

**The Game That Changed the World:  
How Ping-Pong Diplomacy Salvaged International  
Relations Between The United States and The  
People's Republic of China**

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# Process Paper

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We first learned about Ping-Pong Diplomacy from our neighbors. After weeks of listening to the back and forth banter between paddles and as students with a deep sense of curiosity, we asked what had instilled them with such passion for the game, to which they briefly shared the importance of ping-pong in their home country— China. Fascinated by their story, we began to explore more of the game's complex history, eventually discovering information about the 1971 World Table Tennis Championship, often noted as the birthplace of Ping-Pong Diplomacy. After conducting extensive research, the connections between Ping-Pong Diplomacy and this year's theme were evident.

We developed our research by consulting a wide array of primary and secondary sources, including newspapers, conferences, photographs, and books. It was crucial that we found sources reflecting on the significance of the event overtime from both nations' perspectives. An important resource utilized in the development of our project was the Nation Committee on U.S-China Relations (NCUSCR), the host of the Chinese Table Tennis Team's visit to the United States in April 1972. In addition, we were able to conduct interviews with Dr. Yafeng Xia, an expert on Cold War relations between China and the United States and Mrs. Jan Berris, the VP of NCUSCR. Many experts and former diplomats revisited the event as a result of its 50th anniversary this past year, allowing us to gain a modern day perspective on our topic as its values continue to apply in current global relations.

We made the decision to construct an exhibit as we felt that it would be the most impactful way to showcase our project's deeply rooted history. The title was designed in reference to a banner at the 1971 World Table Tennis Championship, written in English and Mandarin. In the center panel of our display is an enlarged image of President Nixon and Mao Zedong shaking hands, placed to encapsulate its symbolic meaning. Below is the phrase, 友谊第一, 竞争第二 (friendship first, competition second), a phrase commonly used between the Chinese and American Table Tennis Teams throughout the friendly exhibition matches. The bottom of our display was converted into a ping-pong table, to play homage to the game.

Following Mao Zedong's communist revolution in 1949, relations between the People's Republic of China and the United States soured. During the 1971 World Table Tennis Championship, a rare encounter between a Chinese and American player led to a strategic invitation to the American Table Tennis Team to tour China. The visit served as a catalyst that led to a crucial series of diplomatic events that successfully incited a realignment between the two superpowers. Many nations felt uneasy with the new U.S-China relations, igniting debates and prompting headlines across the world. However, from the World Table Tennis Championship in 1971 to the Olympics today, unifying sports continue to teach us that diplomacy shouldn't be about competition. Instead it should be an opportunity for nations to come together for a common purpose, forming a better world for all.

# Annotated Bibliography

## Primary Sources:

### Archives

Archive, Wilson Center Digital. Wilson Center Digital Archive, [digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/collection/190/sino-american-confrontation-1949-1971](https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/collection/190/sino-american-confrontation-1949-1971).

This source provided us with a detailed chronological account of Sino-American confrontations while also assessing the impacts of each event. The information provided enabled us to draw connections between conflicts indirectly and directly related to American and Chinese relations leading up to 1971. The information provided helped us to develop our analysis and was significant to our research, because it allowed us to understand why tensions between the two countries had deteriorated.

“Ping Pong Diplomacy: Artifacts from the Historic 1971 U.S. Table Tennis Trip to China - National Museum of American Diplomacy.” U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of State, 1 Feb. 2022, [diplomacy.state.gov/artifact-collection-highlights/ping-pong-diplomacy-historic-1971-u-s-table-tennis-trip-to-china/](https://diplomacy.state.gov/artifact-collection-highlights/ping-pong-diplomacy-historic-1971-u-s-table-tennis-trip-to-china/).

This article aided us in understanding that ping-pong diplomacy was beyond just a diplomatic attempt and a political exchange between the United States and the People’s Republic of China, as it showcased several artifacts, photographs, and videos from the U.S. Table Tennis Team’s time in China. Connie Swerris, a member of the U.S table tennis team, donated several of these resources that allowed us to expand our understanding of the cultural and social exchanges that occurred, as China aimed to not only compete against the United States in friendly exhibition matches, but share their culture.

“Ping-Pong Diplomacy: NGOs and International Relations.” REsource, 12 Oct. 2021, [resource.rockarch.org/story/ngos-and-international-relations-the-case-of-ping-pong-diplomacy/](https://resource.rockarch.org/story/ngos-and-international-relations-the-case-of-ping-pong-diplomacy/).

While conducting research, this article from the Rockefeller Archive Center provided us with context over U.S.-China relations, the formation of the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, and the impact of ping-pong diplomacy both past and present. This source provided us with several photographs that were displayed on our exhibit board.

### **Books**

Eckstein, Ruth. “*Ping Pong Diplomacy: A View from behind the Scenes.*” *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, vol. 2, no. 3, Brill, 1993.

While conducting research, we made it a goal to understand the motives behind ping-pong diplomacy beyond just its surface. This book, written by Ruth Eckstein, elaborates on the topic of ping-pong diplomacy and provided us with insightful information from multiple perspectives that helped us to create our own analysis and find quotes for our board.

Griffin, Nicholas. “*Ping-Pong Diplomacy: The Secret History Behind the Game That Changed the World.*” Scribner.” 7 January 2014.

