

The Analytic Challenge of Understanding Chinese Intelligence Services

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Introduction

Scholars of intelligence and comparative politics have tended to overlook intelligence services as bureaucratic organizations and as components of government information-processing systems. As a consequence, conventionally trained analysts and most journalists tend to overlook the role of intelligence and security services in extending and maintaining state power and international policy goals.

In the case of China, the intense focus of writers on the ups and downs of US-Chinese relations seldom leads to efforts to more deeply understand China and the sources of its government's behavior, and, in particular, the effects that Chinese intelligence services might have on that behavior. Even when journalists and other commentators address the seemingly monthly appearance of new details of Chinese human and technical espionage, analysts tend to focus on each incident as a bellwether of the US-Chinese relationship or as a straightforward counterintelligence (CI) issue.

Protecting the integrity of US intelligence and policy processes is

an important task for the US Intelligence Community, but clear understanding of Chinese intelligence serves more than the CI mission. At the core, analysis of Beijing's intelligence institutions is about trying to understand systematically how the Chinese government uses information to inform its policy formulation, guidance to diplomats and security officials, and the execution of its policies.

Just as importantly, China's civilian intelligence and security agencies are empowered to arrest and to operate inside and outside China. The distinction between intelligence and internal security policy is minimal, institutionally speaking. This makes these services not just part of a policy staff process but an integral tool for the preservation of the power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).^{a 1} Yet, very little is known about the organizations themselves and their importance to China and its future.²

The Analytical Questions

The Chinese intelligence services (CIS) present three distinct analytic challenges critical to understanding

^a Beijing has consistently identified this goal as a “core interest” of China, indicating a willingness to use force if necessary.

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

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the future of China and US-Chinese relations.

The CIS and Domestic Political Activists

First, insights into China's political future require analysis of the competition between domestic political activists and the security services. A decade ago, China's security state appeared to be eroding as modern communications technology swept across the country. Today, domestic intelligence agencies have adapted to the Internet and mobile communications and are capable of following electronic breadcrumbs left behind as people move through China's "informatized" (*xinxihua*) society. Whether the current regime stays in power or a political movement generates enough momentum for political reform will depend on how effectively China's internal security forces perform their work.

Evolution of Chinese Intelligence

The second issue to be watched is the evolution of the Chinese intelligence community, particularly on the civilian side. Internally oriented security services tend to reinforce the leadership's worst fears about potential adversaries, the United States in particular,³ and China's civilian intelligence organizations both focus on internal security.

The degree to which Beijing resolves the issues of overlapping jurisdictions—or, at least, insulates the foreign intelligence function from internal security—will help determine the tone and relative objectivity of foreign intelligence products reaching the leadership. As

Chinese foreign interests widen, Beijing increasingly will call upon the intelligence services to provide inputs to assessments of the intentions of states capable of harming China's interests abroad.

Information Processing Systems

The final challenge is evaluation of the Chinese intelligence community's information processing systems. The civilian ministries include national, provincial, and local elements, which operate under competing horizontal and vertical lines of authority. The military intelligence services under the General Staff Department compose China's only all-source intelligence capability, but the mechanics of intelligence fusion in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) are opaque.

How these agencies collect, process, and disseminate intelligence affects Chinese behavior, and, with the rise of cyberspace issues, the volumes of information are potentially staggering and difficult to manage. Knowing how this system works is a prerequisite to ensuring US leaders can be certain US statements and acts are interpreted as they were intended.

In this essay I will outline a research agenda on the Chinese intelligence services built around these three challenges, and I will suggest some of the factors that should underpin future analysis.



Fundamentals of Chinese Approaches

Before addressing the analytic questions, I will briefly address some misunderstandings of the nature of Chinese intelligence operations. Many, perhaps most, US observers of Chinese intelligence have argued that the Chinese think about and collect intelligence in ways fundamentally different from Western or even Russian intelligence.

