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## “Friendship First”: China’s Sports Diplomacy during the Cold War

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“Is it not delightful to have friends coming from far away?”—Confucius,  
*Analects* 1.1

“Winning and losing is temporary; friendship is eternal.”—*A Modern Chinese Saying*

The Cold War was an era of ideological conflict and hostility between socialist and capitalist countries. In this period of intense political animosity, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) advocated the ideal of “friendship first” in sport. While the so-called “ping-pong diplomacy” of 1971 is well known because it contributed to détente between the PRC and the United States,<sup>1</sup> there has been no comprehensive examination of China’s Cold War sports policy as a whole. This study addresses this gap.

Modern Chinese sport developed in the historical context of China’s century-long crisis and arduous struggle for independence. After the 1949 establishment of the PRC in the shadow of the Cold War, the Beijing government organized and supported sports teams and career athletes representing the new republic in the international sports arena. Western sport had become a part of nation-state building endeavor during the Republican period.<sup>2</sup> The new government in Beijing inherited this legacy and went far beyond. It administrated and sponsored sports activities as the former Soviet Union and other Communist states in Eastern Europe had done.<sup>3</sup> Beijing also introduced a notable new concept in sport, namely “friendship first, competition second.” While Chinese athletes certainly tried as hard as their counterparts from other nations to win medals in sports competition, the “friendship” initiative was by no means

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1. Qian Jiang, *Pingpong waijiao shimo* (Ping-pong diplomacy) (Beijing, 1987.)
2. Andrew D. Morris, *Marrow of the Nation: A History of Sport and Physical Culture in Republican China* (Berkeley, Calif., 2004).
3. Jim Riordan and Robin Jones, eds., *Sport and Physical Education in China* (New York, 1999).

just a slogan. Often times, Chinese athletes were instructed to give up medal opportunities for the goodwill of friendly countries. Also, in Beijing's foreign aid programs, sports-related assistance played a significant role. This study sheds light on the idea and practice of "friendship sport" and assesses its impact on China's foreign relations.

The friendship sport policy adopted by the PRC lasted more than three decades from the 1950s to the late 1980s. Friendship sport is fundamentally different from athletic ethics and practices in the non-Communist West which stress, ideally, athletic excellence for its own sake within a set of rules.<sup>4</sup> For Beijing, however, sport served higher political purposes, including the enhancement of friendship among peoples of different nations. In fact, sport had been an essential part of *waishi* (foreign affairs management), which, as Anne-Marie Brady recently argued, was one of the most effective tools in the CCP's repertoire for sustaining its authority over both its own people and foreigners.<sup>5</sup> It is not to say that athletic excellence was not important in the PRC's revolutionary conceptualization of sport. The Communist leaders in Beijing knew very well that friendship first could not be the philosophy of a weak competitor. Rather, the revolutionary sports ethics had to be based upon strength and the highest standard of athletic excellence to be utilized effectively and perceived respectfully.

During the long Cold War era, the PRC's friendship sport acquired varied meanings and used practices adapted to particular countries. In the 1950s and the early 1960s, it meant that China would carry out regular and friendly athletic exchanges with ideologically similar, namely socialist, countries. During those years, Chinese athletes played the role of modest students learning from their socialist comrades in East European countries. From the mid-1960s to the late 1970s, the PRC tried to win friends by, among other activities, engaging in sports competition with Third World countries. In that period, the Chinese played the role of benefactors by providing sports coaches and constructing sports facilities for some countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin American. In the late Cold War years, the PRC expanded friendship sport to countries of ideological rivals and Taiwan.

Overall, the PRC's use of sports diplomacy was ingenious and effective. The well-known ping-pong diplomacy is an eloquent example of how these policies helped open up opportunities and fine-tune diplomacy. Friendship first in sport was also seriously flawed, as this study will show. Athletic excellence and friendship sport have different and sometimes conflicting goals. In the PRC's case, the former is essential for the country's national pride, whereas the latter was ultimately an op-

4. William J. Morgan, ed., *Ethics in Sport*, 2d ed. (Champaign, Ill., 2007).

5. Anne-Marie Brady, *Making the Foreign Serve China: Managing Foreigners in the People's Republic* (Lanham, Md., 2003).

portunistic scheme. That is why the PRC eventually discontinued the practice in the late 1980s. Nevertheless, friendship sport is a unique and important chapter in China's recent history

This essay has three sections. The first section analyzes friendship sport from the 1950s to the mid-1960s, a period when active sports exchanges were mostly with socialist countries. The second section documents the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), a time when friendship sport was manifested in its extreme form and degenerated into a political tool. It was also during this period that the PRC significantly increased its sports exchanges and aid to Third World countries. After the Cultural Revolution and into the 1980s, as the last section of this study shows, the PRC began to have broader and more regular sports exchanges with countries in spite of ideological differences. After the PRC resumed its membership on the International Olympic Committee in 1979, it also accepted the Olympic sports ethics and practice, and no longer openly championed friendship sport as an alternative athletic principle. However, using sport to initiate and improve foreign relations and relations with Taiwan continued until the late 1980s when a deeper and broader range of reforms fundamentally changed Chinese sports ethics and practice. Friendship sport faded away as the Cold War became history.

### **Friendship Sport in the 1950s and 1960s**

Since the early years of the PRC, the government recognized the political role modern sport could play. In 1952, the new regime created a state-controlled, ministry-level office for sport—the State Physical Culture and Sports Commission (SPCSC), headed by Marshal He Long, a Polibureau member of the CCP and hero of the revolution.<sup>6</sup> The purpose of the Commission was to provide strong leadership and mobilize limited resources for competitive sport in the PRC. Inspired by the Soviet Union's success in the 15th Olympic Games in 1952, Chinese leaders were eager to change the backwardness of Chinese sport. The mandate of the SPCSC was to train elite, professional athletes who would win medals and pride for China in international competition. To achieve the goal, Chinese sports administrators and athletes worked hard to learn from the Soviet Union and East European countries.

