

Spying with Chinese characteristics



BOOK REVIEW

SHYAM SARAN

Roger Faligot's *Chinese Spies from Chairman Mao to Xi Jinping* is a fascinating story of Chinese intelligence services, tracing their trajectory from limited beginnings after the formation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1921 to their current elaborate structures and wide range of clandestine activities. Mr Faligot's book is packed with considerable detail, not all of which may be of interest to a general reader. His extensive research may be worthy of an accomplished secret service anywhere in the world. I have no doubt that the contents of this book would be of particular interest to our intelligence

agencies and one is not surprised that the Indian edition carries a complimentary forward by Vikram Sood who has served as the head of the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), India's external intelligence agency.

There are important takeaways from the book.

One, it is remarkable that many of the early leaders of the CCP were themselves intelligence operatives, some trained in the then Soviet Union and others compelled to learn the arts of deception and intrigue by the dangers that confronted them as members of a political formation under constant assault both by the ruling Guomindang government as well as foreign powers entrenched in China. China's first premier, Zhou Enlai, headed the CPC's intelligence wing in those early years taking on the cover name of Wu Hao. Other top leaders such as Nie Rongzhen, in charge of China's nuclear weapons programme, and even Deng Xiaoping had similar background in intelligence. This may explain the ingrained reticence and caution in their

interactions with foreign leaders. Another trait that resulted from this background is the insistence on careful homework before heading into negotiations. The contrast with our way of functioning is stark.

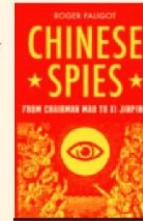
Two, from the many connections among leaders and Party cadres that Mr Faligot has been able to ferret out, what is remarkable is how close familial relationships reinforce official or Party links. During the reform period post-1978, there emerged an expanding network of mutually profitable relationships among party cadres, civilian and military officials and corporate leaders, both from the state and private sectors. The chief beneficiaries were and still are the "red princelings" or descendants of the veteran cadres of the first and second generations. This is a somewhat incestuous aristocracy, reinforced by marriage ties, family relationships and business interests. The intelligence agencies are part of this network. This wider network may have competing factions that operate through patronage groupings led by a senior cadre and his

allies. If a particular leader falls in a factional struggle, his entire patronage group is at risk of a purge. This is what has been happening during Xi Jinping's anti-corruption drive and the intelligence agencies have also been targeted. The extended patronage network associated with the top security chief, Zhou Yongkang, who was purged for having supported the disgraced Bo Xilai, himself a Red princeling, against Xi Jinping is still continuing. Mr Faligot's chapter on the Zhou Yongkang affair reads like a thriller.

Three, the Chinese intelligence services have greatly expanded, command far more resources than ever before and have adopted high tech far more rapidly than had been expected. Domestically they have created a veritable "surveillance state". Externally, they have

become part and parcel of China's public diplomacy, influence operations and commercial espionage. There is a whole-of-society approach to intelligence-gathering, using Chinese students studying in universities abroad, Chinese corporations operating in foreign countries, academics and scientists who maintain contacts with their foreign counterparts. Then there is the very large Chinese diaspora spread across the world and some can be tapped to serve the interest of the motherland. These may not be trained intelligence operatives but serve as information gatherers.

Chinese Spies: From Chairman Mao to Xi Jinping
Author: Roger Faligot
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There is an amusing story of a group of Chinese engineers visiting an Agfa research lab in the early years of reform. They were all wearing suits and ties. While being shown a large vessel in which some advanced chemical solution was being tested, several of the Chinese engineers "accidentally" dipped their ties in the solution. Back in their hotel they snipped off the

soiled portions of their ties to send to research labs in China to analyse. The rest of their ties were found in the waste paper baskets in their rooms.

Mr Faligot is more discreet about the intelligence activities of the western countries in China. He does refer to a counter-espionage operation by China which led to an entire network of American "assets" being neutralised in China and which may not have been restored so far.

The book draws attention to one of the more powerful instruments which sustain China's authoritarian state and which has become an effective means of expanding China's influence abroad. Its unique characteristic is its interpenetration with different arms of the state and society. This is different from how intelligence agencies operate in other countries.

The book lives up to Mr Sood's description as containing "enough mystery, intrigue, and history in it to make it one of the most fascinating narratives of Chinese history from the days of Mao to the present administration..."

The reviewer is a former foreign secretary and a senior fellow, CPR