Introduction

On December 1, 1967, a meeting called by PRC Vice-Premier and Minister of Public Security Xie Fuzhi ordered the indefinite suspension of all operational use of agents (*teqing renyuan*), as well as the decommissioning of safe houses nationwide, and the launch of a general inquiry into whether the men and women who for the past eighteen years had been in China what *inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* were in East Germany had, in Xie's words, "done any bad stuff" (*zuole shenme huaishi*).[1] Four and a half decades later, historians still struggle to understand what triggered this drastic course of action. Was it simply how Xie chose to respond to Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolutionary wish to see the "public security, procuratory, and legal sectors beaten to a pulp"?[2] A few months earlier,

[1] *Jianguo yilai gongan gongzuo dashi yaolan* (*Survey of Major Events in Public Security Work Since the Founding of the Nation*) (Beijing: Qunzhong chubanshe, 2003), p. 319. A Google search for translations of the East German Ministry of State Security term *inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* in English-language texts quickly yields well over two dozen alternatives, including "unofficial informant," "confidential informant," "citizen informant," "part-time informer," "unofficial informer," "Political Police informer," "volunteer spy," "undercover collaborator," "unofficial collaborator," "informal collaborator," and "agent." In this book, the term "officer" (as in "public security officer," "operational officer," "field officer," or "desk officer") refers to a man or woman working for the public security organs of the PRC, while the term "agent" is used exclusively to refer to a person who is not him- or herself an employee of those same organs but has been recruited by an officer in support of an operation. The agent may serve as a passive provider of information or play a more proactive role, depending on the nature and particulars of the operation (see Chapter 2).

[2] The context in which an exasperated Mao had spoken on the subject is discussed in Michael Schoenhals, "'Why Don't We Arm the Left?': Mao's Culpability for the Cultural Revolution's 'Great Chaos' of 1967," *The China Quarterly*, No. 182, June 2005, pp. 277–300.

in July 1967, Xie had specifically tasked his deputies with exploring ways of meeting this stated desire on the part of the CCP Chairman.[3] Or was it prompted – in part or in full – by something completely different, such as a fatal loss of faith, perhaps, in the political integrity of lower-level public security officers and hence in the utility of the agent operations they ran? Or was the reason more simply cold war paranoia?

The ripple effects of the order were in any case profoundly disruptive, and an official ministry chronicle from 2003 surveying operational work in this period speaks of how it suffered nationwide.[4] Shanghai was one of the cities most affected. The municipal director of public security and his deputy holding the counterintelligence portfolio had already come under fire from Cultural Revolutionary rivals, who charged them with using secret agents to pursue highly dubious "revisionist" security ends.[5] Now it was implied that everything they and their predecessors had achieved on the covert front in China's largest metropolis needed to be reassessed.[6] Farther to the south, in the coastal province of Zhejiang, operational work came to an almost complete standstill. Here an inquiry outsourced to the armed forces targeted not just individuals but the very institution of the agent, as the political/semantic distinction was dropped between what until only recently had been the good agents of the PRC and the dreaded *tewu* of its enemies.[7] In an official inquiry report entitled "Views on the Thorough Beating to a Pulp of So-Called 'Domestic Agents'," the PLA in Zhejiang claimed to have unearthed evidence of a vast underground network of agents that had infiltrated the entire provincial public security apparatus. The report further asserted that since the founding of the

[3] Shi Yizhi, *Wo zai gonganbu shi nian* (*My Ten Years in the Ministry of Public Security*) ([Beijing]: privately printed, 2002), p. 18.

[4] *Jianguo yilai gongan*, p. 319.

[5] Shanghai shi gonganju bangongshi zhengzhibu nongbaochu geming zaofandui, ed., *Dadao litong waiguode fangeming xiuzhengzhuyi fenzi Wang Jian* (*Down with Counter-revolutionary Revisionist Element Wang Jian Who Maintains Illicit Links with Foreign Countries*) (Shanghai, 1967), pp. 12–13.

