

Review Essay: Covert Action to Promote Democracy in China during the Cold War

Nicholas Dujmović

Roger Jeans *The CIA and Third Force Movements in China during the Early Cold War* (Lexington, 2018), 342, glossary, bibliography, index.

China's prominence in current events—and the ongoing intelligence challenge China presents—requires us to understand the historical context. A chapter of Cold War history that deserves to be better known concerns CIA's "Third Force" operations against the People's Republic of China. From 1949 into 1954, CIA covertly supported anticommunist, ostensibly democratic movements that were not associated with the Chinese Nationalist Party (*Guomindang*), comprising therefore a Third Force.

The idea behind the Third Force project, which CIA called HTMERLIN, was that the Nationalist Chinese government had discredited itself in the eyes of the Chinese population (and of the Truman administration) for its corruption and dysfunction when it ruled the mainland before its ouster by Mao Zedong's People's Liberation Army.¹ Confusing the history is that, at the very same time the Third Force project was ongoing, CIA was also working with the Nationalist government, which had fled to the island of Taiwan, to destabilize Communist rule on the mainland. CIA's operations with the Nationalists came under the codeword BGMARQUE, and it's important not to conflate these two major projects, which were quite separate (though they competed within CIA for personnel, assets, facilities, and money).²

While the CIA program with the Nationalists has been rather well known by intelligence historians and scholars of Chinese foreign relations,³ information on the Third Force was hard to come by until recently. Early and brief treatments of just a few pages can be found in William Leary's history of Civil Air Transport, former CIA officer James Lilley's cleared memoir, and my own treatment in this journal of a CIA Third Force operation gone awry, the Fecteau-Downey story.⁴ While I was still a CIA staff historian, I collected a couple of shelves of Third Force-related documents, internal studies, and oral histories, thinking I would write a study of it, which would

necessarily be classified but perhaps would be released in time. The project was a low priority, however, and never came to fruition. I remember thinking that the main lesson from this history would be how *not* to run a large, complex covert action program.

Asia scholar Roger Jeans of Washington and Lee University, however, has addressed this gap with his recently published book, *The CIA and Third Force Movements in China during the Early Cold War*. Jeans has produced a unique history of this little-known but important chapter in US-China relations and specifically in CIA history. That he has done so without access to most of the classified record is a tribute to his expertise as a China scholar and his skills as a historian.

Neither Communist nor Nationalist

The first two chapters detail CIA's efforts to organize a Third Force anticommunist resistance on the mainland, even before the final Chinese Communist victory in October 1949, as well as the new salience of these efforts with the entry of Chinese forces into the Korean conflict in the fall of 1950. The search for a Third Force initially was spurred by US military assessments of the fecklessness of the Nationalists and by Truman administration directives blocking aid to the Nationalists and offering support to "indigenous Chinese elements" through "clandestine channels." Jeans's findings, in other words, corroborate internal CIA documentation I saw that indicated the Third Force was not CIA's idea or initiative. Under pressure from the White House, State Department, and the Pentagon, CIA's new covert warfare organization, the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC), sent officers to China with the goal of supporting any anticommunist resistance they could find.

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.

Although Jeans does not say so explicitly, his narrative makes clear that CIA's operations in China, unlike many CIA operations in its history, included people who knew the country, having served there during World War II. One of the colorful CIA men that Jeans identifies as key to the Third Force was Alfred Cox, an OSS veteran with China combat experience. Cox played a leading role both in the covert support for the "Fighting League" pro-Third Force propaganda efforts based in Hong Kong as well as with Cai Wenzhi's "Free China" paramilitary operations against the mainland. (4) According to Jeans, assisting Cox were two true "China hands," both experts and linguists who had served as combat intelligence officers in China with General Clair Chennault's Fourteenth Air Force. After the war, one became a journalist and was recruited into OPC because of his contacts among Muslim generals in northwest China and with Mongolian leaders. The other went into US academia as a China specialist and then joined the Central Intelligence Group in 1947; he would remain with CIA and serve in the region during this period.

But it's also clear that CIA's experts were too few for the task at hand. Alfred Cox had overall responsibility for OPC's increasingly ambitious covert operations in East Asia, while at the same time he was put in charge of the newly acquired CIA proprietary airline Civil Air Transport (CAT was soon flying more than 500 hours per month in support of CIA operations). On top of these duties, Cox was the OPC local chief in Hong Kong, busily recruiting ethnic Chinese for the Third Force. (30, 48 fn 11)

When Chinese troops entered the Korean conflict in November 1950, the Truman administration increased pressure on CIA to stir up guerrilla activity in China in order to "distract and slow down the Chinese advance." (39) Jeans rightly questions this logic, making the apt observation that Mao Zedong could send hundreds of thousands of troops into Korea and still have vast numbers to deal with anticommunist resistance on the mainland. He might have quoted Richard Helms on this score, that in the early Cold War US policymakers either expected CIA to "do something" or demanded CIA "try anything" to fight communism.⁵