This book allowed us to not only expand our knowledge over ping-pong diplomacy following the 1971 World Table Tennis Championship, but gain a better understanding over the long history of the game and its strong diplomatic roots since its conception. Griffin provided us with a unique perspective from both the United States and the People’s Republic of China through a reference to several interviews with players from both countries, representatives from the National Committee on U.S-China Relations (NCUSCR), and from the International Table Tennis Foundation (ITTF.) The book was extremely useful as a source of quotes and information.

Kissinger, Henry. *Years of Renewal*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999.

This autobiography of Henry Kissinger, the National Security Advisor and Secretary of State under President Richard Nixon, allowed us to gain a better understanding regarding Nixon's trip to China. Kissinger was at the forefront of several diplomatic exchanges with the People's Republic of China following 1971, traveling to China prior to Nixon's visit. Throughout his memoirs he writes about his personal views about the newly emerging U.S.-China relations leading up to their visit in 1972, as well as discussing his personal experiences during the trips.

### **Conferences**

TheNCUSCR. "Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of Ping Pong Diplomacy | Jan Berris, Judy Hoarfrost, Doug Spelman." *YouTube*, YouTube, 6 May 2021, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjAV0D5FwW8&t=5s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjAV0D5FwW8&t=5s).

In celebration of the 50th Anniversary of Ping-Pong Diplomacy, the National Committee on U.S.-China relations held a conference revisiting the topic. Key speakers included Jan Beriss, vice President of the organization who accompanied the Chinese ping-pong delegation on its travels; and Judy Hoarfrost, a member of the U.S. table tennis team who visited China in 1971. As they discussed ping-pong diplomacy we gained a better understanding of the importance and impact of the events as they still remain relevant in today's U.S-China relations.

"50 Years Since Ping-Pong Diplomacy." YouTube, uploaded by Diplomacy Center Foundation, 27 May 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVaq2UyETbg>

In this interview, with panelist Robert Daly, Chas W. Freeman Jr., and J. Stapleton Roy, they discussed how Chinese-US relations changed during and after ping-pong diplomacy and its effect on the rest of the world. The information provided allowed us to expand on our knowledge and improve our understanding of the international outcome beyond two nations.

## **Documents**

“Special Message to the Congress Proposing Trade Reform Legislation.” Special Message to the Congress Proposing Trade Reform Legislation | The American Presidency Project, 10 Apr. 1973, [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/special-message-the-congress-proposing-trade-reform-legislation](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/special-message-the-congress-proposing-trade-reform-legislation).

As a response to the newly emerged lines of communication that manifested as a result of ping-pong diplomacy, the United States wanted to make reforms that would continue to promote the progress that was being made. Nixon presented his case to congress about trade reforms which would open the trade market to China and continue to promote a friendship. The information from this source provided a greater understanding surrounding Nixon's role and his diplomatic pursuits.

## **Documentaries**

“The Visionaries: Ping Pong Diplomacy.” *The Visionaries: Ping Pong Diplomacy* | National Committee on United States - China Relations, [www.ncuscr.org/content/visionaries-ping-pong-diplomacy](http://www.ncuscr.org/content/visionaries-ping-pong-diplomacy).

The documentary insightfully provided us with an overview surrounding Ping-Pong Diplomacy and allowed us to view the event through several perspectives as it included interviews from government officials, board members, and participants from the Chinese and U.S. teams. The documentary included greater details on the impact and major events that happened during the 1971 milestone.

## **Interviews**

Berris, Jan. Personal Interview. 15 January 2022.

Jan Berris joined the American and Chinese table tennis teams as they toured the U.S. in 1972, and is the Vice President of the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations (NCUSCR), the principal organization conducting public policy exchanges between

China and the United States. In our interview Mrs. Berris provided us with personal recollections and memories from her experience working at NCUSCR and her several trips to China under the organization that allowed us to gain a more comprehensive understanding of ping-pong diplomacy. This unique perspective also allowed us to better understand the perspective of both the American and Chinese players she traveled with and befriended.

CCTVAmerica1. “Dr. Henry Kissinger Talks about Ping Pong Politics.” *YouTube*, YouTube, 23 Nov. 2021, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=6PZ5F6OW9e8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6PZ5F6OW9e8)

Dr. Henry Kissinger, the Security Advisor and Secretary of State under President Nixon, traveled and experienced China with Nixon during their visits in the 70’s. In this short interview conducted by CGTN in Washington, D.C, Dr. Kissinger explained his view on current and past Chinese U.S. relations in response to the ping-pong diplomacy’s 50th anniversary.

“INTERVIEW: NCUSCR Vice President Jan Berris on Ping Pong Diplomacy.” *INTERVIEW: NCUSCR Vice President Jan Berris on Ping Pong Diplomacy | National Committee on United States - China Relations*, [www.ncuscr.org/content/interview-jan-berris-ping-pong-diplomacy](http://www.ncuscr.org/content/interview-jan-berris-ping-pong-diplomacy).

Jan Berris, shares experience from her travels with the American and Chinese teams across the United States in this interview, mentioning several times the significance behind “friendship first, competition second,” a phrase often intertraded between both nations whilst competing in friendly exhibition matches. It is because of this that we chose to highlight the phrase in the center panel of our board, providing an emphasis on how the phrase drove ping-pong diplomacy forward. Ultimately her interview helped us understand the importance of establishing friendship between the people of the United States and China and allowed us insight into the debate portion of our topic as many were upset that Nixon was encouraging relations with China.

