
22 July 2024 | PDF: [https://hdiplo.org/to/RT25-21](https://hdiplo.org/to/RT25-21) | X: @HDiplo | BlueSky: @h-diplo.bsky.social

Editor: Diane Labrosse
Commissioning Editor: Lori Maguire

Production Editor: Christopher Ball
Copy Editor: Bethany Keenan

Contents

Introduction by Lori Maguire, University of Reims .......................................................... 2
Review by Juliette Bourdin, University of Paris 8 ................................................................. 5
Review by Thomas A. Schwartz, Vanderbilt University ....................................................... 9
Review by Norton Wheeler, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga .............................. 12
Response by Pete Millwood, University of Melbourne ...................................................... 17
Having known Pete Millwood since he was a postdoctoral fellow at the London School of Economics, I am especially pleased to introduce the roundtable on his new book, *Improbable Diplomats: How Ping-Pong Players, Musicians, and Scientists Remade US-China Relations*. Focused on the key period of the 1970s which saw the breakthrough, evolution, and normalization of Sino-American relations, the book consists of six chapters that are organized in chronological order: the first three examining the Nixon years, the next two the period of the Ford presidency, while the last one considers the Carter administration until the regularization of relations between China and the US in 1979. The chronological approach allows us to see the step-by-step developments (and setbacks) in the process.

But this is not your typical history of top-level players (who have attracted a great deal of attention already), for Millwood seeks to shed light on those actors who are outside traditional diplomacy and their less-known role in improving relations. As he explains in the introduction:

> 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 (3).

One of the most impressive aspects of this book, as the reviewers note, is the large range of source material on which it is based, especially the extensive use of Chinese archives. This provides Millwood’s work with great depth of insight into the question at multiple echelons and underscores the authority of his study.

The reviewers who compose this panel are scholars who have all done significant work related to Sino-American relations. In her review, Juliette Bourdin praises Millwood’s book, asserting that "*Improbable Diplomats* offers a convincing reinterpretation of the actual role played by government officials, particularly heads of state, and presents itself as a rebalancing act between the various layers of diplomacy to give nonstate actors the credit they deserve for moving US-China relations forward on the sometimes bumpy road toward normalization.”

---

In some ways, Schwartz’s review is the most critical of Millwood’s work, noting that it is rather long and “retains a cumbersome and dissertation-like writing style.” However, he still finds it of immense interest, both for what it tells us about the past and how it can help us deal with the present: “coming at a time when the future of the US-China relationship is so fraught, policy makers and scholars who are concerned with keeping this crucial bilateral arrangement from going off the rails should read this book.”

Norton Wheeler’s review is full of praise for the former’s contribution. He writes that “Improbable Diplomats draws on previously used and newly explored primary sources, builds on earlier scholarship, and methodically argues that exchange diplomacy both shaped and was shaped by formal diplomacy during a crucial decade in US-China relations.”

In his response, Pete Millwood expresses his gratitude to the reviewers and responds to both their criticisms and their praise. He too notes the contemporary repercussions of his subject, “the lessons of the Sino-American relations of the 1970s—especially societal relations—are more relevant now than they have ever been and may be instructive as to how to maintain a constructive relationship even in the face of fundamental, widening differences in values and interests.”

With this book, Pete Millwood has made a major contribution to our understanding of Sino-American relations in the 1970s and one which contains important lessons for us today when that key international relationship is once again passing through a very difficult period.

Contributors:

Pete Millwood is Lecturer in East Asian History at the University of Melbourne. He previously held postdoctoral fellowships at Hong Kong, Oxford, and Tsinghua universities, and at the London School of Economics. Improbable Diplomats is his first book.


Thomas A. Schwartz is the Distinguished Professor of History and Professor of Political Science and European Studies at Vanderbilt University. Most recently, he is the author of Henry Kissinger and American Power: A Political Biography (Hill and Wang, 2020). He served on the Historical Advisory Committee of the Department of State and was the President of the Society of Historians of American Foreign Relations in 2008.

Norton Wheeler is a semi-retired adjunct instructor of History at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Among his publications are: The Role of American NGOs in China’s Modernization: Invited Influence (Routledge, 2012); “Modernization Discourse with Chinese Characteristics,” East Asia: An
Involving two of the key actors on the international scene, the relationship between the United States and China has been a major focus of attention for decades, and an increasingly busy field of study.1 With China’s tremendous rise since the 1990s, a favorite subject among experts is the risks of a conflict between the two countries.2 Away from the myriad studies that have attempted to define the nature of Sino-American relations in the twenty-first century—from Niall Ferguson and Moritz Schularick’s fairly short-lived “Chimerica” concept between 2007 and 2009,3 to the more recent “Thucydides Trap” analogy used by Graham T. Allison4—Pete Millwood’s Improbable Diplomats chooses to revisit the historical era of the 1970s, between President Richard Nixon’s reopening of diplomatic ties and President Jimmy Carter’s full normalization of diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and it does so with an original perspective that focuses on the informal diplomacy embodied by athletes, artists, and scientists.5