[6] "Zhou zongli jiejian di shiwu ci quanguo gongan gongzuo [*sic*] huiyi quanti tongzhi de jianghua" (Premier Zhou's Address to All Comrades Attending the 15th National Public Security Conference) [5.30–7.30 p.m. on February 8, 1971], p. 19.

[7] The negatively charged term *tewu* does not have a good equivalent in the English language. As employed by public security officers in Mao Zedong's China, it was meant to refer, often with reasonable precision, to operatives or assets of hostile intelligence services, but in popular discourse and the CCP media it tended to become simply a term of abuse thrown indiscriminately at just about anyone suspected of maintaining links with perceived external enemies of the PRC. Where references to *tewu* are made or quoted in this book, because of the term's inherently fuzzy meaning, it has been mostly left untranslated.

PRC, the people of the province had in reality been at the mercy of a "dictatorship of agents"![8] In colluding with their so-called revisionist controllers, these men and women had done far more than just "bad stuff," if the report was to be believed. By the end of 1969, the green light had been given for agents in Zhejiang to be "handed over to the masses." According to one account, there were widespread cases of outed agents being denounced, beaten, and subjected to public humiliation.[9] In the rest of China, including where agents had been dispatched overseas, the situation was not very different. The English-speaking actor Ying Ruocheng, who since 1952 had served the Beijing municipal Bureau of Public Security as an agent reporting on the activities of members of the foreign expatriate community in the capital, and who would one day become vice-minister of culture, was arrested together with his wife in 1968 and imprisoned for three years.[10] One highly placed CMPS officer recalled in 2001 that "No small number of secret operational assets – people who had managed to penetrate the enemy's innermost – were summoned to be, as it was called, investigated, or disposed of in secret, or publicly exposed."[11]

The events of 1967–69 all but closed the chapter on the use of agents by public security organs in Mao's China. Only cautiously, at first, did a policy reversal get underway in 1971, when Premier Zhou Enlai (credited by historians with building up the CCP's intelligence and security services half a century earlier) insisted that "In the past, although some bad people did manage to worm their way in among them, our agents and 'eyes and ears' did on the whole play no small number of positive roles."[12] At the 15th NPSC, which convened in early 1971 and marked the first such national gathering of senior public security officers in over five years, Zhou ordered provincial and municipal leaders to "embark on a level-headed summary [of work in this field]."[13] By 1973, a new CMPS leadership was reaffirming that secret agents constituted legitimate

[8] Cheng Chao and Wei Haoben, eds., *Zhejiang "wenge" jishi (1966.5–1976.10)* (*Record of Events in Zhejiang's "Cultural Revolution"* [*May 1966–October 1976*]) ([Hangzhou]: Zhejiang fangzhi bianjibu, 1989), pp. 117–18, 133.

[9] Ibid., pp. 117–18, 133, 165.

[10] Ying Ruocheng and Claire Conceison, *Voices Carry: Behind Bars and Backstage during China's Cultural Revolution and Reform* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), p. 3.

[11] Sun Mingshan, ed., *Lishi shunjian II* (*Moments in History II*) (Beijing: Qunzhong chubanshe, 2001), p. 552.

[12] "Zhou zongli jiejian," p. 19.

[13] Ibid.

and important instruments of operational activity.[14] China's most senior active military officer, Marshal Ye Jianying, who addressed the 16th NPSC in the spring of 1973, spoke positively of public security work being in the midst of a crucial "turnaround."[15] In practice, this turnaround included a drive to recruit new agents, their deployment now viewed as "urgently called for in the present situation."[16] Even though it would be another three years before Mao's death in the autumn of 1976, the U-turn heralded, in terms of its historical significance, the beginning of the post-Mao era. As such, however, it falls outside the temporal scope of this study.