“Table Tennis champ Connie Sweeris discusses her experience playing in China.” Youtube, uploaded by China Global Television Network, 22 November 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Upun2clMQ3g>

In this interview with Connie Sweeris, she talked about her experience playing in the People’s Republic of China during the historical 1971 World Table Tennis Championship and traveling with her team to China shortly after. She focused lightly on the political exchanges, but heavily on the cultural and social exchanges that occurred during her tenure in China. This helped us understand that the trip was something beyond a diplomatic endeavor, but a chance for two groups to unite and come together as people.

Yafeng, Xia. Personal interview. 5 January 2022

A personal interview was conducted with Dr. Xia Yafeng, an expert on Cold War relations between China and the United States and author of several books relating to U.S-China relations and chairman Mao Zedong. This perspective enabled us to expand on our knowledge of the previous U.S.-China relations and understanding why other forms of diplomacy prior to ping-pong were unsuccessful. Overall, the insight provided by this personal interview aided us in understanding the depth and true significance behind the United States table tennis team’s trip to China and aided us in the development of our project and while creating our own analysis.

## **Magazines**

“China: A Whole New Game.” Time Magazine. 26 April 1971.

This magazine, issued shortly after the team's trip, focused on the United States ping-pong team’s revolutionary trip to China in April of 1971. We utilized the contents of these sources to establish a foundation for the more critical research we conducted regarding both the American and Chinese public’s reaction to the event, as it contains a unique perspective of the American people during this time period. The magazine also

provided several impactful photographs that depict the true nature of the emerging U.S-China relationship that are displayed on our exhibit.

“Nixon’s China Odyssey.” Time Magazine. 6 March 1972.

An article in this source analyzed president Nixon’s trip to China where the two nations candidly discussed their views on an assortment of issues. The magazine provided us with insight into the public eye of America throughout this moment in history through verbal accounts and photographs of the two leaders that are displayed on our exhibit.

Snow, Edgar. “A Conversation with Mao Tse-Tung.” Life Magazine. 30 April 1971.

In an interview with Mao Tse-Tung, the chairman in China at the time, he discusses China's relationship with the United States and how it has evolved. This information provided us with insight on Chinese culture and the impact and control the government has on its people.

## **Newspapers**

“Ping-Pong Diplomacy.” The New York Times, The New York Times, 10 Apr. 1971, [www.nytimes.com/1971/04/10/archives/pingpong-diplomacy.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1971/04/10/archives/pingpong-diplomacy.html).

This article published on April 10, 1971, the day that marked the United States Table Tennis Team’s entry into China, explains the groundbreaking use of ping-pong as a form of diplomacy. This analysis allowed us further insight into the debate side of our analysis, as many disagreed with introducing a friendly relationship with a communistic controlled country. The information in this article also helped us develop an argument with both positive and negative perspectives while better understanding the country's immediate thoughts on the matter.

“The World: The Ping Heard Round the World.” Time, Time Inc., 26 Apr. 1971,  
[content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,902878,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,902878,00.html).

This source explained ping-pong diplomacy’s effect on the foreign policy between China and the U.S. while providing insightful information on the progress that was made with China politically, socially, and culturally, which allowed us to further explore the diplomatic impact. Some quotes and photographs within the article were used throughout our exhibit, and the information provided within was extremely useful in helping us generate our own meaningful analysis and conclusion.

### **Videos**

“Arrival of U.S. Table Tennis Team in Beijing, April 1971.” YouTube, YouTube, 3 Aug. 2021,  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=rt2p0a-ByJI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rt2p0a-ByJI).

This short video depicts the arrival of the U.S. table tennis team in Beijing. The video showcased the manner in which ping-pong diplomacy prompted both countries to interact, as both nations appeared to be enthusiastic and excited. We used videos like this to help us visualize the start of a new relationship between the U.S. and China.

“U.S. Table Tennis at the Great Wall of China, April 1971.” YouTube, YouTube, 3 Aug. 2021,  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_jfAIweh9gQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_jfAIweh9gQ).

This short video depicts the U.S table tennis team’s visit to the Great Wall of China, providing a visual for the significant culture exchanges that occurred throughout the trip, as both teams interacted beyond ping-pong exhibitions. We chose to include a photograph of this moment on our board to highlight this.

## **Secondary Sources:**

### **Books**

Dallek, Robert. *"Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power."* HarperCollins. 24 April 2007

This book written by Robert Dallek on Nixon and Kissinger focused primarily on their time together working in office, however there were several chapters that pertained specifically to ping-pong diplomacy as the matter occurred during a great length of his presidency. This book benefited our exhibition by shedding light on the depths in which the two went to ensure that ping-pong diplomacy was successful and both countries benefited.

### **Magazine Articles**

Magazine, Smithsonian. "Ping-Pong Diplomacy." *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, 1 Apr. 2002, [www.smithsonianmag.com/history/ping-pong-diplomacy-60307544/](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/ping-pong-diplomacy-60307544/).

This magazine article explains the complexity behind ping-pong diplomacy. While often portrayed differently by the media, ping-pong diplomacy served as a cover for the actual events that took place to develop relationships between China and the U.S. between Mao and Nixon. The information in this article allowed us to gain a better overview for the subject and develop a reasoning for these new lines of communication.

### **News Articles**

Maslin, Janet. "Table for Two (Countries)." *The New York Times*, *The New York Times*, 2 Jan. 2014, [www.nytimes.com/2014/01/03/books/ping-pong-diplomacy-by-nicholas-griffin.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/03/books/ping-pong-diplomacy-by-nicholas-griffin.html).

