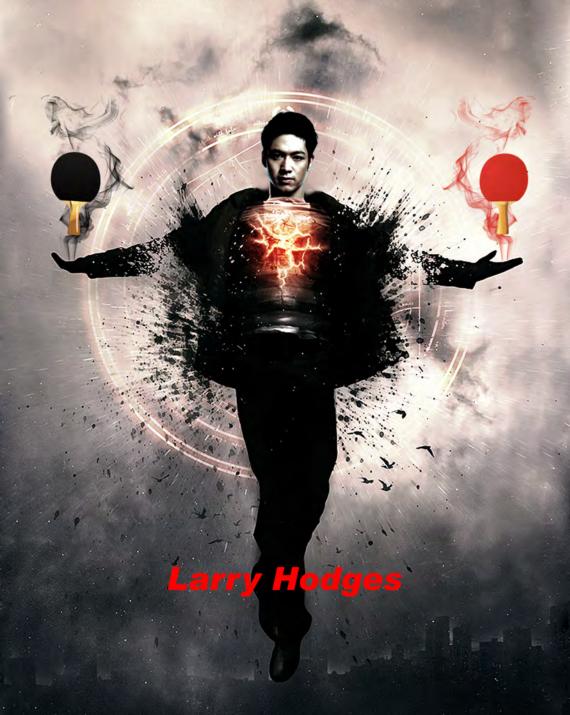
An American Goes to China to Learn the Secrets of Table Tennis



by

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Bonus Short Story at End **Ping-Pong Ambition**

Dedication

To table tennis players everywhere. Especially the spirited ones.

Introduction

This story was many years in the almost-making. I'm a professional table tennis coach & writer, and a professional science fiction & fantasy writer. What could be more natural than combining these two? Just about anything else.

Let's face it. Most stories about table tennis use the sport as a punch line. How could anyone take ping-pong seriously? But how about the Olympic Sport of Table Tennis? They really are the same thing, and you can call it either one. I actually like the stories that make fun of the sport! Those who know our sport know better. Those who don't—well, why not take a quick trip to www.youtube.com, search for "Olympic Table Tennis," and see what comes up?

I've always wanted to combine the two, but it's not easy finding a mix. I did write and sell "Ping-Pong Ambition," the bonus short story at the end of this book. But I wanted something more serious. And then, one day, I mused over the idea of an American going to China to learn the secrets of table tennis . . . and this story was the result. This is not a conventional story, this is a fantasy. You will meet the spirits of a number of the past greats of our sport, and even the spirits of "what made them great" for some current and living players. (Be forewarned—some of the following contain minor spoilers.)

All of the spirits that appear are, or were, real players. Much research went into the three main spirits (Ichiro Ogimura, Rong Guotuan, and the one I've nicknamed the "Dragon," but won't name here), and other aspects of the story. As normally happens in this situation, only a fraction of what I learned could actually be used or it would come off as an encyclopedia. I encourage you to Google or Wiki the various names. The only ones that are made up are the current Chinese team members and head coach, the current U.S. Champion and U.S. Coach, and the two main characters, Andy "Shoes" Blue and Coach Wang. The U.S. Champion is named after three of the top up-and-coming players at my club, Derek Nie, Klaus Wood, and Nathan Hsu (and his older brother, now a coach, John). The U.S. Coach is named after Dan Seemiller and Stefan Feth, both of whom

coached the U.S. Men's Team at the Worlds. (He's also named after Daniel Sofer, a student of mine who's one of the best tenyear-olds in the country, who found three typos. Nathan Hsu also found a few.) And of course the Chinese head coach in the story, Kong Guoliang, is a combination of the Chinese superstar players and coaches, Kong Linghui and Liu Guoliang.

Most of the training exercises, quotes, and cultural items in the Ogimura section are for real. He was a fan of Van Gogh and Louis Armstrong, enjoyed rice balls wrapped in seaweed and Old Parr Scotch Whisky, and at annual parties sang *Danny Boy*. The faded violet shirt, originally much darker, was given to him by Hisae Uehara, who ran the club where he trained and often took care of him. The quotes about an airplane propeller, dilly-dallying, worms, extraordinary effort, launching a serve, setting a personal best each day, and having the guts to sing in front of others are all real. So are many of the training exercises. The description of him as "Mr. Miyagi" came from Stellan Bengtsson.