In large measure this perception stems from Chinese attempts to acquire, legally and otherwise, Western technology information to support Chinese modernization and economic priorities. These efforts have been equated with Chinese intelligence collection and have been labeled the "mosaic" or "grains of sand" approach. Chinese intelligence, it has been argued in this context, has four basic tenets:

- Chinese intelligence focuses on ethnic Chinese as sources;
- It relies on amateur collectors rather than professional intelligence officers;
- It does not use intelligence tradecraft familiar to Western services;
- It pursues high volumes of low-grade (if not entirely unclassified) information.⁴

This view falls down on both conceptual and empirical grounds. Conceptually, both US and Chinese analysts describe intelligence in similar terms—a specialized form of knowledge for reducing uncertainty during decision making. Empirically, the cases linked to the Chinese intelligence services—not

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simply the illegal activities of Chinese nationals or companies—demonstrate that professional Chinese intelligence officers use familiar tradecraft in formalized intelligence relationships with their sources. Additionally, cases are not limited to ethnic-Chinese whatever their nationality.^{a 5}

Chinese Doctrine

Chinese writings on intelligence bear remarkable similarity to familiar US definitions of intelligence functions and goals. Sun Tzu taught that “foreknowledge” (*xianzhi*) allowed commanders to outmaneuver opponents. More modern definitions range from “activating [catalytic] knowledge” (*jihuo zhi-shi*) to information to protect national security, domestic stability, or corporate interests in a competitive environment.⁶

Chinese military scholars today frame intelligence as a distinct subset of knowledge, defined by its relevance to decision makers and a competitive environment. Specifically, intelligence is transmittable (*chuandi xing*) and is knowledge that satisfactorily (*manzu xing*) resolves a specific decision-making problem.⁷

Empirically, Chinese intelligence officers consistently have demonstrated the use of widely practiced professional tradecraft, having successfully exploited for political and military intelligence purposes agents

with vulnerabilities familiar to anyone who follows the subject. The use of such tradecraft goes back to the most famous early known cases, Larry Wu-Tai Chin and Bernard Boursicot (M. Butterfly). The former began in the 1940s and latter in the 1960s.

Similar techniques have been applied in more recent cases—Gregg Bergersen, Chi Mak, James Fonden, and Tai-Shen Kuo. These revolved around a single Chinese intelligence officer, and possibly a second.⁸ Each of these sources was paid for sensitive information and all were aware of an intelligence relationship.

Consequences of the Conventional View

Misapprehension of Chinese intelligence practices has consequences. Most basically, the “mosaic” or “grains of sand” concepts fail to guide the organization, prioritization, and execution of CI efforts against Chinese national and corporate intelligence threats because the concepts do not differentiate between the varied Chinese collectors and their motivations as well as their varied signatures and risks to the United States:

- **The “mosaic” concept does not help clarify what aspects of Chinese information and tech-**

nology collection are important, whether the collection is linked to Chinese intelligence services or not. If “Chinese intelligence” includes everything from the intelligence services to a corporation to a criminal entrepreneur, then the term becomes almost meaningless.^b

- A belief that the Chinese rely on amateur operatives risks leading CI professionals to dismiss or be inattentive to the threat posed by China’s professional services.⁹
- **When economic espionage with no connection to the Chinese intelligence services is interpreted as “Chinese intelligence,” less attention will be paid to what those organizations actually do. The Chinese intelligence services and the Chinese defense industries are distinct entities, although they may sometimes work for mutual benefit.**
- **The “grains of sand” concept focuses analytic attention on the CI risk individuals pose rather than on government intelligence services.**

Still, it should be borne in mind that while the evidence shows that Chinese and US intelligence con-

^a The Chinese intelligence services have balanced finding targets with access and sources able to travel back-and-forth to China. That many of these individuals were ethnically Chinese is a function more of opportunity than intent, because China-based case officers have run most known Chinese operations. Moreover, many of Beijing’s intelligence targets are, in fact, ethnically Chinese, such as Taiwan and overseas dissident groups—where foreigners are targeted, the results are cases like Boursicot’s and Glenn Shriver’s.

