Joana Carlson

**Pre-Ping Pong Civilian Diplomacy**

“Mr. Truman, the people, not the generals, are supposed to run the foreign policy of this country.”

The ping pong matches between the United States and the People’s Republic of China in 1971 marked an important new era in Sino-US relations, and many scholars have looked to this tournament and the civilian exchanges represented therein as one of the earliest examples of this type of diplomacy between the two nations. This view, however, may be unnecessarily shortsighted. Civilians were already actively involved in transforming Sino-American policy more than twenty years before these matches. Between 1949 and 1971, there were a surprising number of Americans in China—either by their own volition or by force. These included businessmen, clergy, and students imprisoned after Communist “Liberation”; Americans who took up residence in China as ideological or political refugees; reporters and students who ventured into China illegally; and family members of prisoners who later visited legally. While ideologically-aligned Americans voluntarily residing in China have received some scholarly attention, prisoners in China, those who sought asylum, and those who made short-term visits have received little attention. This paper will explore the ways these individuals shaped U.S. policy in the years leading up to “ping pong diplomacy,” arguing that the matches in 1971, while noteworthy, were a continuation of an existing undercurrent of civilian diplomacy, rather than a radical shift. Although a corollary investigation of Beijing’s policies correlating to the same time period would provide a valuable insight, the documents currently available are unable to shed much light on the ways in which Chinese individuals in China and abroad influenced Chinese policy toward the United States.

**Prisoners of the Revolution**

An urgent letter from Beijing University professor Dorothy Borg to Louis S. Weiss in 1948 describing teaching conditions at the university and the fears faced by foreign and Chinese professors on their jobs represents the uncertainty that foreigners across China felt as the government underwent its massive transition. “The situation here is very serious and the question is whether the attack on the universities will be renewed shortly with increased violence, as most people think. It is

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1 David R. Luce to Harry Truman, August 7, 1950; OF 150-G Formosa to OF 151 (1948-49) [2 of 2], Box #761, Folder: O.F. 150-G Formosa.
for this reason that we want as much publicity in the United States as it is the only think [sic] which acts as a brake.”\(^2\) Borg’s frustration was voiced against the Guomindang (KMT), rather than the Communist army enclosing Beijing, and the decision by professors at Beijing University to strike were particularly noteworthy considering that during the most egregious periods of misbehavior against students, the entire faculty had never gone on strike.

Following the formal inauguration of the People’s Republic of China in October 1949, foreigners faced several choices. They could return to their home country, they could publicly ally themselves with the revolutionary government, or they could remain neutral and wait. Considering the variety of Americans residing in China at the time, missionaries, students, teachers, and businesspeople, it is not surprising to find members of each of these groups making different decisions for distinct, complex reasons. Some U.S. citizens who had spent most of their lives in China feared that leaving China after October 1949 would mean permanently leaving behind a nation and culture to which they’d become acclimated. An equally important fear involved staying in the Middle Kingdom and possible clashes with the new Communist government or increased difficulty of migration later. Shorter-term residents debated whether to carry out their goals in China before returning home, weighing the importance of finishing their projects and the uncertainty of changed study and work situations under the new government.

In the years following the Communist revolution, other Americans found themselves in China. This group included two waves of prisoners-of-war from the Korean War, a group of whom the Chinese military retained and investigated as well as cohort of U.S. soldiers who denied repatriation to the U.S. in favor of living in China at the Panmunjom negotiations in 1953, Americans seeking asylum from criminal charges in the U.S., and “civilians” captured in Chinese territory and charged with espionage. While most of these citizens found themselves in unforeseen situations that led to their residence in China, others, like American newsmen, students, and family members of prisoners made a concerted effort to get into China—by both legal and illegal means.

“Captivated” by the Revolution

Popular diplomacy has taken many shapes, and those who have become unofficial diplomats have not always had a choice in how they will influence foreign affairs. Prisoners-of-war and civilian hostages have often been used in steering foreign policy and public opinion. Used as human bargaining chips by both the captor nations and their home countries, captives are still effective today. Even when governments decide not to “negotiate with terrorists,” public outrage often sets the parameters for official response. The media uses captives’ stories of life in bondage and conveys or exploits the anguish of their families to generate sympathy and stir readers and viewers to action. Americans imprisoned in China after 1949—and Chinese citizens detained in the United States—were certainly no exception.

