

# The CIA's Analysis into Mao Zedong's Health, Succession, and the Cultural Revolution

Nicholas J.S. Miller

*University of Edinburgh – Flinders University*

[nicholasjsmiller@gmail.com](mailto:nicholasjsmiller@gmail.com)

## ABSTRACT

With continued questions surrounding who will succeed Xi Jinping, a look back is needed to see how the U.S. Intelligence Community analyzed the succession of China's founder, Mao Zedong. Through the utilization of declassified documents, a greater insight and new scholarship are given to understanding how the Central Intelligence Agency misreading the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, Mao's health, succession candidates, and the direction of the country entirely. This paper will also provide insight into the internal bureaucratic struggles that paralyzed the analytical teams leaving the China team set up for failure, ignored, and isolated.

**Keywords:** intelligence, intelligence history, China, Chinese history, CIA, Central Intelligence Agency, Mao Zedong, succession, CCP, Chinese Communist Party

## El análisis de la CIA sobre la salud, la sucesión y la Revolución Cultural de Mao Zedong

## RESUMEN

En vista de que siguen existiendo dudas sobre quién sucederá a Xi Jinping, es necesario echar la vista atrás para ver cómo la comunidad de inteligencia estadounidense analizó la sucesión del fundador de China, Mao Zedong. Mediante el uso de documentos desclasificados, se obtiene una mayor comprensión y nuevos conocimientos para entender cómo la Agencia Central de Inteligencia (CIA) interpretó mal el caos de la Revolución Cultural, la salud de Mao, los candidatos a la sucesión y la dirección del país en su conjunto. Este artículo también proporcionará información sobre las luchas burocráticas internas que paralizaron a los equipos analíticos y dejaron al equipo de China preparado para el fracaso, ignorado y aislado.

**Palabras clave:** inteligencia, historia de la inteligencia, China, historia china, CIA, Agencia Central de Inteligencia, Mao Zedong, sucesión, PCCh, Partido Comunista Chino

## 中情局对毛泽东健康、继任和文化大革命的分析

### 摘要

鉴于有关谁将接替习近平的疑问不断出现，需要回顾一下美国情报界如何分析中国开国元勋毛泽东的继任情况。通过利用解密文件，能更深入地了解中央情报局如何完全误读文化大革命的混乱形势、毛泽东的健康、继任候选人、以及国家的方向。本文还将深入了解内部官僚斗争，这些斗争使分析团队陷入瘫痪，导致中国团队陷入失败、被忽视和孤立。

关键词：情报，情报史，中国，中国历史，中央情报局，- CIA，毛泽东，继任，中国共产党，CCP

### Introduction

With the constant questioning about who will succeed Xi Jinping as he consolidates power around himself, the question of who will succeed Xi is prominent. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) also has admitted that several of their informants had been killed, leaving them effectively blind in China.<sup>1</sup> This only serves as a call to examine the previous period where the CIA assessed Mao Zedong, his health, and his role during the Cultural Revolution.

This paper serves as a case study

into understanding what the core clustering phenomena that shaped the analysis which primarily was the Sino-Soviet split and misjudgments of Mao's health. In addition, there were compounding organizational/bureaucratic and organizational culture issues that caused the CIA to profoundly misjudge nor seek course corrections after Mao died in 1976.

The utilization of intelligence documents to carry out historical analysis has been a difficult process. Intelligence history, as Christopher Andrew and David Diks have noted, is "missing dimension" as it straddles the worlds of

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark Marzzetti, Adam Goldman, Michael S. Schmidt, and Matt Apuzzo, "Killing CIA informants, China crippled U.S. spying," *The New York Times*, May 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/20/world/asia/china-cia-spies-espionage.html>; David Choi, "How China Found CIA Informants and Executed Them," *Business Insider*, August 16, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-china-found-cia-spies-leak-2018-8?op=1&r=US&IR=T>

academia and the hidden world of intelligence.<sup>2</sup> As the years progress, the world of intelligence history continues to open as more documents from the Cold War archives of the U.S. Intelligence Community (IC) continue to be released to scholars. With the CIA's Records and Search Tools (CREST), this allows scholars to gain new insight into the intelligence assessment that guided U.S. foreign policy but improve our understanding of how the U.S. viewed what was going on inside China during the Cold War. In addition, James J. Wirtz brought forth the issue of the influence of "clustering phenomena" and its impact on intelligence analysis, which was a call for understanding the dominant beliefs that shaped analysis.<sup>3</sup>