To offer what he calls a “counter-narrative about the Sino-American relationship in the 1970s” (339), Millwood draws on an impressive array of primary and secondary sources, both Chinese and American, notably eighteen major archives and numerous oral history interviews (347-348, 352). Of particular notice is his close examination of the records of two major committees who played a pivotal role in those years, and whose archives became accessible only recently: the National Committee on United States-China Relations (NCUSCR) and the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People’s Republic of China (CSCPRC). Millwood dissects the much less-studied material of “exchange diplomacy,” focusing more specifically on all the actors—ping-pong players, musicians, scientists, etc.—who participated in the informal diplomacy between the United States and the PRC before, during, and after Nixon’s so-called

---

1 The history of US-China relations is so rich that an encyclopedia and a historical dictionary were even published. See Yuwu Song, ed., Encyclopedia of Chinese-American Relations (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006); and Robert G. Sutter, Historical Dictionary of United States-China Relations (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2006).


Millwood presents his aim in very clear terms, namely that he “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” (6). Organized chronologically, the study explores the nature of Sino-American interactions encompassed within the “three layers of diplomacy”—i.e., between Chinese and American governments, between nongovernmental organizations, and between people themselves—arguing that “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” (7).

Not only is Improbable Diplomats well documented, but it is also both well written and solidly structured. After an introduction and a contextualizing prologue, the analysis unfolds along six chapters. Chapter 1 presents the key role played by nonstate actors in rapprochement, notably ping-pong diplomacy, while chapter 2 details the return trip of ping-pong diplomacy, when Chinese players were invited to the United States, thus helping further the more formal diplomacy already at work. Chapter 3 focuses on the year 1973, which was marked by the establishment of “liaison offices” (163), and the tour of the Philadelphia Orchestra in China, but also the low point of the congressional delegation to China headed by Senator Warren Magnuson. Chapter 4 details the rising tensions that appeared in 1974 and 1975 (“the nadir of the Sino-American rapprochement,” 235), after Nixon resigned in the wake of the Watergate scandal and was replaced by Gerald Ford, who lacked both authority and experience to overcome Chinese frustrations at the incapacity to negotiate normalization. Chapter 5 reveals the growing Chinese interest in American scientific and technological advances, which represented a potential leverage to strike a normalization deal with China, a tactic that Ford and Kissinger were unable to exploit. Chapter 6 shows how, on the other hand, the new Carter Administration was able to achieve normalization by offering scientific cooperation with China. Finally, an epilogue and a conclusion round up the findings of the study and show how the experience of the 1970s can offer a relevant framework to approach today’s US-China relations. A rich bibliography (347-362) and a useful index (363-376) complement the volume.

Besides its carefully crafted narrative that skillfully displays the two-way track between high diplomacy and people-to-people exchanges, one of the strongest qualities of Improbable Diplomats is its ability to counter the official narrative that US-China rapprochement was supposedly based on a “triangular diplomacy,” and

---


that Nixon and Secretary of State and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, and their Chinese counterparts, Chairman Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai, should take all the credit for the opening up of diplomatic relations (337–338):

Diplomatic historians have argued that Sino-American rapprochement was motivated by the need for both Washington and Beijing to gain leverage over Moscow. This book shows that there are limitations to such an explanation for changes in the US-China relationship in the 1970s: while fear of the Soviet threat motivated both sides to begin rapprochement (although in fact Nixon was as interested in Beijing’s help ending the Vietnam War, and Chinese leaders in US withdrawal from Taiwan), it does little to explain the development of the Sino-American relationship from 1972 through 1978 (21–22).

Improbable Diplomats offers a convincing reinterpretation of the actual role played by government officials, particularly heads of state, and presents itself as a rebalancing act between the various layers of diplomacy to give nonstate actors the credit they deserve for moving US-China relations forward on the sometimes bumpy road toward normalization.

On the other hand, the lack of emphasis on the profound mutual hostility that characterized Sino-American relations during the two decades preceding the beginning of rapprochement, and the defiance that the American public felt towards the PRC, is surprising. For instance, in 1967 91 percent of Americans held an unfavorable view of China. Although one may argue that “it goes without saying,” and that it is somehow a “given,” it still seems necessary to recall and insist on this important factor, for this deep hostility formed a key element that intrinsically complexified rapprochement. This is the reason why the PRC’s invitation to the US table tennis team to play in China came as a surprise. The visit itself was the object of very close scrutiny, but the reaction of the public, particularly in the United States, was also very carefully observed and, indeed, its positive response convinced Nixon that Americans might be ready for opening up to China.

