Emily Abramczyk

2021 Summer FURSCA

End of Summer Report

9 July 2021

**Introduction to My Project**

When thinking about U.S.-China relations, people often brush over the effects of ping pong diplomacy that took place in the early 1970s. Society cannot often fathom how a small, white, plastic ping pong ball could be influential in bringing two powerful nations together during a time when Cold War tensions were high and the Vietnam War epitomized the struggle between communist and capitalist ideologies. However, ping pong proved to be an important catalyst in establishing relations between the U.S. and China during a time when the two countries had no formal diplomatic relations with each other and attempts by Chinese and American leaders to use traditional, high level political channels to try to establish talks with each other kept resulting in failure. Although some may argue that sports play a divisive role in international interactions due to highly competitive attitudes intensifying rivalries, the research that I pursued for my 2021 Summer FURSCA project argues that ping pong diplomacy was beneficial to fostering positive U.S.-China relations, both politically and culturally, as the 1972 ping pong exchange intertwined political and athletic competition in order to elevate sports to a level of diplomacy. I wanted to demonstrate that sports competitions create mutual empathy between two groups of people and ease political tensions through people to people interactions, which in turn leads to the greater impact of two governments establishing political relations on the basis of friendship. Therefore, ping pong diplomacy created specifically sports based international contacts between the U.S. and China, and in doing so, sparked diplomatic conversations about global partnerships, efforts to bridge cultural differences, and the importance of athletic empathy as a central element in U.S.-China relations that transcended traditional political negotiations.

My goal for my research project was to highlight the lesser known ping pong diplomacy events that occurred in the early 1970s. The topic is usually mentioned in high school and university classes; however, the events of ping pong diplomacy are rarely explored in depth. Furthermore, the encounter between the Chinese and American table tennis teams at the Nagoya World Table Tennis Championship in April 1971 and the American team’s trip to China the day after the World Championships ended has been well covered by the media and remains well-known to the general public. However, the reciprocal visit of the Chinese team to the United States remains relatively unknown by the general population. In my research, I also wanted to explore how nonconventional aspects such as food, clothing, race, and class played significant roles in the encounters between the American people and the visiting Chinese delegation. Most literary reviews tend to neglect the importance of other cultural aspects in easing U.S.-China tensions. Therefore, I wanted to explore in depth the lesser known stories to help accentuate the significance of ping pong diplomacy, as well as use my research on ping pong diplomacy to display how other sports can be used in the future to continue to foster positive U.S.-China relations.

**Results/Summary**

 During my intensive eight weeks of research and writing, I completed many of my goals for this summer. I collected primary sources from a variety of areas, such as from the Oakland University Kresge Library and the University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library archives, JSTOR, and archived articles from the Detroit Free Press, the New York Times, and the Ann Arbor News. Once I had gathered a plethora of primary source information, I began to organize my materials and connect common themes throughout my sources to establish the sections of my paper. To open up my research paper, I begin with the section Competition or Manufactured Diplomacy? that analyzes the underlying political influences surrounding the ping pong events, which displays the greater significance of the matches. As seen in the following excerpt of my writing, the ping pong matches were not about the athletic competition, but rather about athletic empathy and served as a way to establish friendships and political relationships:

Given these statistics of team rankings and the Chinese ping pong team’s rigorous practice schedule, the U.S. team would barely have a chance at winning any of the matches against the Chinese. So why would the U.S. want to bring over the Chinese team to play against the American team if the American team would just be crushed in front of American audiences? The Chinese knew that they were superior to the American team and, thereby, would intentionally lose some points and select matches to the American players… This act by the Chinese players displayed courtesy and respect for the American players and provided the American audiences a sense of pride in their team… The Chinese decision to not completely destroy the American players in these exhibition matches displays that the players were looking to establish ties of friendship, not only exclusively between the Chinese players and the American players, but between Chinese and Americans as a whole.

I also touch on more political matters in my paper when analyzing domestic perceptions within the Domestic Views on China section. In the subsection Criticisms: Anti-Chinese and Anti-Communist Groups, I analyze the effects of the protests and demonstrations held by Americans with dissenting opinions on allowing Communist ping pong players into the U.S. However, I go on to include the changing attitudes of Americans in my other subsection, Support: Allies and Supporters. This section displays the massive American support and acceptance of the Chinese as perceptions are eased through people to people interactions, which is demonstrated in this example from my writing:

Despite some issues with anti-Chinese and anti-Communist groups, other Americans, such as students and Chinese Americans, responded positively to the Chinese and American governments tactic of using soft power to build international relations and warmly received the Chinese team as Americans got to know the Chinese as people… The budding support and friendships that were forming between the Chinese and the American’s as a result of the ping pong exhibition matches displays the changing domestic views in the U.S., as American’s began to look past anti-Chinese and anti-Communist sentiments that were so prevalent in 1970s America… The soft power tactic of using sports allowed for the changing of domestic views, which opened the door for U.S.-China relations to take place at a high diplomatic level once domestic views were eased.

