

Introduction

In May 1970, Chairman Mao Zedong shared with the Chinese people his most recent thoughts on the United States of America. The chairman had come to rule China in 1949 after a bloody civil war that had raged on-and-off for more than twenty years. He had led his Communist forces against not only their domestic opponents – the Kuomintang – but also foreign enemies. After his founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) at the end of the civil war, Mao singled out the United States (US) as the worst of these enemies, decrying the American arch-imperialists for invading Korea in 1950 and frustrating Chinese attempts to liberate the Kuomintang’s redoubt on Taiwan. Time had not tempered his rhetoric: now, Mao claimed that President Richard Nixon had committed fascist atrocities and massacred both whites and blacks at home, while bombing southeast Asia and masterminding coups to topple legitimate leaders abroad. The chairman hailed an emerging global wave of furious resistance to American imperialism. Mao was confident that a mass movement of protest would overthrow Nixon and international resistance would blunt US aggression abroad.¹

Mao’s invitation for Nixon to visit China less than two years later came, then, as a shock to the Chinese populace. The chairman beamed as he shook hands with the man for whom he had predicted a sticky end. Nixon looked equally thrilled at the meeting, in spite of having made his

¹ “Quan shijie renmin tuanjie qilai, dabai Meiguo qinluezhe jiqi yiqie zougou!” [People of the world, unite and defeat the US aggressors and all their running dogs!], *Renmin Ribao* [People’s Daily], May 21, 1970.

political career hounding “reds” and championing the Cold War containment of Communism. The two men met during “the week that changed the world” and began a process of settling the differences that had divided their countries for more than two decades: US involvement in a war against China’s Communist neighbor, Vietnam; the presence of American troops and nuclear weapons on Taiwan; Washington’s insistence that the Kuomintang government on that island spoke for all Chinese. These negotiations took time. Nixon’s chief foreign policy aide, Henry Kissinger, got into the habit of visiting China twice a year and, in 1975, Nixon’s successor Gerald Ford followed in his predecessor’s footsteps and met Mao in Beijing. The process of negotiation was ultimately successful: the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the United States occurred on January 1, 1979. That agreement was marked by another summit visit, this time by a Chinese leader: President Jimmy Carter welcomed Mao’s ultimate successor, Deng Xiaoping, to the United States for the first state visit to that country by a Chinese leader.

This potted history is how the rapprochement between the United States and China has been remembered: as a series of summits.² This book takes a different approach. It looks beyond great men such as Mao and Nixon to focus on a neglected story: how the American and Chinese *people* reconnected. Many of the most significant moments in this story are also visits – but not by government officials. The first of these was by the US amateur table tennis team. Their sensational ping-pong diplomacy of April 1971 preceded – and, this book shows, helped precipitate – Kissinger and Nixon’s visits to China. It also reawakened the American public’s interest in China. A year later, the return leg of this ping-pong diplomacy constituted the first official delegation of PRC citizens to the United States and brought Chinese Communists into American stadiums, colleges, and living rooms – not to mention to Disneyland.³ Deng’s US summit visit of 1979 was preceded, six months earlier, by the most high-powered delegation of scientists to be sent by the United States

² Margaret MacMillan builds her lively book around the Nixon–Mao summit, but she is far from alone in focusing her narrative and analysis on Sino-American summit interactions. Other accounts are discussed later in this introduction. Margaret MacMillan, *Seize the Hour: When Nixon Met Mao* (London: John Murray, 2006).

³ Chinese officials refused to travel to the United States while Chiang Kai-shek’s Republic of China maintained an embassy there. Chinese diplomats had transited through New York to attend the United Nations after the PRC had been seated there on November 15, 1971. In addition, some PRC citizens had fled to the United States after 1949. The ping-pong return leg was the first official delegation of PRC citizens to visit the United States.

to any country. Led by Frank Press, a brilliant scientist who had discovered how to measure earthquakes at sea and on the Moon, that visit paved the way not only for the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and China but also for large-scale American scientific assistance to China's miraculous post-Mao development. In between, many dozens of exchange visits in both directions reacquainted the Chinese and American people after more than two decades of near-hermetic isolation, reviving the deep interaction that had stretched back for more than a century preceding the 1949 Chinese revolution – and that would subsequently come to be a defining feature of our era.

