

Chinese Intelligence

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Intelligence with Chinese Characteristics

Comparing systems and concepts like the Chinese and the Anglo-American is challenging, and intelligence studies are no exception. It is even more difficult, considering that there is not a perfect translation in Chinese for the word “intelligence”. In fact, the term used by the Chinese is *qinbgao*, which can be translated as “information,” as much as “intelligence.” The Western distinction that intelligence is information that has been analyzed does not completely apply to Chinese doctrine. However, what is clear from Chinese terminology is the action-enabling purpose of intelligence – expressed with the terms *jihuo zhishi* – “activating knowledge.”¹

Albeit this terminology-related question, China has a long tradition in this subject, and every cultivated Chinese, let alone politicians and intelligence experts, knows about Sun Zi, the scholar from 300 BC who first theorized the use of intelligence, more specifically espionage, for warfare purposes.²

This article presents a brief overview of the intelligence organizations in the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) and a few notes to understand intelligence with Chinese characteristics.³

Current Structure of PRC Intelligence Services

There are several intelligence and security organizations in the PRC, some part of larger organizations. None is in charge overall. Only the ones exclusively devoted to intelligence are presented here, and the list is not exhaustive.⁴ Furthermore, a section intentionally missing here regards the important area of intelligence oversight. This is because intelligence activities in China lack parliament oversight for the basic reasons

¹ There is also another term used, *ziliao*, which refers to data, and often is put in comparison with *qingbao*, which generally involves an element of secrecy. For more about this linguistic debate, see Huo & Wang, 1991, and Mattis, 2013 in the section on Readings for Instructors.

² Sun Zi is often referred to as Sun Tzu.

³ This article does not address Taiwan, Hong Kong, or Macao. While considered part of Chinese territory by the Chinese government, the first is labeled as a “renegade province” and the other two go under the term of “one-country, two systems.”

⁴ One of the best open sources is the French intelligence service website:

<http://servicederenseignements.e-monsite.com/pages/grandes-agences/republique-populaire-de-chine.html>. French sources are especially good concerning Chinese intelligence, starting with Faligot & Remi (1990), which is a recommended reading.

that China is not a democracy (apart from direct elections at township and local level) and there are not transparent rules to how security, internal and external, is ensured.

The obvious starting point is the **国家安全部 - Guójiā Ānquánbù** or **MSS - Ministry of State Security**. It is the main agency, responsible for intelligence and state security, in charge of counterintelligence and foreign intelligence (but not of military intelligence). It was established in 1983, with Ling Yun as his first chief, after the reform of the predecessor Central Investigation Department (*Diaochabu*) that was established at the creation of PRC in 1949 and first headed by Kang Sheng and later by Li Kenong.⁵

According to the Federation of American Scientists,⁶ the MSS is organized – unsurprisingly - on the model of the old KGB, with a First Bureau dealing with domestic security, the Second with foreign services and counterintelligence. Other sections deal with signals intelligence (SIGINT) and counter-surveillance, or focus on outer territories like Taiwan. According to some sources, the 17th Bureau is in charge of economic intelligence, the collection of which is one of the characteristics of Chinese services, which have targeted specifically the United States and European countries, France among them.

French sources⁷ in 2005 estimated the MSS had around 7,000 employees but some 50,000 undercover operatives.⁸ The chief of the service since early 2015 is Geng HuiChang. According to many observers, he is President Xi Jinping's man and not a holder of autonomous power, as often has been the case with former chiefs.

The MSS should not to be confused with the **MPS - the Ministry of Public Security (公安部, Gōng'ānbù)** that looks after police bureau and internal / ordinary security⁹ but has no intelligence gathering mission.¹⁰

Military intelligence is the prerogatives of the PLA - the People Liberation Army. Two PLA's departments specifically deal with it.

⁵ Before there was no intelligence service separate from the party, even though there were organized intelligence activities at least since 1927.

