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Joe Schlesinger: The ping-pong player who changed the world

And the lessons we should draw from it

By Joe Schlesinger, CBC News Posted: Feb 18, 2013 5:46 AM ET | Last Updated: Feb 18, 2013 5:44 AM ET



Zhuang Zedong, right, competes in the men's team finals of the 26th World Table Tennis Championship in Beijing in April 1961, his first world championship. (Zhang Hesong / Xinhua News Agency / Associated Press)

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ANALYSIS



Joe Schlesinger
Foreign correspondent emeritus

A man who with a simple gesture of friendliness toward a stranger sparked a change in the course of world history has died in China.

No, he was not a political leader or a diplomat. He was just a table tennis player.

His name was Zhuang Zedong and, in 1971, Zhuang, then the planet's best ping-pong player, a three-time world champion, was riding in a Chinese team bus at the world table tennis championships in Japan when an American player, Glenn Cowan, boarded it.

Cowan, a flamboyant hippie from California, had missed his team's bus and casually climbed aboard the next vehicle to come along.

The Chinese aboard the bus froze. No one spoke for almost 10 minutes.

To them, Americans were the enemy, the U.S an "imperialist paper tiger" that refused to recognize China's Communist regime.

With their country in the throes of Mao Zedong's paranoid Cultural Revolution, any contact with Cowan could have brought disastrous reprisal.

But then the incredible happened. Well aware that he risked official retribution, Zhuang stepped forward, shook Cowan's hand and presented him with a silk scarf.

A photo of the Chinese player fraternizing with

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About The Author

Joe Schlesinger was a foreign correspondent for CBC for 28 years, covering natural disasters, political upheavals and conflicts from Vietnam to the Persian Gulf.

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the American created a sensation in Japan.

And in Beijing, too. But in a quite unexpected way.

A break with its ally, the Soviet Union, had deepened China's isolation.

To counteract it, and to protect themselves against Moscow's reach, Mao and his prime minister, Zhou Enlai, decided to look for partners in the outside world.

The establishing of diplomatic relations with Canada under Pierre Trudeau in 1970 was part of this outreach. But above all, the Chinese wanted a rapprochement with the U.S.



Zhuang and Cowan shakes hands a second time, this time during Zhuang's visit to the U.S. in April 1972, part of the ping-pong diplomacy exchange. (Xu Bihua / Xinhua News Agency / Associated Press)

Yet their indirect signals to Washington went unheeded by president Richard Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger.

"They overrated our subtlety," Kissinger would later write in his memoirs, "for what they conveyed was so oblique that our crude Occidental minds completely missed the point."

So Mao and Zhou essentially took a page out of Zhuang's book and broke the ice with a ping-pong paddle.

'Ping-pong diplomacy'

They invited the American table tennis team to a hastily organized international tournament.

And to make the objective obvious, Zhou held a tea party for the tennis players — Canadian and other teams included — at which he wooed the Americans with kind words: "You have opened a new chapter in the relations of the American and Chinese people."

Mind you, not a word was said about relations between the American and Chinese governments. But this time the White House took the hint.

For Richard Nixon, who had built his whole career on fierce anti-communism, the possibility of a rapprochement with the hated Chinese Communists presented an opportunity to further split the international communist camp and ease the pressure on the U.S. in its losing battle with communist forces in Vietnam.

So three months after China's launch of what came to be called ping-pong diplomacy, Kissinger was in Beijing on a secret mission to establish relations.

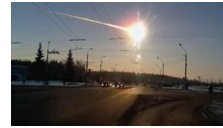
The following spring Nixon was exchanging toasts with Mao.

Wrong side

In many respects, that's how China's rise to today's pre-eminence began, with Zhuang Zedong's impromptu friendly approach to his American counterpart on a bus in Japan.

Though Zhuang was toasted as a hero at the time, he didn't do too well afterwards.

At first, he rose rapidly in party ranks and became sports minister. But he fell in with the wrong crowd: Mao's wife, Jian Qing and her radical Gang of Four who controlled the party in Mao's last years.



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Ping-pong diplomats

Zhuang Zedong was 72 or 73 when he died on Feb. 10, reports differed. And if you missed his passing that's understandable as many of the obits appeared only in the sports sections.

He won the world men's singles championships three times between 1961 and 1965.

The American he shook hands with that day in 1971, Glenn Cowan, died in 2004 at 51. He was 19 when the two met, after Cowan missed the U.S. team bus because he had stayed late at practice.



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Soon after Mao died, the Gang of Four were arrested for reasons and imprisoned.

Zhuang was also arrested and banished from Beijing.

For four years he had no contact with the outside world.

He was eventually allowed to return to Beijing to a low-profile life coaching local teams.

"I was on the wrong side," he admitted a few years ago in an interview with The Times of London. "I did many dreadful things I now regret."

Here was a man who first rose to prominence by speaking truth to power and then, having reached a position of power, betrayed himself by letting it corrupt him.

Still, what he did on that bus in Japan so long ago has resonance in the problems of today's world.

With so many countries at bitter odds with each other but unwilling to come together even just to talk about their differences — think of the U.S. and Iran — they could perhaps all use a Zhuang Zedong.

In other words, a simple citizen who, in the darkness of a dangerous rift, has the courage to shine a very human light on seemingly intractable problems.



The evolution of ping-pong diplomacy. Richard Nixon and Zhou Enlai in February 1972. Pierre Trudeau meets Mao Zedong in October 1973. Stephen Harper plays table tennis with a student at Huamei Bond International School in Guangzhou in February 2012. (Associated Press / Canadian Press / Reuters)



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