The antagonism of the United States government toward “Red China” after the revolution created an understandable attitude of distrust among members of the Chinese government toward Americans living in China. Although some of these U.S. citizens had been living in China for decades, or had even been born in China, they could not necessarily be trusted. While many of these Americans were only monitored from a distance in 1949 and 1950, the beginning of the Korean War brought these individuals under increasing scrutiny, and often incarceration. Their long tenure in China, the government presumed, helped them understand both the culture and the language, and their natural allegiance to the United States made them ideal spies. Clergy bore the additional culpability of religious proselytization and the historical and ideological baggage that made religious adherents dangerous elements of society in China.

From the beginning of the 20th century when the U.S. government perceived and claimed an “Open Door” in China until the civil war of the 1940s, business opportunities presented a quick way to get rich. Many successful businessmen had been born in China and succeeded because they could navigate between the Chinese market expectations and Western strategies. Most foreign businesspeople left before the Communists gained control, since they feared a communist revolution would jeopardize their assets. Some, however, like Robert McCann stayed. Born in China, then 60-year old Mr. McCann held deep connections to the nation. Although he had previously worked for
Frazier, Federal, Inc. as an auto agency manager, he was arrested in Tianjin in June of 1951 on charges of espionage. After serving ten years of his 15 year sentence, he was released in April 1961. McCann had been diagnosed with lung cancer, and Chinese physicians reported that he was “critically ill” with only three months to live.

In addition to businessmen who had spent much of their lives in China, missionaries of various denominations had spent decades working with Chinese citizens. Some, like the Maryknoll sisters were working to take care of lepers, while others served in positions of authority in their local congregations. Although a number clergy left out of fear before the Chinese Communists took control of the government, many also stayed. They determined that their duties had not yet been completed and that they had been appointed by God to serve in China in spite of the dangers. After only a few years, the Communists expelled or incarcerated the rest of the remaining missionaries. Their responses to the time spent under arrest were as diverse at the orders and denominations they represented.

One nun, Sister Mary Victoria of the Maryknoll order, used her experiences under house arrest to write a book detailing her life in captivity. In *Nun in Red China* she recounts the long process her order underwent, from the first occupation of the house by local “farmboys” whose job it was to expose the nuns as spies, to a false accusation of buying and selling opium, to her days as prisoner 197951. Examples like invaders finding recipe cards and assuming they were secret codes, finding a broken radio and accusing the nuns of reporting secretly to the United States government, and uncovering an old sewing machine and divining that it was actually a special type of machine gun allow readers to understand Sister Victoria’s dilemma. She could vehemently deny she was a spy, but in the mind of her amateur interrogators, she possessed code cards, radio transmitters, and machine guns—clearly she was guilty of espionage.

Homer and Wilma Bradshaw, Presbyterian medical missionaries to China for more than 27 years, were placed in separate prisons in 1951 and were not even told their charges until the following year. In late 1955, when they received their freedom, the effects of their imprisonment were evident.

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Both had been put on a slow starvation program and Wilma Bradshaw seemed completely uncomprehending. As her husband explained to the media, “she doesn’t realize, even now, that she’s in free territory.” Her dazed, frightened affect prompted many in the media to wonder about whether she had been “brainwashed.” Despite their frail outward appearance, Mr. Bradshaw admitted that when his health had failed in May of 1955, he began receiving Red Cross parcels that helped him regain his health. Likewise, when Mrs. Bradshaw became ill in 1953, she was transferred out of prison and put under house arrest. Although the middle-aged couple were fortunate enough to gain their freedom together, other prisoners were not so fortunate. Instead, the Bradshaw’s brought information about the condition of American prisoners remaining in China and the news that thirteen others would be released shortly.

Neither Sister Victoria’s ordeal, or that of the Bradford’s generated as much public outcry in America or in diplomatic circles as the 20-year prison sentence of Bishop Edwin Walsh. Walsh was arrested in March 1958 because he had supposedly “organized and directed imperialist spies and counter-revolutionaries hidden in the Catholic church of China in carrying out subversive criminal activities in a systematic way.” Possibly the highest profile prisoner, while in jail, Bishop Walsh received the Xavier Award from the Jesuits in 1960 and William P. Bundy, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs personally appealed to Communist China for Walsh’s freedom at a “testimony meeting in the bishop’s honor. Walsh served 12 years of his 20-year sentence before being released in 1970. Upon arrival in Hong Kong after his liberation, the 79-year old reported that his entire time in prison, he was confined to a room in the medical section of the jail and that he had not been treated badly.

