



BOOK REVIEW

Improbable Diplomats: How Ping-Pong Players, Musicians and Scientists Remade US-China Relations

By Pete Millwood. 336 pp. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023.

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Zhuang Zedong, Frank Press, Jet Li, and Eugene Ormandy may not conjure up the same image in Cold War memory as Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, Mao Zedong, or Zhou Enlai. Indeed, it seems quite improbable that such figures—ping-pong players, musicians, and scientists—exerted any influence or agency on the reshaping of diplomatic relations between the two nations. Yet this is precisely the argument of Millwood's *Improbable Diplomats*, which suggests that these individuals were *key* in shaping one of the most important reproachments in modern history: that of the United States and China in 1972. Pete Millwood is clear from the start in his research goal: to unearth the 'neglected' storyline of reproachment, and thus to expose how bottom-up agencies (what he calls 'the people') held significant agency in the making of US–China relations from the early 1970s to official political recognition in 1979.

Improbable Diplomats, based on the research of the author's 2017 PhD dissertation, proposes a novel perspective from which to view US–China relations—one that challenges the privilege given to administrations, diplomats, and politicians as the dominant actors in international relations. Millwood's book offers a comprehensive overview of the role of non-state actors during the reproachment epoch of the 1970s; not only how they worked with each of the states, but also how they collaborated with private organisations, non-governmental organisations, and individuals. We are given access to what he calls the 'epistemic communities' of the time—scientists, musicians, athletes, scholars, and journalists—and their role in the Sino–US chapter of the Cold War.

Millwood's book is structured around critical moments at which exchanges marked either the advancement or regression of diplomatic relations. An immediate puzzle is presented in the introduction—how Mao Zedong, who was committed to a 'furious resistance to American imperialism', came to welcome the Nixon–Kissinger envoy to visit China just two years later. The problem is contextualised in the Prologue through a thoroughly researched outline of the pressing background history of people-to-people relations before the Cultural Revolution and even the Mao era. Subsequent chapters follow the considerations that were necessary for individuals and policymakers on both sides as they worked through a volatile and fluctuating relationship. He shows, for example, the need to keep China's ping-pong delegates safe from the anti-Communist, Christian fundamentalist Carl McIntire, who had threatened to protest at the team's every stop during their first official visit to the United States in 1972. In another case, Millwood discusses how a People's Republic of China (PRC) song that vowed to 'liberate Taiwan' sent the

US State Department into crisis and led them to revoke their invitation to the already planned tour of the National-Committee in 1975.

Nowhere is the volatile nature of the Sino-US relations better exemplified than in chapter three, 'New Liaisons', which documents the 'spectacular successes' of the Shenyang acrobatic tour of the United States and Philadelphia Orchestra's visit to China alongside the 'horror-show' of Senator Warren Magnuson's 1973 visit to China amidst the strained relationship between Zhou and Kissinger over US bombing in Cambodia. Indeed, the book not only provides a tale of the people who were working to *improve* relations between the two countries, but also spotlights incidents of tension, mishap, and error. Millwood notes that, when Magnuson asked Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Wenjin how, if not by boat, Chiang Kai-shek had managed to flee to Taiwan during the Chinese Civil War, he was embarrassingly reminded 'by American airplanes'. Also, his wife said to the grandniece of Mao, Vice Foreign Minister Wang Hairong, that 'the best ambassadors the US could send to China would be washing machines and electric irons to ease the burden of your people'. Such exchanges left Beijing policymakers scratching their heads and wondering how an individual such as the senator had risen to such a senior rank in Congress. At a deeper level, it reveals a profound ignorance among many higher-level officials in the United States regarding how to engage effectively with their Beijing counterparts, showing a serious lack of understanding of face and other cultural nuances.

The book also provides fascinating insights into the careers of some of the major names in the field of Chinese studies, such as Susan Shirk, David Lampton, and Paul Pickowicz. Their delight in aspects of everyday life in China coupled with concerns around government censorship and control echo sentiments of the foreign-student community in China to this day. Overall, the storylines of individuals during the era of reproachment serve as highly effective methods to showcase broader social and political transformations, highlighting how personal experiences and relationships intersected with larger historical shifts. Millwood suggests that even the leaders at the time themselves, particularly on the US side, were cognisant of the fact that the reproachment had to be widely entrenched in the American populace in order for the partnership to survive in the long term. Millwood provides a source from Marshall Green, the State Department's most senior Asia expert of the time, that pleads Kissinger to strengthen 'the relationship through a broad range of formal and informal agreements and contacts', noting that such encounters will 'greater the chances that it will survive intact through the succession period'.

Perhaps most illuminating are Millwood's accounts of Chinese envoys' nascent visits to America in the 1970s. Chapter two, 'Ping-Pong Diplomacy's Return Leg and After', details the April 1972 Chinese table tennis delegation's visit to the United States, led by the famous ping-pong player Zhuang Zedong, who was well known for his unexpected but dramatic encounter with the American player Glenn Cowan during the 1971 World Table Tennis Championships. Similarly, Millwood's documentation of the Shenyang Acrobatic Troupe's US tour in 1973 offers a novel insight into the first performing arts exchange between the United States and the PRC, which, as Millwood details in chapter four, 'Familiarity Breeds Content', was met with resounding success and sell-out crowds. These would be followed by the Wushu (Martial Arts) Company tour in June 1974 (introducing a ten-year-old named Li Lianjie, who, decades later, became better known in the West as Jet Li) and the Chinese Performing Arts Delegation in July and August 1978 with the Metropolitan Opera Association.

The early 'stage-setting' part of the book begins with top-down power dynamics, in which figures such as Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Edgar Snow feature prominently, and this would seem to undermine the stated goal of

presenting a new narrative of diplomatic relations. As the chapters evolve, however, the narrative increasingly focuses on lesser-known names and non-governmental figures, establishing its main line of interrogation. The structure of the book, nevertheless, is revealing. Rather than being organised around the athletes, musicians, and scientists at the heart of its argument, it follows the somewhat conventional pattern of US presidential administrations, which would seem to suggest that diplomats in Washington exerted underlying influence over what was happening on the ground. Despite these inconsistencies, *Improbable Diplomats* presents a truly original thesis and novel method for interpreting Cold War events. Moreover, the author's storytelling abilities make it both engaging and persuasive.

Improbable Diplomats will be essential reading for students of history and international relations, and is particularly important reading in the current climate—a point that is noted in Millwood's conclusion, 'Lessons for Now'. Many of the concerns and misunderstandings of the 1970s have seemingly reappeared in contemporary US–China diplomacy, which has been on a downward spiral since 2018. Millwood's examination of cultural and scientific exchanges in the 1970s underscores the potential and importance of such interactions for today's world, offering 'lessons for this critical moment'. By highlighting how informal and personal connections have facilitated significant diplomatic breakthroughs in the past, the book presents a framework through which to address challenges that transcend the 'great power contest' and 'destined for war' paradigms that are current among policy intelligentsia. Put differently, the book's premise demonstrates that relationships between great powers are shaped *not* solely by political and economic leaders, but also by ordinary individuals and their interactions. In this way, Millwood's insights suggest that investment in people-to-people diplomacy could offer a meaningful way to improve and reconfigure international relations—or, at the very least, that they hold significant agency. To conclude, while by no means down-playing the role of political authorities in shaping Sino–US relations, Millwood's book meticulously unearths evidence to show how and where ordinary individuals exerted bold influence and ultimately became 'Improbable Diplomats'.