With regards to intelligence failure and the root causes of it—the most held definition is one of strategic surprise (e.g., Pearl Harbor, the Korean War, Fall of the Shah of Iran, and collapse of the Soviet Union). Past scholars have broken the reasonings for why intelligence agencies have failed into three categories: 1) individual analyst

or policymakers; 2) organizational issues; 3) collection issues.<sup>4</sup> In the case of why the CIA misanalysed China in the 1960–70s, it is largely due to the institutional and organizational issues within the CIA that were the root causes for its missteps.

## **CIA's Organizational Culture in the 1960–70s**

Every institution and government bureaucracy has a unique organizational culture that governs how its members are to conduct themselves and deal with outsiders. Organizational culture is the "underlying values, beliefs, and principles" that govern those within an organization.<sup>5</sup> For the CIA, its organizational culture is shaped by the fact its primary customer, which is seen as a source of profound pride, is the President of the United States. It also served, throughout the Cold War, as the primary manager of human intelligence (HUMINT) and covert action programs.<sup>6</sup>

2 Christopher Andrew and David Dilks, *The Missing Dimension: Governments and Intelligence Communities in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

3 James J. Wirtz, "The Art of the Intelligence Autopsy," *Intelligence and National Security* 29, no. 1 (2014): 17.

4 Individual analytical failings can be found in further detail - Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decisions*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962); Richard J. Heuer, "Limits of Intelligence," *Orbis* 19, no. 2 (2005): 85. Organizational failing - Amy B. Zegart, *Spying Blind: the CIA, the FBI, and the Origins of 9/11*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Amy B. Zegart, "September 11 and the adaptation failure of US intelligence Agencies," *International Security* 29, no. 4 (2005): 78-111; Collection - Ariel Levite, *Intelligence and Strategic Surprise*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 26.

5 Daniel R. Denison, *Corporate Culture and Organizational Effectiveness*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1990), 2.

6 Commission on the Roles and Capabilities of the United States Intelligence Community, "Preparing for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – An Appraisal of U.S. Intelligence," March 1, 1996, 61.

The CIA's demographic make-up since it is founding in 1947, arose from the World War II Office of Strategic Service (OSS), which relied upon hiring exclusively from New England elite families, that were white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestants, and had graduated from Ivy League universities.<sup>7</sup> Anthony Marc Lewis, former chief of the CIA's foreign studies program, that this foundational makeup of the CIA being primarily monoethnic led to creating an atmosphere of "hidden cultural assumptions" when it came to analyzing Asia that was an "unacknowledged issue" within CIA management. It led to intelligence reporting that was fraught with "mirror imaging," where the individual analyst would unconsciously view events and filter them through a Western belief or value set.<sup>8</sup> The issue of mirror imaging was an already known issue by CIA management. In 1963, within the internal CIA review of the reasons for the intelligence failings regarding the Cuban Missile Crisis, it was found that the Soviet analysts viewed the actions of the Soviets on Cuba was being viewed not from how the Soviets thought or think but from an American ethnocentric perspective.<sup>9</sup>

To Lewis, the mono-ethnic makeup of the CIA led to the percep-

tions of analysts were impacted by four core attributes. First, a "virile self-image" that meant America served as the patriotic defender of freedom, and any signs of "faltering" meant one could be seen as communist sympathizer, and one's loyalty was in question. Second, "perceptual lag" persisted while the threat of Communism remained frozen in the era of Stalin's reign in the Soviet Union and was never revised despite changing political alignments and leadership intentions, or attention was not paid to how Asian communist nations operated. Third, "cognitive dissonance" occurred when analysts proposed ideas that were out-of-line with long-standing policy or core beliefs, these were vetoed by senior management. Fourth, "selective inattention" or the tendency to maintain a certain attitude or view and disregard anything that challenges it.<sup>10</sup>

