

Review – Tiger Trap: America’s Secret Spy War with China

Written by Shiran Shen

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SHIRAN SHEN, JUL 19 2012

Tiger Trap: America’s Secret Spy War with China
By David Wise
Houghton Mifflin and Harcourt, 2011



“There are no walls which completely block the wind,” so goes an ancient Chinese saying. While the U.S. was focusing its intelligence efforts against the former Soviet Union, China was quietly penetrating the highest levels of U.S. government and nuclear research. To date, much less is known about Chinese spy activities than those of the former Soviet Union. To probe into the publicly known and unknown aspects of Chinese espionage, seasoned investigative journalist David Wise delved into affidavits, government documents, and interviews he was able to secure with more than 150 people, which culminated in the writing of *Tiger Trap*.

In laying the groundwork for cases of Chinese espionage, Wise details the ways in which China spies differently from other countries such as Russia. China, a nation that has been in the espionage business for over two thousand years, is very patient in its overall approach. Wise quotes former senior China analyst for the FBI Paul Moore’s analogy:

“If a beach was an espionage target, the Russians would send in a sub, frogmen would steal a shore in the dark of night and with great secrecy collect several buckets of sand and take them back to Moscow. The US would target the beach with satellites and produce reams of data. The Chinese would send in a thousand tourists, each assigned to collect a single grain of sand. When they returned, they would be asked to shake out their towels. And they would end up knowing more about the sand than anyone else” (10-11).

In addition to general approach, China targets different people for spying from the U.S. In dealing with the former

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Russian KGB, the U.S. tended to recruit Russian spies who had retaliatory motives against their home country. Beijing, by contrast, believes that people with such incentives are emotionally volatile and potentially unstable. Instead, Beijing recruits people who are psychologically and emotionally healthy without alcohol or drug problems. Beijing tends to make the moral appeal largely to Americans who are Chinese immigrants or are of Chinese descent, indicating that they are “helping [poor] China modernize” by revealing U.S. secrets to China.

Generally speaking, Chinese espionage against the U.S. since WWII has been mainly focused on two areas, which constitute the two major threads of Wise’s account: 1) stealing U.S. nuclear weapons data housed at Los Alamos and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratories, and 2) penetrating U.S. counterintelligence.

According to Wise, over the past thirty years, China has acquired a great deal of information regarding the nuclear warhead W-88, America’s most advanced and sophisticated missile. It is so small that several can fit on one missile. A massive, four-year investigation took place to find out how China acquired the design, which sadly involved the wrongful accusation and unjust treatment of Taiwanese American scientist Wen Ho Lee and at least one loyal and innocent female FBI agent of Chinese descent.

Another thread of Wise’s account centers on Katrina Leung, using the code name PARLOR MAID. Leung rose to prominence in the Chinese American community in southern California thanks to the \$1.7 million in payment that she received from the FBI. For more than two decades, Leung acted as a double agent for the FBI and the Ministry of State Security (MSS), China’s spy service and the intelligence branch of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Unbeknownst to the larger U.S. counterintelligence community, Leung was the asset and lover of FBI special agents J.J. Smith and Bill Cleveland Jr., both of whom battled Chinese spies in San Francisco. Leung’s sexual liaison with J.J. Smith, who often went to her house with classified information in his briefcase, gave Leung the chance to secretly copy many of the classified documents after their trysts and pass them on to her MSS handler Mao Guohua.

It was not until Lesley Wiser, FBI’s ace counterintelligence agent who caught the CIA mole Aldrich Ames spying for the Soviet Union about a decade ago, consolidated evidence of PARLOR MAID’s activities with the MSS that Katrina Leung and J.J. Smith were put on trial. As much as the Leung incident revealed about China’s success in stealing U.S. secrets, U.S. intelligence is rendered very vulnerable for running a particular asset for too long and letting the counterintelligence agents become physically and emotionally entangled with their deceptive asset.

In recent years, cyber attacks from China are becoming a pressing concern, given the vulnerability of the Internet. Although it is difficult to determine whether the attack is from the Chinese government or an individual or group unaffiliated to the government, some evidence supports the former. According to a cable from the U.S. Embassy in Beijing to Washington, provided by WikiLeaks, “a well-placed contact claims that the Chinese government coordinated the recent intrusions of Google systems. According to our contact, the closely held operations were directed at the Politburo Standing Committee level” (235). Wise thereby concludes by saying that “China may be America’s single most effective and dangerous adversary.”

Overall, *Tiger Trap* covers a wide range of Chinese espionage cases in terms of characters. Wise judiciously lays out the background information of these characters so that there is no gap in understanding who they are and what they did. However, if the entire book is intended to be a novel, which it seems to be, then Wise could have done a better job in engaging the readers with more delicate narrative devices. The descriptions of the characters could be developed fuller; the plots could be narrated in a more engaging manner instead of merely using exclamation marks, as in the case “Sex! Espionage! A Chinese dragon lady!” (140).

In addition to writing style, some of the substance begs further honing and explaining. On page 12, Wise cites Paul Moore saying that “China normally does not pay money for intelligence.” It is later contradicted by the case of Tai Shen Kuo, a New Orleans businessman spying for China, and Gregg Bergersen, a weapons analyst at the Defense Security Cooperation Agency. Also, it would be helpful if a timeline was provided, piecing the various related and not directly related stories together in chronological order, as Wise moves back and forth in telling all these stories.

Furthermore, given the high importance of cyberwarfare—politically motivated hacking to conduct informational

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sabotage and espionage—between the U.S. and China, such an emerging national security threat should be probed further. Wise does cover the issue in the last chapter, but most of the examples where China conducts cyberwarfare against the U.S. are simply news article stories without detailed delineation and analysis.

Moreover, there is a misspelling of a name in the Larry Wu-Tai Chin case, and more importantly, a factual error. Larry Wu-Tai Chin, who worked as a Chinese language translator for the CIA’s Foreign Broadcast Information Service, sold classified documents to China for more than three decades. According to Wise, the person who sold Chin out was Yu Zhensan, whose name should in fact be spelled as Yu Zhengsheng (俞正声). However, it is in fact not Yu Zhengsheng but his brother Yu Qiangsheng (俞强生) who contacted U.S. intelligence and triggered Chin’s demise. Yu Zhengsheng is the current Chinese Communist Party chief in Shanghai and he has been a member of the Politburo since 2002. Yu Qiangsheng, then director of the National Security Department of the MSS, defected to the U.S. in 1986 and is rumored to have been murdered by MSS associates somewhere in South America a few years later. Yu Zhengsheng’s political career was nearly called into crisis due to his brother’s defection. It would be interesting to also cover the aftermath of Yu Qiangsheng’s defection.

To conclude, it cannot be stressed more how crucial it is for the U.S. to precisely assess and effectively manage the espionage threat from China so that conflicts between the two countries do not escalate into any major confrontation. China is not necessarily a “dangerous adversary” in the view of David Wise, but rather a tough competitor who deserves more precise understanding than hostile presumption. There have been no major films, best-selling thrillers, or sufficient press coverage about Chinese espionage. The stakes are just so high that a book like *Tiger Trap* serves to inform the public as well as to enrich the understanding within U.S. political circles.

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Shiran Shen is a Commissioning Editor for *e-IR* and a fervent watcher and writer of US-China relations. She graduated from Swarthmore College with High Honors and Phi Beta Kappa with a major in political science. You can follow her on Twitter @ShiranShen.