^b After the Congressional investigation into the Chinese espionage scandals of the 1990s, the committee tried to warn future analysts to be clear in their distinctions. The Cox Committee’s final report admonished that “those unfamiliar with Chinese intelligence practices often conclude that, because intelligence services conduct clandestine operations, all clandestine operations are directed by intelligence agencies. In the case of [China], this is not always the rule.”

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cepts and methods may not be too far apart, intelligence organizations operate in the service of national policy. The needs and priorities of decision makers guide the activities of intelligence services and their operations.

Beijing and Washington are engaged in dramatically different competitions that need active intelligence support. For example, counterterrorism in both countries focuses on noticeably different problems. US intelligence agencies primarily are concerned with terrorists abroad and their efforts to go operational within the United States.

China, by contrast, confronts domestic terrorists that apparently have relatively fewer foreign links. The operational challenges related to collecting intelligence on these essentially different terrorist threats produce different kinds of intelligence activity. Observers should be careful not to go too far in describing the similarities between the two systems, especially given the differing cultures and ways of thinking.¹⁰

The Challenges

Thinking of China's intelligence services as bureaucratic organizations raises questions of what functions they serve as part of the state's administrative apparatus and how well they perform those functions. Below, I will outline what I believe are the three principal analytic challenges to understanding the Chinese intelligence services and their relationship to the future of China and US-Chinese relations.

1. Assessing China's Internal Security Apparatus

Informed assessments of the capabilities and performance of China's internal security system may not have direct payoffs in terms of immediate US policy goals, but they are key elements in evaluations of China's stability—in turn a key factor in a number of US strategic interests in Asia. Analysis of China's internal security forces is the first step toward a net assessment of the competition between China's political reformers and its governing apparatus. While the United States may not wish to influence this contest directly, US policymakers should be aware of its progress and the viability of Chinese opposition.

For at least the past 15 years, China has appeared precariously unstable; various sources have noted mounting unrest—now well over 100,000 “mass incidents” per year.¹¹ Reports and photographs of violent demonstrations in various places have given rise to analysis that “Beijing's control over the coercive system, as well as that system's capacity to maintain social control, appears to be slipping.”¹²

Since that assertion was published in 2001, Beijing has reinvigorated its coercive apparatus. As the Chinese citizenry gained access to the Internet and mobile communications, the authorities have increased their investment in internal security. According to press reports, State Council budget figures for 2010 and 2011—even if not broken out by agency—show that the expenditures on internal security systems have

outpaced the cost of China's dramatic military modernization, coming in at \$95 billion compared to \$92 billion in 2010 and up to \$111 billion for 2012.¹³

Following several years of local-level experimentation with intelligence-led policing, State Councillor and Minister of Public Security (MPS) Meng Jianzhu announced the nation-wide adoption of “public security informatization” (*gong'an xinxihua*) at an MPS conference in 2008. “Public security informatization” refers to the process of integrating information more closely into police operations, including both domestic intelligence gathering and information management components.

On the former, the MPS directs its officers to focus on collecting information about potential social disturbances. The most well-known example of the latter is the Golden Shield project, which is primarily about linking a variety of national- and local-level databases with personal information collected from hotels, phone companies, and other businesses that require true-name registration. This data then can be aggregated and used to generate tasking for police stations automatically when a person-of-interest turns up in that jurisdiction.¹⁴

What Beijing really appears to be aiming for is creation of the capacity to create a panoptic state, a capacity that goes beyond what normally is thought of as domestic intelligence. In the CCP's leading journal, China's senior leader responsible for security and stability, Zhou Yongkang, laid out the desired “social management system” (*shehui guanli tixi*), which he said would include integrating MPS

intelligence with public opinion monitoring and propaganda to shape people's decision making about appropriate actions in the public sphere.¹⁵

Since the publication of Zhou's article, the MPS has launched two new efforts to change the level of its public engagement. On 27 September 2011, the MPS formally approved a nationwide policy for public security elements' use of microblogs to spread a ministry perspective and inform Chinese citizens about safety concerns.¹⁶ In December 2011, the MPS also pushed police officers out of their stations as part of a campaign to win over the hearts and minds of the Chinese people—and to monitor public opinion.¹⁷