Stanley Karnow saw that American's analysis of East Asia was dominated by a "delusional belief" that policymakers understood Asia and that there must be "measurable facts" with regards to Asia due to Americans viewing the world through a rational fact-based lens. These facts must be quantifiable statistics, charts, and graphs. This approach failed to achieve a basic understanding of "what the people think."<sup>11</sup>

7 Victor Marchetti and John D. Marks, "Inside the CIA: The Clandestine Mentality," *Ramparts Magazine*, July 1974, 25.

8 Anthony Marc Lewis, "The Blindspot of US foreign intelligence," *Journal of Communications* 26: 1 (1976): 44-45.

9 Central Intelligence Agency, "Consultant Reports on the Estimative Process," August 8, 1963, CIA-RDP86B00259R000800060001-6, 4.

10 Anthony Marc Lewis, "Re-examining our perceptions on Vietnam," *Studies of Intelligence* 17, no. 4 (1973) 1-5.

11 Stanley Karnow, *The Washington Post*, 20 July 1970 in Anthony Marc Lewis, "Re-examining our

James C. Thomson Jr., special assistant to the assistant to the secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs and China specialist on the National Security Council in the Johnson Administration, held onto the preconceived notion when it came to China and Korea analysts that China was continually “on the march like Genghis Khan into Vietnam” or “creating a second Korea War” because all Asian communist countries operated as a monolithic Communist bloc following Moscow’s direct control. Within the CIA and the IC throughout the 1960s had a “profound ignorance of Asian history.”<sup>12</sup> This ignorance bled into a total disregard for the potential differences between individual Asian countries with regard to their societal structures and this perpetuated a “total blindness” to the multiple forms of Asian nationalism. The mindset within the CIA was effectively rooted in the belief that because “Asians look alike,” therefore they must all act alike.<sup>13</sup>

## **The CIA and Chinese Collection Issues**

**D**irector of Central Intelligence (DCI) Allen Dulles (1953–1961) stated that the CIA’s un-

derstanding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was a “profoundly challenged” and an “eternal enigma” due to its physical/cultural differences to the United States, and the fact that the CIA’s case officers could not obfuscate their ethnicity and nationality compared to when operating in Europe or inside the Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup> The CIA considered it one “the most denied area” with regards to its regime, policies, or internal maneuverings.<sup>15</sup>

The CIA’s Directorate of Intelligence (DI) paid “little attention” to internal issues within China after the Soviet Union ended its military aid to the PRC and Mao’s Great Leap Forward (1958–1962) to bolster the Chinese economy failed. The United States Intelligence Board (USIB) saw China as a “lesser threat” and a “stepchild” compared to the Soviet Union and thus received a much smaller portion of resources to go towards the clandestine and analytical divisions of the CIA that managed China.<sup>16</sup> Alan Kirk, U.S. Ambassador to China during the Kennedy Administration, raised his concerns to President Kennedy stating the intelligence regarding mainland China was “very inadequate.”<sup>17</sup>

---

perceptions on Vietnam,” 5.

12 James C. Thompson, “How Could Vietnam Happen? An Autopsy,” *Atlantic Monthly*, April 1968, 1-4.

13 James C. Thompson, “How Could Vietnam Happen? An Autopsy,” 1-4.

14 Allen Dulles, *The Craft of Intelligence*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963), 97.

15 Myles Maxfield and Edward G. Greger, “VIP Health Watch,” *Studies in Intelligence* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1968): 60.

16 David Robarge, “John McCone as Director of Central Intelligence 1961–1965,” (Washington D.C.: Centre for the Study of Intelligence, 2005) 261-262, 265.

17 The USIB was created to assist the DCI in providing the intelligence community (IC) with im-

It was not until the Johnson Administration (1963–1969) that China began to rise in priority for the USIB, which was due to belief the overarching belief within the IC that China would enter the Vietnam War and create a second Korean War.<sup>18</sup> This led to the USIB, in 1965, to now view the PRC, as one of the “highest priority targets” and suggested that an “intelligence database” on China.<sup>19</sup> Secretary of State Dean Rusk (1961–1969) noted that the collection on mainland China was profoundly handicapped by “insufficient information on its capabilities, intentions, actions, and strategies.”<sup>20</sup>