I had to use a little more literary license in the Rong Guotuan segment, but the basic facts about his tragic story during the Cultural Revolution are for real.

I also used a number of real-life experiences in the book. For example, in chapter five the part about a player giving away a fast serve by sticking out his tongue is real—I coached a number of times against a former U.S. team member who did this, and he never did figure out why his fast, deep serves never caught my students off guard!

If you are a player yourself, I hope this story inspires you to higher levels. You might also enjoy the inside table tennis, even if embedded in a fantasy story. But player or not, I hope you'll enjoy this fantasy story of an American table tennis player trying to learn the secrets of table tennis in China, the center of table tennis on this planet.

Acknowledgements

A lot of people helped with this book. Without them, it wouldn't have been possible. Special thanks go to:

- The Great Eight, who critiqued early versions of this story.
 Honfai Geoffrey Cheng, Chris Grace, Vince Green,
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- Mike Mezyan, who created the cover.
- Ledo's Pizza, Hong Kong Café, and the back room of the Maryland Table Tennis Center, three places where I got a lot of work done, ate a lot of pizza and Kung Pao Chicken, and played a little ping-pong.
- And all the **Champions** whose spirits appear in this book!

I owe a lot of thanks to the following four books:

- **Ogi: The Life of Ichiro Ogimura,** by Mitsuru Jojima, translated by John Senior (2009).
- Ping-Pong Diplomacy: The Secret History Behind the Game That Changed the World, by Nicholas Griffin (2014).
- **Table Tennis Legends,** by Zdenko Uzorinac and ITTF (2001).
- **The Ogimura Seminar of Table Tennis,** by Dell Sweeris (1968).



I had searched for the great whale for many years. Only the whale I sought was table tennis glory. I want to be the best. The World Champion. When I walk down the street, I want people to point at me and say, "There goes the greatest table tennis player who ever lived." And so I trained, hour after hour, week after week, year after year, until my feet were callused husks. If the coach said run five miles, I'd do ten. If he said do footwork drills for half an hour, I'd do an hour. If he said practice serves for an hour, I'll do two.

I was Andy "Shoes" Blue, the hardest working player in America. They called me "Shoes" because I wore them out so fast. And yet, just a few weeks ago in December, for the third straight year, I'd lost in the quarterfinals of men's singles at the USA Nationals. I was 25, and no longer the wunderkind I'd been as a junior. It's been a month, but I still wake up every morning with burning tears in my eyes, seeing that last power shot zip past me, just out of reach, and seeing my long-time friend, my rival . . . my enemy, Derek Klaus Hsu, as he raised his hands in triumph on his way to his third straight USA men's singles title. I'd forced a smile, shook his hand and his coach's, sat down, and

died. That's the only way to describe the feeling inside when all your training has ended in another defeat.

That's when I decided to go to China. I would have my whale.

I was the hardest worker the Maryland Table Tennis Center had ever seen. Training eight hours a day with some of the best coaches in America, seven days a week—I never took days off—plus physical training, sessions with sports psychologists, studying videos—these were supposed to make me the best. And I'd been the best. I remember beating Derek Klaus Hsu—for some reason everyone called him by all three names—at the USA Nationals in the under fourteen boys' singles final, winning deuce in the fifth on an edge ball. I'd raised my hands in triumph as he forced a smile, shook my hand and my coach's, sat down, and died. Little did we know that was the last time I'd ever beat him. Twelve years ago.

I was just a mid-level American player, the type that wows basement players and gets creamed by Chinese ball boys. I didn't have what it takes—in fact, as I know now, I didn't even know what it takes. I wouldn't know until Coach Wang taught me, or at least sent me to those who did. Yes, *that* Coach Wang. He was my coach.

The Chinese were the best. If I wanted to learn the secrets of table tennis, I had to go to China. To be specific, to the new National Table Tennis Training Center in Beijing, where the Chinese National Team trained. Somewhere in that building were the secrets I craved, secrets I needed, secrets I would *get*.