⁶ FAS' own source here is: "Spy Headquarters Behind the Shrubs -- Supplement to 'Secrets About CPC Spies'" by Tan Po Cheng Ming [Hong Kong], 01 March 1997, No 233, pp 34-37; Cheng Ming on Chinese Spy Headquarters, FBIS-CHI-97-047, 01 March 1997. Source no longer retrievable.

⁷ Website of French intelligence, accessed on March 2015.

⁸ In the MSS slang, the often dormant, long-term operatives are called "fish at the bottom of the ocean" (*Chen di yu*). (Eftimiades, 1999:35).

⁹ An important exception here is riot control, which is not under the domain of the MPS but is instead taken care by the Chinese People's Armed Police Force (CAPF) - 中国人民武装警察部队, at the provincial level.

¹⁰ The two services are located nearby to each other at 14, Dongchang'an (East Chang'an Street), Beijing.

One is the **Second Department of the PLA General Staff Headquarters** – also indicated *Qingbaobu* or **2PLA**, which is more specifically responsible for collecting and disseminating military information, via human sources (HUMINT), SIGINT, and imagery intelligence (IMINT). Officers are dispatched to China's embassies and consulates overseas, and also to big Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs), banks and think tanks. On another hand, the **Third Department (3PLA)** is in charge of the direct monitoring of foreign armies and their SIGINT,¹¹ and with dissemination of intelligence collected.

2PLA has also a military service of counterintelligence called *Chi Pao Ko*,¹² which exercises a degree of influence on think tanks and research institutes connected with intelligence studies in China, such as the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR, primarily connected to the MSS) and the China Institute for International Strategic Studies (CISS).¹³

There are other bodies in China performing specific kinds of intelligence activities, but they are less prominent than the ones presented here.

Worth mentioning are a couple of historical notes on intelligence in the PRC. Sun Zi's *Art of War*, the classical text about military strategy from the V century BC, devotes the last chapter to intelligence and is still a most common reference about the practice and doctrine of espionage and its political uses.¹⁴ Intelligence operations in Communist China started long before 1949 and are linked to Kang Sheng,¹⁵ Mao Zedong's spymaster and a central figure in China's foreign policy for decades. Among other achievements, Kang Sheng played a substantial role in obtaining nuclear technology for developing a national atomic program.

Another figure to be mentioned for importance is the second chief of MSS. Once the MSS had been created in 1983, and soon after the removal of its first chief, Lin Yun, in 1985 over a scandal (the defection of Yu Qiangsheng, head of the Anti-Espionage Bureau, to the USA), Jia Chunwang rose to power and held tenure until 1998, until today the longest

¹¹ It should be mentioned that Chinese SIGINT is quite impressive and is considered the most extensive of all Asian countries.

¹² Belonging to the PLA's Intelligence is Xiong Guangkai, considered by many the most important intelligence figure of the last two decades (Mulvenon, 2008).

¹³ See Gates & Mulvenon, 2002

¹⁴ "What enables the wise sovereign and the good general to strike and conquer, and achieve things beyond the reach of ordinary men, is foreknowledge. Now this foreknowledge cannot be elicited from spirits; it cannot be obtained inductively from experience, nor by any deductive calculation. Knowledge of the enemy's dispositions can only be obtained from other men." (Sun Zi, *The Art of War*, Chapter 13).

¹⁵ Given that this brief outline excludes Taiwan, all references to Chiang Kai-Shek and his formidable intelligence apparatus have been omitted. However, it is worth noting that Dai Li, his chief of intelligence, was for many years a valid adversary to Kang Sheng. For more about Dai Li, see the recommended readings.

serving MSS chief and one of the most influential. Jia's tenure was fundamental in expanding the scope and the grasp of the MSS¹⁶.

Chinese Methods and Approach to Intelligence

The methods used by Chinese intelligence differ often from the more easily understood methods of other nations. Not only does the collection of intelligence present some peculiarities, as outlined below, but Chinese methods have evolved considerably over the years.