If the long-time China-hands mentioned above underwent such scrutiny and suspicion, those with an even briefer history of living in China were considerably less trustworthy and merited closer evaluation and interrogation. The largest group of short term China residents came to China ironically as “cultural ambassadors” of the United States and received their income from the sale of

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U.S. war equipment left in China after World War II. The inaugural class of Fulbright scholars arrived in China in 1948, after scholarship negotiations between the U.S. government and Generalissimo Jiang Jieshi had been finalized. It is worth noting that not only was China the first nation to receive Fulbrighters, but that originally, nearly 15% of Fulbright scholarship funds were reserved for China—a distinction only matched and not surpassed by the United Kingdom and Italy, and equaled more than double or quadruple the funds allocated for study in other nations. Monies for the China Fulbright program provided the opportunity for twenty professors and twenty graduate students to study in China. Rationale for this hefty scholarship likely involved the number of U.S. military machines and supplies that the Chinese Nationalists had requested, and stockpiled, during World War II for the planned civil war against the Communists. Students and lecturers appointed to go to China in 1947, the scholarship’s first year, were chosen by a diverse American selection committee based on project merit, and presumably, on the likelihood that the academic exchanges would not cause a stir with the Nationalists upon arrival in China at the beginning of their grant period.

Few could have known that less than two years after arriving in China, these scholars would be studying under the watch of the Chinese Communist Party and relying on the Communists’ cooperation to remain in China conducting research. Some scholars decided that it was best to leave China and continue their research elsewhere. However, several others remained, and the issue of Chinese Communist governance over students admitted by the Nationalist government proved uncomfortable for the new government and the scholars alike. Some, though not all, of these academics sympathized with the Nationalist government, creating dissonance between their academic goals and ideological framework. Likewise, the Communist government worried that these grant recipients either were, or could be manipulated into becoming, spies for the United States. After monitoring the remaining academics’ activities for over a year, and taking the pressure of the Korean War into consideration, the Communist government decided to arrest and imprison the scholars. Several Fulbright students were accused of providing information to the U.S. government, and working for U.S. government’s intelligence branches. Upon release in 1955, Dr. Malcolm Bersohn,

formerly a student at Beijing Union Medical College, admitted that he had worked for the O.S.S.

As the title of one New York Times article suggests, the American media and public had difficulty believing that these prisoners had actually engaged in “spying,” and instead asserted that the recently freed prisoners had been brainwashed and were hiding the truth of their lives in captivity in order to protect family and friends still locked in Chinese jails. Columnists cite use of similar phrases, penitent attitudes, and praise for acceptable treatment at the hands of Communists as proof that the scholars had been subjected to indoctrination. In the case of Harriet Mills, who “believed that the United States engaged in germ warfare in Korea,” the media reiterated that she was “badly brainwashed.”\footnote{“4 More Americans Freed by Red China,” \textit{New York Times} (November 1, 1955).}

Whether or not concerted brainwashing occurred in these instances, it is important to remember that given the scholars’ connection to the U.S. government, it would not be unreasonable to think that at least on a small scale, these individuals would have been useful to the American government during the Korean War and could have been actively working against the Communist government using their scholarly status as a cover for additional political activities. Moreover, the lack of outside information could lead a captive to believe that the United States had indeed used biological weapons in Korea—indeed, articles and political cartoons from Chinese newspaper \textit{Renmin Ribao} (People’s Daily) show that the Chinese public shared the same conviction, despite American denials. After witnessing the atomic bomb used on Japanese civilians a decade earlier, use of germ warfare in Korea would not have been a big leap of reason. As former P.O.W. Morris Wills told one reporter, “I know the American Army and they wouldn’t think twice about trying out germ warfare on people they think substandard – like Koreans and Chinese.”\footnote{Gerald Clark [of the Montreal Star], “Turncoats Find a Limbo in China,” \textit{New York Times} (November 29, 1958): 5.}

While the prisoners above all stirred U.S. diplomats to work toward cooperation with China for the exchange of civilian prisoners, the captives themselves were not the only agents of popular
diplomacy. The role of the American media and its influence on American public opinion cannot be underestimated. News regarding civilian prisoners, especially missionaries, in China generated public outrage. Prisoners’ names, addresses, and next of kin appeared in the newspapers as early as 1952, prompting readers to write letters of sympathy to family members, and in some instances, to offer material assistance. The Wang-Johnson prisoner exchange talks in Geneva, beginning in 1955, coincided with a period of deep American distrust of Communism, fueled earlier by Senator Joseph McCarthy. American popular opinion could not be swayed to believe that reports of decent treatment in Chinese prisons and expressions of remorse over illegal actions were genuine. These prisoners, many concluded, had been tortured or brainwashed by Chinese communists to believe that the situation inside “Red China” was, in fact, better than the American public assumed.