Attempted here is a historical examination and analysis of agent work in the first eighteen years of the PRC – as an aspect of *domestic* politics, the operation of the state, and what in the Western press at the time was called "life under communism."[17] (Readers expecting to read the story of Mao's secret agents on intelligence and espionage missions abroad will be disappointed: the battle of wits here takes place on the home turf, by and large, even when it pits the unsung heroes of the CMPS against the operatives of the American and British "imperialists."[18]) It seeks to cover agent activity, historical context, operational doctrine, and realities on the ground. What were agents in the early PRC and what were they supposed to achieve? What qualities and qualifications were they meant to possess? More fundamentally, *who* were they? How were they recruited and run? How were they rewarded? How were their services discontinued? By providing empirically grounded answers to questions like these, their story illustrates just how domestic agent operations mixed uniquely Chinese characteristics with those generic to the work processes

[14] *Jianguo yilai gongan*, pp. 335, 348–49.
[15] Ibid., p. 350; Ye Jianying, "Zai di shiliu ci quanguo gongan huiyi shang de jianghua" (Speech at the 16th National Public Security Conference) [afternoon of May 5, 1973], p. 4.
[16] Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun Beijing tielu fenju gongan fenchu junguanzu, "Guanyu ermu jianshe gongzuo de shixing yijian" (Tentative Views on How to Develop Eyes and Ears) [February 26, 1973], p. 1. The "present situation" refers to the post-1971 thaw, described in Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 345–54, 373–78.
[17] *Time* magazine, October 8, 1956.
[18] On the subject of CCP intelligence operations overseas in the Mao era, see Michael Schoenhals, "Zhongguo gongchandang zhongyang diaochabu jianshi" (Brief History of the Central Investigation Department of the Chinese Communist Party), in Zhu Jiamu, ed., *Dangdai zhongguo yu tade fazhan daolu* (*Contemporary China and Its Development Road*) (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 2010), pp. 252–72.

of all state agencies employing covert means to maintain and defend state power.

Bone of Contention

Agents had been a bone of contention in Mao's China well before the decision in 1967 to suspend their use. Critics had initially argued that their covert deployment in a People's Republic was morally reprehensible; they later argued that it violated the spirit of the Maoist "mass line" before finally insisting that it bore all the hallmarks of revisionism. Advocates, on the other hand, consistently maintained that the use of agents was indispensable – that they were uniquely effective instruments for combating enemies of the socialist new order.[19] Past experience, they pointed out, had proven their value as providers of all-important human intelligence. Hence, when the power and influence of the advocates peaked, in the mid-1950s, China's national railroad network alone saw more than 10,000 public security agents serving in a variety of capacities.[20]

At the time of the founding of the PRC, some senior public security officers had favored the recruitment and deployment of secret agents in both rural and urban society.[21] Others were skeptical, claiming that there was no clear operational purpose for them to serve in the countryside. Agent running, they added, was in any case simply too sophisticated a praxis for the average rural public security officer to competently manage. Had the skeptics reasoned in terms of modernity, they might have pronounced it incompatible with "widespread rural illiteracy, technological backwardness, bureaucratic inefficiency and incompetence of alarming proportions," which was what the political scientist Vivienne Shue in *The Reach of the State* identified as ubiquitous to so much of Mao's China.[22] Not least, the *absolute* clandestinity that running agents necessitated would have clashed head on with rural social realities and been

[19] *"Teqing gongzuo" jiangyi* (*Lectures on the Subject of Agent Work*) (Beijing: Zhongyang renmin gongan xueyuan, 1957), pp. 1–2.

[20] Wang Jinxiang, "Zai di qi ci quanguo tielu gongan baowei gongzuo huiyi shang de baogao" (Report to the 7th National Conference on Railroad Public Security and Protection Work) [March 18, 1955], p. 25.

[21] Wang Jinxiang, "Dongbei gongan baowei gongzuo qingkuang yu jinhou renwu" (The Situation and Future Tasks of Public Security and Protection Work in the Northeast), *Gongan baowei gongzuo* (*Public Security and Protection Work*), No. 17, February 15, 1950, p. 12.

[22] Vivienne Shue, *The Reach of the State: Sketches of the Chinese Body Politic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 47.

practically impossible to achieve. The skeptics among the decision makers eventually prevailed: in due course the fielding of agents by rural bureaus of public security was curbed. At the Central People's Public Security Academy in Beijing in 1957, officer cadets were told that "in ordinary rural village areas, work is to be carried out by relying on the masses, without any further deployment of agents."[23] For most of the eighteen years covered by this book (with a handful of exceptions, to be noted in due course), agents served only as instruments of *urban* operational activity.