From the early 1950s, China had sent numerous athletes to the Soviet Union, Hungary, and other countries in the Communist bloc for training. It also invited sports experts from socialist countries to give lectures and to coach Chinese athletes.<sup>7</sup> The SPCSC issued a formal directive in

6. Xiong Xiaozheng, Tan Hua, Luo Shimin et al., *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo tiyu shi* (A sports history of the People's Republic of China) (Beijing, 1999), 49–50.

7. *Ibid.*, 42–49.

1959 which emphatically gave priority to sports exchanges with socialist countries:

While engaging in international sports activities, we should adhere to the policy of being “both Red and expert” [*you hong you zhuan*] so as to facilitate understanding and friendship among peoples of various nations and to serve the purpose of developing and improving our country’s sports activities. Exchanges should primarily be with brotherly [socialist] nations. As for countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, we should keep relations with those with which we have already had [cultural] exchanges, though we should also consider initiating new relationship. As for Western capitalist countries, we should not forcefully seek exchange activities, but should engage in necessary and possible exchanges, especially with North European nations. Toward nationalistic and capitalist countries, we should adhere to the principle, namely, “they come more and we go less.”<sup>8</sup>

The emphasis on exchanges with countries of ideological affinity during this period helped shape the PRC’s future sports exchanges. Winning friends not medals characterized the sports exchanges in the early years of the republic. Premier Zhou Enlai repeatedly stressed that “friendship is more important than competition.” According to Li Menghua, a veteran sports official, Zhou told Chinese table tennis players before their departure for the 27th World Championship in March 1963: “I have always advocated that friendship is more important than competition. [You] should demonstrate etiquette (*fengge*), proletarian etiquette, revolutionary etiquette, so as to win friendship of revolutionary comrades, of working people, and of athletes from various countries.” Zhou told the athletes to uphold internationalism in international sports events, not to use tricks: “The greatest success is not victory in sports skills [*jishu*], but political influence.”<sup>9</sup>

Zhou’s emphasis on friendship implied that Chinese athletes should not be afraid to lose. Given the fact that Chinese athletes were then far behind in just about all sports events except ping-pong, losing was in fact only to be expected. In 1951, for example, the Czechoslovakian soccer team beat China’s Army team (also called the August 1 team) 17 to 1. In June 1956, the Czechoslovakian women’s basketball team visited the PRC. Its first match with the Beijing women’s basketball team ended with the score of 87 to 39 in favor of the visitors.<sup>10</sup>

8. Shandong tiyu yundong weiyuanhui (Shandong Sports Committee), archives, A054-01-119.

9. Li Menghua, “Zunzun jiaodao yongzhi nanwang” (Unforgettable teachings) in *Bujin de sinian* (Remembering forever) (Beijing, 1987), 550–61; quotations from 556–58.

10. Shandong Sports Committee, archives, A054-01-023; Xiong, Tan, Luo et al., 209.

While losing to socialist friends rather than to capitalist countries was politically more acceptable, defeats like these were nevertheless very uncomfortable for the hosts. Chinese sports officials were entrusted with the task of winning medals for Chinese pride despite the ideal of friendship sport. In practical terms, their priority was opposite to the premier's. SPCSC officials urged their athletes to train harder so as to improve their performance in international competition. They also tried other means to avoid embarrassment in sports competition as much as possible even with China's best friends. One concept and practice that Chinese sports administrators adopted during the early years of the PRC's sports exchanges was called "train domestically and unite against foreigners" (*guonei lianbing, yizhi duiwai*). It meant that although Chinese athletes were supposed to belong to individual teams (provincial and military), they shared common responsibility of winning honors for China. In the event of international competition, one Chinese team could "borrow" athletes from other teams. One such case occurred in 1961 when the Russian men's volleyball team visited Jiangsu province.<sup>11</sup> Prior to this visit, the Russian team had two wins in Beijing, beating both the Chinese Army and National Teams. The pressure on the Jiangsu team was enormous. To ensure at least one victory, the Jiangsu Sports Committee obtained permission to get support from Jiangxi and Fujian provinces. The reinforced "Jiangsu" team ended up winning a decisive victory over the Russian team by a score of 3 to 0.<sup>12</sup> The same scheme was adopted when the Polish Army basketball team visited China in the same year. In this case, the Chinese counterpart team would be the Chinese Army's August 1 Team. A notification (*zhishi*) from the Political Department of the Army authorized the August 1 Team to request assistance from the Chinese National Team for players. The Chinese Army Team was also given permission to select top players from regional army teams for the "friendly competition" with the Polish Army Team.<sup>13</sup>

The idea to "train domestically and unite against foreigners" soon developed into an unwritten principle in China's international sports competition regardless of ideology. Given China's size and population, the practice helped Chinese athletic teams to gain advantage when the average skills of individual athletes were below those of their foreign counterparts.

These cases show how China planned to engage in "friendly" sports exchanges so that its athletes could be both competitive and friendly at the same time. There were occasions, however, when unexpected situations occurred even with ideological friends. In such cases, while friend-

11. It was not the national team of the Soviet Union.

12. Jiangsu tiyu yundong weiyuanhui (Jiangsu Sports Committee), archives 3118/468.

13. Ibid.

ship was the ultimate goal, Chinese officials did not hesitate to defend Chinese dignity by declining friendly competition. In 1963, for example, the Chinese track and field team visited North Korea. In his report to the State Sports Commission, the team leader praised North Koreans for their warm welcome and courteous treatment of the Chinese team. “There is, however, one event which was improperly arranged by the Korean hosts,” the report said, and gave the following detail:

In our twelve-day visit, we had one friendly competition with the North Korean team, and trained together with our host team many times. . . . When we were about to leave, the hotel service people and restaurant workers even lined up to say farewell to us. . . . [Korean] leaders, however, asked to meet the Chinese track and field team, and watched a competition [between Chinese and Korean teams]. They suggested men’s and women’s 200 meters sprint, and men’s 1,500 meters, three events. The suggested competition would have taken place in the afternoon right before a soccer match between North Korea and Burma. Of the three suggested events, two were Korea’s strongest and our weakest. If the competition had occurred, it would have been to our serious disadvantage. Therefore, we declined the invitation by pointing out that there were too many technical problems for arranging such a competition—for example, how to prepare for the playing field, what slogans to use, which events to choose, and so on. . . . In any event, we did not have enough time to solve these problems.<sup>14</sup>

This case makes clear that “friendly sport” had to be based on the competitive strength of Chinese athletes. In the early decades of the PRC, a top priority set by the SPCSC was to recruit and train quality athletes, so that sports exchanges with foreign countries could be both friendly and honorable. In the 1950s and early 1960s, however, athletes who could compete at the international level were extremely few. To complicate the matter further, Communist ideology and political practice in China, which emphasized party loyalty and class background, were often at odds with meritocracy in recruiting and training athletes.

To ensure athletic competitiveness, China adopted a relatively flexible policy regarding athletes and coaches’ political background throughout the 1950s. In the first half of the 1950s in particular, China worked extremely hard to lure sports talents among overseas Chinese, who were otherwise considered politically unreliable. Wang Wenjiao (badminton, Indonesia) and Rong Guotuo (table tennis, Hong Kong) were two best known examples. Wang returned to China in 1954 and became China’s top badminton player. From the early 1970s, he was China’s head coach of badminton for more than twenty years and was named “New China’s Sports Pioneer” in 1985. Rong, on the other hand, returned from Hong

14. Jiangsu Sports Committee, archives. 3118/666, 1963.

Kong in the mid-1950s and won for China the first world championship title of any kind in 1959 by winning men's singles in world table tennis championship.

A directive from the Shandong Sports Committee provides us with some detail of flexible practices in recruiting athletic talents. It stated:

Overseas Chinese from our province alone amount to ten thousand households. . . . We need to discard the old strict, dogmatic way of [dealing with them]. We should let them feel that there is freedom in the motherland. During their visit and interviews with us, we should be flexible and adopt the principle that "Let [Mainland Chinese] engage with their overseas Chinese counterparts in the same field of specialty." Thus, the overseas Chinese would have opportunities to meet people from every walk of life.<sup>15</sup>

To be tolerant toward differences with athletes of overseas Chinese was, however, not always easy. In a report to the State Sports Commission, local sports officials complained that a delegation from Hong Kong and Macao did not behave very well: "A few athletes have improper, even reactionary, thoughts. Out of one hundred and ten members of the delegation, twelve have no proper occupation. . . . [Some] indulge in gambling, and . . . others have extremely bad personal behavior styles."<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, throughout the 1950s, China recruited many sports talents from overseas Chinese. As China turned more radical and rigid in its ideology in the late 1950s and 1960s, however, stricter regulations were formulated and implemented in checking athletes' class background, especially for participation in international competition. Individual athletes were not allowed to contact foreigners directly. Few athletes knew foreign languages in the first place, and those who grew up under the new regime were not required to learn foreign languages.<sup>17</sup> This is quite ironic considering China's emphasis on friendship sport and people-to-people diplomacy. Even local sports officials were instructed not to deal with foreign diplomatic agencies without going through local "foreign affair offices" (*waiban*).<sup>18</sup>

In this period of China's limited foreign contact, its athletes were among the very few who had opportunities to go abroad. Ideally, the government would select athletes who were both politically reliable and athletically talented to represent China in friendly sports exchanges. The problem was, however, that in the early years of the new republic, the best athletes and coaches were often from politically undesirable

15. Shandong Sports Committee, archives, A054-01-023.

16. Ibid.

17. Foreign languages were not a required test subject in sports-college entrance examinations.

18. Jiangsu Sports Committee, archives, 3118/667, 3118/103, 14 Feb. 1959.

family background and who themselves were often deemed as contaminated by bourgeois ideas. This situation led to a dilemma for policymakers. According to one report, in Jiangsu province, for example, as high as 21 percent of the athletes came from families of “exploitive classes,” and almost 40 percent of the coaches were from those families.<sup>19</sup>

In 1959, the State Sports Commission issued instructions to local sports committees regarding background checks of athletes and coaches. It stated those whose “families had historical problems, those with relatives in foreign countries, and those who themselves had backward political thoughts cannot go abroad [for sports exchanges].”<sup>20</sup> It further emphasized that “[personal file] materials prepared for foreign visits should first be examined and approved and then be sent [to the State Sports Commission]. The [personnel] forms should be filled out with each item clearly written without any omission or unintelligible part.” The instructions also provided examples of mistakes which should be corrected in obtaining more detailed background information on athletes. “Some files give too abstract information,” it complained, “such as ‘so and so has individualistic and bourgeois thoughts.’” Other files contained only information regarding athletic technique without detailing political thoughts of the athletes. Local officials were admonished to provide more complete information in the future.

The instructions went on to say that regulations by the Central Committee of the CCP required that those people who had passed background checks for foreign visits should prepare additional materials when they again became candidates for future foreign trips. The new materials should include reports on their activities in the last foreign visit and newly found problems since then. Ideas and personal behavioral manner (*sixiang zuofeng*) were also important. Bad personal behavior would cause problems and have negative influences on their mission. The instructions concluded that “in the future, we should be strict regarding both athletes’ political background and their personal behavior.”<sup>21</sup>

Provincial reports provide us with some detail as to what kind of political and historical problems might become reasons for preventing an athlete or coach from visiting foreign countries for sports exchanges. One such example has to do with a basketball coach named Li who was distrusted simply because he was on Wuxi city’s basketball team “before liberation.”<sup>22</sup>

19. *Ibid.*, 3118/92, 9 Dec. 1964.