We utilized this source to conduct preliminary research on ping-pong diplomacy when we first began the research process. This article by the New York Times focuses on ping-pong diplomacy's groundbreaking nature, as it was published across news outlets nationwide. We found it helpful to develop a concrete understanding for the event before studying the project itself.

“Once a Tool for Diplomacy, Table Tennis Now Viewed by China as So Much More.”

NBCNews.com, NBCUniversal News Group, 6 Aug. 2021,

[www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/tool-diplomacy-table-tennis-now-viewed-china-much-rcna1601](http://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/tool-diplomacy-table-tennis-now-viewed-china-much-rcna1601).

This source provided a brief overview of ping-pong diplomacy. We obtained a quote from this source describing the symbolism and political meaning behind ping-pong in China, as it was viewed as political as opposed to a source of entertainment like in most Western countries. We felt that it was important to include this context in our exhibit.

Ruane, Michael E. “Fifty Years Ago, a Hippie, a Dental Assistant and a 15-Year-Old Helped

Open China with Ping Pong.” The Washington Post, WP Company, 10 Apr. 2021,

[www.washingtonpost.com/history/2021/04/10/ping-pong-diplomacy-50-years-ago/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2021/04/10/ping-pong-diplomacy-50-years-ago/).

The Washington Post’s article on ping-pong diplomacy proved especially useful when we first began researching our topic. It provided us with basic knowledge regarding the U.S team’s invite to China and the consequences that followed. We utilized the foundation established after reading this article to conduct more thorough research with primary sources.

## **Videos**

“Assignment: China - ‘The Week That Changed The World.’” YouTube, uploaded by USC

U.S.-China Institution, 25 Jan. 2012, <https://youtu.be/uyCZDvec5sY>.

This informational video, produced by the USC U.S.-China Institution, included footage of Nixon’s speech deeming the United States table tennis team’s trip to China, a week that changed the world by influencing U.S.-China relations. We incorporated these clips and excerpts provided into the media portion of our exhibit and utilized the video’s contents to develop and assess the true impact of the trip.

## Websites

Andrews, Evan. "How Ping-Pong Diplomacy Thawed the Cold War." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 8 Apr. 2016, [www.history.com/news/ping-pong-diplomacy](http://www.history.com/news/ping-pong-diplomacy).

This article discusses the effects of ping-pong diplomacy, and how it changed the course of the Cold War. Both nations had significant reasons to rekindle relations, however, ping-pong was not the original form of diplomacy they had in mind. The information in this website allowed us to gain an overview of our topic.

Dahlberg, Tim. "Column: Ping Pong Diplomacy Resonates a Half Century Later." *AP NEWS*, Associated Press, 5 Apr. 2021, [apnews.com/article/sports-diplomacy-tim-dahlberg-column-table-tennis-china-e6bb60c46febddc81678b4f3908441ca](https://apnews.com/article/sports-diplomacy-tim-dahlberg-column-table-tennis-china-e6bb60c46febddc81678b4f3908441ca).

This article highlights the invitation the United States table tennis received from Mao Zedong to travel China. The article provided reference to several interviews conducted with members of the team such as Judy Hourfraust, addressed the tough decisions that had to be made, and touched on what made this event so historically monumental. This source helped us understand why the invitation, sent after an interaction between two ping-pong players, was pivotal in developing relations between the two countries as prior attempts had not resulted in friendship.

"From Ping Pong Diplomacy to the Beijing Games." *Team USA*, [www.teamusa.org/News/2008/June/12/From-Ping-Pong-Diplomacy-to-the-Beijing-Games](http://www.teamusa.org/News/2008/June/12/From-Ping-Pong-Diplomacy-to-the-Beijing-Games).

Team USA published this article, providing information on the 1971 encounter from the American perspective. Using this source we were able to learn how the encounter manifested to Americans and was portrayed in the United States.

“Nixon's Trip to China.” Nixon's Trip to China | Richard Nixon Museum and Library,  
[www.nixonlibrary.gov/nixons-trip-china](http://www.nixonlibrary.gov/nixons-trip-china).

The Nixon Library provided context on Nixon’s historic trip to China, explaining both the successes and failures. The information provided allowed us to better understand why Nixon went and what resulted from his visit. We also obtained a quote from this source that was used to explain President Nixon’s goals to establish a peaceful framework with China.

“Ping-Pong Diplomacy.” *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service,  
[www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/china-ping-pong/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/china-ping-pong/).

This article provided us with information on the immediate effects of the invite extended out to the American ping-pong team and officials to visit China. This crucial event would lead to a landslide of diplomatic endeavors, ultimately resulting in the easing of tariffs and trade embargos. It enabled us to build our knowledge on details regarding the consequences of ping-pong diplomacy.

“President Nixon Arrives in China for Talks.” *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 13 Nov. 2009, [www.history.com/this-day-in-history/nixon-arrives-in-china-for-talks](http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/nixon-arrives-in-china-for-talks).

Throughout Nixon’s presidency he sought to better the relationship between the United States and China. As the country went on to continue a seemingly endless war with Vietnam, Nixon viewed China as an asset, wanting them to help digress the war. This sourced was useful in helping us understand the driving factors behind Nixon efforts to involve the country with a communist country, as he had led a very anti-communist campaign.

“Richard Nixon, Remarks upon Returning from China, Feb. 28, 1972.” *US*, 28 Feb. 1972, [china.usc.edu/richard-nixon-remarks-upon-returning-china-feb-28-1972](http://china.usc.edu/richard-nixon-remarks-upon-returning-china-feb-28-1972).