While all the prisoners above were living in China prior to the revolution and decided to remain, it’s important to recognize that not all American prisoners in Mainland China were living there before the Communist take-over in 1949. Some arrived as a result of the armed conflict in Korea from 1950 to 1953 and others were captured later inside Chinese territory. Mary Ann Harbert and Gerald L. McLaughlin were among the latter minority. Their boat disappeared in Chinese territorial waters in 1968, and they were presumed dead until 1971 when the Chinese government announced that they had been arrested as spies and released Harbert, then 25 years old, noting her companion had committed suicide in 1969. The majority of these later arrivals were prisoners-of-war from the Korean conflict and their “civilian” counterparts. While most of the P.O.W.s were exchanged at the repatriation talks in Panmunjom, Korea in 1953, a crew of eleven airmen and their two civilian companions captured in Chinese airspace, remained in Chinese prisons on charges of espionage.

The American public followed the stories of these men in the papers and kept abreast of developments during the Wang-Johnson talks. While the experiences of these airmen are important, arguably public opinion in the United States provides an even clearer window through which to view the ways in which their captivity stirred the American public, and U.S. policy thereafter. In 1955, during the Wang-Johnson talks, Chinese representative Wang Bingnan presented an unusual offer to Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson that took the State Department aback and startled many Americans.

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Ambassador Wang said that the Chinese government would allow family members to visit imprisoned servicemen and would, thereafter, release the prisoners. This offer baffled U.S. policymakers, and raised the hopes of some family members. The New York Times tracked down the families of these men and asked if they planned to accept the Chinese offer. Most families of the prisoners responded negatively, citing the expense of the trip, child-rearing responsibilities at home, and skepticism that their visit would accomplish anything. A few families, however, responded enthusiastically, and Mr. Harold Fisher even voiced a willingness to bring two of his prized Hampshire hogs as a goodwill gesture. The New York Times added, “The hog-gesture had previously been suggested by one of the Chinese guards of the farmer’s son, according to a recent letter.” Upon learning of some families’ desire to see their captive relatives, PanAm and Northwest Airlines offered free air transportation (even in 1955, when a round-trip ticket cost over $1000), and benevolent organizations like the Red Cross and other charities offered to cover additional expenses incurred during the trip. These offers were, understandably contingent on the approval of the U.S. government to grant family members passports to travel to China.

As bizarre as sending goodwill pigs may seem, family members’ responses to China’s offer were less schizophrenic than those of the U.S. State Department. After deliberating over the offer, the State Department first issued a statement saying that they would neither encourage nor forbid families to see their loved ones in China. Only a week later, the State Department issued a letter to the families stating a full policy reversal and refusing to grant passports to visit China, calling the Chinese government’s gesture a “propaganda move.” In an argument that confused reporters at the time, John Foster Dulles explained that if the U.S. government acquiesced to the proposal, it would encourage rogue nations to kidnap American citizens. Senator Mundt of South Dakota went even further in his description of the futility of the mission saying, “Even if they [the families] found them

19 John Foster Dulles to Frank J. Starzel [General Manager, the Associated Press], Sep. 6, 1956, Dulles, John Foster (3), Box #49, Jackson, C.D.: Papers, 1931-67, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, KS.
bleeding from every pore, the Communists would tell them ‘You’ve got to say the boys are in good shape or we’ll hang your son.’”20 The airmen’s families did not make the trip to China in 1955, and the eleven airmen were released despite the State Department ban on family travel. However, the two civilian companions, who admitted working for the C.I.A., remained. It was not until two years later that their families were allowed to visit.

While the American public was still processing the State Department’s about-face, Chinese delegates were arranging for their own civilians to return home from the United States. In a speech earlier in August, Zhou Enlai criticized U.S. responses to the civilian exchange plans, and reiterated that the number of American civilians remaining in China paled compared to the number of Chinese nationals who had been forbidden to return to China—fifty-one Americans, compared to more than 600 students who had requested to return to the mainland and over 5,000 Chinese students total residing in the United States. He further stressed the inherent differences between the students the U.S. government forbade to return to China and the American prisoners held in Chinese jails who had been convicted of crimes. These students, Zhou argued, had been invited by the United States in 1948 and granted government scholarships, and had not been accused or convicted of any offenses that would legally prevent them from returning to their families in China.