In fact, the heritage of the early years of the Cold War and the ravages of McCarthyism in the US explain why Nixon could boast that he was undertaking a “journey for peace,” and that this journey became, in the president’s view, the “week that changed the world.” Although Nixon certainly exaggerated the concrete repercussions of his 1972 visit to China, it nonetheless holds true that the impact of such diplomatic opening on the public was tremendous, so much so that it even gave birth to the adage that “only Nixon could go to China.” Strangely, the weight of this crucial factor is fully acknowledged only at the very end of the book: “These early exchanges had also confirmed what Nixon could only suspect: that decades of hysteria about a red, yellow peril were over and that Americans were prepared to make friends with people who had been

---


9 Incidentally, this very spring 2023, the Paris Opera is presenting a production of Nixon in China, John Adam’s opera, composed in 1987 and inspired by Nixon’s 1972 visit to China, which recalls that this event represented, indeed, a turning point, and that the media coverage of the visit left a profound imprint on collective memory.
This is a timely and important book. It is not the easiest read, as it retains a cumbersome and dissertation-like writing style. The manuscript also needed a ruthless editor to make it about 20 to 25 percent shorter. However, coming at a time when the future of the US-China relationship is so fraught, policymakers and scholars who are concerned with keeping this crucial bilateral arrangement from going off the rails should read this book. Coming out of the isolation caused by the pandemic, the contemporary US-China relationship bears superficial but striking resemblance to the 1970s time period that the book covers, as President Richard Nixon and National Security Adviser and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger set in motion policies that began to thaw the hostility between the two countries until formal recognition in 1979.

Millwood’s book takes aim at what it sees as the traditional narrative of the reopening of US-China relations, focused as it is on the high-level diplomacy conducted by Nixon and Kissinger with their Chinese counterparts, particularly Chairman Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai. As the author of a biography of Henry Kissinger, I have been inclined to think there remains much value in this narrative. However, as the subtitle of his book makes clear, Millwood sees the exchanges of persons in the aftermath of the formal diplomatic opening as playing a much more significant role than scholars have credited. Based upon his access to the archives of the National Committee on United States-China Relations (NCUSCR) and the Committee on the Scholarly Communication with the People’s Republic of China (CSCPRC), Millwood argues that these nongovernmental organizations “took a different approach” from that of the US government in rebuilding the relationship with China, and that this constituted “an alternative American approach to US-China relations in this formative decade” (13).

Over the course of six chapters, Millwood lays out his case for the importance of exchanges in maintaining the momentum for the normalization of US-China relations in the 1970s. The author’s proficiency in using Chinese-language sources enhances his argument and is another great strength of the book. He uncovers some fascinating episodes, such as when Mao ordered the Chinese ping-pong team, which was on a reciprocal visit to the United States in 1972, to visit the White House and shake hands with President Nixon, despite the simultaneous protests over the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong during the Vietnamese Easter Offensive. (The American interpreters refused to attend the event.) Millwood makes it clear that American government officials had far less control over their delegations than the Chinese government had over theirs. Both the NCUSCR and the CSCPRC refused to operate “as a branch of federal administration” (174). While these organizations were able to maintain their independence, they also had the tendency to fall “over themselves in their praise of the [People’s Republic of China] PRC, particularly in their comments to their Chinese hosts” (185). Millwood records that during a visit by American psychologists with the team, Yale University’s William Kessen, the leader of the delegation, came to argue that “Chinese children had greater self-confidence than their American peers,” and another member of the group thought that Chinese early childhood education was superior to that of the United States, since “American children know only how to scream” (186). However, the prize for obsequious praise and extraordinary

---

obtuseness must go to the Hollywood actress Shirley MacLaine, who claimed that Chinese “women had little need or even desire for such superficial things as frilly clothes and make-up,” and that “relationships seemed free of jealousy and infidelity because monogamy was the law of the land and hardly anyone strayed” (223). The fact that MacLaine’s book about her visit to China was a bestseller and led to an Academy Award-nominated documentary reflects a bizarre idealization of China that even affected realists like Kissinger. But it also stirred significant controversy in the United States at the time.

Millwood argues that after Nixon’s initial trip and the creation of liaison offices in early 1973, “the two tracks of high-level and exchange diplomacy were…clearly and productively connected” (169). However, after this point, the high-level diplomacy stalled, a victim of the Watergate scandal, Kissinger’s misreading of the Chinese position on Taiwan, and power struggles within the Chinese leadership. Millwood makes the case that during this stalled period in high-level diplomacy, the exchanges of scientists, athletes, musicians, and other groups helped maintain the momentum of US-China relations. High-level diplomacy resumed when a new president, Jimmy Carter, his national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and a new Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping, could take a novel approach. Millwood contends that Brzezinski “worked with top American scientists within and beyond the US government to link scientific assistance for Deng’s urgent modernization efforts to diplomatic negotiations toward normalization—an innovation that helped secure a final agreement in December 1978 on US terms” (268).