Improbable Diplomats argues that exchange visits between Americans and Chinese did more than just reconnect these two peoples, however. It shows that these interactions also exerted a powerful influence on the diplomatic relationship between the two governments – and, indeed, on the negotiations that took place in summit meetings. The cultural and scientific exchange program of athletes, musicians, physicists, and many others was, this book contends, a critical factor in the successes and failures, the progress and setbacks, that marked the eight years of negotiations during Washington and Beijing's rapprochement, culminating in diplomatic recognition in 1979. Exchange visits were, naturally enough, shaped by developments in high-level diplomacy – but, in turn, exchanges also influenced relations between the two governments. These two tracks of diplomacy were, this book reveals, deeply connected and mutually constitutive.

The role of ping-pong diplomacy in instigating Sino-American rapprochement and Nixon's China summit is well known and has been widely recognized by historians: that episode was perhaps the example par excellence of cultural exchange diplomacy during the Cold War. What has received less attention is the continuing influence of exchange visits and transnational contacts on Sino-American diplomatic talks after Nixon's 1972 visit and through to the final agreement to establish formal relations made in 1978.⁴ Having been both cause and consequence of Nixon's visit, the expanding exchange program of the 1970s was one of the foremost means by which both governments looked to maintain and

⁴ An important recent study of Sino-European contacts in the 1950s and 1960s stated, for example, that “the actual official and substantial development of Sino-American relations only started at the end of the [1970s].” This book explores the substance that was in fact evident before 1979. Angela Romano and Valeria Zanier, “Circumventing the Cold War: The Parallel Diplomacy of Economic and Cultural Exchanges between Western Europe and Socialist China in the 1950s and 1960s: An Introduction”, *Modern Asian Studies* 51, no. 1 (2017): 2–3.

deepen rapprochement during the eight-year road to “normalizing” relations, the term used to refer to the establishment of full diplomatic ties.

Exchanges influenced the Sino-American relationship in two critical ways: by having an immediate, tangible effect at key make-or-break junctures in the relationship, and by gradually and cumulatively contributing to the overall condition of ties. The following chapters will feature a range of critical moments where exchange contacts made the difference between the relationship moving forward or breaking down. In 1971 and 1972, the two legs of ping-pong diplomacy constituted the first reciprocal exchange visits between US and PRC citizens; in 1973, deepening exchanges prompted the creation of de facto embassies in Washington and Beijing; in 1978, Frank Press’s marquee scientific delegation helped convinced Chinese leaders to urgently conclude normalization negotiations in order to upgrade their access to advanced American scientific expertise. In all these instances and more, contact through cultural and scientific interaction acted as an impetus for major change in the diplomatic relationship – change that would not have been realized, certainly when it was, without the input of actors outside of either government.

Perhaps as important, however, was the long-term contribution of exchange contacts in rebuilding a Sino-American relationship that had all but completely dissolved during the twenty years after China’s Communist revolution. As will be shown in this book’s prologue, the number of Americans that had traveled to China since 1949 numbered in the dozens. During that time, almost no PRC citizens had officially set foot in the United States and certainly there had been nothing like the Chinese exchange delegations that began to visit the country in 1972.⁵ High-level diplomatic contact had hardly been deeper: ambassadorial negotiations held in Geneva and then Warsaw had been frosty and led to almost no agreements – in spite of more than one hundred meetings.⁶ In the absence of contact, both ignorance and suspicion had bred. Before Nixon traveled to Beijing, he hastily crammed information about Mao’s China by

⁵ One of the few exceptions was the visit of PRC diplomat Wu Xiuquan to New York in 1950. Wu travelled to the United States as the head of a PRC delegation to the United Nations but used his presence to visit New York and meet with Americans seen by Beijing as friendly to the PRC, including the Black singer Paul Robeson, who was unable to accept Xu’s invitation to travel to the PRC. Wu Xiuquan, *Zai waijiaobu ba nian de jingli, 1950.1–1958.10: Waijiao huiyilu* [Eight Years in the Foreign Ministry: Memoirs of Diplomacy] (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 1983), 59–63.

⁶ Yafeng Xia, *Negotiating with the Enemy: U.S.-China Talks during the Cold War, 1949–1972* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

reading books by some of the few Westerners to have directly experienced the country, calling some of the authors to the White House for personal conversations.⁷ Chinese leaders relied on similar – sometimes even the same – individuals for information on the United States: leftist Americans like Edgar Snow that visited or sojourned in the PRC were considered some of the few reliable conduits of information about the United States by top Chinese leaders like Mao and Premier Zhou Enlai.