And so, on a cold day in January, I flew to Beijing, arriving as the sun went down. I used the last of my money for a taxi to the Training Center, thirty minutes away. And there it was!

It was beautiful—the Taj Mahal looked no better. China had had a national training center for decades, but the new one had only recently opened. I stared at it as I approached on the long walkway from the street.

Lights out front lit up a palace with pure white walls, perhaps two hundred feet wide, ten stories high, topped by a great white dome, with spires on all four corners. Towering bushes surrounded it. The bush by the door was cut into the

shape of a giant green ping-pong paddle and ball. On the right was a huge Chinese redwood tree that reached all the way to the top of the building and above. I could see the light coming out of the tenth floor, and could only wonder what was inside. For it was on the tenth floor that the national men's team trained. The women trained on the ninth, junior boys on the eighth, junior girls on the seventh, and various offices took up the first six. It was symbolic, having the players train on the upper floors, showing they were most important and above all others. Or so I'd read.

I stood outside the front door, twiddling with my pingpong paddle in the cold air. I stared at the ping-pong paddle bush and wondered what to do next. I had not told them I was coming, so they were not expecting me. Why would they want to train a mid-level American player in this Olympic sport? My job was to convince them. My stomach rumbled from nervousness and hunger. I had a packet of beef jerky in my pocket, and so pulled out a large hunk to chew on while I pondered my next move.

Finally I took a deep breath and held my ear to the door—and I swear I could hear it! The distant sound of pingpong balls getting hit back and forth. The balls were hitting rackets held by players coached by people who knew the secrets of table tennis. There was only one way to get those secrets.

I knocked on the door.

After a while I knocked again, and then I pounded on it. And then I waited.

And waited.

And waited.

It was cold, and I was shivering, dressed in street clothes, with only a light warm-up jacket over the turtleneck shirt I always wore to hide the weird birthmark on my neck.

I stared at the huge wooden door, wondering what to do next.

"I believe I can help you," said a voice from behind me. I whirled around and there he was.

Chapter 2

The Sweat of Champions

He looked about my age. Like me, he held a paddle in his hand, but where I was twiddling with it, he was absentmindedly twirling it about like a baton in an absentminded



fashion. He had that inscrutable Chinese look that screamed knowledge. A cigarette stuck out the corner of his mouth. He wore the red Dubai warm-up suit of the Chinese National Team, and yet I didn't recognize him. Hard to believe! He was still a nobody at that time.

"You are the American, Andy Blue?" he asked.

"You know me?" I asked. "They've heard of me in China?"

He shook his head. "Only I know of you. I know everything. I am Coach Wang."

He stared into my eyes like a searchlight, as if he could see into my soul. I kept eye contact, but I could feel my stomach tighten under this close scrutiny. He seemed young to be a highlevel coach, but he was Chinese, and that had to count for something.

"What can I do for you?" I asked.

"What can I do for *you* is proper question," said Coach Wang. "You wish to be champion?"

"With every atom of my body," I said.

"Then I will make you champion. Come with me." He turned and walked down the walkway away from the National Training Center I had traveled almost 9000 miles to train at.

What was I supposed to do? The doorway to the National Training Center, the doorway to my dreams, was locked to me. My destiny did not lead in that direction, at least

not at this time. But someone once said that when one door closes, another one opens. I stared at Coach Wang's retreating back as he crossed the street, and made the fateful decision. I grabbed my few small bags and rushed after him.

It was a short trip as he walked into a small, run-down building across the street. It was only one floor, perhaps the size of a McDonalds. It had a large front window, and as I approached I saw the ping-pong tables inside. Another table tennis center!

But this one was small. I went inside and looked about. There were four tables, all vacant, and a small lounge area, also vacant except for Coach Wang, who now sat in a worn-out lounge chair that was probably older than me. There were several metal folding chairs, so I chose one and sat down. The place was poorly lit, a serious problem in an Olympic sport where the ball travels at speeds the eye can barely track.

"Welcome to my dojo, the Hall of Pong," he said. It was spookily quiet, without the usual sound of ping-pong balls being hit about. Perhaps it was just a slow night.

"You said you'd train me?" I asked. "I don't have any money."

