

Intelligence in Public Media

Chinese Spies: From Chairman Mao to Xi Jinping

Roger Faligot (translated by Natasha Lehrer), (C. Hurst & Co., 2019), 568, appendices, notes, index

Reviewed by David Ian Chambers

Over three decades ago, the Larry Chin case catapulted Chinese espionage into the headlines and onto the agendas of national security policymakers. Since then, continuing exposures of hostile intelligence, influence, and cyber operations have demonstrated the growing scale, diversity, and depth of China's covert activities against Western targets. In parallel, China's security services have developed sophisticated human and technical methods of surveillance against Chinese nationals and foreign residents in China.

Accompanying these changes, there has been a revival of many 1950s-style mass-campaign techniques to indoctrinate Chinese citizens about threats to national security presented by foreign espionage and subversion. But with a difference: whereas those who informed on suspicious activity in the 1950s might have counted on a red rosette or certificate as their reward, today's potential informants are offered incentives up to 500,000 RMB (over US \$70,000) for reporting any activity they believe may be threatening state security. Always a difficult target, China has thus become an increasingly challenging operational environment for foreign intelligence services. Nonetheless, these major developments have not been accompanied by the publication of a reliable narrative history of Chinese communist intelligence and security services. A study of their changing missions, organization, modus operandi, and their reflection of China's volatile political culture is long overdue.

This book, an update and translation of French journalist Roger Faligot's 2008 *Les Service Secret Chinois*, aims to fill that gap. It comprises 14 chapters grouped into three parts. The first examines the long haul from foundation of the Chinese Communist Party's first dedicated security/intelligence organs in the late 1920s to Hong Kong's retrocession in 1997. Parts 2 and 3 address subsequent developments up to a cut-off point around 2018–19. Various appendices include leadership name-lists, organization charts, and a selective chronology of Chinese espionage cases exposed in the United States between

1984 and 2017. No bibliography is provided, but the content and footnotes indicate that the author has drawn predominantly on secondary Western sources, spiced with material from overseas Chinese periodicals, discussions with fellow journalists and Western officials, and his own observations while visiting China. Overall, there is little in the book that is new, much that may frustrate intelligence professionals and academics familiar with the subject, and a great deal of that will mislead or misinform readers approaching the subject afresh.

The text is littered with errors and omissions that should have been eliminated before publication. Chinese names and terms are frequently misromanized, a problem that emerges as early as page 1, where the name of a former head of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) civilian intelligence service is misrendered. Western names are not immune—former CIA Director John Brennan is mis-named as Paul Brennan. (389) Footnotes are sparse and often missing: thus page 400 contains a lengthy quotation from a useful US article on the recent restructuring of Chinese military intelligence, but it gives no indication where the original may be found. Where footnotes to books do appear, relevant page numbers are uniformly omitted, creating an unnecessary chore for readers wishing to consult the cited source. In short, the book's scholarly architecture is lacking.

What of the content? As the centenaries of the CCP's first intelligence and security organs approach, the author sensibly devotes an opening chapter to the formative years before the Long March of 1934–35, a period when the party leadership first grasped the potential and basic techniques of intelligence work much in evidence today: penetration and disinformation operations, use of agents of influence and commercial cover, false-flag approaches, and the exploitation of vulnerable targets' venality and sexual appetites. These have long been common fare in Chinese and Western studies of the period, but the author's partial treatment adds little, notably omitting the key contributions of HUMINT, SIGINT and

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intelligence-led negotiations that enabled the Red Army to begin the Long March, a defining episode in modern Chinese intelligence history.

An ambitious chapter follows on the period from the late 1930s to the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. Historically-inclined readers hoping for a detailed exploration of critical wartime intelligence casework will be frustrated as the author favors a meandering discussion about a Belgian cartoonist over analysis of classic CCP operations, (e.g., Shen Anna's long haul to become Chiang Kai-shek's confidential stenographer, SIGINT successes against Guomindang and Japanese targets, and Hua Kezhi's guileful penetration of the upper reaches of the Guomindang military and foreign diplomatic establishment). Several passages refer to the post-1949 role of the Central Social Department, the CCP's wartime civilian intelligence and security agency, overlooking the fact that it was abolished in 1949. Founding Minister of Public Security Luo Ruiqing is described as having received Moscow training in counterintelligence before being deployed in Paris against the *Deuxième Bureau*—overseas assignments not mentioned by Luo's many official and family biographers. Most importantly, there is no discussion of recurrent and intense post-1949 debates in the intelligence community and between it and its political masters about resources, recruitment of sources of foreign nationality or dubious backgrounds, or critical suggestions in the mid-late 1950s that intelligence work should be abolished, countered by civilian intelligence service chief Kong Yuan and his deputy Zou Dapeng with the help of then rising CCP star Deng Xiaoping.

The procession of errors and questionable research continues into and beyond the Cultural Revolution chapter: Faligot commits the strategic blooper of misidentifying the “Gang of Four,” and suggests incorrectly that Zou Dapeng, pioneer of foreign intelligence operations, was murdered by Red Guards in 1966—he committed suicide in April 1967. (Deaths and dates are not one of the author's strong points: elsewhere Faligot states that Sir Edward Youde died before taking up the post of Hong Kong governor; minimal research would have shown that Youde served as governor from 1982–86.)

Similar flaws characterize the author's discussion of the fate of China's intelligence community during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), undoubtedly the darkest period in its modern history. Much of the analysis draws explicitly on a speech allegedly given on November 9, 1978 by Hu

Yaobang which detailed Kang Sheng's role in the abuse and destruction of China's civilian intelligence service. There can be no doubt about Kang's malign activities, but Faligot fails to address significant doubts about the speech's provenance and content, not least the fact that Hu spent most of that day in Cambodia, not returning to Beijing until the evening that day. Additionally, rather than being “General Secretary of the CCP Central Committee and its overall number one,” (112) it should have been noted that Hu was not even a Politburo member at the time. In aggregate, such failings greatly diminish the credibility of the book, suggesting the author has overlooked readily-available memoirs of intelligence and security seniors who survived the worst days of the Cultural Revolution and well-sourced analyses of the period by Chinese historians.

Moving closer to the present, the 1983 formation of the Ministry of State Security (MSS) and its initial organization is covered adequately, but the author barely touches on the origins and consequences of a key characteristic of early MSS activity: its strategic shift away from the use of diplomatic cover in overseas operations. Similarly, while covering the familiar ground of the Larry Chin and Boursicot cases exposed in the mid-1980s, Faligot inexplicably fails to consider the Glen Duffie Shriver case, a classic 21st century attempt to penetrate CIA and harbinger of the subsequent Kevin Mallory and Jerry Chun Hsing Lee cases.

The final and better part of the book comprises chapters devoted to (i) PLA cyber activity (ii) security and intelligence operations related to the 2008 Olympics, and (iii) the mixed last decade, in which China's services have enjoyed major home-turf counterespionage successes and a significant expansion of their overseas collection activities despite being buffeted by elite political factionalism, charges of leadership corruption and, for the military intelligence services, substantial reorganization.

Even with the avalanche of open-source Chinese material over the past 30 years, Chinese intelligence history remains a hard nut to crack. No defector yet has taken the Mitrokhin path to document past Chinese intelligence operations and the seepage of classified material out of China remains glacial. Faligot's book is certainly much better-based and argued than its obvious predecessor, Richard Deacon's *A History of the Chinese Secret Service* (1974). By no means a definitive guide, it does at least offer a menu of issues and developments that will hopefully stimulate others to pursue further and more rigorous research. ❖

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