Other limitations imposed on the fielding of agents also found their way into CMPS doctrine. In urban China, below the national and provincial levels, only duly empowered officers in municipal bureaus of public security and their branches (*not* local police officers working out of ordinary police stations) had the right to recruit and run agents. Here a practical problem presented itself in the form of the occasional need to recruit as agents those who Mao called the "running dogs of imperialism . . . the Guomindang reactionaries and their accomplices."[24] Given how the CCP constantly exhorted ordinary citizens to inform on anyone acting in the least bit suspicious, clandestine work under these conditions proved none too easy; hence, proponents of agent operations quietly encouraged public security officers to, when necessary, tactically misrepresent their actions to "the masses." In 1954, CCP Politburo member Peng Zhen suggested to more than 800 public security officers from all over China attending the 6th NPSC that "if you are afraid the masses will alert the enemy [to your operation], then you may tell them there's nothing problematic about [the person they suspect] and the masses will back off. The masses will take our word for it, they will not be overly suspicious."[25] But remarks like this had a way of backfiring, given the ease with which they could be construed ex post facto as "shielding bad people." In 1968, those

[23] "*Teqing gongzuo*," pp. 14–15. For a brief summary of general problems plaguing operational work in China's rural villages at the time, see Gonganbu erju bangongshi, "Nongcun zhencha poan zhong de yixie wenti" (Some Problems Affecting the Operational Cracking of Cases in Rural Villages), *Renmin gongan* (*People's Public Security*), No. 13, December 8, 1952, November 20, 1956, p. 7.

[24] *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung*, 5 vols. (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965, 1977), Vol. 4, pp. 417–18.

[25] *Guanyu Mao Zedong tongzhi wuchanjieji zhuanzheng xueshuo he sufan gongzuo fangzhen luxian de xuexi cailiao* (*Materials for the Study of Comrade Mao Zedong's Doctrine on the Dictatorship of the Proletariat and Policy and Line in the Elimination of Counterrevolutionaries*) (Beijing: Zhongyang zhengfa ganbu xuexiao zhengce falü jiaoyanshi, 1960), p. 380.

who had ousted Peng from power went so far as to claim that during his fifteen-year tenure as mayor of Beijing, the capital's Bureau of Public Security had effectively served as an undeclared "station" running *tewu* and spies "for the United States and Chiang Kai-shek"![26] Arrested agents such as Ying Ruocheng, who had associated with countless foreigners and whose father, Sir Ignatius Ying, lived on Taiwan, supposed that they had been thrown into prison not simply as "suspected spies of this or that foreign power" but, more importantly, because they were political pawns tied to the fate of their masters.[27]

In addition to the difficulties posed by their covert deployment in urban society at large, the recruitment and running of agents inside the ubiquitous socialist "work units" (*danwei*) after 1949 was another cause for concern.[28] In the absence of effective conflict resolution mechanisms, the legitimate intra-*danwei* compartmentalization of information concerning agents and resident operational officers working as agent handlers under the cover of another occupation developed into a latent source of friction. Inquiries conducted by the CMPS in the mid-1950s found that quite a few agent handlers behaved arrogantly, with an exaggerated sense of their own importance. Not surprisingly, when their covers or the covers of their agents were blown, they were routinely accused by their ordinary work unit colleagues – rightly or wrongly, in public or in private – of the twin sins of "isolationism" (*gulizhuyi*) and "mysticism" (*shenmizhuyi*). While in theory these deplorable -isms signified a serious failure to keep those with a *legitimate* need to know in the loop (and public security officers had it impressed upon them to not trust unconditionally even "comrades who've been around for many years"[29]), inside many *danwei* bitter complaints were also voiced by those who, from a purely operational point of view, did *not* have such a "need" but felt politically entitled to one. During the CCP's "free airing of views" and rectification campaign in the spring of 1957, some agents – to the fury of not just operational officers but also members of the party's higher echelon – turned whistle-blower

[26] "Beijing shi 'wenhua dageming' dashiji" (Record of Major Events in the "Great Cultural Revolution" in Beijing), *Beijing dangshi ziliao tongxun* (*Beijing Party History Materials Newsletter*), supplement No. 18, June 1987, pp. 9–10.