Jeans describes how the outbreak of the Korean War and the China's entry into it caused official Washington to mitigate its "disgust" with the Nationalist regime of

Chiang Kai-Shek on Taiwan. Chiang, who at least had an island, a military, and a government, was perhaps not so bad at all, while it was proving difficult for CIA to create a unified Third Force that could actually do something. (chapter 3 passim) This beginning of a shift of perspective among some CIA officers, State Department diplomats, and the Joint Chiefs helps explain the apparently contradictory policies of supporting a Third Force while at the same time engaging in joint operations with the Nationalist government that, understandably, hated the Third Force and protested US support of it.

Political vs. Paramilitary Wings

As Jeans explains, the CIA Third Force program had two major elements, one mainly political and the other paramilitary. His chapter three (of eight) is about the "political wing" of the Third Force, the CIA-supported Fighting League for Chinese Freedom and Democracy (*Zhongguo ziyou minzhu zhandou tongmeng*), which, despite its name, did no actual fighting. Based in Hong Kong, the Fighting League engaged in propaganda, political and cultural education and publishing, recruiting among students and refugees, and lots and lots of talking. Early on, the League rebuffed CIA attempts to engage it in resistance operations on the mainland but claimed to have a network of intelligence agents engaged in collection. However, its leader Zhang Fukui said that almost all the intelligence was falsified by young agents reluctant to infiltrate the mainland but eager for "American gold." (120–21)

Comprising mostly intellectuals and out-of-work politicians, the Fighting League's membership did not exceed several hundred, and CIA's expenditures on it mostly went to subsidizing its various journals (with print runs of 2,000 copies, most of which never left Hong Kong), and its leaders' individual monthly stipends. Jeans estimates CIA spent less than \$350,000 on the Fighting League over three years, a pittance "considering the group was supposed to help overthrow Communism in China." (83–85). It operated under constant threat of being shut down by the British authorities and from penetration from the Communist and Nationalist regimes alike.

The other, and more consequential, Third Force element was the Free China Movement (*Ziyou Zhongguo yundong*), led by Cai Wenzhi, the former deputy chief

of staff of the Nationalist Army, assisted by other former Nationalist military officers. Chapter four deals with this paramilitary program, which employed CIA-trained Chinese ethnic agents to engage in resistance operations and to collect intelligence on the mainland. Bases for training and launching operations were set up in Japan, Okinawa, and Saipan. (111) Two of the six CIA field units in Japan were part of the Third Force complex, and CAT pilots and aircraft based at another airfield also supported Third Force operations. (114)

Despite training hundreds of Chinese at the various OPC training sites for insertion operations into China, the Third Force paramilitary project managed, according to Jeans, to launch only a half-dozen or so missions, and every one of them failed. (chapter 5 *passim*) It seems likely more operations took place than the few Jeans unearthed, but in any case his assessment reflects the reality that the Third Force enterprise, as a paramilitary or political project, was a grand failure.

The greatest single failure is the subject of an entire chapter (six), entitled “CIA Debacle: The Downey-Fecteau Third Force Mission to Manchuria.” Here Jeans relates the story of the November 1952 shootdown of a C-47 transport aircraft and the capture of young CIA paramilitary officers Dick Fecteau and Jack Downey, whose saga of imprisonment and release two decades later has been documented in these pages.⁶ Jeans provides some interesting context from the Chinese perspective but otherwise provides a straightforward summary of what is already known without making any major errors. The most egregious of the minor errors, however, is Jeans’ assertion that the men’s lengthy imprisonment was the result of CIA’s “stubborn refusal” to admit their affiliation. In fact, CIA was in favor of disclosure but could not do so unilaterally in the face of opposition from the White House, State, and the Pentagon. Jeans suggests this sorry episode may have been a factor in the demise of the Third Force project as a whole, (145) and I see no reason to dispute this assessment.

Jeans notes, however, that the most important factor in the withdrawal of US support for the Third Force was the end of the Korean War; the 1953 armistice obviated the urgency of creating a diversion to weaken Chinese commitment to that conflict. Other factors included the change of administration in 1953; the Republicans were more favorably disposed toward the Nationalists than

the Democrats had been. Indeed, Undersecretary of State Walter Bedell Smith, lately the CIA director who had been skeptical of the Third Force project during the Truman administration, observed that there was “no alternative” to supporting Chiang Kai-Shek. (192) According to Jeans, CIA support for the Fighting League ended in 1953, and this political wing of the Third Force disbanded in Hong Kong the following year. Likewise with the Free China Movement: CIA curtailed its support to Cai Wenzhi’s men in early 1954, and the agency began arranging for their resettlement. A few went back to Hong Kong, but surprisingly, most went to Taiwan, helped in part, writes Jeans, by bribery. (194)