Coach Wang shook his head. "I no want your money. I will make you champion. That will be my payment." He tossed out his cigarette and lit up another.

I looked about. The place was dirty—trash on the floor, chipped yellow paint from the walls on the floor, even cobwebs in one corner. I got up and examined the closest table. It was dusty, and obviously hadn't been used in some time. The other tables were the same.

I'd traveled halfway around the world for this? Even by American standards this was a dump. And yet, there was something about Coach Wang, something mysterious. If I'd only known.

"Do you accept me as your coach?" Coach Wang asked.

I'd dreamed of training under Chinese Head Coach Kong Guoliang, side by side with the members of the Chinese National Team at the National Training Center. Instead I was in a tiny, run-down dojo run by an unknown I'd met outside. This would be a life-changing decision.

Far more than I knew at the time.

"I accept you as my coach," I said as I wiped some dust away from a table. "When do we start?"

"We start now," he said, and I realized he was already at the far side, racket and ball in hand. We began to hit, forehand to forehand, a standard warm-up. Like me, he used a shakehands grip. Soon we'd get into more advanced stuff, and I'd learn the secrets of Chinese table tennis. Poor lighting, dusty tables, dirty floors—none of this mattered now.

"Should I change into my playing shoes?" I asked as we continued to hit.

"No need," he said. It felt funny playing in the running shoes that I used as my walking shoes when I wasn't playing. The heels made me an inch taller, and since I was so used to the thinner heels of my table tennis shoes I felt like I towered over the table. But if the coach said "no need," then who was I to question the coach? I was still in my traveling clothes, with my playing clothes in my bags.

"You have good form," he said after a few minutes.

"Thank you," I said, beaming on the inside.

"As your coach, I now know your game," he said, a small smile on his face.

"That was fast," I said.

"Is that a scar on your neck?" he asked, pointing with his free hand as we continued to rally.

"Just a birthmark." I'd been born with it. But the turtleneck shirt I wore was old and wearing out, and the neck had fallen down, revealing the weird mark.

"It looks like the mark of a rope on someone who was either strangled or hanged."

I shook my head; it was nothing so dramatic. "It was neither. I've had it since I was born. When I was a kid I used to cover it with makeup so the other kids wouldn't see. Now I just wear turtlenecks."

Coach Wang nodded. "You have the mark."

"What do you mean, 'the mark'?"

"And yet you are no good," he continued, ignoring me.

A punch to the gut. But it was true. A coach who can tell the truth is better than one who lies and gives false praise.

"And yet there is still hope," he said as we continued to hit forehand to forehand, never missing, a steady staccato rhythm as the ball went back and forth, back and forth. If I'd been a dog, my ears would have shot up.

"There are three secrets to table tennis," Coach Wang said. I smacked a forehand, harder than before. He caught the ball cleanly out of the air, finally ending our rally. "First you must have the Body of Pong." Inwardly I groaned and grinned at the same time. It was time for some physical training! It was the hardest part of training, pushing yourself to the max, sweating as you strained your muscles to their limit. But I was ready for the challenge. I wanted to be a champion. There was nothing he could ask me to do that I wouldn't do.

"Tell me what to do," I said. "What are the other two secrets?"

For the first time he smiled. "You will see. Now we go outside." It was time for some running! Conveniently I had on my running shoes—Coach Wang had foreseen this.

I followed him outside, ready to impress him with my running skills. I might not be able to beat the best players, but nobody trained harder.

He walked across the street, back to the Chinese National Training Center. I could almost hear the balls bouncing back and forth inside. Coach Wang stopped and pointed at the redwood tree on the side.

"You must climb tree and look through window," he said, puffing on his cigarette. He glanced at his watch and nodded to himself. "Hurry, it is almost time."

Climbing a tree for physical training? That wasn't something I'd done in America. Frankly, it seemed too easy. And why would I look through the window? But mine was not to question why, mine was just to climb and see why.

I was a professional athlete, and I climbed the tree with ease. When I reached the top, adjacent to the tenth floor, I waved at Coach Wang. He just stared back. It was time to look through the window.

In contrast to the Hall of Pong, the room was brightly lit. There were a number of tables in the huge room, each barriered off in large courts. But I barely noticed it because of who was

gathered around one of the tables, playing cards. It took me only seconds to see and recognize the greatest players in the world! But something was wrong, very wrong.