On 1 July 1965, the CIA created

the China Intelligence Activities Coordinator (CAIC), which later became known as the DCI China Coordinator in subsequent intelligence document. The CAIC’s role was to improve collection on China, review the reports the analytical teams generated, and recommend improvements.<sup>21</sup> The DCI China Coordinator was seen as a “unique” position within the IC as it directed all Chinese activities for the CIA.<sup>22</sup> On 21 March 1966, the CIA then created the China Task Force (CTF), which sought to centralize all intelligence production regarding China and the Chief of the CTF also served as the DCI China Coordinator.<sup>23</sup>

---

proved coordination, integration, approved recommendations for future intelligence activities, and established subordinate committees/working groups to manage specialized issues. Its membership included representatives from the Department of State, Department of Defense, U.S. military branches, National Security Agency, Atomic Energy Commission, Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Central Intelligence Agency. Central Intelligence Agency, “Development of the United States Intelligence Board Under President Eisenhower, 15 September 1958 0 January 1961,” CIA-RDP79M00098A000100070001-2, January 20, 1961, 1-5, 20.

“Memorandum from the Ambassador to the Republic of China (Kirk) to President Kennedy,” March 29, 1963, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963, Vol. XIII, Northeast Asia, Document 172, 1-3.

- 18 House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Report on Sino-Soviet Conflict and Its Implications, Together with Hearings Held by Subcommittee on the Far East and The Pacific, March 10, 11, 15, 16, 17, 18, 23, and 31, 1965, 89th Cong., 1st sess., 1965, 8R–9R*; Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, XXX, China, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010, document 85, NIE 13-9-65, “Communist China’s Foreign Policy,” May 5, 1965, 1-3.
- 19 Central Intelligence Agency, “Review of Intelligence Activities Against Communist China,” CIA-RDP73B00148A000200160011-2, October 8, 1965, 1-2.
- 20 Central Intelligence Agency, “Review of Intelligence Activities Against Communist China,” CIA-RDP73B00148A000200160009-5, September 30, 1965, 1-2; United States Intelligence Board, “Measures for Improving U.S. Intelligence Efforts Against Communist China,” USIB-M-395, July 1, 1965, 1-6.
- 21 Central Intelligence Agency, “DCI China Coordinator Responsibilities,” CIA-RDP73B00148A000200030003-5, July 19, 1965, 1-7; Central Intelligence Agency, “Designation of REDACTED as DCI China Intelligence Activities Coordinator,” CIA-RDP73B00148A000200030003-5, June 23, 1969, 1.
- 22 Central Intelligence Agency, “Memorandum for: General Reynolds Subject: Self-criticism in March 1967,” CIA-RDP73B00148A000200150001-4, March 10, 1967, 1-4.
- 23 Central Intelligence Agency, “Establishment of a China Task Force,” CIA-RDP79T01762A000900010005-0, March 21, 1966, 2-3.

While it is not known the identities of the rotating directors who managed China collection what is known is that the first director (1965–68) sought to improve the allocation of collection resources towards China, raising the collection priority, and developing an inventory of what assets were available. The second director (1968–70) focused their tenure on developing a warning system against any Chinese-borne attacks.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the late efforts by the CIA to manage the Chinese collection issue with its working groups the USIB regarded China as a “negligible intelligence priority.”<sup>25</sup> According to internal memos from those who sat in the CTF meetings the China Coordinator lacked time to solely dedicate their attention to Chinese issues, due to the fact they often held multiple other positions that competed for their time. There was profound poor communication between the Coordinator and the Group Principals (Senior China Analyst, Management, and IC representatives). The poor communications led to the meetings no longer being considered a “meaningful forum” to discuss the growing intelli-

gence issues. The meetings, when they did occur, frequently lacked agendas, and the China Coordinator was frequently not even aware of their team’s activities, problems, or plans. When management was pressed for additional resources to obtain information on senior Chinese leadership, it was rebuked and denied noting “their issues were no different” than what the Soviet analysts were dealing with at the time.<sup>26</sup>

An additional issue faced by the Chinese analytical group was the fact that they did not have the “background and staffing process in China” because China “thought differently” than the Soviet Union. They frequently requested the creation of “extremely sophisticated clandestine effort,” which required approval of the China Coordinator and the Director of Operations (DO), but it was denied citing the Soviet Union as being a higher priority. By the end of the 1960s the CIA’s own China analytical programs were described internally as “fragmentary, incomplete, and irregular.”<sup>27</sup>

By 1971, the CIA still considered China an “enigma” by the China analysts who managed it.<sup>28</sup> On 17 De-

---

24 Central Intelligence Agency, “Memorandum for the United States Intelligence Board – The Role of the DCI China Coordinator,” 1.