In his view, the final normalization agreement was successful because of the efforts of both governmental and nongovernmental actors. Millwood downplays other factors which led to normalization, including US and Chinese concerns about growing Soviet power. However, his argument about the importance of exchanges is certainly defensible.

Although Millwood’s narrative approaches US-China relations from the transnational perspective, he emphasizes in his conclusion that “transnational history ignores the state at its peril” (339). Referencing the work of Thomas Zeiler, who criticized the tendency of transnational historians to relegate the state “to a secondary role,” Millwood stresses how important state actions have been in the US-China relationship. His recognition of this connection between state actions and diplomatic relations takes on greater

---

1. Even Henry Kissinger was not immune to this enthusiasm for the Chinese way. When he returned from China after his historic visit in July 1971, he told his friend and the historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., that “I could not possibly understand anyone young and militant wishing to dedicate themselves to the cause of the Soviet Union…. European communism is dreary and sterile. But I could fully understand it if someone decided to dedicate himself to Communist China.” Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Journals 1952–2000*, eds. Andrew Schlesinger and Stephen Schlesinger (New York: Penguin Press, 2007), 341.

2. In fact, MacLaine’s documentary caused an outcry against PBS, the Public Broadcasting System which aired the documentary on national television. Conservatives criticized both it and another documentary, “The Children of China,” which also talked in glowing terms about the life of children in Mao’s China, with scenes of children teaching each other the thoughts of Chairman Mao. The popular American magazine *TV Guide* headlined the story, “PBS Under Fire,” and concluded, in a preview of our current cultural wars, that PBS had “a liberal or radical left-wing bias.” Benjamin Stein, “PBS Under Fire,” *TV Guide* 23:50 (December 13, 1975), 5.

significance when one looks at the last few years in the US-China relationship. Conflicts over trade, the COVID-19 pandemic, Taiwan, and human rights in Hong Kong and for the Uighurs, have all roiled the relationship between the two countries. Millwood argues that “the deep, broad connections between the Chinese and American people can have a positive—perhaps corrective—influence on strained diplomatic ties” (342). He closes the book noting that “[h]ow to effectively respond to China’s rise is the most important geopolitical challenge facing the United States in our time” (344). One could also ask whether transnational connections and exchanges between Chinese and Americans have such a positive and restraining effect when China remains a defiantly authoritarian and repressive dictatorship and the United States a flawed but pluralistic and open democratic society? We can only hope that Millwood is right, and that the connections forged between Chinese and Americans over the last forty years will serve to buffer the hostility and potentially dangerous rivalry between these superpowers of the twenty-first century.
Pete Millwood has made a significant contribution to a growing body of scholarship on nongovernmental actors in international relations, particularly US-China relations. In some cases, the author substantively expands on existing studies; in others, he fleshes out what have been little more than skeletal notions.

Millwood’s focus is on the 1970s, from the famous ping-pong matches of 1971 and President Richard Nixon’s meeting with Chairman Mao Zedong the next year, to the normalization of relations by President Jimmy Carter and paramount leader Deng Xiaoping at the beginning of 1979. The author’s overriding interpretive argument is that formal and informal diplomacy for this period were “deeply connected and mutually constitutive” (3). The near-decade lag between mutual outreach and the formalization of ties makes this period in the relationship especially fruitful for such a study. Millwood’s ideal type “exchange diplomacy” works well as an analytical tool for analysis of this mutually constitutive dynamic. He further posits three layers within exchange diplomacy: negotiations between governments about exchanges; interactions between American non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and their (quasi-governmental) Chinese counterparts; and interactions between Chinese and American participants in exchanges (6-8).

For the 1970s, documentation for the first two layers is more plentiful than for the third.

On my reading, *Improbable Diplomats* offers two particularly important—and interrelated—insights. First, the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People’s Republic of China (CSCPRC) played a far bigger role in shaping US-China relations in the 1970s than has been evident from previous scholarship. Its activities included shaping exchange policies of both governments, modestly accelerating normalization, and yielding a final agreement that was closer to American preferences than might otherwise have been the case. Second, these diplomatic achievements are, in part, attributable to Carter’s National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, who appreciated the more-than-symbolic significance of exchanges in a way that Nixon and Ford’s advisor, Henry Kissinger, did not.

Millwood also comprehensively discusses the role of the National Committee during the 1970s, more so than any previously published account. Founded in the 1960s to educate the American public about China, the National Committee was transformed by the ping-pong matches into a cultural exchange organization that sometimes seemed to be a surrogate State Department. Three examples of the expansion of the National Committee story also illustrate Millwood’s extensive and productive use of Chinese-language documentation.