In the 1950s and 1960s every Chinese diplomatic post overseas had an Investigation and Research Office with staff from the Central Investigation Department – the so-called Institute of Contemporary International Relations. However, from Deng Xiaping (in office from 1981 to 1989) onwards non-intelligence personnel, from news people to businessmen to academic researchers, started to be charged with intelligence collection tasks. Only a few career officers were left in embassies.

In general, Western perceptions of Chinese intelligence have been long biased due to the fact that China is essentially an inward-focused country. When it comes to security its approach to intelligence gathering has been often regarded as “unsophisticated and risk-averse, particularly when you consider the bureaucratic inefficiencies inherent in the Communist Party of China’s (CPC) administrative structure. But it is an approach that takes a long and wide view, and it is more effective than it may seem at first glance.”¹⁷ There are at least the three main Chinese intelligence-gathering characteristics, which often overlap, and that make China’s approach to intelligence and espionage different.

Most important is the so-called mosaic-approach, where low-grade and generally unclassified, but massive in scope, information is collected by thousands of assets. According to the open-source intelligence company Stratfor, this approach is particularly successful because it is designed to “overload foreign counterintelligence agencies by the painstaking collection of many small pieces of intelligence that make sense only in the aggregate. This is a slow and tedious process, and it reflects the traditional Chinese hallmarks of patience and persistence as well as the centuries-old Chinese custom of *guanxi*, the cultivation and use of personal networks to influence events and engage in various ventures.”¹⁸

¹⁶ The MSS began as a central-level ministry with only a handful of provincial departments. By the end of Jia's tenure, the MSS covered every province, provincial-level city, and a countless number of municipalities. (Mattis, 2011).

¹⁷ Stratfor, 2010.

¹⁸ *Guanxi* is a typical feature of the Chinese culture, and it can be translated as “network.” (Stratfor, 2010:2). But *Guanxi* also means ‘relationships’ and is “a system of interpersonal relationships that has long historical and cultural roots,” constituting an essential feature of the Chinese society. “*Guanxi* itself

Another important characteristic is related to the identity of the intelligence collectors. Most of the times, they are not professionals, but amateurs recruited among Chinese-born residents in other countries or students and researchers who are abroad for study and research.¹⁹

The third method is the long-term cultivation of foreign assets, often via blackmail, honey-pots,²⁰ corruption or other expedients, once useful pressure points of the targets are identified.

Surprisingly enough given this highly specific approach, Chinese doctrine is more similar to the Western approaches than one could imagine. This is evident looking at scholarly articles on the subject, especially recent ones. This is due to the fact that Chinese doctrine has evolved considerably over the years, mirroring the progressive opening of China to the Western world and the increasing amount of knowledge available. As one of the most prominent scholars of Chinese intelligence has written, "Chinese writings on intelligence bear remarkable similarity to familiar US definitions of intelligence functions and goals."²¹

Finally, in the last 20 years new methods for intelligence collection have emerged in the cyber world.

Some Case Studies

Since 2003 one hundred and twenty-three Chinese agents have been identified in the US.²² It is impossible to present here, even briefly, all instances of Chinese espionage over the decades. Some cases, however, stand out.

One of the most damaging was Larry Wu-Tai Chin who worked for the US Army as a translator beginning in 1944. Later becoming an American citizen he worked for the Central Intelligence Agency's Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS). For decades until his apprehension in 1985 he spied on the US and "revealed President Nixon's

works as an important power base that represents saved favors, faces, and special relationships with powerful people. When relational norms and Confucian values are considerably eroded, guanxi could bring out further egoism, opportunism, and instrumentality." (Luo, Y. "The changing Chinese culture and business behavior: The perspective of intertwinement between guanxi and corruption," *International Business Review*, 17, 2, 188-193 (2008)..

¹⁹ The closest equivalent practice is by Israel's Mossad, which employs the Sayanim, volunteers in the Jewish diaspora not directly connected with the intelligence services but willing to help and provide various services.

²⁰ A few instances have been recorded, one of the most famous was the Bernard Boursicot case, from the name of the French diplomat caught into Kang Sheng's net in the 1970s when he became enamored of Beijing's transgender opera singer, Shi Peipu.