The Department of Immigration had decided after the Korean War began that students engaged in scientific study should not be allowed to return to mainland China because their knowledge would present a security threat if the students returned to China and used their knowledge to serve the government. Over the years, students who had requested to return to care for dying family members, who worried about their own health problems, or who simply missed family and friends, received systematic rejection to leave the U.S. In a public relations debacle that outraged not only the Chinese government and the students involved, but also the American public, the State Department not only lifted the restrictions earlier placed on Chinese students, but went further to notify students that unless they left by the specified date—in many cases only three or four weeks later—they would be guilty of violating U.S. law and subject to hearings and up to $5000 in fines. According to some, the policy was turning formerly pro-American students into opponents of the

U.S., that “We are driving highly qualified, intelligent people straight into the arms of communism. I have had Chinese tell me ‘If this is democracy we don’t want any part of it.’.” Some students who had only a matter of months to finish their terminal degrees were baffled and despondent about the sudden, and seemingly putative reversal in U.S. policy.

**Living in Exile**

Understandably, many Americans residing in China after 1949 were there against their wishes. However, an important cohort of American citizens chose to live in China. For some, the Chinese Communists’ emphasis on equality and protection of civil rights—at a time when the international community was sharply criticizing the United States for failing to protect minority rights—made living in a China an appealing option for those who had suffered persecution in their American communities. Others were prompted by a sense of curiosity and adventure and hoped to discover what living in “Red China” would really be like. The rest stayed because they were afraid to return to the United States, where some faced criminal charges.

Of those drawn to China for ideological reasons, gun-brandishing Civil Rights activists Robert F. Williams and his wife Mabel stand out. Robert had distinguished himself in the Civil Rights Movement for his views on armed resistance, which stood in direct opposition to the non-violent measures espoused by many early Civil Rights leaders. Although neither Williams nor his wife were communists, they militantly opposed imperialism and respected the way Chinese communist leaders strove to unite and strengthen the “third world” nations of Asia and Africa. Although the Williamses held similar values, it is unlikely that they would have come to China had they not felt compelled to flee the U.S. After their involvement in a violent clash with police and white protesters in their hometown of Monroe, North Carolina in 1961, the Williamses escaped first to Cuba, where they spent several years beaming Radio Free Dixie over the Florida Straits, and in 1966, Williams and his wife moved to China in 1966, just as the Cultural Revolution was gaining strength. While living in China, Robert Williams visited communes and factories to gain an insight into Chinese social reconstruction. Mr. and Mrs. Williams socialized with the upper echelons of Chinese society and became acquainted with top political leaders and other political exiles. In the late 1960s, President Nixon began covert

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efforts to learn more about China and possibly re-establish diplomatic relations. At that time, Robert Williams agreed to share his knowledge of China with President Nixon if the President could assure him a safe return to the U.S. In 1969, Williams and his family returned to the United States and successfully fought extradition to North Carolina, where the kidnapping charges brought against him in 1961 were finally dropped in 1976.

A second group of Americans who ended up in China were former Korean War prisoners-of-war. In 1953, after the cease-fire in the Korean conflict, prisoners of war were brought to the border town of Panmunjom to be repatriated. Twenty-one American soldiers announced that they would decline repatriation and requested to live in China. The decision to stay was not in itself illegal, and the former G.I.s had the right to decline returning to the United States. Some stayed hoping for greater civil rights protection or out of curiosity to discover the “New China” while others remained out of fear of criminal prosecution in the United States upon return.

Of the twenty-one, only Clarence Adams claimed that he stayed in China because he was frustrated with the racism he encountered in the United States. While in China, he studied at universities in Beijing and Wuhan and married a Chinese woman. In his memoir, *An American Dream* (2007), he describes his life in China as “comfortable,” but failed to find the racial equality for which he had left the United States. In a brazen move, Adams recorded broadcasts urging African American soldiers fighting in Vietnam to put down their guns and go back home to fight for racial equality in America. He returned to Memphis with his family in 1966, as antagonism toward intellectuals increased and the Cultural Revolution began.