---

primary and secondary sources. First, he complicates a “missed message” narrative about delayed US reception of leftwing journalist Edgar Snow’s indication of Mao’s openness to a visit by Nixon. He persuasively argues that there was no delay and, further, that “Snow was only one of multiple channels through which the Chinese suggested starting such a dialogue.” Further, the Chinese had reason to proceed slowly, as they prepared rank-and-file party members for coming changes in the relationship (82-85).

Second, he shows not only that Chinese leaders had consciously used ping-pong diplomacy with other nations prior to the US matches (51-52), but that “Mao and Zhou [Enlai] were deeply and personally involved in the seemingly spontaneous contact between the American and Chinese table tennis teams at the world championships in Nagoya, Japan in March and April 1971” (86-89). Third, Millwood uses Chinese sources to expand the story of a cancelled exchange. When China gave last-minute notice that it would include “liberate Taiwan” lyrics in a 1975 musical tour of the United States, the National Committee, which maintained a neutral position on the Taiwan question, balked. President Ford personally approved compromise lyrics expressing “brotherhood” with the Taiwanese people, but Beijing refused to budge and the tour was cancelled (214-217).

Just as the predominantly scientific exchanges that it coordinated attracted far less popular attention than the sports, musical, and other cultural exchanges that the National Committee facilitated in the 1970s, so has the sponsoring organization drawn less attention. In redressing what we can now see as imbalance, Millwood focuses the second half of Improbable Diplomats on the personnel, ideas, and actions of the CSCPRC. In the early 1970s, China tried to sideline the organization in favor of the Federation of Scientists, because the latter had more members who were sympathetic to Maoism while one parent organization of the former (the National Academy of Sciences) refused to cut ties with a Taiwanese scientific body (110). By the end of the decade, however, the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) had warmed to the CSCPRC. Based on Chinese sources, US official documents, and CSCPRC archival sources, Millwood persuasively argues that China’s growing thirst for US scientific and technical knowledge was one decisive factor. Another was the willingness of Carter and Brzezinski to acknowledge and support nongovernmental actors and, in this case, to be influenced toward harder bargaining with China. CSCPRC leadership had consistently sought more substance and reciprocity in exchanges, less tourism. Knowing, by the late 1970s, that the Chinese were focused on economic development, CSCPRC leaders declined to press the US government to capitulate on Taiwan (i.e., agree to no military ties) as a condition of normalization. In fact, the organization’s top leaders, Frank Press and Anne Keatley, migrated into government service, where they helped negotiate and then implement the scientific exchanges that were part of the normalization agreement.

Additional features of form and content in Millwood’s book are noteworthy. Though they do not fit comfortably within his “exchange diplomacy” framework and could have constituted a separate journal

---

article, his discussion of Congressional visits led by Senators Warren Magnuson (177-183) and Hugh Scott (261-265) and another that favorably influenced Senator Henry Jackson (285) is revealing. In effect, interactions between branches of government displayed patterns of alternating tension and collaboration that replicated relations between the executive branch and exchange NGOs.

Millwood weaves into his narrative the actions of several other organizations that played significant roles in 1970s US-China relations, drawing largely on secondary sources but incorporating some primary sources as well. The National Council for United States-China Trade, unlike the National Committee and the CSCPRC, was formed after Nixon’s visit. However, the US administration promptly anointed it as the third major conduit for informal relations during the wait for normalization. Quite different were the roles of the US-China People’s Friendship Association (USCPFA) and the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars (CCAS). Both had a pronounced pro-Beijing, anti-Taipei stance and, at crucial points, came close to lobbying the US government on behalf of China’s. The USCPFA organized both local chapters and its own exchanges. While those exchanges were intermittently attractive to Beijing in the early 1970s, the pull of organizations that were influential in Washington was ultimately much stronger.

A final note on content: though the book is a work of scholarship, there are some wonderful stories along the way. One is about Perry Link, whom I knew as the author of a Chinese language textbook series that I once used as a high school substitute teacher and who became persona non grata in the People’s Republic after he championed dissident physicist Fang Lizhi in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square crackdown. It turns out that Link also once ran afoul of an American exercise in exchange diplomacy. He was one of six interpreters for a National Committee-sponsored athletic tour group that was visiting the White House. Four of the six, including Link, protested the war in Vietnam by refusing to enter the White House (135).

Beyond narrative content, Improbable Diplomats is rich in its use and discussion of sources. A 34-page introduction presents a thoughtful review of scholarship on nongovernmental relations between the US and China, with an emphasis on the 1970s. In this section and in his numerous citations of secondary sources, Millwood is a model scholar: he cites in order to draw—and build—on prior research, not to establish an intellectual pedigree. To offer one random example: he writes, “Two of these organizations—the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars and the National Council for United States-China Trade—have been the subject of recent dedicated studies, by Fabio Lanza and Christian Talley, respectively” (20). Correspondingly, Millwood makes productive use of an impressive array of primary sources. He conducted research in eighteen archives, including the Beijing, the Shanghai, and the Tianjin Municipal Archives, the

---

1 So many terms we have for interactions involving nongovernmental actors: Track II, Track III, cultural relations/diplomacy, transnational relations, informal diplomacy, public diplomacy, people-to-people diplomacy, etc. The terms have distinctive, though related, meanings. As noted above, “exchange diplomacy” serves Millwood’s purposes well. Additionally, he uses most of these alternate terms at one point or another.