The idea of information control has deep roots in Chinese strategic thought and may provide insight into how Beijing is acting on its domestic ambitions. Beginning with Sun Tzu, Chinese strategists have envisioned a seamless web of counterespionage, information collection, agent provocateurs, and propagandists—what Sun Tzu called the “divine skein.”¹⁸

Intelligence as information to support decision making is only one part of the overarching idea of achieving information superiority. For example, modern PLA strategists divided strategic information operations into multiple categories including manipulation of adversary decision making, intelligence and offensive counterintelligence, and efforts to erode or destroy an opponent's sensors, both human and technical.¹⁹

The question is whether these ideas permeate internal security and

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how far the MPS and MSS go in attempting to draw out potential dissidents—not just identifying already active subversive elements.²⁰

The MPS rejuvenation fits within a broader strategy of localizing grievances while preserving the legitimacy of the central government in Beijing.²¹ The visible signs that this strategy is working include examples of protestors in Guangdong Province, who, despite their problem with corrupt local officials, still appealed to Beijing.²²

The potential ability to track millions of people and register their communications would support this strategy by making it easier to follow activists and malcontents wherever they go, physically and virtually. People like the lawyers Chen Guangcheng and Gao Zhisheng, artist Ai Weiwei, and authors Chen Wei, Yu Jie, and Liu Xiaobo are dangerous because they draw attention to systemwide grievances and directly challenge the CCP's role in perpetuating official abuse.²³

The final question about the MPS and related security offices is what is their degree of political influence. Do the internal security forces merely execute policy or are they intimately involved in its creation—and, consequently, in CCP policymaking and strategy formulation? Little open-source material—other than published career information and public leadership functions—help in analyzing this question.

The largely unchronicled rise of the MPS during the past decade sug-

gests Meng and his predecessor Zhou Yongkang are largely responsible for reforming the MPS and raising the profile of “social management” and “preserving stability.”

Yet despite the growing importance of the CCP's efforts to monitor and shape an increasingly contentious Chinese society,²⁴ nowhere can be found a public profile of either of these two men that analyzes their impact on policy or the organizations they oversee.

2. Evolution of the Chinese Intelligence Community

While analysts of Chinese intelligence activities often invoke China's long history of espionage, the Chinese intelligence community as currently constituted is less than 30 years old. While culture matters, institutions are affected by much more—including incentives, leadership attention, and measurements of performance. Assessments of developing bureaucratic and political relationships may be difficult, even impossible, using only open-source material, but clearer understanding of them will help US intelligence and policymakers understand the conflicting interests that will shape the Chinese intelligence apparatus and its contribution to Chinese policymaking, especially as Beijing's interests abroad grow and create new bureaucratic space and possibly greater influence for the intelligence service most able to respond to leadership needs.

Since its creation in 1983, the Ministry of State Security (MSS) has

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fought to carve out its operational and policy space from the Ministry of Public Security. When Beijing created the MSS, it fused the remnants of the CCP's Investigation Department with the intelligence- and counterintelligence-related components of the MPS.

The first minister of state security had been a senior vice minister of public security. Thus, the MSS lacked a distinct identity, drawing as it did from several organizations that were still in the process of reconsti-

tuting from the chaos of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76).²⁵

Recent developments suggest Beijing may be placing more emphasis on the MSS and other intelligence services to develop stronger foreign intelligence capabilities. The first sign was the selection of Geng Huichang as the new MSS chief in a ministerial shakeup in August 2007. Geng became the first minister with a foreign affairs, rather than internal security, background. He reportedly served as a professor at the MSS-affiliated Beijing International Relations Institute and as a scholar, and later director, at the MSS think tank, the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations.²⁶

A second sign is the emergence since 2008 of PRC intelligence operations conducted entirely outside of China. Until then, no exposed Chinese espionage case occurred without operational activity inside China—that is, no operation occurred without a physical connection to China. The Swedish first identified the new approach in 2008, when they uncovered Chinese intelligence officers in the Chinese embassy in Stockholm who had recruited a Uyghur émigré to spy on fellow émigrés in Europe and beyond. The Germans may have identified the second, alleging the existence of a spy ring run by a Chinese intelligence officer out of the Chinese consulate in Munich in 2009. Last year a case involved the Taiwan Army's director of telecommunications and electronic information, who was recruited in Bangkok.²⁷

