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Title: “Culture and Politics: Personal Connections and Ping Pong Diplomacy”
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Abstract

Relations between the United States and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) changed during the 1970s. Although President Nixon’s visit to the PRC was not until February of 1972, the initial thaw in tensions began in March of 1971 with the thirty-first World Table Tennis Championships in Nagoya, Japan. At this international competition, American athlete Glenn Cowan made history when he hitched a ride on the Chinese team’s bus and ignited communication between the two countries. This personal connection between athletes led to more interactions between individual American and Chinese peoples. Just a few months later in July of 1971, Henry Kissinger and Premier Zhou Enlai would meet and negotiate the 1972 visit between President Nixon and Chairman Mao Zedong. Thus, the rapprochement that occurred between the PRC and U.S. was largely a product of what has been called ping pong diplomacy, but this thaw in relations was not isolated to the realm of politics.

In addition to political impacts, the U.S. also experienced cultural exchanges in the wake of ping pong diplomacy. These exchanges emerged due to the development of personal connections between the U.S. and PRC during the 1970s. The same person-to-person interactions experienced by the table tennis teams also spread to other individuals, such as government officials (i.e. Kissinger and Zhou), businessmen, and academics. Political encounters involved discussions of Vietnam and Taiwan, while cultural exchanges breached multiple topics. Throughout the U.S., Americans became more exposed to Chinese studies, art, and even symbols such as the panda bear. By making personal connections among Chinese and American individuals, ping pong diplomacy allowed diplomatic relations between the U.S. and PRC to emerge and cultural exchanges to flourish. For the first time, Americans could see the PRC as a nation of people rather than just a communist regime and took an interest in the foreign country like never before.

Bibliographical Note

For this paper, I utilized mainly primary sources consisting of newspaper and magazine articles from The Economist, The Boston Globe, and many more. These sources cross economic, social, cultural, and political lines in order to provide various viewpoints on the impacts of ping
pong diplomacy. Among the secondary sources used were works by scholars Victor Cha, Chris Tudda, Yafeng Xia, and Ruth Eckstein.