20. *Ibid.*, 3118/103.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, 22 Apr. 1959.

In carrying out instructions for political scrutiny, local officials often had difficulty because extremely few, if any, qualified athletes and coaches had "clean" political and historical backgrounds. When a Jiangsu gymnastics team was asked to represent China on a foreign tour, local officials provided the following detail regarding four athletes:

Ms. Ding (13 years old), master-level gymnast; father and mother are both rightists;

Ms. Ying, master-level gymnast; father is a capitalist and rightist;

Ms. Zhou, the best gymnast on the team, but her older brother is a bad element . . . in addition, she herself does not have commendable behavioral style;

Ms. Gu, relatively inferior gymnast but with potential; mother is a Christian, and stepmother committed suicide in the Three-Anti Movement [1951];<sup>23</sup> elder brother a Communist party member.

The report concluded that "Of the four people above, only Gu has relatively good political background. The other three all have family members or close relatives with serious political problems." Given the situation, "We propose to reallocate the task [of this foreign visit] to athletes of other provinces."<sup>24</sup>

This suggestion turned the thorny problem back to the SPCSC. Given the stringent political requirements, they probably could not identify another province for the task. The State Sports Commission evidently had no choice but to lower the standard by instructing the Jiangsu Sports Committee to be more "flexible in political assessment" and "as long as athletes themselves have good political standing and draw a line between themselves and their family members with political problems, they should be considered for foreign visit."<sup>25</sup>

The Commission itself was, however, not sure about how flexible political scrutiny should be. It had to report some cases to the Organization Ministry of the Central Party Committee (*Zhongyang zuzhibu*) for final decision. Accordingly, the State Sports Commission asked the Jiangsu officials to prepare for substitute athletes in case Ms. Ding and other two gymnasts were not approved for the scheduled foreign visit.<sup>26</sup>

23. The "three-antis" targeted in the political movement in 1951 were corruption, waste, and bureaucracy.

24. Jiangsu Sports Committee, archives, 3118/103, 21 Mar. 1959.

25. *Ibid.*, 1 Apr. 1959.

26. There are no available sources for us to know whether gymnasts with questionable family background actually went for the mission. It is likely they did. The family background check was usually not so strictly followed in this period that top athletes were actually denied foreign visits. Political background check had greater impact on recruiting new athletes.

After the early 1960s, political background checks became more and more strict. One of the results of tighter political control over athletes was the tendency among athletes to be compliant executioners of party policies. In international competition, Chinese athletes had to take political orders as well as coaching from team leaders (*lingdui*) and coaches. If an international contest took place in China, even the spectators were indoctrinated and coordinated so that friendship was strengthened instead of weakened. I shall discuss two such events in which China played a significant role to show how friendship sport was staged during this period.

#### The 26th Table Tennis World Championship in Beijing, 1961

The 26th Table Tennis World Championship was the first large-scale sports event ever held in China, and it was held right after the three years of famine that followed the Great Leap Forward movement in 1958. A 35-percent cut in sports budget was announced just before the championship.<sup>27</sup> To prepare for this event, however, the SPCSC selected more than one hundred ping-pong players throughout the country to be trained in Beijing. The central government also built a 15,000-seat stadium for the event. Two hundred forty-two athletes from thirty-two countries came to Beijing. Premier Zhou Enlai personally attended the welcome banquet for the athletes with televised coverage. All top government and party leaders except Chairman Mao Zedong attended the opening ceremony, which featured Peking Opera, an orchestra, and acrobat performances by China's best artists.

As the Japanese player Matsuzaki Kimiyo remembered, "The spectators gave the warmest welcome to the Chinese players and next to the players from the Soviet Union." "When the Soviet athletes came to the court," Matsuzaki recalled, the "spectators stood up and gave a long applause." Friendship sport was, without a doubt, ideologically discriminatory as the Chinese spectators failed to conceal their feelings toward those they disliked. "As I feared," Matsuzaki, the defending world champion lamented, "Japanese players were the least favorite of the [Chinese] spectators. . . . They would invariably cheer for our opponents whoever they were. The Japanese players received no applause." Matsuzaki also complained that the referees seemed to be hostile to them, too. Somehow the decision was "suspiciously unfavorable" to the Japanese players.<sup>28</sup>

This unfriendly atmosphere, felt keenly by the young Japanese ath-

27. Jiangsu Sports Committee, archives, 3118/666.

28. Matsuzaki Kimiyo, *Takkyu Yarasete!* (Let me play ping-pong!) chap. 12. Available at <<http://www.butterfly.co.jp/history/>>. The book was originally published in "Table Tennis Report," July 1979–Oct. 1980.

letes, was probably not what the government intended. If anything, the fans' behavior deviated from "friendship first" sport advocated heartily by Premier Zhou. The Chinese victory at a major international sports event such as the 26th World Table Tennis Championship was, in Zhou's mind, only a partial success for the People's Republic of China.<sup>29</sup> The victor must also be made lovable, which was the essence of friendship sport. Evidently, Chinese officials quickly intervened to make sure all participating athletes whichever countries they represented felt welcomed. Toward the later days of the matches, Matsuzaki realized to her surprise that "the spectators began to cheer me on." The energetic and innocent-looking world champion did not know that the fans suddenly turned friendly because her aggressive playing style, along with Japan's new role in Asian international politics as perceived by Beijing, caught Zhou's attention.