In President Nixon’s speech, he shared the goals of his trip to China with the people of the United States of America. This speech provided us with information which helped us understand Nixon's stance on the visit and how he intended to resolve the conflict and utilize China as an ally.

Ruwitch, John. “50 Years Later, The Legacy Of U.S.-China 'Ping Pong Diplomacy' Faces Challenges.” *NPR*, NPR, 10 Apr. 2021, [www.npr.org/2021/04/10/985803697/50-years-later-the-legacy-of-u-s-china-pingpong-diplomacy-faces-challenges](http://www.npr.org/2021/04/10/985803697/50-years-later-the-legacy-of-u-s-china-pingpong-diplomacy-faces-challenges).

This article by the National Public Radio, written in celebration of ping-pong diplomacy's 50th anniversary, helped us manifest a much larger picture of the topic and its long lasting impact. The website contained multiple photographs of the teams and Nixon that we referenced whilst creating our project.

Sixth Tone. “How Ping-Pong Turned the Tables of the Cold War.” *Sixth Tone*, 10 June 2021, [www.sixthtone.com/news/1007688/how-ping-pong-turned-the-tables-of-the-cold](http://www.sixthtone.com/news/1007688/how-ping-pong-turned-the-tables-of-the-cold)

This article elaborated on how a simple act of kindness by Zhuang Zedong led to the development of a friendship between two superpower nations and a shift in the Cold War. China was an ally with the USSR, however their relationship was decaying, and a shift in allies was an option China was debating to pursue. This article allowed us to understand the decisions that were made, which led to a relationship between China and the United State and how ping-pong diplomacy served as a catalyst for both countries to pursue their geopolitical goals.

“The Nixon Visit.” *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service,  
[www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/china-visit/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/china-visit/).

This website provided us with basic information regarding Nixon’s trip to China along with the crucial decisions that had to be made prior in order to ensure everything would pan out smoothly. Nixon's trip was key to ensuring relations with the People’s Republic of China would be successful. The article allowed us to better understand the outcome of the trip, which resulted in the issuance of the Shanghai Communiqué.

“The Opening of China.” [www.nixonfoundation.org/exhibit/the-opening-of-china/](http://www.nixonfoundation.org/exhibit/the-opening-of-china/).

China’s invitation to the U.S. team was a geopolitical game change, as no American delegate had visited China in decades. This article by the Nixon Foundation expands on Nixon’s trip to China, a cataclysmic event. Several quotes within this article were referenced when designing our exhibit and writing our analysis.

“The Power of Ping Pong Diplomacy.” *ETTU.org*,  
[www.ettu.org/en/n/news/2021/april/the-power-of-ping-pong-diplomacy/](http://www.ettu.org/en/n/news/2021/april/the-power-of-ping-pong-diplomacy/).

Utilizing this article we were able to gain a better understanding of the topics worldwide impact, as it was published from a country that was not in direct involvement. Ping-pong diplomacy was not only able to ignite friendly relationships between the U.S and China,, but kindle friendships with other nations as well. The article elaborates on how ping-pong was able to create a legacy that continues on today through a mix of culture, trade, contact exchange, and educational change.

Tiezzi, Shannon. “When the U.S. and China Were Allies.” – *The Diplomat*, For The Diplomat, 21 Aug. 2015, [thediplomat.com/2015/08/when-the-us-and-china-were-allies/](https://thediplomat.com/2015/08/when-the-us-and-china-were-allies/).

This article had an overview of ping-pong diplomacy and provided us with background information on the topic. During WWII the U.S. and China were allies as they shared a

common enemy— Japan. This article allowed us to understand the relationship between both nations during the years leading up to the 1971 Table Tennis Championship.

“Timeline: U.S. Relations With China 1949–2021.” *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations, [www.cfr.org/timeline/us-relations-china](http://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-relations-china).

We used this source to expand our understanding on United States and Chinese relations before ping-pong diplomacy. Since 1949, U.S-China relations have evolved immensely. The timeline of major events and conflicts between the two superpowers included in the article provided a visual and textual recollection from 1949 to 2021 that gave us an insight both past and present.

Times, Global. “What We Can Learn from Ping-Pong Diplomacy.” *Global Times*, [www.globaltimes.cn/page/202104/1220453.shtml](http://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202104/1220453.shtml).

This report by the Global Times, written in response to ping-pong diplomacy’s 50th anniversary touches on what we can learn from the subject as it relates to present day diplomacy. The information in this article helped us gain an understanding for the application of past diplomatic methods in present day diplomacy as China and the United States are beginning to face turmoil.

U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of State, [history.state.gov/milestones/1937-1945/pearl-harbor](http://history.state.gov/milestones/1937-1945/pearl-harbor).

This article elaborates on United States and Chinese relationships from 1935 to 1949, the start of China’s communist revolution. This source helped us gain a better understanding of U.S-China relations prior to 1971, as they had turned from allies when they were both at war with Japan to enemies when several events caused tensions between the countries to rise.

# Full Exhibit

Media Link: *The Game That Changed the World*  
*Media Link*



# Left Top Panel Photo

## Thesis:

Since China's communist revolution in 1949, relations between the People's Republic of China and The United States of America were characterized by trade embargos, propaganda, and decades of antagonism. During the 1971 World Table Tennis Championship, a rare encounter between a Chinese and American player led to an invitation to the American Table Tennis Team to tour China. The following year, the invitation was reciprocated and both teams toured the U.S. The visits served as a catalyst for a crucial series of diplomatic events that successfully incited a realignment between the two superpowers and sparked debates with many nations as the world spectated.