²¹ Mattis, 2012:3.

²² Ibid. This number is as of April 2015.

desire to open diplomatic relations two years before the policy was implemented.”²³

A substantial focus of Chinese activities targeted US military secrets, especially nuclear technology. A most important analysis is the “Cox Report,”²⁴ released in redacted form during the Clinton Administration in the 1990s. While some parts of the report remain classified, the report stated that China had managed to obtain sensitive information about thermonuclear weapons, including deployment details and reentry vehicles.²⁵ Also, the Report warned that “elements of the stolen information on U.S. thermonuclear warhead designs will assist the PRC in building its next generation of mobile ICBMs” and, more worryingly, that “despite repeated PRC thefts of the most sophisticated U.S. nuclear weapons technology, security at our national nuclear weapons laboratories does not meet even minimal standards.”²⁶ Subsequent investigations focused on three Chinese-Americans, Guo Bao Min, employed at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory; Wen Ho Lee, on the staff of Los Alamos National Laboratory where the W-88 warhead was designed; and Peter Lee, also at Los Alamos and TRW corporation.

Another famous case was Chi Mak, an “illegal” sleeper agent sent to the US to gain access over the long term to US military technologies, and the object of one of biggest FBI’s counterintelligence operations. He managed to send to China sensitive electric drive technology for submarines, and was brought to trial in 2007.²⁷

But Chinese intelligence activities have not just targeted military objectives. A lot of press attention has been given for instance to Katrina Leung, the lover of two FBI counterintelligence agents focused on Chinese intelligence activities who had initially

²³ David Major & Peter Oleson, “Espionage Against America,” *Guide to the Study of Intelligence*, Association of Former Intelligence Officers, <http://www.afio.com/publications/MAJOR%20OLESON%20Espionage%20DRAFT%20ver%202014Nov10.pdf>.

²⁴ Officially named the *Report of the Select Committee on US National Security and Military/Commercial Concerns with the People’s Republic of China*, US House of Representatives, 1988. <http://www.house.gov/coxreport/pdf/gen.pdf>.

²⁵ An FBI investigation, code-named Kindred Spirit, happened when “the U.S. intelligence discovered in 1995 that secrets about the W88, the most advanced miniature nuclear warhead (deployed on the Trident II SLBM), may have leaked from Los Alamos National Laboratory to China between 1984 and 1988. U.S. intelligence reportedly was handed a secret PRC document from 1988 containing designs similar to that of the W88.” (Kan, 2006:5).

²⁶ The tone, if not the conclusions of the Cox Report, has been criticized by a group of scholars from Stanford University, that observed in a note that “The language of the report, particularly its Overview, was inflammatory and some allegations did not seem to be well supported.” The details of the Stanford note have been provided in the reference list for documentation, while the debate about the report remains open.

²⁷ On May 10, 2007, the jury convicted Mak on charges of conspiring to export U.S. military technology to China and acting as an unregistered agent of a foreign government. Bhattacharjee, Y. (2014). How the F.B.I. Cracked a Chinese Spy Ring - *The New Yorker*. Available at: <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/how-the-f-b-i-cracked-a-chinese-spy-ring>. [Accessed 15 Jun. 2015].

recruited her as an asset. She was in reality a double agent for the MSS and managed since 1991 to pass classified information to the Chinese government.²⁸

A growing number of cases are concerned with industrial espionage. According to FBI data since 2006²⁹ there have been federal investigations and criminal prosecutions of about 44 individuals in 26 separate investigations.

An example is the case of Dongfan Chung, a Chinese-born naturalized American and an engineer working at Rockwell International and Boeing, who was sentenced to 15 years in prison for economic espionage. As a result of his activities, an impressive amount of technological details was revealed regarding the B-1 bomber, Delta IV space launch vehicle, the C-17 cargo plane, the F-15 fighter, and, last but not the least, the Space Shuttle.