Otho Bell, William Cowart, and Lewis Griggs spent their short time in China working on a collective farm—an industry they’d chosen because of their familiarity with agriculture—and were the first P.O.W.s who stayed in China to return to the United States. Bell had been accused of mistreating fellow prisoners and collaborating with the enemy, and according to his wife, “It will take courage for him to return and face trial…It would be easier for him to stay there, but, for our daughter’s sake, I feel that he should have the chance to atone, if he wishes.” Bell’s own comments

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also cast shadows on his actions in Korea, writing to his wife that if he had come home sooner he would have been hung as he believed happened to two P.O.W.s who initially rejected repatriation and later changed their minds. Upon return to the U.S., Bell, Cowart, and Griggs spent three months in jail before the Supreme Court ruled that they could not be court martialed since they had already been dishonorably discharged and were technically civilians.

Others like Lowell Skinner and William White stayed out of curiosity, interested to see what benefits communist society had to offer. Skinner worked in a paper factory for nine years, working through the lean years of the Great Leap Forward and staying until 1963 when he cited disillusionment with the Chinese revolution and a “lack of individual freedom” as his primary reasons for returning to Ohio. White’s experience in China was considerably different. He chose to study for a law degree at Renmin University in Beijing, where he met his future wife. Although he was an African American soldier from the South, he did not cite racism as a reason to emigrate or an explanation for why he decided to come back. Instead, when he finally returned to the United States in 1965, he claimed he simply wanted to “live a peaceful, ordinary life” with his wife and two bi-racial children in the U.S.

Clearly, these individuals encountered frustration while in China and faced living in “limbo.” As Canadian reporter Gerald Clark remarked after interviewing them in 1958, “I have the feeling they are fighting a weird inner battle…The irony is that the Americans often feel compelled to explain, with some sympathy, the actions and attitudes of their countrymen.” They still considered themselves American, and seeing anti-American posters in the streets was upsetting. On the other hand, they often found the actions of U.S. officials embarrassing.

Although each of their experiences, first in the United States and later in Korea and China were different, the American public and the media made no distinction between those who had stayed out of fear and guilt for crimes committed, and those who were simply looking for greater racial equality, better standards of living, or simply wanted a change of pace. When referring to any

of the 21 who refused repatriation, they were invariably labeled “turncoats,” at term the former
P.O.W.s hoped would “wear off.”\textsuperscript{28} Even the U.S. government treated them differently. The two
prisoners of war who had merely considered emigrating to China received three and a half years in jail,
while other soldiers who had committed actual crimes and had not considered rejecting repatriation
received comparably mild punishment—regular discharges in the case of the Army and Air Force,
and no discipline in the Navy and Marines. The émigrés who returned in 1955 were forced to wait for
three months in jail before being released without a court martial. Those who returned later were not
imprisoned, but had to stand before the House Committee on Un-American Activities and give their
testimonies.\textsuperscript{29} Even after the U.S. government cleared their names, many had difficulty finding work
and dodging “turncoat” slurs.

Although some exiles in China may have initially sought to make political statements by
emigrating, it is evident that their decisions to stay or return involved more than politics. For Robert
and Mabel Williams, civil rights drove them to China and the ability to exchange information with the
Nixon administration in return for clemency paved the way for their return. The Korean War P.O.W.s
are more difficult to summarize, however, each realized that by emigrating to China they had
trespassed the U.S. government’s moral, if not legal, standards. They realized that staying in China
meant remaining in an uncomfortable identity limbo, while returning to the U.S. would bring
hardship. Upon leaving, each braced themselves for harsh treatment by American policymakers and
neighbors alike.

\textbf{Just Passing Through}

In addition to Americans who found themselves imprisoned in China or decided to live in
China to escape conditions in the United States, there were others who simply wanted a glimpse of
life behind the “Bamboo Curtain” and hoped to tell other Americans what was really going on. Their
goals were significantly curtailed by the fact that after 1949 both China and the United States forbade
Americans to visit China. Although China offered to allow family members to visit military prisoners
in China in 1955, the State Department refused the offer. Nevertheless, most of the prisoners were

\textsuperscript{29} Clarence Adams, \textit{An American Dream: The Life of an African American Soldier and POW Who Spent
Twelve Years in Communist China} (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007).
released shortly thereafter, giving U.S. policymakers little reason to capitulate to China’s future “propaganda” offers to allow other U.S. citizens to come to China in exchange for the release of American prisoners. However, American obstinacy did not dissuade Premier Zhou Enlai from making a similar exchange offer in 1956. This time, instead of inviting family members, China wanted to invite the American media, and in exchange Zhou offered to release most of China’s remaining U.S. civilian prisoners.