The fierce athletic competition ended with a lavish show of China's friendship. Players were given a tour of the Great Wall. The farewell banquet was hosted by the mayor of Beijing. Chinese artists performed the ballet "Swan Lake" before dinner. From a young ping-pong player's perspective, the entire championship was almost perfectly organized. Each foreign team was provided with two Chinese translators. Even the banquet invitation cards were specially engraved for each team. Guests were seated with their name cards on the tables. Yet, the show of friendship by the Chinese was by no means randomly targeted. If at the beginning of the championship Soviet players were particularly welcomed by the spectators, toward the end, Japanese players, especially Matsuzaki-san, was extended a special treatment by Chinese leaders. At the farewell banquet, Matsuzaki was, to her great surprise, seated next to Marshall He Long, chairman of the State Sports Commission. The young Japanese player was also assigned a veteran translator just for herself, whose Japanese "is no different from a native, and seems to be from the Chinese Foreign Ministry."<sup>30</sup>

Afterwards, the Japanese table tennis team stayed and had friendship contests with Chinese players in Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Guangzhou. In each city, Matsuzaki recalled, spectators packed the stadiums as it was in Beijing.<sup>31</sup> The Chinese state evidently played a big role in the "ping-pong frenzy." In 1962, immediately following the 26th Table Tennis World Championship, the China-Japan Friendship Table Tennis was inaugurated.<sup>32</sup> As Ogimura Ichiro, the former Japanese world cham-

29. The championship did end with a big win for China with three gold medals for men's single, men's team, and women's single.

30. Matsuzaki, chap. 12.

31. Ibid.

32. Ogimura Ichiro and Motoo Fujii, *Takku monogatari—Episodo De Tsudzuru Takkyu No Hyakkunen* (The table tennis monogatari) (Tokyo, 1996), 43.

pion points out, the Friendship Table Tennis pioneered the cultural exchange between the two countries.<sup>33</sup> Matsuzaki would have many more opportunities to meet and receive extremely personal care from the gracious and fatherly Chinese premier.

#### The “Games of the New Emerging Forces” in Jakarta, 1963

The second sports event that amply demonstrates the ways in which friendship sport was played was the 1963 “Games of the New Emerging Forces” (GANEFO) in Jakarta, Indonesia. Three thousand athletes from forty-eight nations participated in the first GANEFO. Before the games, Marshall He Long, vice chairman of China’s Defense Ministry and chairman of the State Sports Commission, told the Chinese badminton players to “win all the medals for China” and promised a celebration party in their honor if they succeeded. Chen Yi, the foreign minister, however, instructed the athletes otherwise, “to be considerate to the host country’s feelings, and save some medals for the Indonesians who consider badminton their national sport.” Premier Zhou Enlai did not address the obvious contradiction but allegedly said that “both friendship and [sports] techniques are important. You should do well in both.”<sup>34</sup>

The GANEFO provided an excellent opportunity for China to break political isolation. By 1963, China had been excluded from the Olympic Games for more than a decade while at the same time its relationship with the Soviet bloc deteriorated. China eagerly sought friendship from Third World countries including Indonesia. Sports events were great venues for the purpose. By this time, Chinese athletes excelled in badminton as well as table tennis. In 1963 and 1965, the Chinese team defeated the world champion teams of Indonesia and Denmark. But the world Badminton Association accepted Taiwan as a country and China decided not to join the organization and thus was not able to participate in world championships. Chinese athletes were also excluded from the Asian Games. To break the isolation, China enthusiastically supported the GANEFO in Indonesia.

To win both friends and medals was a challenge. At the badminton men’s singles final in Jakarta, Marshall He Long restlessly watched the match between the Chinese player and Indonesian national champion on his hotel room television. As the game went on, the Chinese player quickly secured a comfortable lead. A Chinese victory over the local hero appeared to be certain as millions of Indonesian spectators and televi-

33. 1956 Tokyo World Table Tennis Championship was China’s first participation in the event. *Ibid.*

34. Liang Lijuan, *He Zhenliang yu Aolipike* (He Zhenliang and the Olympics) (Beijing, 2000), 63.

sion viewers anxiously watched. At this point, Marshall He Long intervened and gave orders to the head of the Chinese team that the Indonesian player had to win. "All of sudden," according to the Indonesian media, "the Chinese player seemed not to know how to play anymore" and duly lost the match.<sup>35</sup> In this manner, at least in appearance, China had both won friendship and showed its athletic prowess in Jakarta.

Friendly games of the "new emerging forces" were meant to be the Third World's Olympics and to continue indefinitely. The initial plan was that the GANEFO would be held every four years. Either Cairo or Beijing would host the second GANEFO. Political turmoil in China as well as in other participating countries of the GANEFO, however, prevented the games from being played ever again.

In China, the Cultural Revolution first interrupted formal sports competition and then politicized sport to such a degree that the slogan "friendship first, competition second" was followed literally by Chinese athletes in their limited sports exchanges with foreign countries.

### **Friendship Sport during the Cultural Revolution**

In 1966, the Culture Revolution began and kept China in almost total isolation from the world until 1972. During this tumultuous era, Maoist radicals vaunted the idea that political purity was more important than professional expertise and that government bureaucracy was stifling the creativity of the original revolution. China's sports apparatus came under attack for precisely this fault of being "expert" and bureaucratic.<sup>36</sup> They criticized "championship-ism" (*jinqiao zhuyi*) which allegedly characterized the capitalistic line of sport in China before the Cultural Revolution. For more than two years, from 1967 to early 1970, Chinese athletes had little formal training and stopped participating in any international competition. When China resumed its sports exchanges in the early 1970s, the new sports leadership further emphasized "friendship first, competition second." In a restricted-access (*neibu*) speech, a leading sports official stated: "Sports are important venues for people's diplomacy. [In the future,] not only national teams but provincial teams should engage in international sports activities."<sup>37</sup>

Indeed, the PRC quickly resumed sports diplomacy in the early 1970s. A major difference between this period and the earlier one is that most of China's athletic exchanges were with Third World countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. No longer did China play the role of a modest

35. Ibid., 63-64.

36. Jiangsu Sports Committee, archives, 3118/92 and 3118/843.

37. Shandong Sports Committee, archives, A054-01-272.

student in sports exchanges; instead, China began to be the benefactor, helping other countries train their athletes and build sports facilities. In other words, friendship sport in this period served as a form of foreign aid.