## Setting the Table:

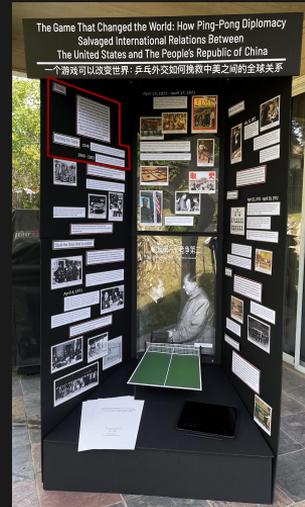
1949

*"The establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) made Western activities in China impossible. The US suspended diplomatic ties with the PRC, and Mao forced Western organizations to leave the country." (Rockefeller Archive Center)*

1950 - 1953

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While the United States continued to die the death sentence...



## Thesis:

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Source Credit Text:

"Chinese communist revolution, 1949." (New York Times)

"In this 1961 photo from China's Xinhua News Agency, Zhuang Zedong, right, competes in the men's team finals of the 26th World Table Tennis Championship in Beijing." (Washington Post)

"Lin Hui-Ching represents China at the 31st World Table Tennis Championships in Nagoya, Japan, 7 April 1971" (Richard Nixon Foundation)



While the United States continued to dig themselves deeper in the long-exhausted war with Vietnam, garnering scrutiny nationwide, there was a mounting hunger in Washington for a radical shift in foreign policy with China.

"After the formation of the People's Republic, they realized that most nations displayed their strengths to other nations through sport. Table tennis turned out to be the answer for reasons beyond the personal tastes of party leaders: it was cheap, requiring little equipment beyond paddles, balls, a flat surface and little space." (NBC)

"Table tennis in China wasn't considered a sport at all. In the West, sports were mere entertainment. In China, all forms of culture have become political. Sports were a form of war waged for world revolution." (Nicholas Griffin)



As the Chinese ping-pong team assembled at the 1971 World Table Tennis Championships, it was clear that China sought to use the event as a tool to reenter the international family.

Could the Great Wall Crumble?:

By 1971, no official American delegation had entered China in decades and diplomatic silence was strong. There weren't expectations for a development in U.S.-China relations from either country during the World Table Tennis Championship in Nagoya, Japan. However sometimes, chance has a sharper eye for diplomacy than politicians.



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"American player Glenn Cowan (right) shakes hands with Chinese player Zhuang Zedong(center) after getting off a bus for Chinese players during the 31st World Table Tennis Championships on April 4, 1971 in Nagoya, Japan." (Global Times)

"Chinese three-time world champion Ping Pong player Zhuang Zedong (left) presented a Yellow Mountain silk weaving art piece to American athlete Glenn Cowan (right) on April 4, 1971" (National Museum of American Diplomacy)

"The American Table Tennis Team entering China, 1971." (New York Times)

"U.S. Table Tennis player Connie Sweeris quickly took this photo of the guarded Hong Kong-China border that the team crossed on foot in April 1971." (National Museum of American Diplomacy)

"Connie Sweeris' modified passport warning travelers of legal penalties for traveling to Communist-controlled places, State Department consular officials crossed out "China " for this trip." (National Museum of American Diplomacy)

"The U.S. Table Tennis team, Chinese players, and Chinese officials pose for a group photo on the tarmac in Beijing, April 1971." (National Museum of American Diplomacy)



Arnold Klein (left), Zhuang Zedong (center) and Glenn Cowan (right) shake hands after the 31st World Table Tennis Championships in Nagoya, Japan, on April 4, 1971. (AP Photo)

"The U.S. team was at the 1971 World Table Tennis Championship in Nagoya, Japan, when an encounter between Glenn Cowan of the U.S. team and Zhuang Zedong of the Chinese team became an international sensation. Cowan had missed his bus following practice and boarded the Chinese team's bus. Zhuang approached the American, shaking his hand and offering him a depiction of the Huangshan Mountains on a piece of silk cloth." (National Museum of American Diplomacy)

April 4, 1971

"Despite always maintaining that the moment was spontaneous, he once admitted, 'Before I left China, I went to a warehouse to get a large silk Chinese Foreign Ministry "kiss" a warehouse, very carefully graded." "I kiss with gifts for foreign signatures. It was always decided in advance exactly what level of gift a diplomat would receive." (Nicholas Gott)'"



"Graham Steenhoven, the president of the United States Table Tennis Association, told the Chinese team's president how much he and the American players admired the skill of the Chinese team. This evolved and resulted in Chairman Mao Zedong's decision to invite the American team to visit China at the end of the tournament." (Duch Eckstein)

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"The world waited anxiously as the United States rushed to secure details as there was no precedent set for such a trip. Steenhoven first had to insure that it wouldn't be against State Department policy to travel to China."