After Communist China began shelling Nationalist-held islands in the fall of 1954, Taiwan and the United States grew closer and signed a mutual defense agreement that December; with this act, Jeans writes, “the Third Force idea was effectively dead.” (204)

Strengths and Weakness of CIA and Third Force Movements

Overall, Jeans weaves together a complex narrative that makes use of an impressive range of sources, including memoirs and interviews with Third Force participants (from CIA officers and Chinese agents alike), Communist Chinese documents, declassified US diplomatic correspondence and intelligence assessments, and important secondary sources. Even with its flaws of storytelling—sometimes excruciating detail about secondary personalities, repetition, and lots of chronology hopping—his book is an impressive accomplishment and, as a pioneering work on little-known CIA operations, a valuable contribution to intelligence history.

That said, intelligence officers should be warned that there is much herein to set one’s teeth on edge. Most annoyingly, Jeans throughout insists on using “agent” when he means CIA officer, and he even cites something I wrote to support his usage. Yes, “staff agent” and “contract agent” were CIA job titles in the early 1950s (the equivalent, respectively, of “staff officer” and “non-official cover officer”), but it will not do simply to drop the adjectives and call CIA officers “agents,” and it’s indefensible when referring to someone like career CIA officer James Lilley. (xxvi, 31, 238 and *passim*) At one point, we read of “agents” paying off “agents”—what is

meant is that OPC officers paid Chinese assets (or agents). One consequence of this confusion is that, when Jeans writes that more than 1,000 “OPC agents” were operating *in Korea* by the end of 1950, (32), we don’t know what he means. The confusion is compounded 80 pages later, where he writes that there were more than 1,000 “OPC agents” at the end of 1950, but this time *in Japan*. (114)

Jeans is confused on other intelligence terms. “Plausible deniability” was a concept to protect the president from political responsibility for ordering covert action; the phrase should not be used to describe operational cover stories. (60 and elsewhere)

There are other indications that Jeans is not an expert on US intelligence and its history. It’s not true, as he asserts, that CIA was created “almost solely” to collect intelligence (1)—deliberately vague language in the National Security Act of 1947 provided for secret operations, including covert action, that had already been going on. His frequent use of “OPC/CIA” is confusing, as it obscures the fact that the Office of Policy Coordination, created in 1948 to undertake all forms of covert action, was part of CIA even if it took guidance from the State Department and the Joint Chiefs. A more accurate and less confusing usage would have been “CIA/OPC.”

It’s a mystery that Jeans never seemed to discover the HTMERLIN codeword for the Third Force project (or, for that matter, BGMARQUE for the joint operations with the Chinese Nationalists), something a careful researcher should have found in declassified documents or, indeed, in a major secondary source that Jeans cites often.⁷

Finally, Jeans displays an obvious animus for CIA. He seems to take personally CIA’s reluctance to declassify relevant documents, which leads him into repeated asides about CIA’s lack of historical transparency (xxvii–xxx, 72, 231–232, 236, and elsewhere) and distracting non sequiturs about failing to catch spies like Aldrich Ames and Robert Hanssen. (xxx) I don’t believe it is true, as he asserts, (xxix) that CIA withholds information on past activities simply because they are embarrassing failures. There are lots of reasons, some defensible, others not, why historical information that could and should be released isn’t, but it’s a bit much to say that there’s a “CIA cover-up” (xxvii) about its history, given how much material the CIA and its History Staff make available—much of it unfavorable.

History’s Lessons

Intelligence officers should look past all that and focus on the major strength of Jeans’s book: his analysis of the reasons for the failure of the Third Force, for they are legion. The most pertinent lessons for covert action practitioners today are these:

CIA learned the wrong lessons from history. The agency believed a Third Force could be successful in establishing itself on the mainland just as OSS operations in wartime China, Burma, and France were successful. Those operations, however, enjoyed support from populations under occupation from an invader. By contrast, the Chinese people after Mao’s victory did not see the Communists as invaders, but as a homegrown movement that had opposed the invaders. CIA should not have counted on even benign support from the population of the mainland.

CIA officers gave too much credence to émigré stories that turned out to be implausible or fantastic. One of the ex-Nationalist generals of the Third Force claimed to be in touch with half a million guerilla fighters in South China alone, where they had stashed a million weapons into hidden caches. The Chinese Nationalists themselves estimated there were as many as 2 million anticommunist guerillas on the mainland. (35–37, 58). Working with admittedly little information other than these claims, CIA and the fledgling “intelligence community” of the early 1950s estimated the number of anticommunist fighters on the mainland was between 600,000 and 700,000. (44, 46). The leaders of the Free China Movement said their “brigades” of guerrillas on the mainland would rise up when the Third Force made landings on the mainland. (117–19). All these claims were pure fantasy. Even when CIA knew that Third Force leaders were making spurious claims, (69) the agency, under continued pressure from State and the Pentagon, went forward with training and operations.