There was Bai Hanhui, the world champion, the best in the world, the most athletic of the Chinese, known for his incredible foot speed and powerful forehand. But there was something wrong, something different. Then it hit me—the man was overweight. Not overly fat, but nothing like the fit and thin Bai Hanhui I'd seen so many times.

Playing cards with him were three other legends. Fang Guiying, world #2, known for his powerful topspin from both forehand and backhand. Ping Qiao, world #3, known for his incredible quickness. And Yan Zhiheng, world #4, known for his incredible serves.

All seemed out of shape, nothing like the chiseled bodies of professional athletes. These were slightly bloated versions of the famous faces I'd worshipped from afar for so long. Yan in particular looked more Santa Claus than athlete.

And then in through a back door came Kong Guoliang, head coach of the Chinese Team, the legend himself, followed by three assistant coaches. Kong blew a whistle, and all four players jumped to their feet. Others that had been out of sight from my vantage point appeared, and soon the 24 members of the Chinese National Men's Team stood surrounding Coach Kong and the other coaches. One of the assistant coaches carried a case of water, which he placed on one of the tables—24 bottles of water, 24 members of the Chinese National Team, many of them obviously out of shape. Each grabbed a bottle and chugged it down.

And then, the impossible. Before my already disbelieving eyes came an even more disbelieving sight. The fat melted away like snow, leaving nothing behind but the chiseled bodies of the Chinese National Team as we all know them.

I glanced down at Coach Wang, who stood at the base of the redwood tree, and he smiled back. Then he motioned for me to climb down. I did so.

"What happened up there?" I asked as I reached the bottom and dropped to the ground.

"You have done physical training for many years," he said. "So have the Europeans and others all over the world. You have wasted your time. Now you know the truth. If you wish to be a champion, you need the Body of Pong. And there is only one way to do that."

"How?" I practically gasped.

"You must steal the training water," he said.

"You mean the case of water they were drinking?"

"Yes. But it is not water. It is the Sweat of Champions, collected during training, and fed to the players before training."

"Wait a minute. To get the Body of Pong, you want me to steal a case of water made of human sweat, and then *drink it?*" I felt sick to my stomach.

"There is more to it than that—you will see. But it is the only way. And take your playing bag with you, with racket and playing shoes."

"Why?"

"You will see." He had an irritating habit of answering many of my questions with those three mysterious words.

And so I had no choice. Coach Wang's plan was simple: I climb the tree late at night, break the window and climb in, and look around until I found a case of "training water," and steal it. Simple, right? But why did he insist on my bringing my playing bag? What was it I "will see"?

And so at midnight I found myself once again up at the top of the redwood tree, once again looking through the window, with my playing bag slung over my shoulder. The lights were off so I couldn't see inside. Coach Wang had given me a heavy flashlight which would serve two purposes. I stared at the window. Would this be the first step toward a life of crime? Breaking and entering was wrong, whether in America or China, and here I was, just a few hours after arriving. . . .

But it had to be done. I shinnied along a branch to the window. I took a long, smooth backswing with the heavy flashlight, almost like a forehand, and then put all my weight into smashing it into the window. It shattered into pieces. Then I hung back to see if anyone had heard. After about five minutes I decided it was safe. And that's how I finally got into the Chinese National Training Center, like a common burglar.

The gym was magnificent! There were twelve tables, two rows of six, all in full-sized playing courts, about fourteen by seven meters, each surrounded by waist-high barriers. This was where the best of the best trained, under the tutelage of the most brilliant coaches in the world. These were the playing courts of God.

I stared at them, feeling left out. But fate had intervened, and training here wasn't an option. I was now a disciple of Coach Wang, and a prospective thief. I was going to steal from the Gods.

No! I had to stop thinking of them as Gods. They were mere mortal men with great skills. Someday I was going to beat them. And if that meant stealing, so be it.

With flashlight in hand, I tiptoed through the courts where these Gods—mortal men—trained. A few rackets, towels, empty water bottles, and large numbers of balls lay scattered about.

