

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

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Amidst rising tensions between the United States and the People's Republic of China, Pete Millwood's new book is a timely contribution that reminds us about the challenges the two countries faced and the successes they made in managing their engagement in the past. Like many other scholarly works, Millwood's book focuses on the formative years of US–PRC relations in the 1970s. This book distinguishes itself from mainstream diplomatic history, however, by looking beyond “great men” and concentrating on non-state actors and “people-to-people” exchanges outside formal diplomacy. The main source base is the archives of two US non-governmental organizations: the National Committee on United States–China Relations (NCUSCR) and the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China (CSCPRC). The author complements these newly available documents with records drawn from nearly 20 archives from across the United States and China. He argues that cultural and scientific exchange visits between Americans and Chinese before the normalization of US–PRC relations not only reconnected these two peoples but also exerted a powerful influence on the diplomatic relationship between the two governments. This book reveals how formal diplomacy conducted by Mao, Zhou, Nixon and Kissinger, and informal ones by athletes, artists and scholars were deeply connected and mutually constitutive.

The six chapters in the main body of the book are preceded by a chapter-long prologue that examines the patterns of US and PRC Cold War-era exchange diplomacy before the Nixon era. Beijing mostly selected critics of the US government, many of whom were African American political radicals and emerging Left-leaning students, to visit China. In return, these Leftist cultural and political figures, W. E. B. Du Bois and Susan Shirk among them, were expected to write rosy reports about the PRC. Such reports were partly the results of highly choreographed tours that the PRC designed to impress foreigners. Meanwhile, the status of the Republic of China on Taiwan, which the US government recognized as the government of China until 1978, became one of the most contested issues in exchanges, lasting into the rapprochement era under Nixon and beyond normalization. Chapter one, “By popular demand,” examines 1971 and 1972. It traces how both Washington and Beijing approached the other country's citizens to indicate their interest in dialogue, which is best illustrated by the ping-pong breakthrough of April 1971 that pre-empted Kissinger and then Nixon's first visits to China. Chapter two, “Ping-pong diplomacy's return leg and after,” covers spring 1972 to summer 1973. It explores the instrumental role played by the NCUSCR in building up US–PRC exchange contacts by hosting the return leg of ping-pong diplomacy in April 1972 and the Shenyang Acrobatic Troupe's visit to the US in December 1972. During this period, the NCUSCR and the CSCPRC gained dominance in exchange diplomacy, which was backed up by the US government. Chapter three, “New liaisons,” studies the rest of 1973 to the end of Nixon's term in 1974. After the establishment of the de facto embassy of the PRC in Washington in May 1973, US–PRC relations witnessed deepening connections, exemplified by the September

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1973 visit of the Philadelphia Orchestra to the PRC. More contacts also created tensions, demonstrated by the disastrous congressional delegation to the PRC led by Senator Warren Magnuson in July 1973.

Chapter four, "Familiarity breeds contempt," studies the downturn of US-PRC relations in the early months of Gerald Ford's term in 1974 and 1975. Ford's lack of domestic authority resulted in stagnation in high-level negotiations. In this context, conflicts in the exchange programme took on a central importance in the overall relationship between the two countries: new waves of American visitors, fuelled by hyperbole surrounding earlier travel to China, were jarred by the strict choreography and ideological self-promotion that were characteristic of the PRC's hosting of foreign guests. Their Chinese hosts, on the other hand, were frustrated by Americans' sense of superiority, their obsession with China's lingering "backwardness," and their racism. Chapter five, "Asking for more in exchange," shows how Americans outside of the government, the CSCPRC in particular, were willing and able to vocally dissent from the US government's China policy. This chapter, concentrating on 1975 and 1976, particularly contrasts the CSCPRC's stance – that insisted on mutuality and on leveraging the PRC's appetite for US technology to promote US diplomacy – with the US government's short-sighted and unprincipled actions. Chapter six, "Political science," looks at the normalization of US-PRC relations under Jimmy Carter in 1977 and 1978. This chapter highlights how the rotating door between the NCUSCR, CSCPRC and US policymaking enabled the Carter administration to ask a higher price for access to US science and technology from the post-Mao PRC government and achieved a final normalization agreement in 1978 that made possible continued US presence in and protection of Taiwan afterwards. A chapter-long epilogue follows, which discusses the active roles played by the two organizations in the immediate wake of the upgrading of governmental relations between the US and PRC.

There was significant dissymmetry between the two countries' approaches toward the relationship between the government and broader society. While the NCUSCR and CSCPRC generally served the broader goals set by the US government, they consistently asserted their own agency in formulating structures for exchanges, and eventually helped set terms for the normalization agreement that served the PRC's immediate interests and some of the US government's long-term strategic goals. In contrast, the PRC government demonstrated its tremendous control over the exchange programmes and even its citizens' lives. One central issue that troubled US-PRC relations during the rapprochement, and arguably until today, is the lack of reciprocity between the US and the PRC in access to each other's society and resources. One prominent example was that the PRC offered few opportunities to US scientific researchers while it made great demands on American technology. Another was the PRC's "protection" of its politics and society from US social scientists, especially Sinologists. The revival of this practice in recent years has prevented Millwood from thoroughly consulting sources in China for this book. These were but a reflection of Deng's policy of making the foreign serve the PRC without China being corrupted by capitalist ideology. The author far-sightedly notes: "We are back to where we were in the 1970s when it comes to forecasting the PRC's future: the country will likely remain powerfully distinct from the US example" (p. 344). This book is a helpful asset to anyone who teaches, studies or wants to know more about the history of US-China relations, particularly between the two "peoples" whose opinions were shaped by, and who were capable of shaping, governmental relations and global geopolitics.

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