One of the events that exemplified the “new” friendship sport was the Asian-African Table Tennis Friendship Invitational Tournament of 1971. Players from more than fifty nations in Asia and Africa participated. As the host country, China paid for all the expenses and generously entertained its guests. Since the tournament was held in cold Beijing winter, foreign athletes were provided with Chinese military overcoats. Hotel rooms where players stayed were provisioned with brand-name cigarettes and other offerings. Chinese table tennis players were much better at the game, but they tried very hard not to win too many of the friendly matches.<sup>38</sup>

The event was widely publicized in China. China even issued stamps to commemorate the games. In terms of courting friendship, the Asian-African Invitation Tournament was probably a success. It was during the tournament that the United Nations passed a resolution for China’s joining the organization. A little more than a year later, in 1973, China hosted a similar tournament, the Asia-Africa-Latin America Table Tennis Friendship Tournament. As many as eighty-six nations and more than 1,100 athletes participated and enjoyed China’s hospitality. Twenty-two Chinese cities hosted the guests.<sup>39</sup>

The best known case of friendly sport was, of course, the celebrated ping-pong diplomacy through which China began to normalize its relationship with the United States. Table tennis historian Tim Boggan has documented American ping-pong players’ experiences in China in 1972.<sup>40</sup> From the American players’ point of view, friendship sport might be good for politics but terrible for sport. As “Jack,” a member on the U.S. team, complained, “these non-competition matches weren’t really giving our team the kind of practice they needed. What were we learning from them? And, what’s more, the matches just looked awful.” “Exhibitions,” he said, “are no [expletive] good.”<sup>41</sup>

Ping-pong diplomacy is often narrowly understood as between China and the United States. In fact, in the early 1970s, China used the “little silver ball” to improve and initiate relationship with a number of coun-

38. Wang Wenrong, a top Chinese ping-pong player in the late 1960s and early 1970s, interview with author, 25 June 2001, Shijiazhuang, Hebei.

39. Shandong Sports Committee, archives, A054-01-285, 28 Aug. 1973.

40. For ping-pong diplomacy, see Hong Zhaohui and Yi Sun, “The Butterfly Effect and the Making of ‘Ping-Pong Diplomacy,’” *Journal of Contemporary China* 9 (2000).

41. Tim Boggan, “Ping-Pong Oddity,” <<http://www.usatt.org/articles/poddity13.shtml>> (accessed 21 Sept. 2004).

tries of various social and political systems, including Japan, Australia, Canada, Singapore, Malaysia, among others. What is also little known is that "friendship first" in sport had its disastrous moments as well. One such case is China's "mistaken win" over North Korea in the 1971 Table Tennis Championship men's singles event. When China decided to participate in the 31st Table Tennis World Championship after missing two championships since 1965, Chinese leaders also urged North Korea's participation. The People's Democratic Republic of Korea was one of China's very few international friends at the time. The North Koreans were, however, undecided because they were not confident of winning medals in the tournament. To persuade the North Koreans to participate, Beijing's leaders hinted that the Chinese team would make sure that North Korean players would not go home empty handed and gave the Chinese delegation instructions to that effect.

It turns out, however, in the men's singles competition, the Chinese players were not doing very well themselves. After three rounds, only one player, Xi Enting, was undefeated but was to meet the North Korean player in the next round. This unexpected situation caused a dilemma for the Chinese team: if Xi let the Korean player win as tacitly agreed upon, China would not win any medal for men's singles; if Xi defeated the Korean player, it would be a betrayal of friendship. After long deliberation, the Chinese delegation decided to ignore their instruction because they believed that the Korean player was not likely to win a medal even if he was given a chance. Accordingly, Xi Enting did not show the Korean player the "friendship" as promised and took the match. Xi went on to win the bronze medal for China.

When Zhou Enlai learned about this disobedience, he was furious. Upon their return, he summoned the team's leaders and the head of the SPCSC and severely criticized their championship-ism in disregarding China's friendship with North Korea. Zhou ordered Han Nianlong, the vice foreign minister, and Xi Enting to go to Pyongyang to deliver a formal apology.<sup>42</sup> The Chinese compensated the North Koreans with more than an apology. In 1977, for example, Chinese table tennis player Yang Yin teamed with a North Korean player to win woman's doubles world championship.

After the success of ping-pong diplomacy, China sped up its sports exchanges with a variety of countries. In 1972 alone, China had sports exchanges with seventy-nine countries in 230 events.<sup>43</sup> One example was the 1972 visit by Thailand's table tennis team, followed by teams from Malaysia and the Philippines. These visits helped the breakthrough

42. Xi Enting, interview with author, 28 June 2001, Tiwei keiyan suo (Institute of Sports Research), Beijing.

43. Shandong Sports Committee, archives, A018-02-182.

of China's relationship with Southeast Asian countries.<sup>44</sup> Archival sources provide some detail as to how China actually planned and organized some of these visits and how "friendship first" was practiced in sport.

In 1973, a soccer team from Lebanon came to China. The SPCSC issued a guideline to local sports officials which stated that "you must faithfully carry out the friendship first, competition second policy. . . . Propagate our country's achievements in socialist revolution and socialist construction with actual deeds."<sup>45</sup> When the Lebanese team arrived in Jinan, Shandong, the local officials reported their plan to put up the delegation at the Nanjiao Hotel. Located in the southern fringe of the "city of spring water" as Jinan had been known, Nanjiao Hotel was among the best guesthouses at the time. The head of the delegation was to stay in a suite and the associate leader in a single room, the rest of the team members would share double rooms, and all rooms were to be provided with tea and cigarettes. The budget for each person was seven yuan per day.<sup>46</sup> The show of friendship and hospitality was also carefully arranged in soccer matches between the guests and local Chinese teams. Shandong officials briefed the SPCSC with the following report:

. . . The [Soccer] Match Won Us Friendship

1. Yesterday evening's match was very friendly. . . . More than ten thousand spectators were present and in good order . . . . In the first half of the match, our team scored one goal and the guest team none. Soon after the second half began, we let [them] score twice consecutively. The match ended with the score 1:2 [for the Lebanese team]. Our guests were in high spirit and became very lively. The head of the guest team came to shake our hands and thanked us for our encouragement.