Disunity among the foreigners CIA was working with was crippling. The political and military wings of the Third Force remained separate organizations because the Chinese anticommunists could not unite in their aims or agree on the leadership of the Third Force. Neither CIA nor State could fix this. Because of deep-seated personality clashes among the Chinese, the Americans could not get the leaders of the Fighting League and the Free China

Movement, which itself changed its name four times, to unite their forces. (115–16) The League was beset with internal backbiting and rivalry; (90) even before its creation, “two of its major participants had become rivals for leadership,” leading to the expulsion of a leading Third Force figure. (63)

CIA suffered greatly from a lack of qualified people.

Some leading CIA officers in the Third Force project knew China well, so I disagree with Jeans’s blanket condemnation of CIA’s “almost complete ignorance of the language and culture,” (257) but clearly there were far too few China experts for the task. For example, when OPC wanted to recruit Manchurian refugees in Hong Kong for operations in northeast China, it got southern Chinese who were attracted by the prospect of working with the Americans, and OPC apparently could not tell the difference. (118) I know from my own research that CIA personnel working with the Third Force were overworked and often overwhelmed by their duties. CIA officer Alfred Cox’s doubling and tripling up of his duties with OPC and CAT led him to the point of a nervous breakdown. (225)

The expertise deficit extended to paramilitary matters. As I have detailed in the *Journal of Military*

History (an article Jeans cites), OPC used recent college graduates with no military experience to train Chinese agents (many of them former Nationalist officers!) in paramilitary duties, while US military detailees to CIA often were assigned to work espionage (in the Office of Special Operations) rather than paramilitary operations in OPC.⁸

In an epilogue, Jeans details how the United States made many of the same mistakes in pursuing a democratic Third Force in Vietnam in the early 1950s. The idea of Third Forces in Asian countries was, as Jeans quotes Graham Greene, the “Great American Dream” that was destined, tragically, to fail.⁹

With his groundbreaking study, Roger Jeans amply demonstrates the anticipated conclusion of my never-written classified history of CIA’s Third Force project: this is, indeed, how *not* to run covert action. It is hard to disagree with his final assessment that “there are limits to the ability of an outside force to influence a country.” (263) It is entirely apt that the last two words of his narrative are “wishful thinking.”



The reviewer: Nicholas Dujmović is the founding director of the Intelligence Studies Program at The Catholic University of America. He retired from CIA after 26 years of service as analyst, manager, editor of the *President’s Daily Brief*, and CIA historian.

Endnotes

1. For the codeword HTMERLIN, see Joe Leeker, “CAT and Air America in Japan,” <https://www.utdallas.edu/library/specialcollections/hac/cataam/Leeker/history/Japan.pdf>
2. BGMARQUE operations are described, and HTMERLIN is mentioned, in the declassified “Director’s Log” for DCI Walter B. Smith, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/1951-09-01.pdf>, and also appears in the declassified history by Gregory Pedlow and Donald Welzenbach, *The Central Intelligence Agency and Overhead Reconnaissance* (CIA History Staff, 1992), 222; see <https://www.archives.gov/files/declassification/iscap/pdf/2014-004-doc01.pdf>.
3. A compelling memoir of BGMARQUE operations is found in Frank Holober, *Raiders of the China Coast* (Naval Institute Press, 1999).
4. William Leary, *Perilous Missions: Civil Air Transport and CIA Covert Operations in Asia* (University of Alabama Press, 1984); James Lilly, *China Hands* (Public Affairs, 2004); and Nicholas Dujmović, “Extraordinary Fidelity: Two CIA Prisoners in China, 1952–1973,” *Studies in Intelligence* 50, No. 4 (December 2006): 21–36.
5. Richard Helms, *A Look Over My Shoulder* (Random House, 2003), 124.
6. Dujmović, “Extraordinary Fidelity.”
7. Leeker, “CAT and Air America in Japan.”
8. Nicholas Dujmović, “Drastic Actions Short of War: The Origins and Application of CIA’s Covert Paramilitary Function in the Early Cold War,” *The Journal of Military History* 76 no. 3 (July 2012): 775–808.
9. See Thomas L. Ahern, Jr., *The Way We Do Things: Black Entry Operations into North Vietnam, 1961–64* (CIA, Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2005). It is available in CIA’s FOIA Electronic Reading Room and at https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB-284/5-THE_WAY_WE_DO_THINGS.pdf. The 71-page lightly redacted declassified monograph details numerous failed entry operations—and provides testimony that CIA historians are willing to tell bad news stories.