25 Central Intelligence Agency, “Memorandum for: General Reynolds Subject: Self-criticism in March 1967,” CIA-RDP73B00148A000200150001-4, March 10, 1967, 3-4.

26 Central Intelligence Agency, “Memorandum for: General Reynolds Subject: Self-criticism in March 1967,” 3-4.

27 Central Intelligence Agency, “Memorandum for: General Reynolds Subject: Self-criticism in March 1967,” 3-4; Central Intelligence Agency, “First 1969 Meeting of China Intelligence Activities Coordination Group,” CIA-RDP73B00148A000200030040-4, March 14, 1969, 1-5.

28 Central Intelligence Agency, “Memorandum from O/DDS&T dated June 2, 1970, Subject: Annual Report to the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB) – FY 1970,” CIA-RDP 85B00159R000100060016-8, June 30, 1970, 1-2.

cember 1971, DCI Richard Helms disbanded all the internal China working groups stating they were no longer needed, and their members were moved to National Security Council Intelligence Committee (NSCIC) assignments or sent to other internal working groups.<sup>29</sup> The reason for the disbanding of the working rooms was that President Nixon was making movements toward opening the PRC to the US. This meant that China was no longer managed by a “coterie” of analysts but rather had the “entire CIA bureaucracy” at its disposal.<sup>30</sup> On 11 February 1972, the CIA published, “On Assessment of Intelligence Analysis and Production on China,” which noted that the IC had greatly improved their ability to meet policy maker questions regarding China, the Chinese working groups were no longer needed, and the CIA gave itself a “satisfactory,” with regards to meeting President Nixon’s concerns regarding China.<sup>31</sup>

If CIA management was happy with how China was analyzed, we ask how was it analyzed?

## How Was China Analyzed?

According to Gail Solin, a China analyst within the Directorate of Intelligence (DI), who au-

thored the central text “The Art of China Watching,” the CIA relied upon the translation of foreign media through the CIA’s Foreign Broadcast Information Services (FBIS). She also stressed that China analysts needed a strong understanding of “Marxism and the Soviet Union” as they were seen as the “core shapers of Chinese politics.”<sup>32</sup> At no point did she mention Mao Zedong thought or Chinese contributions to Marxist thought; the emphasis was always on China through a Soviet lens. Chinese analysts employed “Pekingology,” which was the Chinese studies version of the Soviet “Kremlinology,” which was often seen as a “mysterious arcane art” compared to “astrology, reading oracle bones, or tea leaves.”<sup>33</sup> The process involved a careful reading of Chinese media, as there were little to no clandestine resources to draw upon, to understand what was going on inside China. While the Soviet analysts would have long Party speeches to pour through and analyze, China analysts had only “brief [and] enigmatic Mao quotations to decipher.”<sup>34</sup>

The only “reliable indicator” used to judge an elite’s standing within Chinese politics was their closeness to Mao in public appearances, but this tool was seen as “widely speculative”

29 Central Intelligence Agency, “Proposed Review by CIACG of Current and Anticipated Needs for Intelligence on China,” CIA-RDP73B00148A000200030032-3, June 17, 1971, 1-3.

30 Central Intelligence Agency, “China Intelligence Activity Coordinating Group Meeting, 17 December 1971,” CIA-RDP73B00148A000200030019-8, December 17, 1971, 1.

31 Central Intelligence Agency, “Proposed Review by CIACG of Current and Anticipated Needs for Intelligence on China,” CIA-RDP73B00148A000200030032-3, June 17, 1971, 1-3.