2. Winning or losing serves political purpose. The visit of the Lebanese team has a complicated background: (1) their team is made up of coaches and athletes from seven countries. The match had to serve the need of people's diplomacy United Front and to serve the political need of enhancing friendship; (2) their team was mediocre, but very eager to win. Since the team had already lost two matches in Beijing and Tianjin, the match in Jinan was their only hope, although they themselves had little confidence they could win; (3) This was the first time that we have been entrusted with a task related to foreign affairs. We felt extremely honored and prepared meticulously. We were highly confident we could win the match, but considering the political need and the national inter-

44. "ASEAN's Autonomous Diplomacy in Twenty Years," *Japan Economic News*, 21 Aug. 1987.

45. Shandong Sports Committee, archives, A054-01-285.

46. Ibid., "Shandong sheng geming weiyuanhui tiyu yundong weiyuanhui baogao" (Provincial Revolutionary and Sports Committee Report), 22 July 1973.

est, however, we should not [win]. We were concerned with the reaction of the masses and opportunities for similar tasks in the future, though. After consulting with the State Sports Commission, it was decided that, given our guests' situation, we should allow them to win. This decision reflected the true feeling of the athletes and the general public and we faithfully obeyed.<sup>47</sup>

Evidently, the State Sports Commission was satisfied with what the Shandong sports officials did. A year later, when a Ugandan soccer team visited Jinan, the guest team received the same courtesy that their Chinese hosts extended to the Lebanese. The Shandong team duly "lost" to their African friends 0 to 1. As before, the Shandong sports officials showed their understanding that the Uganda team had to win because it had already lost two earlier matches in Beijing.<sup>48</sup>

China's sports diplomacy went far beyond face-saving friendship competition during this period. More important, China began to send sports experts abroad and build sports facilities for Third World countries as a form of foreign aid. The aid did not come from the central government alone. Provincial governments also received orders for foreign aid tasks. Shandong province, for example, helped build a stadium of 10,000 spectators in Nouakchott, Mauritania. The aid package also included a dorm for Mauritanian athletes. According to the agreement, China would be responsible for the entire project's design, all the building materials, and the construction itself. The overwhelming nature of the task compelled the Shandong Sports Committee to request a new office in charge of foreign affairs with eleven members including two French translators.<sup>49</sup>

Hunan, Zhejiang, and Fujian were other provinces that contributed to sports-related aid projects. In 1976 and 1977, Hunan was twice asked by the SPCSC to help build sports stadiums for the Burkina Faso in West Africa and the Republic of Liberia. All in all, from 1966 to 1979, China helped Cambodia, Mongolia, Tanzania, Somali, Sierra Leone, and Congo, in addition to Mauritania mentioned earlier, build sports facilities. Many more countries benefited from China's sports aid programs in the 1980s (see below). Among the sports stadiums that China helped to build, the one in Congo was the most luxurious and could hold as many as 80,000 spectators. More exotic was the sports facilities China built for Samoa, which included a stadium, four soccer fields, and tennis courts.

China also sent athletes and coaches to Third World countries to help train local athletes. This type of foreign aid started as early as 1957.

47. *Ibid.*, A054-01-285.

48. *Ibid.*, A054-01-300, 18 June 1974.

49. *Ibid.*, A054-02-217, 10 Dec. 1975.

Since then, China has sent as many as 2,400 sports coaches to 116 countries in 26 types of sport.<sup>50</sup> Until the late 1980s, the Chinese central government paid for all its athletes and coaches. The common practice was that the SPCSC would ask provincial and city sports teams for “sports experts” (*tiyu zhuanjia*) as the foreign aid personnel were called. Once selected, the candidates were put into a training program which included political indoctrination and disciplinary instruction on what to do and what not to do in foreign countries. Most provincial teams eagerly participated in the program because for the athletes, who had usually passed the peak of their career, this type of mission was a form of political pork. Recipients would have the opportunity to see foreign countries and get paid (though not much) in foreign currency. Hunan, for example, sent coaches to Pakistan among other countries.<sup>51</sup> Beijing was probably top on the list of cities and provinces which sent coaches and athletes abroad. As many as a dozen table tennis players from the capital city went to more than ten countries to teach and coach. Among them, Wang Dayong is probably the best known. After being sent to Ecuador, he then became famous for coaching the Belgian national team. It is not coincidence that Ecuador, as many other Third World countries during this period did, established its diplomatic relations with China.<sup>52</sup> Wang Dayong’s case is also typical of Chinese sports-aid personnel serving as “diplomats” in another important way, that is, most Chinese athletes and coaches eventually left their initially assigned Third World countries and went on to developed countries in Europe, Japan, and the United States. For this reason, Chinese athletes and coaches probably failed to have a long-lasting impact on Third World countries.

### **Friendship Sport in Transformation: The 1980s**

In the 1980s, friendship sport went through significant changes as China introduced a wide range of reforms. In the new era, sports success became a more important symbol of national pride among the general public in China. “Friendship first” was no longer openly advocated even by the central government. This was a transformational era in Chinese sports ideals from “friendship first” to “patriotism first”.<sup>53</sup> Yet, the legacy

50. Wu Ju and Liu Rui, *Wan jia chungiu* (A history of myriads of families), <[http://www.chinabright.com.cn/gotone/g08/family\\_02.htm](http://www.chinabright.com.cn/gotone/g08/family_02.htm)> (accessed 23 June 2005).

51. Hunan tiyu ju (Hunan Sports Office), *Yu guoji tiyu jiaowang ri yi pingfan* (More frequent sports exchanges with foreign countries), <<http://www.sports.gov.cn/hn-sports/dasai/hngk008.htm>> (accessed 23 June 2005).