[27] Ying and Conceison, *Voices Carry*, pp. 3, 54–55.

[28] On "work units" (i.e., places of employment), see Xiaobo Lü and Elizabeth J. Perry, eds., *Danwei: The Changing Chinese Workplace in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1997).

[29] Zhang Youyu, "Zai huiyi shang de jianghua" (Speech at the Conference), *Renmin gongan zengkan* (*People's Public Security: Supplement*), No. 20, December 25, 1950, p. 14.

and exposed the system of which they were or had been part, believing it to be partially responsible for what Mao Zedong himself in a recent speech had called "defects and mistakes in our work."[30] Needless to say, accused of leaking state secrets and endangering national security, they found themselves front-line targets of the ensuing anti-Rightist campaign.

Finally, making agent work even more of a contentious issue was the corrupting influence of the power, vested in the office of the handler with his or her stable of agents, to bend the rules of proper proletarian conduct in order to prevail on the covert front. During the early years of regime consolidation, senior CCP leaders contended that the occasional mismanagement of this power was due in part to the fact that "a majority of our cadres lack experience and knowledge of how to utilize [agents]."[31] But serious problems soon arose with alarming frequency in the course of operations where agents were used to monitor domestic dissent or target the activities of hostile intelligence services on Chinese soil. Initially, the CMPS was prepared to frame its criticism in more comradely terms: officers had allowed themselves to be "*confused* by the 'achievements' of agents" and "*deceived* by their tricks of the trade: 'boasting, flattering, and cheating.'"[32] This softer tone was to change, however, as increasingly higher professional demands were placed on officers. By the early 1960s, corruption had been identified internally as endemic to many parts of urban China's public security sector. A National Conference on Political Protection Work held in 1964 lambasted the misuse of operational funds, misappropriation of confiscated property, and other examples of what was referred to as the influence on operational officers of a "bourgeois *tewu* work style."[33]

None of the charges that accompanied the nationwide suspension of the use of agents by public security organs in December 1967 were, in other words, entirely new. New was only the position of the CMPS leadership – one that represented a significant departure from Minister of

[30] *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung*, Vol. 5, p. 410.
[31] Wang Jinxiang, "Zai dongbei zhengzhi jingji baowei chuzhang yewu gongzuo huiyi shang de baogao" (Report to Vocational Work Meeting of Political and Economic Protection Office Chiefs from the Northeast), *Gongan baowei gongzuo*, No. 19, September 15, 1950, p. 24.
[32] Guofang daxue dangshi dangjianshi, ed., *Zhonggong dangshi jiaoxue cankao ziliao* (*Reference Material for Teaching CCP History*), 27 vols. (Beijing: Guofang daxue, 1986), Vol. 19, p. 256. Emphasis added.
[33] *Jianguo yilai gongan*, p. 280.

Public Security Luo Ruiqing's appraisal from 1958 concerning the first nine years of PRC public security work:

> [There are those who want to] make out operational work to be something bad, applying a kind of logic that results in a formula like this one: operational work equals cases involving agents, cases involving agents equal isolationism and mysticism, isolationism and mysticism equal an ideological line that is bourgeois, which makes operational work bourgeois stuff [*dongxi*]. That public security and protection organs engage in operational work is due to the influence of the bourgeoisie, which points at the existence of a two-line struggle – and so on and so forth. *This kind of logic is incorrect*.[34]

A decade later, Luo's successors were to maintain that the logic of the detractors had in fact been entirely correct.[35] Significant elements and modus operandi of operational work, they argued, had simply not delivered against changing policy objectives.