32 Gail Solin, “The Art of China Watching,” *Studies in Intelligence* 19, no 1. (1975), 4-5.

33 Gail Solin, “The Art of China Watching,” 25.

34 Gail Solin, “The Art of China Watching,” 25.



and could generate “highly sensational conclusions” if used by the “wrong people.”<sup>35</sup> Solin never expanded on who those wrong people were. It could be referring to newer analysts monitoring China or policymakers misinterpreting the analytical reports. One of the frequent issues was the constantly rumors that an official was dead or had been purged. Solin noted one case when Madame Mao (Jiang Qing) had a fight with Mao and was not seen for many days. There was intelligence suggesting that that Mao had either accidentally killed or possibly injured Jiang Qing. When Madame Mao reappeared a few days later she had no visible black eyes or injuries.<sup>36</sup> No date was given to confirm when this event was supposed to have occurred. Nor could any declassified files found within the CREST database to expand on this case example.

Lastly, disinformation and unreliable intelligence sources were frequent issues for CIA analysts. This is because Chinese analysts had to contend with disinformation coming from Taipei, but also Moscow. Solin noted that there were instances where Taipei had provided “authentic Peking [Beijing] directives” that were disregarded as fake by CIA analysts, but were later found to be “sound, accurate and important information.” The second instance was the Soviets stated in their reporting that they knew who the new Chinese Politburo members were and when the

National People's Congress (NPC) was going to convene. This was disregarded by the CIA as “Soviet disinformation” despite the information turning out correct.<sup>37</sup> Further analysis could not provide clarity on the example that was discussed in the CREST database at this time. However, this just highlighted the issue of analytical mindsets within the CIA and group-think mentality—e.g., information from one source must be automatically treated as disinformation and ignored.

### **Clustering Phenomena No. 1 – The Sino-Soviet Split**

Mindsets within analysis, according to Richard Heuer, Jr., serve to provide a fixed world attitude, as intelligence analysts are dealing with information that is often “incomplete, ambiguous, and often contradictory.”<sup>38</sup> The individual analyst's preconceptions or mindset will likely have the most impact on the final report. Analytical mindsets are quick to form and difficult to change once they become settled in how an analyst views the world. When new information is found, it is often adapted into the person's conceptual framework/beliefs, and information that contradicts this framework is often ignored. Heuer viewed mindsets as “neither good nor bad” but rather “inescapable” as it provides the analyst with a way to carry

35 Gail Solin, “The Art of China Watching,” 25.

36 Gail Solin, “The Art of China Watching,” 28.

37 Gail Solin, “The Art of China Watching,” 27-28.

38 Richard J. Heuer, Jr, “Limits of Intelligence Analysis,” *Orbis* 49, no. 1 (2005): 85-86.

out what he saw as “routine intelligence production.” However, while Heuer often puts the blame on the individual analysts’ biases, he gives no consideration to the biases within an institution or organization.<sup>39</sup>

When it came to the CIA’s own analysis on China, one mindset that was pervasive and was maintained by the CIA management, which was the ardent belief that the Soviet Union had an “active hand” across all communist governments, which was known as monolithic communism. To the CIA, China was taking direct orders from the Soviet Union despite a long history of mutual hostility between the two countries, and their differences or past friction were ignored once both became a communist nation.<sup>40</sup> In the early 1950s, the CIA did not even have a separate China as its own regional analytical division rather it was a part of the Soviet Union analytical department. The department was known as the Sino-Soviet group under the Directorate of Intelligence (DI), and their internal reports were called the “Esau Studies.”<sup>41</sup>

Soviet interest in controlling China was noted as early as this 1948 intel-

ligence report, “Growing Soviet Interest in China,” with the CIA stating that “the Soviet’s desire [an] active role in the Chinese civil war” and seek a “close relationship with Communist China.”<sup>42</sup> The true intentions of the Soviet Union were later addressed in an April 1949 CIA document, “Prospects for Soviet Control of a Communist China,” which predicted that the Soviet sought “world domination” and were going to “add China [as] another Soviet satellite.”<sup>43</sup>

The CIA saw that the Soviet Union had a “strong influence” over the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) due to CCP leadership stating that they “identified with Moscow’s International Communism” and the loyalty towards the Soviets would prevent the CCP leadership from fracturing as it would mean “a loss of Soviet control over China.”<sup>44</sup> In a June 1949 intelligence summary, “China: Soviet Orientation,” the CIA affirmed, through a reading of Chinese media, that the CCP leaders had aligned themselves to an “orthodox Communist doctrine” and “pledged unwavering acknowledgement of Soviet leadership.”<sup>45</sup> This view was maintained into the early 1950s, with a 1952

39 Richard J. Heuer, Jr, “Limits of Intelligence Analysis,” 85-86.

40 David Robarge, *John McCone as Director of Central Intelligence 1961-65*, (Washington D.C.: Centre for the Study of Intelligence, 2005), 25.

