

NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON UNITED STATES-CHINA RELATIONS

71 West 23rd Street, 19th Floor, New York, NY 10010-4102 (212) 645-9677 Fax: (212) 645-1695 e-mail: info@ncuscr.org

China Sports Leadership Forum

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Remarks of President Stephen Orlins

Thank you for the kind introduction.

The last time I was introduced at a sporting event was over 40 years ago, and it wasn't as pleasant for me. I was the captain of my high school basketball team. We were very good at academics - I think virtually everyone on the team went on to graduate school - but we were not tall. And we were definitely not the best high school basketball team in New York, a state that was home to many great basketball players.

Before the new season started, the school held a pep rally to get the other students to support the team. The whole school was in the gymnasium. The principal stood up and announced, "Here is our basketball team. They are short... but they are slow."

Our team's greatest accomplishment that year was losing to a team on which the young Julius Erving played. He of course, went on to be called Dr J and became one of the greatest NBA players ever.

As president of the National Committee on U.S.-China relations I want to talk briefly about the important role that sport has played in building the relationship that the United States and China have today. I also want to talk briefly about the role that it will play in the future and why sports is so important in creating a more peaceful and prosperous world.

The NCUSCR was established in 1966. At that time, the United States was involved in the Vietnam War and China was entering the Cultural Revolution. Despite America's public denunciation of China as "Red China" and China's denunciation of Americans as "decadent imperialists," Chairman Mao and Premier Zhou and President Nixon and Secretary Kissinger had decided that the Soviet Union posed a common threat. The years of no diplomatic relations had to be ended. But 22 years of silence and hostility had created deep mutual mistrust. This was true for officials and for ordinary people in both countries, who needed to be convinced that the resumption of relations was a good thing.

What made this happen? In large part it was a sport, Ping Pong, that changed attitudes on both sides. It was Ping Pong that created the first person-to-person ties between the People's Republic of China and the United States. And because dramatic political events were taking place at the same time, that period is now referred to as the time of "ping-pong diplomacy."

This happened in 1971. At that point, China had been cut off from diplomatic relations with most of the rest of the world for over two decades. Then, seemingly out of the blue, the U.S. ping-pong team, which had been visiting Japan for the World Table Tennis Championship, was invited to visit China. The story goes that the invitation came about because an American player happened to get on a bus with some Chinese players. They started talking. You can probably imagine the conversation and how at some point someone said, “Well, you should come over and we can have a match.” That’s the story; records now show that in actuality, Chairman Mao and Premier Zhou had been discussing such a possibility for a while.

It’s hard to imagine now just how dramatic and exciting this was. All kinds of formal permissions were required, but the U.S. team’s visit took place only a few days later.

Time magazine called it the “ping heard round the world.” There was a huge amount of press coverage. Over the course of that tour, the young American and Chinese table tennis players, many of them teenagers, changed the way ordinary people in their countries thought about so-called Red or Communist China and the decadent, imperialistic United States.

And there were major political results, too. The “people-to-people” exchange provided President Nixon with a backdrop for the major diplomatic shift that was in progress. During the U.S. team’s visit to China, the United States announced the end of a twenty-year trade embargo against the People’s Republic. In July 1971 Nixon announced that Secretary Kissinger had secretly visited China and then he himself went to Beijing from 20 to 27 February 1972, the first visit by an American president to China.

The American Ping Pong team reciprocated by inviting their Chinese opponents to visit the United States, which they did in April of 1972. This is when the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations (NCUSCR) stepped in to organize what became a huge media event, broadcast by every news outlet and publicized in magazines as diverse as *Life* and *Seventeen*. The two teams traveled on one charter plane and another plane was needed for all the reporters and camera people.

The Chinese players completely dominated the matches, but the U.S. players managed to win surprise victories especially when the tour landed in their hometowns. From these sporting events came the term “ping-pong diplomacy” and the belief that sport would play a unique role in the U.S.-China relationship.

Throughout the 1980s, there were many athletic exchanges that introduced Chinese athletes to huge U.S. audiences across the country, all in the spirit of “friendship first, competition second – youyi di yi, bisai di er.” And sports would continue to play a role in China’s diplomatic relations with other countries after the International Olympic Committee (IOC) re-instated China in 1979.

Over the next two decades, the National Committee continued our sports people-to-people diplomacy, sending or hosting teams in almost every organized sport. We sent tennis players, swimmers, divers, track and field stars, and basketball players to China and hosted soccer and volleyball teams as, well as acrobatic and martial arts tours in the United States – to name just a few of the dozens of athletic exchanges the Committee ran in the 1970s. There is a great photograph in our office of a young martial arts expert visiting the United States. In a video celebrating our 40th anniversary, he describes how this visit changed his life. I think almost everyone in this room knows Li Lianjie, Jet Li, the person in the photograph.

In the late '80s, the National Committee reduced and then in the 90s stopped these programs because by then sports exchanges could be made profitable, and you in this room could do a better job at it than we could. The fact that these activities have been commercialized in no way reduces the importance of sports in the relationship.

In fact, there are times when the bilateral relationship between the two countries hits rough patches but the sports relationship expands. In many ways, the people-to-people diplomacy that sports represents is a foundation for a stronger political relationship. When you have a Chinese on your basketball team or she is your doubles partner, his nationality makes no difference; it is his jump shot or her back hand that counts.

In the last 20 years, nothing has influenced American perceptions of China more than the 2008 Olympics. All Americans marveled at the opening ceremony and the extraordinary number of gold medals that China won. And for me, someone who works on the political side of U.S.-China relations, there were certain images that I won't forget, images I think still mean something to Americans.

The first was Yao Ming walking at the front of the Chinese team holding the hand of a 9-year-old survivor of the Sichuan earthquake. The human emotion conveyed through that image was unforgettable. The second, totally unplanned, was Liu Xiang having to succumb to his injury and his coach coming to tears describing his hard work and disappointment. Americans thought, "I feel his pain. That's just how I would feel."

So at a time when there is too much fear of China's rise, in part because China can be so different from America, this one image conveyed, better than thousands of words ever could, that we are all the same.

This was, by the way, was one of the main reasons for the founding of the modern Olympic Games. They were not just meant to be a reenactment of an ancient sports festival. They were meant to help a rapidly globalizing world. They believed that through sports people would come to understand one another, to see what they have in common and not just their differences. They believe sports would make young people better equipped to cope with social,

political, and economic challenges of the early twentieth century and become responsible global citizens. Surely we can say the same today.

Pierre de Coubertin and his supporters who founded the modern Olympics also believed that sports would let people get to know the people of other countries and encourage a reduction of hatred, distrust, and prejudice. Again, this is an opportunity for everyone involved in promoting sports in the 21st century.

You working in the sports field enjoy a special privilege. You work in a field that knows virtually no boundaries and you entertain billions. From an outsider's perspective you have a lot of fun. So, with that privilege there comes a special obligation. The globalization of sports means that you are often representing your country in a global context.

The Chinese here are all ambassadors for China and the Americans are all ambassadors for America; find the best in your culture and in your sport and convey that to the millions that see your sport. You help lay the foundation for peace and stability in Asia and the rest of the world. Keep doing your cross-border deals because each and every one of them helps bring the two countries and their peoples together. Continue to develop and celebrate the unique role of sport in the U.S.-China relations—the “ping heard round the world.”