Several books were published before the Beijing Olympic Games discussing China’s Olympic dreams and China’s international relations and sports. However, Xu Guoqi’s book is unique. It offers an international history approach, as the author claims, to analyze the role of sports in China’s political and diplomatic relations by “using the whole world as a reference point” (6). It is the first time the “Two–China Question,” “Ping-Pong Diplomacy,” and the Montreal Games in relation to the “Two–China” issue, are examined with such rich references from both China and the West.

The “Two–China” issue is one of the most fascinating events in the history of the Olympic movement and the history of international relations in both the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of China. Based on archives from Taiwan, Beijing and Lausanne, Xu Guoqi vividly describes how the three parties applied different political approaches, which made the issue more complicated in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, and how the three parties compromised in a new political environment in the late 1970s and 1980s to produce the “Taiwan formula,” which later became the formula for China’s resolution for Hong Kong: “one country, two systems.” Sport in China has certainly become the testing ground for political solutions for the country. “One country, two systems” and “one China, many members” are the models for China’s ambition of unification in the twenty-first century.

“Ping-Pong Diplomacy” has frequently been used in China as evidence of China’s diplomatic and political skills in breaking through the isolation of the Cold War and returning to the international political stage. The small ping-pong ball has moved the globe, the world. However, Xu Guoqi, for the first time, examined the “American version of ping-pong diplomacy” (9) through Western, especially American, sources to help the audience see the other side of the coin. He demonstrates the American response to the Chinese table tennis team’s visit of 1972, and the suspicion and hostility among the White House, the State Department and the National Committee which reflected the uncertainty of the Sino–US relations at the time. However, as Xu states, the ping-pong delegation was the first official PRC envoy to the United States since 1949, and its visit generated an enormous amount of interest in China among the Americans. The positive response from the American side certainly played an important part in stimulating the development of diplomatic relations between China and the USA in the 1970s, which, in turn, changed the political order of the world in the late twentieth century.

The chapter on the Montreal Olympics is the most interesting. Xu has dusted off the files from the archives and chosen the best morsels from a huge quantity of raw material to present the reader with the fascinating story of “politics challeng[ing] the Olympic ideal” (164) in Montreal in 1976.
The Two–China issue, again, dominates the theme of the Montreal Olympics in 1976. This time, the parties, including the PRC, Taiwan, the IOC, Canada, the US, the UK, Germany and Australia, were all involved.

Both Beijing and Taiwan were determined to represent China at the games (the IOC did not manage to solve the problem until 1979). Although the PRC was not a member of the IOC yet, its international visibility was much improved as a result of the ping-pong diplomacy. The PRC assumed its seats at the United Nations in 1971 and established diplomatic relations with the US and Canada and some other Western countries in the 1970s. Therefore the PRC insisted on linking the visibility of the Olympics with its international status and legitimacy at the Montreal games.

Canada, on the other hand, had established diplomatic relations with the PRC in 1970 and acknowledged the One–China policy: the PRC was the sole legitimate government of China and Taiwan was part of China. However, Taiwan was still a member of the IOC then and was determined to use its membership status to participate in the games. Canada, for its part, when Montreal applied for the games, promised the IOC in 1969 that it would welcome all member countries to participate in the games.

Now the question was who should represent China at the games, the PRC or Taiwan. How could the Canadian government, the IOC, Beijing and Taiwan solve this diplomatic crisis so that the games could take place? Would Canada break its diplomatic relations with Beijing to follow the IOC rule? Would the US boycott the games if Taiwan athletes were not allowed to enter Canada? It is one of the crises not widely known but which almost destroyed the Olympic movement at the time.

Xu’s Olympic Dreams is a well-researched and fine piece of work with excellent photographs. Its chapters about the Two–China Question, Ping-pong Diplomacy and the Montreal Olympics have advanced the study of Chinese sports, Chinese politics and China’s diplomatic relations. This is a must-read for anyone interested in history of China.

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