Understanding is also needed of the role of military intelligence (especially 2PLA) in any competition for shares of the state budget and for influence within the central leadership. Chinese military modernization, especially the PLA's development of precision-guided weaponry, has created a new need for timely tactical intelligence—targeting and data guidance, as well as information to guide bomb damage assessments, for example.²⁸ While 2PLA has been known as “China's CIA,”²⁹ the military's need for more intelligence support would have created pressure for 2PLA to focus more on military requirements rather than national policymakers.³⁰

Chinese policymakers—with the exception of two civilian members of the Central Military Commission—can exercise little direct influence over the PLA. Thus the PLA's intelligence needs could lead it to monopolize intelligence resources or underinvest in capabilities that might otherwise go to meet the requirements of the central leadership. If PLA intelligence resources become more internally directed, as suggested by senior personnel appointments,³¹ then Beijing may lose an alternative to the internally oriented civilian security and intelligence apparatus.

A second factor to be understood is the degree to which bureaucratic inertia and the influence of the internal security elements of the Chinese intelligence and security apparatus affect developments. The civilian organizations, the MPS and MSS, report to the political-legal system (*zhengfa xitong*) overseen by Zhou Yongkang, who also sits on Politburo Standing Committee. His portfolio emphasizes preserving internal stability (*weihu wending gongzuo*)

Chinese Intelligence and Security Services^a

Civilian

Ministry of State Security (MSS)
Counterespionage and Counterintelligence; Foreign Intelligence; Domestic Intelligence

Ministry of Public Security (MPS)
National Police; Domestic Intelligence;

Military

Second Department of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) General Staff Department (2PLA)
Foreign Intelligence; Defense Attaché System; Imagery Intelligence; Tactical Reconnaissance

Third Department of the PLA General Staff Department (3PLA)

Signals Intelligence

^a Other major intelligence and security departments not specifically discussed in this essay include the Fourth Department of the PLA General Staff Department (4PLA); the Liaison Office of the PLA General Political Department; the intelligence departments of the PLA Navy, PLA Air Force, and Second Artillery; and the State Secrecy Bureau.

and, according to the Hong Kong press, Zhou does not sit on any of the foreign policymaking bodies, such as the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group (FALSG).³² The minister of state security only gained an FALSG seat in 1998.³³

Both civilian ministries also have substantial portions—probably the majority—of their personnel in provincial departments or local bureaus, which report to the provincial and local party committees in addition to their home ministries. Foreign affairs however are not handled at the subnational level, encouraging these local MPS and MSS units to focus on provincial, rather than national, concerns like internal stability.

3. Understanding the Chinese Intelligence Processing System

If US policymakers hope to shape the way China exercises its growing influence in the world,³⁴ they will require clear understanding of how Chinese intelligence interprets official US statements and intelligence about the United States its services collect and evaluate. Will information the United States purposefully transmits reach China's senior civilian and military decision makers? How it is interpreted will depend on the biases and underlying assumptions about the United States that each of the services have, subjects we know little about. Without answers to such questions the risk will be high that US statements and actions will be misinterpreted.

In part the answers to such questions lie in understanding the ideo-

It is highly likely that whatever reaches the top will have been influenced by local procedures and biases.

logical and political prisms through which Chinese officials at multiple levels view the United States. In part the answers lie in the institutional frameworks through which intelligence about the United States flows and the ways in which the Chinese manage intelligence derived from the new digital world of large data.