With the flashlight I was able to see my way to the back door that Coach Kong and the other coaches had come through. There was a dimly lighted hallway on the other side. Coach Wang had told me to turn left and find the first door on the right.

This opened into a small, unlit office. With the flashlight I saw pictures of Coach Kong on the wall in his younger days, back when he dominated the world as one of the greatest players of all time. This was his office. Feeling braver now that I was five minutes or so into my criminal enterprise, I began to look about. I quickly went through the office, hoping to find the case of training water. In the back was a refrigerator. I opened it—and there they were! Three cases of water. The Sweat of Champions.

And then something growled, and I jumped three feet into the air.

Very slowly I pointed the flashlight in the direction of the sound, and saw the two very large dogs lying on the floor in a corner, their almond-shaped eyes reflecting the light of my flashlight like four bright coals. It was Ping and Pong, Coach Kong's pet Kunming wolfdogs, and the mascots of the Chinese

National Team. Slowly they rose to their feet, growling. They looked like German Shepherds but taller . . . and meaner.

"Nice doggies!" I said, wishing I knew how to say it in Chinese. The two wolfdogs growled louder, and took a few steps toward me, cornering me against the refrigerator. Their lips were curled back, exposing dozens of slobbering white teeth.

Very slowly I put down the flashlight and reached for a case of water. With my fingernails I tore a small hole in the plastic covering, which I slowly ripped wider. Then I reached in and grabbed a bottle. If I were going to have to fight a pair of wolfdogs, I'd need to be a lot faster than a normal human; I'd need the Body of Pong. And that meant drinking the Sweat of Champions—and really fast!

One of the wolfdogs lunged at me. With my normal table tennis reflexes I was able to push it aside, but the other followed. I smacked the second one in the head with the water bottle. Both began barking. Before they could come at me for round two, I twisted the lid off the bottle. The smell of sweat was instantly overpowering. The Chinese National Team Members *drank this?* I had no choice. I guzzled a large swallow. I began to heave, and probably would have thrown up if I hadn't been interrupted by round two as both dogs leaped at me, mouths wide.

The two dogs froze in mid-air, in mid-leap, slobbering jaws wide. Their howling was replaced by eerie silence. And then the silence was broken.

"You wish to train?" The voice, in only slightly accented English, came from the doorway. The silhouetted figure of a short man stood there. I stared back and forth between the two frozen dogs and the man in the doorway.

"Who are you?" I asked. I started to move my flashlight toward him.

He flipped on the light switch by the door. I could only stare in shocked recognition at the ghostly figure before me. He was relatively short and pencil thin, with thick eyebrows and a piercing stare. He wore a faded violet shirt.

No one from the table tennis world would have failed to recognize him, one of the most famous faces ever. The man who revolutionized table tennis in the 1950s with his training

methods and techniques, and who was so far ahead of his time that many are still used today. Who led Japan to years of dominance while twice winning Men's Singles at the World Championships. Whose training techniques were copied by the Chinese, who he also helped train, leading to their years of dominance. Who spent years as an executive member and then president of the International Table Tennis Federation, helping lead the sport from near obscurity to an Olympic Sport and greatness. And who had died in 1994. Every serious player remembers where he was when he first heard the great Ogi had died.

"You wish to train?" repeated the man. I could vaguely see the hallway behind his translucent figure. I'd recently read his biography, *Ogi: The Life of Ichiro Ogimura*. I felt like I was seeing a ghost, and I was.

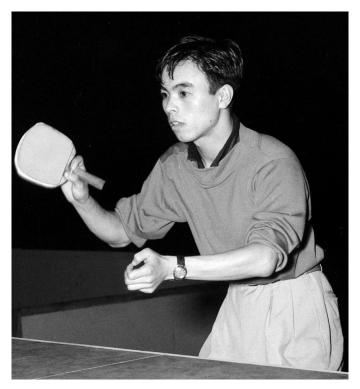
And yet, this was the moment I'd been waiting for all my life. I was grateful for Coach Wang's help, but this was Ogimura. "Yes!" I cried.

"Come with me." He turned and walked into the hallway.

To read the rest of "The Spirit of Pong," order at Amazon, in either print or kindle versions.

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Ichiro Ogimura