Missing Dimension

In the introduction to their seminal 1984 study *The Missing Dimension: Governments and Intelligence Communities in the Twentieth Century*, Christopher Andrew and David Dilks lamented the fact that academic historians frequently tended to either ignore intelligence altogether or treat it as of little importance.[36] While after 9/11 this general observation may no longer hold true, the fact that not one of the seventy book titles reviewed in *The Journal of Intelligence History* since its first issue in 2001 deals with Chinese intelligence or intelligence in China forces one to conclude that academic historians *of China* are, a quarter of a century

[34] Luo Ruiqing, "Guanyu jiunian douzheng zongjie de jige wenti" (On How to Summarize Nine Years of Struggle), *Gongan jianshe* (*Public Security Construction*), No. 277, December 1, 1958, p. 25. Emphasis added.

[35] Cf. *Jianguo yilai gongan*, p. 324.

[36] Christopher Andrew and David Dilks, eds., *The Missing Dimension: Governments and Intelligence Communities in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 1. In a paper given in 2002, Andrew declared, "I stand by my claim" that "intelligence 'is still denied its proper place in studies of the Cold War.'" He went on to suggest that part of the reason "is the relative inaccessibility of the intelligence archive by comparison with other primary sources. *The root of the problem, however, is cognitive dissonance* – the difficulty of adapting traditional notions of international relations and political history to take account of the information now available about the role of intelligence agencies" (emphasis added); Christopher Andrew, "Intelligence, International Relations and 'Under-theorization,'" in L. V. Scott and Peter Jackson, eds., *Understanding Intelligence in the Twenty-First Century: Journeys in Shadows* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 32.

later, still not taking much of a professional interest in (or contributing significantly to the literature on) intelligence.[37]

Does this really matter? Yes it does, but for reasons that are not immediately evident. The biggest problem is not that insufficient attention has been paid by historians to, for example, operational work or agents per se, but rather that the absence of the intelligence dimension from history does "distort our understanding of [history's] other, accessible dimensions."[38] Work on the present book has been driven by a conviction that our understanding of the Maoist system of governance, for instance, as well as our appreciation of the history of everyday life (*Alltagsgeschichte*) in China after 1949, urgently need to be enriched by drawing on what Wesley K. Wark calls intelligence's "under-exploited and unrealized . . . usable past."[39] To begin with, we need to illuminate the role of agents – the men and women whom the CCP's first public security director in Beijing referred to, tongue in cheek, as the "people's *tewu*" – and add it to the list of what a best-selling U.S. textbook calls the "techniques for making

[37] The exceptions that deserve to be mentioned are Frederic Wakeman, Jr.'s magisterial *Spymaster: Dai Li and the Chinese Secret Service* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), which deals with Republican China, and political scientist Michael Dutton's prize-winning *Policing Chinese Politics: A History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), marketed as a "history of public security in China" from the 1920s to the present. Some of the key data on which Dutton's discussion of public security in the PRC rests cannot be independently verified: in his preface he asks his readers to "simply . . . take their own leap of faith about the veracity of [the highly classified] material" used. Needless to say, readers of a work of serious historical scholarship must *never* take such a "leap of faith," since how can one assess a historian's interpretation of his or her "material" and "documents" if one is not told what they are? Also, how can one judge whether a particular analysis of a source is right or wrong, perceptive or muddle-headed, unless one knows what that source is? In spite of this, Dutton excels in the realm of sophisticated postcolonial theorizing, and his analysis is interesting and readable in its own right. Both Wakeman's and Dutton's studies are, it deserves to be further pointed out, fundamentally different from books such as Roger Faligot and Remi Kauffer's *Kang Sheng et les services secrets chinois* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987) or John Byron and Robert Pack's *The Claws of the Dragon: Kang Sheng – The Evil Genius Behind Mao – and His Legacy of Terror in People's China* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992). These two nonacademic best-sellers were based on what their authors claimed was sensational "inside information," but once its provenance could be independently verified, much of it proved to be highly inaccurate, derived from secondary or tertiary sources, inadequately analyzed, and often simply misunderstood.

[38] Andrew and Dilks, *Missing Dimension*, p. 1.

[39] Christopher Andrew, Richard J. Aldrich, and Wesley K. Wark, eds., *Secret Intelligence: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 530. On the subject of *Alltagsgeschichte*, see Alf Lüdtke, ed., *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).