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Ping-Pong? That's So Old China.

By *Maureen Fan*
Washington Post Foreign Service
Thursday, August 14, 2008

BEIJING, Aug. 13 -- On Wednesday, relegated to a half-empty gymnasium at Beijing University, a sport that once thrilled a nation seemed like a relic.



Nearly every park or school in China features a ping-pong table. This man was playing last week at a public park in Beijing. (By Natalie Behring -- Bloomberg News)

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Far from the iconic Bird's Nest and the incandescent Swimming Cube, a steady clocklike rhythm -- tick, tock, tick, tock -- filled the air as players swatted tiny balls back and forth. There were no space-age swimsuits, no towering NBA players, no state-of-the-art fireworks displays. Instead, there was only the first day of the table tennis competition, and it felt almost retro.

"Ping-pong is a game for kids," declared Sun Yu, 12, who nevertheless came to watch the competition with his grandmother and a classmate. "I've played it since I was 5, but now I've lost interest."

Millions continue to call ping-pong [China's](#) national game. But for younger generations, whose sports horizons have been broadened by satellite TV, Internet chat rooms and star-making advertising now available in China, there is less interest.

Many are too young to remember Chairman Mao's "ping-pong diplomacy," when members of the U.S. table tennis team were invited to China in 1971, paving the way for President Richard M. Nixon's historic visit the next year.

When it comes to thwacking a small, hollow ball above a taut net, the Chinese have long been very, very good.

The world's nine top-ranked players are Chinese, and China has won 16 of 20 Olympic gold medals in the sport. Every player on the U.S. team was born in China.

But the game -- referred to exclusively as ping-pong here -- has been pushed to the

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sidelines, in part because the government has begun to focus more resources on sports traditionally dominated by the West, such as basketball, swimming, canoeing, rowing, sailing, and track and field. The hurdler Liu Xiang is wildly popular here. Basketball player Yao Ming of the NBA's Houston Rockets is so revered that he led the Chinese team as it paraded in these Olympics' Opening Ceremonies.

Among some ordinary Chinese, ping-pong just seems less fashionable than it once was.

"Ping-pong became a popular national sport because of politics," said Cui Xingming, 22, leaving the gymnasium with his girlfriend. "But nowadays I think even pool is more popular than ping-pong."

Ping-pong was declared a national sport in the early 1950s, when the International Table Tennis Federation became one of the few world bodies of sport to recognize China instead of Taiwan. China later boycotted the Olympic movement for more than two decades because organizers allowed Taiwan to compete.

As China's economy has boomed and its culture has become more westernized, more people have started to play tennis, basketball and other sports, said Shi Chunyuan, communications director of the Liaoning Sports Bureau. Still, the Chinese can find a table in nearly any school or public park.

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"There's a large and solid ping-pong player base in China, and that's why we keep the crown year after year," Shi said. "This won't change -- ping-pong is true to its name as a national pastime."



Nearly every park or school in China features a ping-pong table. This man was playing last week at a public park in Beijing. (By Natalie Behring -- Bloomberg News)

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Players on the Chinese Olympic team are not unbeatable. During the 2004 Summer Games in Athens, South Korean Ryu Seung-min defeated China's Wang Hao to win the gold medal in the men's singles competition. But this year the Chinese have home-court advantage, and expectations are high.

"I still like to watch the sports that China is good at," said Zeng Qixiang, 68, a retired factory worker who watched China defeat Greece in the men's competition on Wednesday. "China is good at small balls, like badminton, ping-pong and tennis, not big balls."

For Zeng and others, the game continues to hold a treasured place in this country because there is so much history behind it. Just because the Chinese are now enamored of a hurdler doesn't mean they can't like ping-pong, too.

"Nowadays, people play many other kinds of sports," said Li Jinjing, 28, a producer with CCTV, the state broadcaster. "But it doesn't mean that ping-pong can be replaced. China has 5,000 years of history, and after all this time, China is still irreplaceable."

As China's women's team clobbered Croatia and the Dominican Republic on Wednesday, the spotlight was elsewhere. China was being mesmerized by three waifish girls who would go on to capture gold for this country in team gymnastics.

"We always win all the ping-pong games -- there's no suspense," said Li Sufan, 24, a middle school teacher leaving the China-Croatia game with her brother. "My students prefer to play basketball -- for them, it's a symbol of coolness."

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