After discussing domestic views, I analyze American and Chinese differences in mannerisms, food, clothing, race, class, religion, and political ideologies in my Cross-Cultural Encounters – Bridging the Gap Through Culture section. In the subsections of this section, I explore how ping pong diplomacy helped the American and Chinese people to overcome cultural clashes and connect with each other through their cultural differences. Finally in my last section, I examine the growing interest in China specifically from an educational standpoint and how, because of ping pong diplomacy, there is an evident shift in the increase of interests and interactions between American and Chinese societies. For my conclusion, I end my paper not as a closing on ping pong diplomacy as events that happened in the past and remain in the past, but as a gateway for other sporting events to be used in a similar way to foster the positive growth of diplomatic relationships between countries. Although I got most of the draft writing done for my research paper, I did not finish my writing completely. In the future, I hope to come back to the draft of my research paper to continue to add in more analysis and edit my writing.

 Unfortunately for my research project this summer, I did not achieve all of my goals; however, my unfinished goals for my ping pong diplomacy project have become future plans that I hope to pursue later during my academic career at Albion College. Due to the continuing regulations for COVID-19 remaining in place for archives during June and early July of 2021, I had the challenge of not being able to travel to the University of Michigan’s archives in person to look through materials when trying to gather research materials for my project. I was fortunate to be allowed permission into OU’s archives; however, the University of Michigan archives remained closed to in person visitation during the span of my project. The U-M Asian Library remained completely closed to the public and, while The U-M Bentley Library had virtual consultation hours with their archivists available, there were limits on the amounts of document scans I could obtain virtually. Furthermore, a flaw in my project itself is that my research work remains heavily focused on American sources and materials. A challenge that I faced was finding Chinese sources and, when I did come across Chinese sources, another issue was the language barrier I faced being I do not know Chinese. My future plans for this project include trying to collect primary sources produced by the Chinese and then use FURSCA funding to hire a translator for the documents. I considered this option towards the end of my project; however, I ran out of enough time to pursue the option further. I decided to prioritize my time by focusing on organizing and analyzing the data I had already collected to begin the process of drafting my research paper. Similar to my future goal of including more Chinese primary sources, one aspect that I touch on a little in the work I produced but would like to explore more are the discrepancies between the American and the Chinese narratives in recounting the ping pong diplomacy events. I was able to find a Chinese produced documentary from 1972 with actual footage of the team’s trip to America with an English voice over, but I was unable to find the full identical version of the film with the Chinese voice over. When I pursue my project further in the future, I want to see if there are any differences between the two documents and, if there are differences, explore the ulterior motivations behind the changes. Also, I hope to expand the different types of media sources that I use in my research paper, such as including videos of 1971-1972 news reports and interviews pertaining to ping pong diplomacy and including Chinese produced ping pong propaganda posters, to expand on the role other media sources besides newspaper and written documents played in contributing to the effects of ping pong diplomacy. Another unique aspect that I want to pursue in the future is to reach out to more people who participated in the ping pong diplomacy events, such as Judy Hoarfrost, a U.S. table tennis women’s player on the team in 1971 and 1972, to conduct my own oral history interviews with them. Although I accomplished a majority of my goals during my eight weeks of research, the exciting part is that the research I completed this summer is simply the beginning of future plans and directions that I hope to pursue for my project before I graduate from Albion College.

**Conclusion**

 My research has impacted my life by helping me understand that, although sports have typically been viewed as leisure entertainment, the shared passion for a sport can be used as a vital tool in bridging the hostile gap between countries to form political relations that might have never formed without the help of friendly athletic competition. I have also learned the importance of utilizing cultural differences as a uniting factor to strengthen relationships between groups of people. Generally from the FURSCA experience and the research I conducted, I gained valuable skills that will not only contribute to aiding me in my future plans at Albion College, but will also contribute to my success in my work after I graduate. I learned important research skills on how to contact and communicate with archivists and how to conduct research in college and university archives. I also got in contact with a translator from one of the 1972 ping pong diplomacy banquet events and had the unique opportunity to learn how to conduct an oral history interview. Through this project, I have worked on how to pull out relevant information from multiple different sources and how to condense the information into concise sections. I also enhanced my writing skills as I began to draft a research paper. Most importantly, my condensed, rigorous eight week research schedule taught me valuable time management skills. I had to make sure I remained on top of email correspondences throughout the summer and had to utilize my time most effectively by prioritizing important aspects of my project. I am greatly appreciative of the FURSCA program for funding my summer research project, which included travel expenses to do archival work at OU and to gather materials from my public library, as well as funds for purchasing access to online archived newspaper articles. I look forward to presenting my research at the Elkin R. Isaac Student Research Symposium and, if possible, presenting at the American Historical Association, Asian Studies Association, and the ASIANetwork. I am greatly appreciative and thankful for the help and guidance from my research advisor, Dr. Joseph Ho. Dr. Ho was in constant contact with me through email, texts, and video chats throughout the summer. During our weekly meetings, he aided me in my research process by helping me make short term and long term future plans for my project, teaching me about how to conduct a research project, and leaving edits on my draft writing during the writing process. I am especially grateful for Oakland University Professor and Coordinator of Archives and Special Collections, Dominique Daniels, and University Archives Assistant, Shirley Paquette, for allowing me to do in-person work at OU’s archives and for their help in accessing resource material. Furthermore, I appreciate the help from the University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library Project Archivist, Sarah McLusky, for meeting with me virtually and sending over digital pictures of resource materials for my project. Lastly, I also want to thank Dr. Vanessa McCaffrey and Reneé Kreger for running the 2021 Summer FURSCA program and assisting with all my research questions and needs.