses America-Japan Society." News release. <https://www.nixonfoundation.org/2018/10/vice-president-nixon-future-u-s-japan-relations/>.

In this address, Nixon identifies the PRC to be a foremost enemy of the US, denouncing it to be a force of Communist totalitarianism. I used quotations of Nixon's words from this address in comparison to words by Mao, demonstrating the mutual hostility between the two nations since 1949.

People's Daily Front Page. Photograph. February 21, 1972. http://en.people.cn/200202/21/eng20020221_90734.shtml.

This website contains a photograph of the original 1972 *People's Daily* reporting of the Nixon and Mao handshake. This government newspaper indicates the importance Mao sees in the rapprochement with the US; taking up almost half the page, the photograph communicated directly to the Chinese people about Chairman Mao's changing attitude towards the Americans. I used this as evidence showing the intentional media portrayal, arranged by Mao.

"Ping Pong Diplomacy." Video. YouTube. Posted by USC US-China Institute, May 3, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jsBfvnqqmw>.

In this speech, Chinese ping-pong player Zhuang Zedong recounts his experience with Glenn Cowan and the significance of the ping-pong exchanges between the US and the PRC. This provides me with first-hand accounts of the entire Cowan-Zhuang exchange, including many details that are incomplete in other secondary sources about ping-pong diplomacy, which I cited as primary sources about the encounters that catalyzed the later rapprochement.

Premier Zhou Enlai meets Henry Kissinger in Beijing in July 1971. Kissinger was then US President Richard Nixon's national security adviser. July 1971. Photograph. https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2011-06/24/content_12765224_2.htm.

This image was taken during Kissinger's secret visit to Beijing in July 1971. I used this image to show that this meeting between Kissinger and Zhou before Nixon's visit established the main diplomatic objectives on both sides and laid the foundation for higher-level meetings. There existed three parallel relations on three levels: Cowan and Zhuang, Kissinger and Zhou, Nixon and Mao.

President Richard Nixon Shaking Hands with Chairman Mao Tse-tung. February 21, 1972. Photograph. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/194759>.

This image is a high-resolution version of the image of Nixon and Mao shaking hands printed on the front page of *People's Daily*. I used this image as evidence showing the intentional media portrayal of friendliness, a message emphasized throughout ping-pong diplomacy.

Sample, Robert B., Jr. "Nixon Eases China Trade Embargo to Allow Nonstrategic Exports." *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), April 15, 1971. <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/04/15/archives/nixon-eases-china-trade-embargo-to-allow-nonstrategic-exports-u-s.html>.

This *New York Times* article reports on Nixon's easing of the trade embargo against the PRC as a result of the newly established friendly interactions between the Chinese and American ping-pong players. I used this to demonstrate Nixon's reciprocation of Mao and Zhou's friendliness towards the visiting American athletes.

Time, April 26, 1971. <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19710426,00.html>.

The cover of this issue of *Time* magazine features the famous picture of the American ping-pong team at the Great Wall of China. Such a prominent coverage of grinning Americans in the PRC indicates the people's belief that a shift towards friendliness between these two previously hostile nations was occurring. This change in public attitude was necessary for Nixon to conduct further political discussions with Mao and Zhou. I used this as evidence of the positive media portrayal of the Sino-American rapprochement.

University of Southern California. "Joint Communiqué Of The United States Of America And The People's Republic Of China, February 27, 1972 (Shanghai Communiqué)." USC US-China Institute. <https://china.usc.edu/joint-communic%C3%A9-united-states-america-and-peoples-republic-china-february-27-1972-shanghai>.

This is a record of the Shanghai Communiqué, which recounted American and Chinese resolutions on important topics such as Taiwan and Vietnam. The American side's ambiguous wording about Taiwan reflected the diplomatic tactic that ensured the success of this rapprochement: using ambiguity to not directly address the ideological differences between the US and the PRC. I cited this as an example of the skillful ambiguity employed by this diplomacy.

"乒乓外交50周年 专访1971年访华美国乒乓球队队员." Video. YouTube. Posted by 中国体育官方频道 ZHIBO TV Official Channel, October 10, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7y3nAK-e6fE>.

This is an interview of Connie Sweeris, one of the nine American ping-pong players who visited the PRC, conducted by the Chinese official sports channel. This interview provides me with insight into the experiences and impressions of the American athletes; while they initially had some negative perceptions of the PRC, they were moved by the overwhelming hospitality expressed by the people and leaders, which successfully changed their attitude toward the PRC to something friendlier. I cited this as primary evidence of the reactions of American ping-pong players.