As rapprochement began in 1971, Americans outside of government also needed to learn about – and to care about – China if rapprochement was to be successful. The direct experience of participating in rapprochement by interacting with Chinese people through the medium of exchanges was perhaps the most important way in which trust and understanding was rebuilt. This process of restoring empathy was, then, simultaneously undertaken by Americans working in the West Wing and those living unremarkable lives on the West Coast, and a broad and durable bilateral relationship could only be constructed if Americans in and out of office reconnected to China – a fact not lost on Kissinger and his colleagues in Washington. Exchanges did not always produce positive sentiments or genuine understanding, however: although the vast majority of Americans that directly encountered China and its people in the 1970s were glad to have done so, many developed simplistic or stereotyped readings of China that were inaccurate but nonetheless influential. Emotion often trumped information in how Americans perceived China. Nonetheless, the piecemeal and cumulative work of exchange contact made a critical contribution to restoring a relationship between the two societies, just as did periodic moments of breakthrough via exchange diplomacy.

Sino-American exchanges generally had a salutary influence on the diplomatic relationship. After the first ping-pong trip paved the way for Kissinger and Nixon to visit China, further exchange visits amplified American popular enthusiasm for Nixon's new China policy and provided the public with substance to accompany the pomp and secret discussions of the presidential summit and Kissinger's visits. High-level relations between Washington and Beijing deteriorated in the wake of the Watergate scandal that absorbed the White House from 1973 and culminated in Nixon's resignation in 1974. During this fraught period, exchange contacts were

⁷ See, for example, Nixon's meeting with André Malraux. Steven E. Phillips, ed., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. XVII, China, 1969–1972 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 2006), Document 192.

one of the few facets of the US-China relationship that remained active despite deadlocked diplomatic talks – even as the impact of the breakdown and tension in high-level ties was powerfully felt in the exchange program. Finally, the expansion of Sino-American scientific and technological cooperation in the years leading up to 1978 – largely realized through exchange visits and transnational scientific cooperation – played a critical role in convincing Deng Xiaoping to offer Washington the compromise deal that unlocked the final normalization agreement of that year.

Nonetheless, diplomacy via the exchange program was also the venue for political conflict between the American and Chinese people and governments. In one instance in 1975, a major tour by a Chinese performing arts troupe was called off at the last minute after US hosts learned of the visitors' intention to sign a song that called for the "liberation" of Taiwan, adding strain to an already tense Sino-American diplomatic relationship under Ford. At other times, antagonism over the program of exchange visits developed gradually. American visitors chafed at the strict controls they were subject to while in China, particularly as Chinese guests were welcome almost anywhere in the United States – from private homes to the most cutting-edge scientific laboratories. Indeed, resentment at imbalances of access ultimately prompted frustrated US nongovernmental organizations to impose their own limits on Chinese delegations – an action that alarmed governments in both capitals. Exchange contacts could, then, threaten the diplomatic relationship just as easily as they could strengthen it.

This book thus shows that, before normalization, the unofficial diplomats who organized and participated in exchange visits were at the vanguard of negotiating China and America's transition from their mutual isolation in the 1950s and 1960s to the cooperation of the 1970s and the decades that followed. In this way, *Improbable Diplomats* seeks to broaden our understanding of Sino-American history: rather than a relationship determined by a few oversized individuals – Kissinger, Zhou, Nixon, Mao, Carter, and Deng – this book shows that the rapprochement was a far wider interaction between Americans and Chinese both inside and outside of government.

EXCHANGE DIPLOMACY AND ITS PRACTITIONERS

This book employs the term "exchange diplomacy" to encompass three layers of diplomacy that were all critical to the Sino-American exchange program and, this book argues, to the US-China relationship more broadly. First, negotiations between the Chinese and US

governments over the exchange program. The importance of exchange visits to Sino-American ties was enshrined in the Shanghai Communiqué signed during the Nixon–Mao 1972 summit. That document, which became a charter of the relationship before normalization, stated that, “The two sides agreed that it is desirable to broaden the understanding between the two peoples. To this end, they discussed specific areas in such fields as science, technology, culture, sports and journalism, in which people-to-people contacts and exchanges would be mutually beneficial. Each side undertakes to facilitate the further development of such contacts and exchanges.”⁸ While the two governments did indeed discuss “specific areas” for such visits during the 1972 summit, thereafter government-to-government exchange diplomacy was typically concerned with the overall structure of visits in each direction: their number and broad focus – cultural, scientific, or commercial, for example.