Institutional Frameworks

China, like the United States, has separate civilian and military organizations, but it also has components of national security and intelligence distributed throughout provincial and, in some cases, lower levels. This is true both for civilian ministries, which have provincial and lower level bureaus, and for PLA intelligence organizations. An excellent military example is the Third Department of the PLA's General Staff Department (3PLA). The 3PLA—responsible for signals intelligence, computer network reconnaissance (cyber), and technical countermeasures—has offices and technical reconnaissance bureaus in each of China's seven military regions and several major cities,³⁵ and it is likely that the Chinese services have their own training and procurement units in these areas. If so, it follows that regional differences in performance and equipment will exist throughout the PLA's intelligence organizations.³⁶

With multiple levels between the sources of intelligence and China's leadership, it is highly likely that whatever reaches the top will have

been influenced by local procedures and biases.³⁷ Understanding how each of China's intelligence organizations processes reports, identifies important issues, and validates information will be key to understanding how Chinese perceptions are shaped.^a ³⁸ Even if understanding these processes does not provide the insights British signals intelligence did into German intentions, it forms the beginnings of serious assessment and awareness.

A related question is to what extent are institutional and procedural biases reflected in the public writings of Chinese intelligence-affiliated analysts. Examples are the works of analysts at the military intelligence-run China Institute of International and Strategic Studies and the MSS-run China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations.³⁹ Are their writings useful in understanding how PLA and MSS intelligence analysts filter and interpret world events and foreign intentions?

Large Data Processing

The reported scale of China's hacking activities suggests terabytes of data may be finding their way to Chinese intelligence organizations.⁴⁰ What happens to the data there remains unknown. The intricacy of China's civilian and military security and intelligence organizations and the variety of services they are presumed to provide to a multitude of government organizations make it

^a Students of deception basically come to the same conclusions about what makes deception—influencing an adversary to make disadvantageous decisions by denying or supplying information—function well. Would-be deceivers need time, control over their own information, channels through which pass information, and the ability to monitor the adversary's thinking and behavior.

Ferretting out of internal, generally secret, processes may seem irrelevant to national policy or the daily diplomatic and commercial relations, but it is no less important for analysts and policymakers to understand.

difficult, if not impossible, to examine solely through open sources.

Key questions include how will the Chinese take on the challenge of processing vast amounts of data that human beings, even in the large numbers Chinese intelligence presumably could recruit, are unable to process. The challenge goes well beyond simple translation problems or conversion of data into searchable formats by organizations with different bureaucratic practices and jargon. How exploitation of such data adds value to Chinese leaders and policymakers is yet another question—one which Western services have probably not even begun to address, let alone resolve.

Conclusion

China's intelligence services have long been underanalyzed as major bureaucratic organizations and components of state power. This may have mattered relatively little during China's inward-looking and underdeveloped years. Today, its leaders are significant players on the world stage, and understanding how and what they learn about the world and how they formulate their policy choices is more important than ever.

Given the complex choices the Chinese face, it is likely that their intelligence services will play an even greater role than they have in the past.⁴¹

The intelligence and intelligence analysis challenges the Chinese face will look familiar to many US analysts:

- **Determining sources of energy and maintaining the security of delivery routes.**
- **Protecting Chinese officials and citizens working abroad.**
- **Preserving markets for Chinese goods and defense of key supply chains, among many others.**

All of these interests will put pressure on the intelligence services to be more active abroad against a wide variety of targets, both official and not. How intelligence performs missions in support of these and other goals will also serve as indicators of Chinese national policy, and possibly in some cases as indicators of independent policymaking in the services.



At the same time, understanding Chinese intelligence remains crucial to understanding the state of China's internal stability, although this topic cannot be watched solely from an intelligence perspective—the pace of economic development, indications of the PLA's loyalty to the CCP, and signs of the party's cohesion are other keys.

Recent Western misconceptions about Chinese intelligence operations and insufficient scholarly attention to intelligence organizations have limited awareness of how these institutions actually function, but, as China's influence grows and domestic unrest continues, failure to remedy these deficiencies will be to the detriment of the United States and others with similar policy perspectives.

Finally, open-source researchers are likely only to be able to establish the broad contours and systemic pressures under which Chinese intelligence operates. They may also be able to offer the questions in need of research. But much of that research involves the ferreting out of internal, generally secret, processes. That work may seem irrelevant to broad national policy or the daily blow-by-blow of diplomatic and commercial relations, but it is no less important for analysts and policymakers to understand.

Endnotes

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