This shrewd decision depended on several factors to be successful. Given that the U.S. had only recently denied American families the right to be reunited in China, the odds that the Eisenhower administration would suddenly approve members of the American media to go did not seem likely. In the probable event that the U.S. would not give its reporters permission to visit China, the Chinese government hoped some of these reporters would be intrigued enough by the proposal that they would come even without American consent. News of the Chinese offer reached the Eisenhower administration and the American press in August of 1956, and the U.S. government failed to respond before the deadline of September 22, 1956. Chinese Central Party media organ *Renmin Ribao* railed against the American refusal to allow reporting on China, claiming that contrary to U.S. accusations of a closed system in China, Dulles had actually constructed the “Bamboo Wall” and the “Paper Wall,” that U.S. freedom of the press was a joke, and that “the center of the Free World isn’t really free.”

Despite U.S. bans, the first three American journalists arrived on December 24, 1956, without State Department permission into the warm reception of the Chinese government. Edmund Stevens and Philip Hollington of *Look Magazine* and Afro-American reporter William Worthy arrived in mainland China via Hong Kong for a one month tour of China. While in China, Communist Party representatives provided tours of model factories and farms and made sure that the reporters had a chance to meet key Chinese dignitaries. Four days after the reporters’ arrival in China, the U.S. State Department issued a memo saying that the three reporters’ visits were illegal and that their passports were now valid only for return travel to the United States, at which point, they would

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30 It is important to keep a balanced perspective on *Renmin Ribao’s* statements on freedom of the press and the articles’ target audiences. These stories were published in 1956, during the same period that Chinese intellectuals suffered denunciations and prison terms for responding to the call to contribute constructive criticism on the Communist Party and its leadership during the “100 Flowers Movement.” These stories targeted the literate average Chinese citizen whose understanding of foreign relations came, by necessity, from the Chinese media.
be confiscated. Renmin Ribao used this windfall to boast that Americans had such a strong interest in China that in the face of harsh government reprisals, reporters defiantly ventured into China. Before embarking on the trip, William Worthy had contacted the American Civil Liberties Union, who agreed to represent him legally in the likely event that the State Department withdrew his passport. Upon his return, Worthy’s visit to China became the subject of debate—in Congress, at universities, and among average American readers.

Across the United States, the ACLU organized interested citizens and held rallies to support Worthy’s passport application. Boston University student John Chaffee wrote to then Senator John F. Kennedy asking about his thoughts on journalists traveling to “Red China,” and in the Senate and House of Representatives, congressmen debated William Worthy’s application and passed a resolution in favor of granting renewal. Despite popular support and congressional approval, Secretary of State Dulles decided that he would make an example of Worthy. If Worthy could visit China without penalty, he argued, others would be inspired to do that same. Americans had already applied for visas to China and had been denied. If Worthy’s illegal visit went unaddressed, missionaries, students, and businessmen would disregard the existing travel ban and accept the risk. Dulles correctly perceived that Worthy’s case would set an example for other Americans. The ways in which Worthy’s treatment influenced other citizens, however, defied Dulles’s intentions.

Less than a year after Worthy’s illegal venture to China, a group of American students ignored State Department warnings from Under-Secretary of State Christian Herter and accepted Beijing’s invitation to travel by train from the International Youth Day in Moscow to Beijing. This invitation was originally open only to fourteen students; however, when other American students in Moscow heard about the opportunity, they petitioned the Chinese delegation for entry permits. The Chinese government sponsored the travel expenses of the students in the original group and provided entry permits for the remaining 28 students, who were responsible for their own expenses. The fact that 42 American students agreed to go to China despite the consequences was noteworthy enough, but even more remarkable, some of these students had the opportunity to do something no

31 From Department of State Bulletin, Jan. 14, 1957, pg. 54
other Americans had been allowed to do—ten of them actually visited American prisoners in China and discussed their situations, and reported their findings back to media outlets in the United States.33

But exactly what had the students’ seen? What had they been allowed to see and what did they have the knowledge to perceive? A recent conversation with Robert Carl Cohen, a student who made the trip in 1957 and was “the first American to film inside China,” (Worthy had only taken photos) revealed the limitations of such a trip. He admitted that they had, as expected, been allowed to see what the Central Government wanted to them to see and had little opportunity to interact freely with the local population. (This was especially true because no one in their group spoke Mandarin.) Even during government-sponsored events, Cohen admitted feeling a bit lost. Given the spontaneous nature of the Chinese excursion, he had not had the opportunity to adequately research Chinese politics or history and did not even know who to talk to, who to film, or what events were particularly significant. In spite of his admitted deficit, Cohen did take extensive footage, which he sold to CBS after his return to the United States.