The closer details of exchange contact were negotiated at the second layer of exchange diplomacy: that between US nongovernmental organizations and their counterparts in China. As will be discussed below, the Chinese interlocutors of US private organizations concerned with exchanges were under state control: US nongovernmental organizations worked with state-run institutions like the Chinese Academy of Sciences or the Chinese People’s Institute of Foreign Affairs (CPIFA) as well as directly with the Chinese Foreign Ministry. It was at this level that the specifics of exchange contacts were typically negotiated: the precise topics of exchange visits and the principles that would govern the behavior of Chinese visiting the United States and Americans visiting the PRC, for example. Moreover, it was at this second layer that most disagreements or controversies over exchanges typically played out (even if the US government was an interested party in such talks and frequently sought to influence their outcome).

The third – and by no means least important – layer of exchange diplomacy happened on the ground, between Chinese and Americans participating in exchange visits. Careful planning and choreography by the two governments and by US nongovernmental organizations meant nothing without the participation of individual Americans and Chinese involved in visiting and hosting. As we shall see throughout this book, the exchange diplomacy conducted at the two aforementioned layers was

⁸ Shanghai Communiqué, February 27, 1972, *FRUS, 1969–1976*, vol. XVII, Document 203.

only as effective as the individual transnational encounters that occurred in sports stadiums, laboratories, and theatres – and around dining tables and on the tour buses that took participants between the more structured, performative moments of exchange visits. Here, there was agency for Chinese actors beyond state control: the PRC government carefully selected and trained participants in exchanges in this period, but Beijing could not exert control over every moment of visits and the primary role and identity of exchange participants remained athletes, artists, or scientists.

The agency of Chinese individuals participating in exchange encounters was demonstrated in the run-up to the very first exchange of this book's narrative. The first leg of ping-pong diplomacy was, as argued in Chapter 1, a carefully planned initiative by Mao, Zhou, and the Chinese government. But even this most important moment in Sino-American exchange diplomacy involved individual agency on the ground: Mao only learned of Chinese player Zhuang Zedong's famous greeting of the American hippie Glenn Cowan from his digest of Western newspapers. Upon reading of Zhuang's spontaneous interaction with Cowan and the Chinese player's presentation of a silk-scroll painting to the American as a token of friendship, Mao remarked, "Zhuang Zedong is not only very good at ping-pong but also quite diplomatic. This man is quite politically minded."⁹ Mao and his colleagues would, on many other occasions, have cause to be satisfied with the initiative taken by Chinese participants in exchanges to ensure such interactions met the goals of the state – but we will also see that, on other occasions, the PRC state looked to countermand decisions made by individual Chinese participants in exchanges. We should not ignore the agency of the Chinese people that participated in exchange diplomacy or the challenge this agency could pose to Beijing's carefully orchestrated diplomacy.¹⁰

Other terms have been used by historians to refer to these layers of exchange diplomacy: as shown in the quotation from the Shanghai Communiqué above, one such term was "people-to-people diplomacy" (民间外交) or sometimes simply "people's diplomacy" (人民外交). The term

⁹ Li Gong, "Chinese Decision Making and the Thawing of U.S.–China Relations," in *Re-examining the Cold War: U.S.–China Diplomacy, 1954–1973*, ed. Robert Ross and Jiang Changbin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 342–43; Xu Guoqi, *Olympic Dreams: China and Sports, 1895–2008* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 133.

¹⁰ Gordon Barrett makes a similar point regarding Chinese scientists participating in earlier transnational exchanges and contacts. Gordon Barrett, "China's 'People's Diplomacy' and the Pugwash Conferences, 1957–1964," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 20, no. 1 (April 2018): 168.

people-to-people diplomacy had been used by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in earlier periods to refer specifically to the attempts of the Party and, after the 1949 establishment of the PRC, the state, to bypass foreign governments and conduct diplomacy with the populations of other countries directly.¹¹ The practice of people-to-people diplomacy had earlier Soviet precedents – closely studied by China during the Sino-Soviet Alliance – and, like similar initiatives from Moscow, was focused on influencing foreign public opinion, especially in the West. (After the Sino-Soviet Split, any reference to Soviet inspiration in China’s foreign affairs was, of course, expunged).¹²