"The American Table Tennis team crossing Hong Kong." (The New York Times)



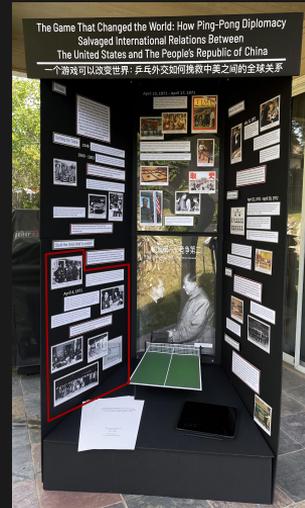
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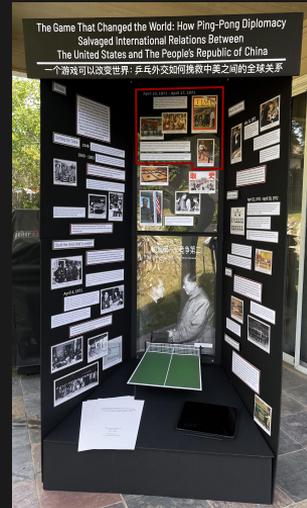
Source Credit Text:

"A Chinese dance troupe performs for U.S. Table Tennis players, April 1971." (National Museum of American Diplomacy)

"The National Committee on US-China Relations' board delegation on the streets of Beijing" (National Committee on U.S.- China Relations)

"American ping pong players pose for a picture during a tour through China." (TIME)

"Glenn Cowan visiting Tsinghua University while in China." (TIME)



***April 10, 1971 - April 17, 1971***

*"[The] American public followed the daily progress of the visit in newspapers and on television, as the Americans played--and lost-- exhibition matches with their hosts, toured the Great Wall and Summer Palace, chatted with Chinese students and factory workers, and attended the Canton Ballet." (PBS)*

*"At first, the Chinese players had no idea of the impact the US team's arrival was having. Xu Shaofa, one of the country's top players, crept into officials' offices once a week to steal the newspapers. It was from him that the team learned of the influence Ping-Pong diplomacy was having on relations with their "American enemy."  
(Nicholas Griffin Interview with Xu Shaofa)*

# Center Center Panel Photo

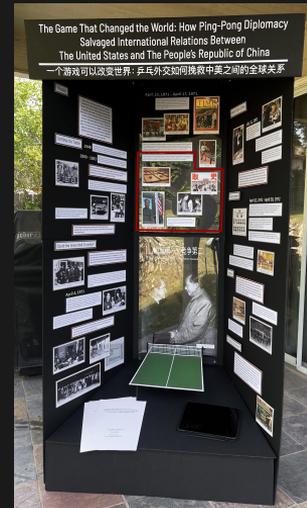
Source Credit Text:

“American Ping Pong team practicing with Chinese players in Peking’s Capital Stadium.” (TIME)

“Chinese pedestrians stare at U.S Players Errol Rsek and Western newsmen (center) in Peking’s Tienanmen Square”. (TIME)

“U.S. Table Tennis player Connie Sweeris shakes hands with Premier Zhou Enlai.” (National Museum of American Diplomacy)

“Before a portrait of Mao, Old Glory unfurls in China for the first time in over two decades. 1972.” (TIME)



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*“Their trip was the start of what became known as “ping pong diplomacy” and helped lay the groundwork for establishing official diplomatic relations between the United States and the People’s Republic of China.” (National Museum of American Diplomacy)*

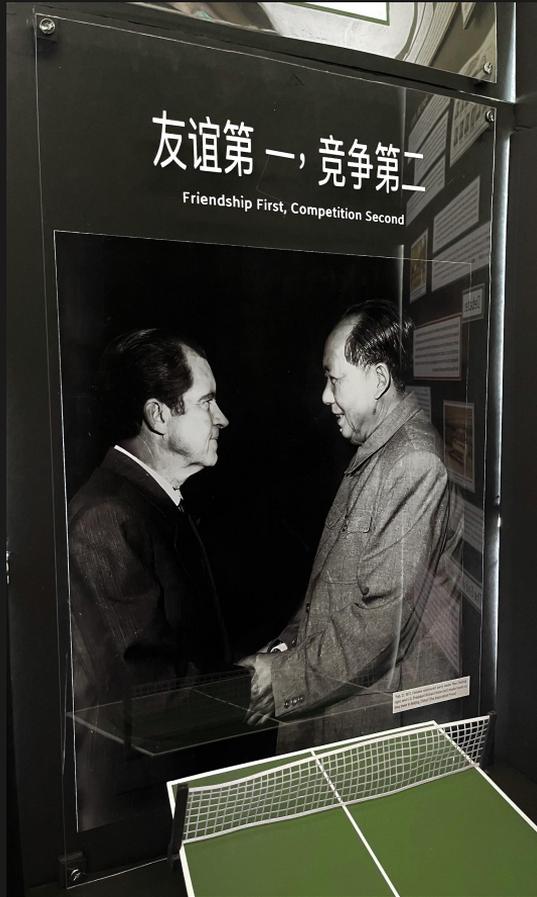
*“On April 14, the same day that the American players met with Zhou Enlai, President Nixon had announced that the United States was easing its travel bans and trade embargos against China.” (HISTORY)*

# Center Bottom Panel Photo

Source Credit Text:

"Feb. 21, 1972. Chinese communist party leader Mao Zedong (right) and U.S. President Richard Nixon (left) shake hands as they meet in Beijing, China." (The Associated Press)

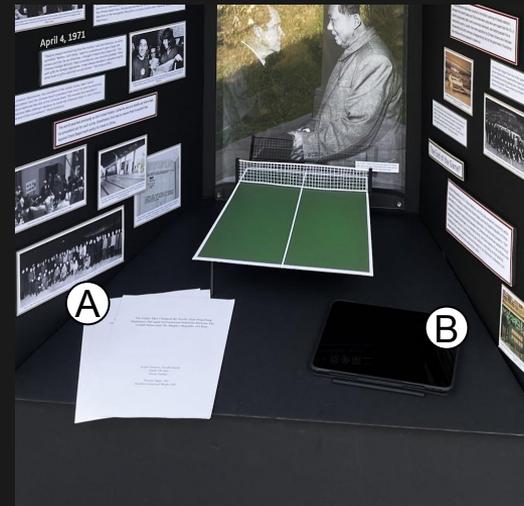
"The Ping Heard Round the World." (TIME)



**A**

“Even two weeks ago, the prospect would have seemed incredible. 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 the U.S. visitors.”