2 Specialists will undoubtedly wish that an additional title or two had been included. My own candidate would be Stross’s Bulls in the China Shop. Although it is mostly about the late 1970s through 1989, the first chapter on the Canton Fair in the early 1970s captures, through thick description, the spirit of earlier people-to-people exchanges.

Guangdong Provincial Archives, the Zbigniew Brzezinski collection, and others. He strikes a balance between boldness and caution in his interpretation of his sources. For instance, he states that Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing, likely instigated the confrontation over “liberate Taiwan” lyrics discussed above. Still, he cautions that “[t]he high-level Chinese documents that would confirm or rule out Jiang’s involvement are not available…” (218). In many cases, he integrates judicious use of primary and secondary sources. He writes, “Richard Suttmeier and Denis Simon are among the scholars of post-normalization scientific contacts that analyze this ‘benefitting side pays’ formula,6 although they do not mention that the Chinese recognition of imbalance in scientific exchange was a substantial break with the PRC’s approach before 1978” [as Millwood shows through the use of sources from both sides] (321).

I have only two quibbles, both regarding potentially misleading statements. One is about research. Millwood claims that “this book is the first to make a thorough use of the archival use of both organizations [i.e., National Committee and CSCPRC]” (15), from which some readers might infer that neither organization has been much studied. While that would be a fair inference for the CSCPRC, considerable research has been done on the National Committee.7 The other fuzzy signal is interpretive: “[B]oth the CSCPRC and the NCUSCR found a purpose in a post-normalization landscape of Sino-American contact by expanding and diversifying their programs” (317). This statement is true but incomplete. The latter

---


7 Millwood is technically correct about the National Committee—for the 1970s, in a published book. But other scholars have studied that organization far more than they have the CSCPRC. For a forthcoming book that will complement Improbable Diplomats (with more emphasis on exchange participants and on broader cultural flows during the 1970s), Kazushi Minami made extensive use of National Committee archives. Mao Lin made some use of the archives for a 2016 journal article and has a book project that will presumably draw more deeply on them. “‘To See Is to Believe?’ Modernization and U.S.-China Exchanges in the 1970s,” Chinese Historical Review 23:1 (May 2016), 23-46; see https://cah.georgiasouthern.edu/history/faculty/dr-mao-lin/ for the book project. Jeffrey Crean also recently made some use: “A New Sphere of Influence: Table Tennis Diplomacy and the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations,” Journal of American East Asian Relations 28:2 (2021), 109-132. My own research in the National Committee archives was broader but, at least for the 1960s and 1970s, much shallower than Millwood’s: Role of American NGOs, 28-49, 78-82 87-88, 95-100, 127-133. Millwood cites my book numerous times, along the lines described in the previous paragraph. For these two central organizations and the broader early exchange landscape, scholars continue to find a useful starting point in two essays in Joyce K. Kallgren and Denis Fred Simon, eds., Educational Exchanges: Essays on the Sino-American Experience (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1987): Kallgren, “Public Interest and Private Interest in Sino-American Exchanges: De Tocqueville’s ‘Associations’ in Action,” 58-79; Jan Carol Berris, “The Evolution of Sino-American Exchanges: A View from the National Committee,” 80-96. Berris, whom Millwood interviewed five times, has earned the appreciative respect of many scholars for graciously opening the National Committee’s doors and (pre-archiving) files to them.
organization has continued to evolve and exercise influence. The former, by the 1990s, was limping along with reduced funding, a truncated educational agenda, and a new name.\(^8\)

To recap, *Improbable Diplomats* draws on previously used and newly explored primary sources, builds on earlier scholarship, and methodically argues that exchange diplomacy both shaped and was shaped by formal diplomacy during a crucial decade in US-China relations. Some readers, like this reviewer, will find his interpretation generally compelling. Those who are less readily persuaded can at least trace Millwood’s interpretive steps backward through his clearly-documented sources.

---

\(^8\) An essay by former CSCPRC director, Mary Bullock, whom Millwood interviewed twice about the 1970s, explains these changes: “Mission Accomplished: The Influence of the CSCPRC on Educational Relations with China,” in Cheng Li, ed., *Bridging Minds*, 49-68.
Response by Pete Millwood, University of Melbourne

I am very grateful to Juliette Bourdin, Thomas Schwartz, and Norton Wheeler for their careful readings of my book. Their comments are constructive, attentive to detail, balanced, fair, and insightful. I am also grateful to Lori Maguire for organizing this forum promptly after my book’s publication.