People-to-people diplomacy continued to be a feature of Beijing’s relations with the United States in the 1970s and certainly the PRC’s approach to exchange visits was in part intended to shape American public perceptions of China and to cultivate friends of China among Americans. The term can be misleading, however. The PRC state’s use of a term that implies unmediated interactions between people was always deliberately deceptive because of the central role of the PRC state in putting such interactions toward its political ends; as Anne-Marie Brady puts it, the term refers to how the Chinese “government makes use of a wide range of officially nonofficial contacts with other countries to expand its influence.”¹³ The term should certainly not confuse us into thinking that the Chinese state was uninterested in such contacts, or saw them as unimportant: as Zhou Enlai commented in 1957, the PRC state’s diplomacy incorporated official, semi-official, and nongovernmental diplomacy.¹⁴ The PRC state was no less interested in controlling the Chinese population’s diplomatic interactions with people outside China as it was any other aspect of their lives (even if, in both instances, this control could never be, in practice, total).¹⁵ I employ the term people-to-people

¹¹ For further discussion of these terms, see Barrett, 140–41. The PRC continues to highlight “people-to-people” exchanges and diplomacy in its foreign policy. These constitute one of the five pillars of the contemporary Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) launched in 2013.

¹² Beverley Hooper, *Foreigners under Mao: Western Lives in China, 1949–1976* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016), 24; Anne-Marie Brady, *Making the Foreign Serve China: Managing Foreigners in the People’s Republic* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 190.

¹³ Brady, *Making the Foreign Serve China*, 23.

¹⁴ Zhao Qizheng, “You minjian waijiao dao gonggong waijiao [From People’s Diplomacy to Public Diplomacy],” *Waijiao pinglun* 26, no. 5 (2009): 1.

¹⁵ The use of the term people-to-people diplomacy in the specialized historiography of China’s foreign relations is specific to this strategy but can nonetheless be confusing to those not already familiar with that literature.

diplomacy in this book in its specific historical context: the PRC's state-led direct appeals to Americans beyond government. However, I prefer the term exchange diplomacy when analyzing the broader category of all exchange contacts between China and the United States between 1971 and 1978 because I believe it better represents the involvement and agency of both non-state and state actors, in both China and the United States, in the Sino-American exchanges of this period.¹⁶

Exchange visits of the sort examined in this book are also often referred to as public or cultural diplomacy. Public diplomacy has been defined by historian Nicholas J. Cull as “the conduct of foreign policy through engagement with foreign publics.” This was indeed an important objective of both Chinese and US sides in the exchanges of the 1970s, which was particularly apparent in some categories of exchanges such as Beijing's courting of American congressmen and of members of the US-China Peoples Friendship Association, to give two examples. Nonetheless, while this book analyzes in some detail Chinese attempts to share US public opinion through exchange contacts, the difficulty in gauging the reception of American exchanges in China in the 1970s – then and now – as well as the multiple other objectives of exchanges has led me to avoid focusing of exchanges primarily as a form of public diplomacy.¹⁷ I have avoided the term “cultural diplomacy” for a more practical reason: not only because it is, as Michael L. Krenn has argued, a “slippery term” that has lacked clear definition in the historiography, but also to distinguish between exchanges of arts and culture on the one hand and, on the other hand, visits focused on science, trade, and other topics (one of the definitional problems highlighted by Krenn).¹⁸ These various foci for exchanges are often considered together under the rubric of cultural diplomacy. Here, I delineate explicitly cultural exchanges from scientific, commercial, and other exchange visits.

The significance of exchange visits in Sino-American relations was enhanced before 1979 by the absence of full, “normalized” diplomatic relations between the two governments. This lack of official relations made exchange contact both more significant – one of the only shows

¹⁶ Tellingly, the Chinese state has itself more recently moved away from the term “people-to-people diplomacy” (民间外交) and toward the term “public diplomacy” (公共外交) for initiatives aimed at foreign populations. Zhao, “You minjian waijiao dao gong-gong waijiao.”

¹⁷ Nicholas J. Cull, “How We Got Here,” in *Toward a New Public Diplomacy: Redirecting U.S. Foreign Policy*, ed. Philip Seib (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 23.

¹⁸ Michael L. Krenn, *The History of United States Cultural Diplomacy: 1770 to the Present Day* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 1–2.