**B** Media Link: [The Game That Changed the World Media Link](#)



友谊第一，竞争第二

*friendship first, competition second*

# Right Top Panel Photo

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"The President, Premier Chou Enlai and Mrs. Nixon dine in the Great Hall of the People. Then Nixon and Chou exchange toasts, drinking mao-tai, a clear Chinese liqueur." (TIME)

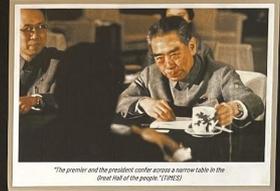
"The premier and the president confer across a narrow table in the Great Hall of the people." (TIME)

## Nixon's Trip to China:

July 15, 1971



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*"President Nixon — broadcasting live from studios in Los Angeles — sent a tremor through the Cold War world, announcing that he'd be visiting the People's Republic of China early the following year."  
(Richard Nixon Foundation)*

*"Currently, pursuing normalization of Sino-American relationships and easing the tense situation have become the Chinese and American people's strong desire. People, only the people, are the driving force creating world history. We believe, this common desire from two nation's people will be achieved one day."-Zhou Enlai*

*"In the years ahead, we will build a bridge across 16,000 miles and twenty-two years of hostility which have divided us in the past. We have been here for a week. This was the week that changed the world."  
Richard Nixon*

Both countries used this face-to-face opportunity to candidly discuss their views on an assortment of issues that had remained unresolved for decades. However the visit didn't strictly result in diplomatic successes. Despite Nixon's strong efforts, the United States failed to persuade China to help negotiate a peace settlement with Vietnam and both nations were unable to form a consensus on the political status of Taiwan.



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"The Chinese Table Tennis Delegation to the United States, 1972" (Rockefeller Archive Center)

"Member of the Chinese ping-pong team coaches a Maryland high-school student." (National Committee on U.S.- China Relations)

## Return Game:



## April 12, 1972 - April 30, 1972

"The National Committee made history by co-hosting the Chinese Table Tennis Team in round two of what became widely known as Ping Pong Diplomacy. The Chinese team arrived in Detroit by chartered plane and left from San Francisco, with Ann Arbor, Williamsburg, Washington, New York, Memphis, Los Angeles, and the Bay Area in between." (National Committee on U.S.- China Relations)

"The Chinese delegation, led by Zhuang Zedong, China's most famous table tennis player of the day, consisted of 13 players, 8 newsmen and photographers, interpreters, and 7 senior officials—testimony to the importance the Chinese attached to the visit." (National Committee on U.S.- China Relations)

"This was certainly matched by the U.S. side, as evidenced, among other things, by a planeload of journalists who covered the event, sell-out crowds at six large arenas, and a reception on the White House lawn by President Nixon." (National Committee on U.S.- China Relations)

"The team was en route from Virginia to Washington to meet President Richard M. Nixon, who had ordered a heavy air assault on the port of Haiphong in North Vietnam, China's ally. One purpose of Ping-Pong diplomacy, as it came to be known, was its way of spreading good will and distracting both nations from such things." (New York Times)

"If I had to come up with one phrase that would describe that period, it would be 友谊第一，比赛第二 (friendship first, competition second). Gradually even our security detail, who spoke no Chinese whatsoever, or the American ping pong players, everybody learned that phrase: 友谊第一，比赛第二." (National Committee on U.S.- China Relations)



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Right Center Panel  
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Source Credit Text:

"President Nixon attending a table tennis exhibition in Beijing, 23 February 1972." (Richard Nixon Foundation)

"U.S. and Chinese exhibition teams pose for a photo at the exhibition, April 1971." (National Museum of American Diplomacy)

"Applauding Chinese stand behind sign proclaiming: 'Welcome warmly the U.S. Ping Pong Delegation.'" (TIME)

**Debate:**

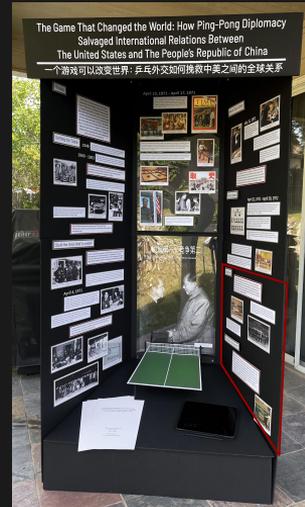
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*"In Australia, the Soviet ambassador warned that the US did not understand what kind of people it was dealing with in China." The Soviet ambassador to Uganda, Kurdyukov, advised that the Americans "must be very, very careful with the PRC." (Nicholas Gribbi)*

**The End of the Game?**

Despite fluctuations in U.S.-China relations, one thing has remained consistent: while Washington and Beijing connect the United States and the People's Republic of China politically, it is because of these uncommon diplomats—the ping-pong players—that social and cultural exchanges, in a changing world, the clairvoyance of an ordinary man remains a powerful tool in connecting our two nations, reminding us that placating friendship first, and competition second throughout our diplomatic endeavors can shape significant political and social affairs alike.



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