52. <[http://www.bjsports.gov.cn/jsp/others/bjty50/bjty50\\_pp.htm](http://www.bjsports.gov.cn/jsp/others/bjty50/bjty50_pp.htm)> (accessed 24 June 2005).

53. Zhao Yu, *Qiangguo men* (The superpower dream), *Dangdai*, no. 2, 1988.

of sport serving politics persisted in various new forms and had new directions. During this period, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and East Asian countries in particular became the focus of China's new friendship sport.

China's sports offensive toward Taiwan started in the 1980s, but Zhou Enlai had initially planned sports exchanges with Taiwan in the early 1970s.<sup>54</sup> The 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles provided the first opportunity for China to court Taiwanese friendship via sport. During the 1990 Asian Games in Beijing, a warm welcome was offered to athletes from Taiwan competing in mainland China for the first time since the founding of the PRC.<sup>55</sup> In the same year, China and South Korea started sports exchanges for the first time in history, indicating China's new foreign policy shift toward the Korean peninsula. Since the two countries did not have formal diplomatic relations, the Seoul and Beijing governments decided to use English names "China" and "Korea" to address each other in sports events.<sup>56</sup>

While China generally succeeded in making new friends through politicized sport, problems, even crises, did sometimes arise. One such crisis occurred in 1982–83 when tennis player Hu Na left her team and sought political asylum while visiting the United States. When the U.S. Justice Department granted her political asylum, Beijing retaliated by canceling cultural and sports exchanges with the United States. However, the incident only temporarily hindered the sports and cultural exchanges and the general trend toward China's opening up to the broader world. In the 1980s, provinces began to play even bigger roles in sports exchanges. Fujian province, for example, was among the most active regions in sports exchanges with Taiwan and foreign countries. From 1979 to 1987, Fujian alone had sports exchanges with seventy-five countries and world regions.<sup>57</sup>

Less publicized but even more significant sports exchanges occurred between China and South Korea in the 1980s and 1990s. China's decision to participate in the 1986 Asian Games and the 1988 Olympics in South Korea, over North Korean protests, was greatly appreciated by Seoul. South Korea reciprocated by strongly supporting the 1990 Asian Games held in Beijing. Seoul sent a high-level delegation led by a close relative of President Chun Doo Hwan to the games, provided millions in advertising revenue, and made other substantial contributions to facilitate Beijing's successful staging of the event. The 11th Asian Games in Beijing were an extremely important event for China's international relations in the 1990s. In the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown

54. Xu Yingsheng, *Wo yu pingpong qiu* (Table tennis and me) (Beijing, 1995).

55. *Yomiuri Shinbun*, 4 July 1996.

56. *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, 3 Mar. 1984.

57. <[http://www.fj.xinhuanet.com/fjty/2004-07/01/content\\_2417526.htm](http://www.fj.xinhuanet.com/fjty/2004-07/01/content_2417526.htm)> (accessed 25 June 2005).

on the pro-democracy movement, China once again became isolated; the Asian Games were considered a great opportunity for Beijing to rejoin the world community. Beijing worked hard to make the event successful, and it was. More than six thousand athletes, coaches, and staff from thirty-seven countries participated, the largest in the history of the Asian Games.<sup>58</sup>

Despite the success of the 1990 Asian Games in Beijing, friendship sport was becoming a chapter of history, not current events. Although the government has never officially announced the end of the friendship first principle, China no longer championed alternative sports ethics as a challenge to the Olympic ideal. Sports officials stopped the extreme practice of politicized sport, such as micro-managing sports competition results. In addition, sports exchanges ceased to be a form of foreign aid and in 1986 the SPCSC issued a directive which terminated state-sponsored coaches to Third World countries.

## Conclusion

Friendship sport was a product of the Cold War. It was ideologically and politically motivated and characterized by differential treatment which distinguished between political friends, potential friends, and foes. Friendship sport was also motivated by China's great-power aspiration. As a large country with a long history, China tried to show its generosity to the world. Sports exchanges were used as a form of foreign aid. This is not to say that the friendship shown by China was insincere. The point is that Beijing probably overestimated what sport might be able to accomplish.

Noble as the ideal was, China failed to carry friendship sport through consistently. Chinese athletes were also entrusted with another mission: to "win honor for the motherland." For this purpose, Chinese athletes did not consider it beneath their dignity to bend the rules, as long as the rules did not explicitly forbid them—the best example was the Chinese invention of irregular ping-pong rackets and covering them with surfaces designed to give extra spin.<sup>59</sup> The Chinese concern for national pride was as strong as that of most other countries in the world, if not stronger.<sup>60</sup> As discourteous reception of the Japanese soccer team shown

58. *Hokaido Shinbun*, 8 Oct. 1990; *Asahi Shinbun*, 7 Oct. 1990.

59. The long pips used by some Chinese players give unusual spin to the ball, which is harder to return. It is, however, difficult for players to learn to use long pips rubber sheets well.

60. Tom W. Smith, "National Pride in Specific Domains," GSS Cross-National Report No. 27, <<http://www-news.uchicago.edu/releases/06/060627.pride.pdf#search=%22sports%20and%20national%20pride%22>> (accessed 29 Sept. 2006).

by the Chinese fans at the Asian Cup in 2005, friendship sport in the Cold War era would have to be reinvented in the new age of globalization.<sup>61</sup> Ironically, perhaps the best friendship ambassador was an export, the basketball player Yao Ming.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, the implementation of friendship sport during the earlier decades of the PRC demonstrated the painstaking efforts it had made toward internationalization.

61. *Mainichi Shinbun*, 14 June 2005.

62. Judith Polumbaum and Thomas Oates, "Agile Big Man: The Flexible Marketing of Yao Ming," *Pacific Affairs* 77 (2004).