41 David Robarge, *John McCone as Director of Central Intelligence 1961-65*, (Washington D.C.: Centre for the Study of Intelligence, 2005), 25.

42 “Weekly Summary Excerpt, 9 January 1948, Growing Soviet Interest in China,” in Woodrow J. Kuhns, *Assessing the Soviet Threat: The Early Cold War Years* (Washington D.C.: Centre for the Study of Intelligence, 1997), 166.

43 Central Intelligence Agency, “Prospects for Soviet Control of a Communist China,” CIA-RDP78-01617A003500040004-5, April 15, 1949, 1.

44 Central Intelligence Agency, “Prospects for Soviet Control of a Communist China,” 2.

45 ‘Weekly Summary Excerpt, 17 June 1949, China: Soviet Orientation’ in Woodrow J. Kuhns, *As-*

intelligence report stating that Mao had made “explicit” his allegiance to the Soviet Union, and Mao’s successors, Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai, had all “publicly committed to Stalinism.”<sup>46</sup>

The notion that there could be a split between the two countries was seen as heresy inside Washington. President Eisenhower affirmed that China could not split from the Soviet Union as they (the Soviets) sought a “global scheme ... and no party to the [communist] bloc can take independent action.” Eisenhower noted in consultations that he had with other world leaders that they had all concurred that a fracture between the Soviet Union or China was not seen as possible.<sup>47</sup> Walter Robertson, Eisenhower’s Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs for the State Department, said that Mao was “wholly dedicated to the cause of international communism under the leadership of Moscow.”<sup>48</sup> On 13 January 1950, the US Secretary of State Dean Acheson at the National Press Club stated that the USSR was seeking to “annex parts of China.”<sup>49</sup> On 11 February 1950, Secretary Acheson later sent a diplomatic cable to Ambassador David Bruce stat-

ing that the Kremlin was seeking to introduce Soviet advisors within China to infiltrate the CCP and ensure China remained under “Stalinist control.”<sup>50</sup>

Any serious examination of the core leaders of CCP leadership (Mao, Zhou Enlai, and Liu Shaoqi) was seen as a “waste [of] time” as their only loyalty was to the USSR. The CCP were labeled “puppets of world communism, i.e., of Moscow,” and they were “entirely satisfied” to fulfill this role. The CIA was also “highly confident” that China would “never break away from Moscow,” never question Moscow’s leadership, and maintain Leninism as their “supreme doctrine.” Thus, it was “not worth studying any variations of communism” because “they held no importance.”<sup>51</sup>

This mindset, within the CIA, was self-serving. It aligned with how they used their human resources and placed no new demands upon them to consider alternate analytical methods and mindsets. By focusing on threats posed by Soviet intentions, all other countries were wrapped into the all-encompassing “Soviet lens.” There was no need to develop a “China lens” to exam-

---

*sessing the Soviet Threat: The Early Cold War Years*, 319-320.

46 Central Intelligence Agency, “Central Intelligence Bulletin,” C02050106, December 23, 1952, 3-4.

47 “From Memorandum of Conversation, Taipei, 18 June 1960,” *FRUS, 1958-1960, Vol. XIX, China*, 679.

48 “Editorial Note: From Memorandum by Marion W. Boggs of the 428<sup>th</sup> meeting of the NSC, December 10, 1959,” *FRUS, 1958-1960, Vol. XIX, China*, 640.

49 Walter Waggoner, “Four Areas Listed. ‘Attaching’ Manchuria, Inner, Outer Mongolia, Sinkiang Cited,” *New York Times*, January 13, 1950.