Secondary Sources

"Assignment: China – 'The Week That Changed The World.'" Video. YouTube. Posted by USC US-China Institute, January 25, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uyCZDvec5sY>.

This documentary, produced by the University of Southern California's US-China Institute, includes primary television footage of Nixon's visit to the PRC. The footage of his first moments at the Beijing Airport allowed me to accurately narrate this significant scene in my paper, which I have included in my section 'Thawing Relations.'

Department of State. "A Guide to the United States' History of Recognition, Diplomatic, and Consular Relations, by Country, since 1776: China." Office of the Historian. <https://history.state.gov/countries/china>.

This article by the US Department of State recounted the US's hostile attitude towards the PRC after 1949, such as its act of moving its Chinese embassy to Taiwan and its refusal to recognize the PRC. This indicates the fundamental ideological differences between the two countries. I used this source in my historical context section "Frozen Isolation."

Greig, Murray. "Ping-pong, Ali and Yao: Wow!" *China Daily*. Last modified October 1, 2019. <https://www.chinadailyhk.com/articles/115/159/194/1569908239318.html>.

This article provides me with a lot of photographs taken during the American ping-pong team's visit to the PRC, including the picture of the friendly matches. These are evidence of the Chinese hospitality towards the American athletes, contributing to the easing of Sino-American tensions and building of a friendlier relationship. I described scenes in these photographs in my section "Breaking the Ice."

Griffin, Nicholas. *Ping Pong Diplomacy: The Secret History Behind the Game that Changed the World*. New York, NY: Scribner, 2014. Overdrive Edition.

This is one of the most detailed accounts of ping-pong diplomacy. I learned a lot of specific details about the event, such as the number of press coverage generated by the ping-pong exchanges. I used this when describing the implications of the Cowan-Zhuang encounter and the American players' visit to the PRC.

Hu, Xinlan. "Danger and Opportunity: The Sino-U.S. Rapprochement as a Domestic Political Crisis in Both Countries, 1971-1972." Digital Georgetown. Last modified May 7, 2018. <https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/1050475/Hu%20Honors%20thesis.pdf>.

This paper analyzes the domestic debates that Nixon and Mao faced in their process of reaching rapprochement. I learned about Jiang Qing's opposition to improving relations with the US and how Kissinger cited American domestic opposition to justify Nixon's inability to immediately cut off all ties with Taiwan. I used this source in explaining the discussions between Kissinger and Zhou during Kissinger's secret meeting.

Kissinger, Henry. *Diplomacy*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1994.

This book by Kissinger analyzes Nixon's motives behind seeking Sino-American rapprochement, in retrospect. The term "triangular diplomacy," first defined by Kissinger, describes the trilateral dynamic among the US, the USSR, and the PRC that Nixon hoped to establish by improving relations with the PRC. I learned about the geopolitical advantages this dynamic would bring to the US. I cited this source in my historical context section to explain Nixon's primary motivation behind pursuing rapprochement.

"The LONG History of America - China Relationships." Video. YouTube. Posted by Stanford, October 24, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vW747IAz154>.

This video posted by Stanford University recounts the evolution of Sino-American relations throughout history. The analysis of Sino-American hostility from 1949 to the 1960s helped me understand the historical context of my topic. I used this source when explaining the historical context.

MacMillan, Margaret. *Nixon and Mao: The Week that Changed the World*. New York, NY: Random House, 2007. Overdrive Edition.

This book provides me with a detailed analysis of Nixon's visit to China and the preparations behind the scenes leading up to that visit. It gives me several great primary quotes from the leaders. I used this source when I analyzed Nixon's visit to the PRC.

Mann, James. *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999.

Chapters of this book analyzed the Nixon and Kissinger trips to the PRC. I learned about the domestic opposition faced by Nixon from the State Department and his decision to maintain strict secrecy and exclusion to eliminate the influences of the State Department. I used this source as a reference when I analyzed Kissinger's visit to China.

"Memory of a Nation 20161102." Video. YouTube. Posted by CCTV 中文国际, November 2, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qAh8SVFYP30>.

This documentary produced by the PRC state-owned China Central Television recounts Mao's private conversations with Zhou regarding the secret Kissinger visit. This source, like all other CCTV sources, represents the official stances of the Chinese government. This helps inform me about the perspectives of Mao, the leader of the CCP. I learned that Mao was willing to make temporary, pragmatic compromises regarding Taiwan for the pursuit of Sino-American rapprochement. I used this source when describing Mao's reaction toward the U.S.'s limited promises regarding Taiwan.