I am gratified indeed that the reviewers find the book to be an “important” one. I am pleased that Bourdin and Wheeler find persuasive my argument for the significance and influence of exchange diplomacy and of people-to-people contacts in the Sino-American rapprochement. I am glad, too, that Schwartz and Wheeler pay close attention to my use of Chinese sources: one of my foremost objectives in this research was to shed light on the Chinese perspective on societal connections between China and the United States in this period. Earlier studies of Sino-American rapprochement often relied largely or solely on English-language sources, in part because of the availability of sources; with greater (albeit far from total) recent availability of Chinese archival and published sources, we can now study the other side of the relationship. All three reviews offer excellent summaries of some of the book’s arguments and analysis, which is especially pleasing to me as evidence that I communicated these ideas successfully in the text. I will dedicate the remainder of my response to responding to a few points of contention raised by the reviewers, and to a small number of clarifications.

Bourdin is right to emphasize that popular American views of China were negative even into the late 1960s. The book attempts to address this point in the prologue and chapter 1 by showing how hard the National Committee on US-China Relations (NCUSCR) and others worked to make the public case for opening some level of communication with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) under Doak Barnett’s principle of “containment without isolation.” I argue that those efforts were at least somewhat successful. A Gallup survey conducted as early as January 1969 found that opposition to the People’s Republic’s admission to the United Nations was at the lowest-ever recorded level, with 56 percent of Americans in favor of the United States “going along” with the decision if the PRC won a vote to enter the organization. The success of these efforts was further demonstrated by, for example, the positive reaction to China’s hosting of the US table tennis team, as also cited by Bourdin. Certainly, though, I would agree with Bourdin that there was truly a sea-change in popular American attitudes toward China from the late 1960s through to the 1970s. As Bourdin correctly points out, most Americans felt fear and confusion when they thought of China in

---


1967—but most then applauded President Richard Nixon’s trip in 1972,¹ and millions sought to follow in his footsteps within that decade, taking trips to China that would have been unthinkable in the 1960s.

Wheeler is correct in emphasizing the value of previous scholarship on the National Committee on US-China Relations, which includes his own important study of the organization (focused more on the post-1979 period, but with coverage of the 1970s, too).⁴ My book is, as Wheeler states, the first to make full use of the organization’s archives from the 1970s, but not the first to study the NCUSCR’s role in Sino-American relations. Nonetheless, I do think that the NCUSCR records that were made available directly to me in the organization’s offices,⁵ and then those made available in the substantial collection at the Rockefeller Archive Center from 2017 onwards, offer a substantial addition to the source base that this previous research was based upon.⁶ This is what my quoted statement—that “this book is the first to make a thorough use of the archival use of both organizations”—refers to with reference to the NCUSCR (15).

Schwartz’s comment on the book’s length is perhaps the most direct criticism in the three reviews; Wheeler, too, suggests that the book’s coverage of various Congressional visits could perhaps have been expunged. Improbable Diplomats is the first English-language work to attempt to cover all forms of Sino-American non-governmental and people-to-people contact in the 1970s (the book’s prologue and epilogue extend this coverage even further temporally).⁷ The NCUSCR and CSCPRC are at the heart of the narrative, but the book includes significant coverage of the National Council for US-China Trade, the US-China People’s Friendship Association, and the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, to name just the most prominent US organizations. As mentioned, the book also discusses Congressional delegations. Simultaneously, the book examines these American organizations’ Chinese counterparts: the Chinese People’s Institute of Foreign Affairs, the Scientific and Technical Association of the PRC, the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, and the Chinese Academy of Sciences. The best extant English-language works on the topic of US-China non-societal relations in this decade—Christian Talley’s book on the National Council for US-China Trade and Fabio Lanza’s work on the Committee of

---

¹ A Roper survey conducted in October 1971 already found that 51 percent of respondents approved of Nixon’s announced trip, with only 22 percent disapproving. A March 1972 survey found that 68 percent of Americans thought that Nixon’s trip was “very effective” or “fairly” effective at improving world peace. Perlmutter, 196-200.


³ But not, of course, only to me: as Wheeler points out, Jan Berris has worked hard to make the NCUSCR records available to any scholar interested in the organization’s history.

⁴ Other scholars also worked with the Rockefeller Archive Center NCUSCR collection from around 2017 onwards (after which the archive processed and released the donated records) and have begun to publish research based on these new records that complements my findings in Improbable Diplomats. For one example already published see Jeffrey Crean, “A New Sphere of Influence: Table Tennis Diplomacy and the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations,” Journal of American-East Asian Relations 28:2 (2021): 109-132.