Although they incurred legal and personal difficulties, these illegal visitors provided a window of opportunity for limited legal travel to China. William Worthy’s protracted legal battle challenging the State Department’s Constitutional right to deny freedom of travel, the students’ information about Red China and the lax punishment they received (essentially the equivalent of “promise not to do it again, ok?”34), and the opportunity Cohen’s footage had provided for the American public to see behind the Bamboo Curtain, undermined the grip the State Department had on American citizens’ travel to China. Furthermore, the fact that ten of the students were allowed to meet and interview prisoners John Downey and Richard Fecteau made family members want similar privileges. The Eisenhower administration recognized that it either had to permit limited, legal travel to mainland China or accept that every year more American citizens would risk traveling to China illegally. With this in mind, the State Department began relaxing its travel policy by first appeasing journalists’ requests to visit to China. Although this capitulation sated the U.S. media, the

administration’s refusal to allow reciprocity for Chinese journalists not only went against international standards, but outraged Chinese media outlets and may have provided the rationale for the Chinese government to keep some of the American prisoners in China incarcerated.

In 1957, after all but five American prisoners in China had been released, the United States belatedly amended its policy to allowing citizens to legally visit family members who were still serving their sentences. These last five prisoners, who were serving jail terms for espionage, failed to meet the qualifications granted other prisoners that allowed them to leave earlier. Instead, in an effort to help family members see these remaining inmates—and likely to give ordinary Americans the chance to see what Chinese jail conditions were like, the Chinese government granted entry visas the wives, mothers, and brothers who requested permission, several of whom came on multiple occasions over a period of thirteen years.

The mothers of three prisoners, John Downey, Richard Fecteau, and Hugh Redmond were the first family members of prisoners to legally travel to China. The matrons, who reportedly “had no qualms about visiting Communist China,” began their trip on New Years Day 1958, arriving in Hong Kong on January 6.35 The three women, who had not told their sons about their arrival in advance, brought warm clothes and vitamins for their sons, and some of the prisoners’ favorite foods. As early as 1955, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai had given assurances about the health of Downey and Fecteau, saying that although the actions of the two men merited the death penalty (a charge that the State Department notably did not refute), nonetheless Zhou promised, “they will come back home one day.”36 Mrs. Downey made a return visit in 1960 and Mrs. Redmond visit again in 1962. At that time, she appealed fruitlessly for her son to be released so that he could come back to the U.S. and care for her because of her declining health.37

Robert E. McCann, a businessman born and raised in China, was serving a 15-year jail term for carrying out espionage activities against the Chinese during the Korean War. Between 1958 and 1961, his wife Flora McCann had visited him in his Tianjin prison. She reported to the American

media that the Chinese Red Cross had been “simply wonderful” to her during her stays.\textsuperscript{38} When McCann’s lung cancer became terminal and the Red Cross informed Mrs. McCann that her husband only had several months to live, his wife petitioned the Chinese government to allow her to take her husband back to the United States, after serving ten years of his sentence. The High People’s Court granted her request, “in the spirit of humanitarianism,” and in April 1961, both McCanns returned to the United States.\textsuperscript{39}

**Ping Pong Diplomacy: A Transition or a Continuation?**

Where do these military and civilian prisoners, exiles, and travelers fit in relation to the existing “Ping Pong Diplomacy” paradigm? Were they predecessors to the table tennis team, or do they fit in a different category altogether? An examination of the evidence of Americans in China between 1949 and 1971 suggests that these individuals paved the way for the ping pong teams in 1971; especially since these pioneers reaped the legal and personal repercussions for their roles in popular diplomacy that the table tennis members never encountered.

China’s invitation to host the U.S. ping pong team in 1971, while noteworthy, seems to follow a pattern in post-1949 Sino-American relations, by which both the U.S. and China either relied on, manipulated, or rued the actions of their citizens at home and abroad in their ability actualize changes in both nations’ foreign policy. It would be too cynical to imply that governments used their citizens as foreign diplomacy pawns, as one author suggests, and it would be too naïve to assume that individuals’ influence on foreign policy went unchecked by government parameters. While recognizing the agency of each person, it is important to keep a balanced perspective and realize that governments and their citizens both needed and intimidated each other. It was their back-and-forth strategization, the challenge of reaching the edge without going too far, and knowing where the competition’s weak points were that made the years before the actual ping pong matches bear striking resemblance to the game.