Özçelik, Ali Onur. "Rapprochement between America and China during the Nixon Era: A Product of Timing or the Leadership?" *Bilge Strateji* 9, no. 16 (March 15, 2017). <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/677354>.

This journal article provides statistics from a 1967 American public poll. The results indicate that the majority of Americans viewed the PRC as the US's foremost enemy, an attitude that Nixon must change to normalize relations with the PRC. I used this statistic to demonstrate the changing attitudes of Americans towards the PRC.

World Trade Organization. "China." World Trade Organization. https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/acc_e/a1_chine_e.htm.

This official site describes the status of the PRC in the World Trade Organization. The US was instrumental in helping the PRC join the WTO in 2001. On the other hand, American corporations also benefited from gaining access to the Chinese market. I used this source as an example of the continual benefits that the PRC gained from ping-pong diplomacy.

Zhen Li, "建国后毛泽东对'美国帝国主义'的认知和应对," Central Party History and Documentation Research Institute, last modified December 5, 2019, <https://www.dswxyjy.org.cn/n1/2019/1205/c423725-31492201.html>.

This article, published by the Chinese Central Party History and Documentation Research Institute, gives the PRC government's evolution of policies toward the US. I learned that Mao had always been open to working with the US; he responded with antagonism when the US was hostile towards the PRC, but pragmatically changed his attitude when he realized the benefits of a Sino-American rapprochement. I use this source as an example of the Chinese perspective and goals.

"《国家记忆》20161101《中美1972》系列 第二集 乒乓外交." Video. YouTube. Posted by CCTV中文国际, November 1, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gyo5t6j_uv0&t=16s.

This documentary produced by China Central Television describes the CCP and Mao's reactions to the Cowan-Zhuang encounter. I learned about the debate within the CCP—while most politicians believed that it was untimely to invite the American team, Mao worked against these debates and invited them.

Process Paper

The United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) are the world's two largest economies, and their relationship significantly shapes present world dynamics. Thus, studying the conflicts and compromises between these two superpowers has become more important than ever. Growing up in both the US and China, I understand that there are great ideological differences between the two countries; I am interested to learn how the two have built a diplomatic relationship despite their fundamental differences. With 2022 being the fiftieth anniversary of the Sino-American rapprochement, I turned to ping-pong diplomacy, the genesis of open Sino-American diplomacy in the contemporary era.

I began by researching Cold War history, especially the geopolitical dynamics among the US, the PRC, and the Soviet Union. Then, through interview clips, historical newspapers, memoirs, and declassified files, I learned about the ping-pong-driven exchanges between American and Chinese athletes, the secret conversations between Henry Kissinger and Zhou Enlai, and Nixon's visit to the PRC. As someone fluent in both English and Chinese, I incorporated a significant number of Chinese sources—documentaries, journal articles, and newspapers—to enhance the Chinese perspective in my paper, which is not often accounted for in detail in most high school papers about ping-pong diplomacy.

My research helped me realize that “ping-pong diplomacy” extended beyond the exchanges between American and Chinese athletes; the term can be used to describe the grander Sino-American diplomacy that, much like the sport, was characterized by adept bilateral exchanges. I thus refer to the entire process of Sino-American rapprochement when I use “ping-pong diplomacy.” Two components are integral to my paper: intranational debates—how people within each country held disparate opinions towards foreign policy—and international diplomacy—how the two countries interacted with each other, mostly through their top leaders. Through continual writing and revision, I explained the specific diplomatic tactics of Nixon and Mao. By establishing strict secrecy, the leaders limited the influence of domestic political debates; by conducting skillful diplomacy, they mitigated public antagonism and established cooperation. Publicly, they avoided political discussions and used the media to promote friendliness. Privately, they pragmatically compromised without conceding core ideologies and interests. This event produced desirable outcomes for both countries, transformed twentieth-century geopolitical dynamics, and established a lasting Sino-American diplomatic relationship.

One cannot describe the process without addressing challenges. It was difficult to distill only the most essential elements from the seas of historical evidence. More challenging was digging deeper or sometimes breaking away from the frameworks of my already finished essays each round—I felt like I was chiseling and resculpting a predefined statue. Despite these challenges, my love for history and my topic powered me through.

This journey has allowed me to grow as a historical thinker and writer, which would not be possible without the great people along the way. Many thanks to my teachers, who helped me transform historical thinking from hobby to habit. Lastly, I want to thank my mom, who has always been the most inspiring.