Concerned Asian Scholars—cover one of the aforementioned US organizations each. Talley’s book is 270 pages long and Lanza’s 262 pages long, with neither making use of Chinese sources to provide coverage of their counterparts’ perspective on either organization. At 376 pages, *Improbable Diplomats* is not short, and I did consider expunging coverage of some of these contacts. Ultimately, though, I decided it was worthwhile to attempt to offer the first examination of the full range of Sino-American societal contacts of the 1970s, from both the US and Chinese sides, in a single work. After all, one of the core arguments of the book is that rapprochement was the result of the actions of a far larger and more diverse cast of actors than recognized, or at least explored, in previous works.

Schwartz also notes the book’s “cumbersome and dissertation-like writing style,” although Bourdin states that the book is “both well written and solidly structured,” with Wheeler also highlighting what he calls “wonderful stories” included in the narrative. Style is, of course, a matter of taste. Some readers may, like Wheeler, find, for example, the prologue chapter that attempts to offer a summary of several different relevant historiographies useful and informative; others may have preferred that I omit this material in favor of focusing only on the story of the 1970s. Wheeler praises my analysis of both primary and secondary sources, even going as far as to say that the latter is that of “a model scholar”; other readers may have preferred that I had kept some of my direct engagement with earlier scholarship out of the main text.

Before concluding, I would like to clarify one point in Schwartz’s otherwise precise review. On page 185, the quotation he cites as referring to the NCUSCR and CSCPRC—that they had the tendency to fall “over themselves in their praise of the PRC, particularly in their comments to their Chinese hosts” (185)—in my original text in fact refers to a tendency among “American visitors” to China in general, rather than those two committees. (The original quotation reads, “there is no denying that American visitors often fell over themselves in their praise of the PRC” (185).) These visitors were often participants in NCUSCR and CSCPRC delegations, but, in general, I would say that these two organizations themselves, with their more frequent and deeper dealings with the PRC, were less prone to overly exuberant praise of China than were the first-time visitors that they often took to China. Indeed, Wheeler’s review highlights my argument that these organizations could be hard-nosed negotiators in their dealings with the PRC state. This is a minor misreading in Schwartz’s otherwise careful review, and I mention this only as clarification.

Schwartz’s concluding point about the book’s contemporary salience is much more important and one that I have thought about a good deal since I finished the text. I did so a year and a half into the pandemic, when it seemed that the drastic Sino-American isolation of 2020 might be an aberration, and that a tense but active relationship between the two countries might be revived in 2021 or 2022. That has not been the case. As of June 2023, there were only 24 flights a week between China and the United States, compared to 350 a week before Covid. Strikingly, 350 was also the total number of all American students in China as of June

---


9 “US, China plan to increase commercial flights between the countries,” *Reuters*, 28 June 2023.
2023, according to the State Department. There are many more Chinese students in the United States, but their numbers were also down 29 percent between January 2020 and 2023, while transnational scientific cooperation has been hurt by fears of both espionage and espionage allegations. As Schwartz highlights, the Sino-American relationship of today is closer to that of 1970 than it ever has been since that date, bar perhaps in the immediate wake of the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown—a development that would have been almost unimaginable in December 2019. We should not overstate the similarities: trade is encumbered but still extensive; there are still hundreds of thousands of Chinese in the United States; and diplomatic contact is still frequent if sometimes fraught. These are all important differences to 1970. Nonetheless, the lessons of the Sino-American relations of the 1970s—especially societal relations—are more relevant now than they have ever been and may be instructive as to how to maintain a constructive relationship even in the face of fundamental, widening differences in values and interests.

Schwartz asks “whether transnational connections and exchanges between Chinese and Americans have such a positive and restraining effect when China remains a defiantly authoritarian and repressive dictatorship and the United States a flawed but pluralistic and open democratic society.” Surely people-to-people exchanges between authoritarian and democratic societies are extremely challenging, and do not easily offset tension in diplomatic relations (as my book repeatedly shows and argues). But was this not true in 1971? Chairman Mao Zedong was no less of a dictator than President Xi Jinping is, the destructive Cultural Revolution continued into the mid-1970s, and no American thought that China was on the way to becoming a liberal democracy in the 1970s. Of course, Cold War geopolitics helped midwife the societal relationship of the 1970s, but there are plenty of good reasons—economic, environmental, existential—for both sides to work to rebuild some level of Sino-American cooperation today. Neither Americans nor Chinese are likely to compromise on their deeply held and often incompatible values today, but most did not in Mao’s time, either—and, as my book shows, many found ways to build the relationship all the same.

Once again, I am grateful to the three reviewers for their engagement with my work.

---

10 This is according to US Ambassador to China, Nicholas Burns. “U.S. Ambassador to China on Future of the Countries’ Complicated Relationship,” NPR, 21 June 2023.