The outlook will not be complete without briefly mentioning the so-called "863" Program sponsored since 1986 by the PRC's State High Technology R&D organization, i.e. a specific kind of approach where companies steal US commercial technologies to advance the Chinese economy.³⁰

Chinese Cyber Activities.

Chinese cyber espionage represents a substantial threat to Western countries. It long has been known that China uses state-sponsored "hackers." Also, the PLA has a military espionage unit specifically devoted to cyber operation, the Chengdu Province First Technical Reconnaissance Bureau (TRB).³¹

According to CISPA, Cyber Intelligence Sharing and Protection Act, "China is the world's most active and persistent perpetrator of cyber economic espionage. U.S. companies have reported an onslaught of Chinese cyber intrusions that steal sensitive information like client lists, merger and acquisition data, pricing information, and the results of research and development. This illegally-acquired information gives Chinese companies an unfair competitive advantage against the companies from which it was stolen."³²

The most famous instance to date has been that denounced in 2010 by Google, whose servers were attacked in "a concerted political and corporate espionage effort that exploited security flaws in e-mail attachments to sneak into the networks of major financial, defense and technology companies and research institutions in the United

²⁸ CBSnews.com, (2015). Real-Life 'Spy Who Loved Me' Scandal. Available at: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/real-life-spy-who-loved-me-scandal/> [Accessed 15 Jun. 2015].

²⁹ Smith, I. C. & N. West, 2012.

³⁰ Among the most-sought sectors there are biotechnologies, space, IT and energy, while geographically speaking California's Silicon Valley is the main target.

³¹ Wise, 2011.

³² CISPA, 2012.

States”³³. Together with Google, about 20 other companies, such as Yahoo, Symantec, Adobe and Northrop Grumman, have found they were targeted by Chinese hackers, in what has been dubbed “Operation Aurora.”³⁴

However, it would be incorrect to believe that only government-sponsored espionage exists. As the Cox Report clarified, a plethora of Chinese actors – public and private – have been involved in technology theft and economic espionage. There have been, for example, cases involving Chinese corporations as well – with the result that some of them have been denied the acquisition of American companies and their technologies (for example Huawei and ZTE³⁵).

Recent developments

Another important point is how the system regulates itself from within. . What is evident is that every change in CPC leadership – at this moment with the 5th generation leaders at the helm since the 18th Party Congress in November 2012 – is normally carried along with some purges at the top of those services. This is what has happened with the new leader, Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the CPC and President of the PRC, and the procedures still appear to be ongoing at the moment.

As a matter of fact, since 2013, Xi has been waging an anti-corruption campaign that is considered by many observers as a way to get rid of political adversaries, in the biggest purge since the Cultural Revolution (around 15,000 people to be investigated). One of the latest victims has been, in January 2015, **Ma Jiang**,³⁶ Vice Minister and Chief of MSS, implicated in the Founder Group’s investigation.³⁷ Ma was a high profile official, in

³³ Washington Post, January 14, 2010.

³⁴ Google China cyberattack part of vast espionage campaign, by Ariana Eunjung Cha and Ellen Nakashima, Thursday, January 14, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/01/13/AR2010011300359.html?sid=ST2010011300360>.

³⁵ In both cases, the two Chinese companies have been excluded in the US (and Huawei later in Canada) from public works on the basis of national security. The companies, on the other way, have always maintained to be private corporations, with no links or instructions from the Chinese government to illegally acquire Western technology. Messmer, E. (2015). A House Intelligence Committee report blasts Huawei and ZTE as threats to U.S. national security. Available at: <http://www.networkworld.com/article/2160516/data-center/house-intelligence-committee-report-blasts-huawei-zte-as-threats-to-u-s-national-secur.html>.

³⁶ Jamil Anderlini, Chinese spymaster Ma Jian detained in corruption purge, January 12, 2015 9:32 am, FT, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/84707fd8-9a37-11e4-8426-00144feabdc0.html#axzz30d800tbm>

³⁷ Founder Group is a Peking University-owned technology company, under investigation since 2012 over claims of corruption. “Founder has been involved in a high-profile spat with Beijing Zenith, a property developer with a mysterious background, but which is also the second-biggest shareholder in the conglomerate’s Founder Securities unit. Beijing Zenith publicly accused Founder executives of insider trading and misappropriating company assets to the tune of several billion yuan.” South China Morning Post, (2015). Chinese spy chief Ma Jian detained as corruption crackdown widens. [online] Available at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/article/1678537/chinese-spy-chief-ma-jian-detained-corruption->

charge of China's counter-espionage operations, and the highest-ranking security official investigated after **Zhu Yongkang**, chief of MPS between 2002-2007.³⁸ Zhu was demoted in July 2014. He was the first member of Politburo's Standing Committee to be involved in an official investigation in the history of the PRC. While the official charges, which were formalized in April 2015 talk of "bribes, abuse of power and intentionally leaking state secrets" that cover a period since 1988, thus most of Zhu's three-decade political career, the outlook seems more complex than that. As related by the South-China Morning Post "The Supreme People's Court said last month that Zhou had "undermined the party's solidarity and engaged in political activities not approved by the authorities," a rare accusation that some analysts suggested was an indication that Zhou would face charges for political offences." The trial, held in Tianjin No 1 Intermediate People's Court in Spring 2015 where Zhou risked a death penalty, concluded in June 2015 with the former security czar pleading guilty and receiving a sentence of life imprisonment.³⁹

Readings for Instructors

There are a few important on-line references for Chinese Intelligence Services, although some are not up-to-date. They still represent a useful starting point for instructors. The main three to be consulted are:

- <http://www.globalsecurity.org/intell/world/china/mss.htm>.
- <http://fas.org/irp/world/china/mss/index.html>.
- <http://servicederenseignements.e-monsite.com/pages/grandes-agences/republique-populaire-de-chine.html>.

Also, there are the websites of Chinese think-tanks devoted, among other subjects, to intelligence studies, some of them only available in Chinese. For an updated list of the most prominent of them and a brief description, see:

<http://libguides.gwu.edu/content.php?pid=77975&sid=591628>.

crackdown [Accessed 15 Jun. 2015].

³⁸ SCMP, China's ex-security chief Zhou Yongkang charged with corruption, leaking secrets, April 4, 2015 http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1755037/chinas-ex-security-tsar-zhou-yongkang-indicted-after-graft-probe?utm_source=edm&utm_medium=edm&utm_content=20150403&utm_campaign=breaking_news.

³⁹ Yibada, (2015). Ex-Security Chief Zhou Yongkang Sentenced to Life in Prison. [online] Available at: <http://en.yibada.com/articles/38175/20150613/ex-security-chief-zhou-yongkang-sentenced-life-prison.htm>. [Accessed 15 Jun. 2015]. Yet, "with the arrest of a major leader in a continuing, and massive, purge, and constant reminders that the stakes of the struggle against corruption are nothing less than the survival of the party, Xi and his colleagues have sought to generate a period of crisis in which major changes are possible. The question to remain is whether this political window is wide enough—and will stay open long enough—to allow systemic change to take root." (Cohen, 2014).

Recommended books and journal articles include:

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http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42688&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=758&no_cache=1#.VVjCldpVikp .
- de Graffenreid, Kenneth (ed.), *The Unanimous and Bipartisan Report of the House Select Committee on U.S. National Security and Military Commercial Concerns with the People's Republic of China* ("The Cox Report"). Select Committee, U.S. House of Representatives (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1999). A copy of the declassified sections of the Cox Report is accessible at:
<http://www.house.gov/coxreport/chapfs/over.html>
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- Peter Mattis, "Five Ways China Spies. Not as different as you might think," March 6, 2014 at <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/five-ways-china-spies-10008> .
- "Secrets About CPC Spies -- Tens of Thousands of Them Scattered Over 170-Odd Cities Worldwide" by Lo Ping Cheng Ming [Hong Kong], 1 Jan 97 No 231, pp 6-9 [Journal Discloses `Secrets' About PRC Spy Network FBIS-CHI-97-016 1 Jan 1997]

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