50 Cable to Ambassador David Bruce in Paris, February 11, 1950. *FRUS, 1950, Vol. VII, Korea*, 308-309.8.

51 Central Intelligence Agency, “Evaluation of Leadership of Chinese Communist Party/Position of the Chinese Communists in World Communist Movement,” 1.

ine and interpret events in China, as the “Soviet Lens” was all that was needed. To question that would be too challenging to the edicts established by the leaders of the IC.

In April 1952, FBIS authored “Propaganda Evidence Concerning Sino-Soviet Relations,” which noted the beginning of a potential divergence between the two countries’ propaganda regarding the Soviet aid to China during the Korean War. It was deemed a “minor struggle” over China’s standing within International Communism. However, the relations between China and the Soviet Union were seen as having no signs of “deterioration.”<sup>52</sup>

Harold Ford, a senior intelligence analyst within the CIA, stated that the assessments of a schism between the two countries were centered on “tea-leaf interpretations” of Chinese and Soviet state media.<sup>53</sup> Internally, China analysts were divided regarding the Sino-Soviet split, with contrarians seeing the open-source information to support a split was as “overestimated” by the proponents of a split. Analysts that discounted a split had a background in either Communist theory, or

the Soviet Union, or were generalists that had been assigned to the region with no background in either China or Soviet studies. There was a reluctance within the Agency to go against the conventional wisdom that communism was a monolithic structure under the total direction of Moscow. By challenging this fact, analysts were going against the IC’s most respected experts on communism—such as George Kennan—the founder of the containment strategy against the Soviet Union—who discounted that split was occurring.<sup>54</sup>

In 1961, Sherman Kent, Director of the Office of National Estimates (ONE), wrote that communism was still “one faith” but had developed into two different voices of authority (Beijing and Moscow), that there was no Communist monolith, and that a split could occur within the next year.<sup>55</sup> It was not until the 1962 NIE 11-5-62 – “Political Developments in the USSR and the Communist World,” that finally acknowledged a “definitive split” in Sino-Soviet relations. This was echoed in the 1964 NIE that China and the Soviet Union had “virtually no chance of reconciliation.”<sup>56</sup>

52 Central Intelligence Agency, “Propaganda Evidence Concerning Sino-Soviet Relations,” CIA-RDP79R01012A001800010011-1, April 30, 1952, 1-2.

53 Harold Ford, “Calling the Sino-Soviet Split,” *Studies in Intelligence* 41, no. 4 (1997): 42.

54 Harold Ford, “Calling the Sino-Soviet Split,” *Studies in Intelligence* 41, no. 4 (1997): 64; Central Intelligence Agency, “Statement of Missions and Functions of the Senior Research Staff on International Communism, DD/I,” CIA-RDP80-01446R000100010011-4, February 13, 1956, 2-4; Central Intelligence Agency, “Comments on Predictions in the American Press of a Sino-Soviet Split,” CIA-RDP80-01446R000100060007-4, 1-4.

55 Kent Memorandum to McCone, “An Appraisal of Soviet Intentions,” in *CIA’s analysis of the Soviet Union, 1947-1991*, eds. Gerald K. Haines and Robert E. Leggett, (Washington D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2001), 72. The Office of National Estimates managed the coordination for the CIA of the NIE product.

56 NIE 11-5-62, “Political Developments in the USSR and the Communist World,” 21 February 1962;

According to Philip Bridgham, director of the Sino-Soviet Study Group (SSSG), there were frequent pressures from members within CIA senior management to disband the SSSG entirely due to their pro-Sino-Soviet split reports. Bridgham stated that the CIA senior management took their reports and “water[ed] down drafts” to deliberately prevent the consumers [the President] from seeing evidence of a Sino-Soviet split. One unnamed analyst said that he was asked to “recant his Sino-Soviet heresy”; when he refused, he received a negative performance evaluation and later had to leave the Agency.<sup>57</sup> It is known how many analysts were purged in this period because of holding differing views nor have their names been declassified.

In 1963, CIA Director John McCone told the NSC that he did not believe the reports of a Sino-Soviet split and took them “with a grain of salt” due to what he saw as weak evidence. He cited the fact that the Soviet Union had “fervently” supported China’s application to the United Nations (UN) and their application for a seat at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).<sup>58</sup> McCone refused to see any differences

between the nations, stating that there were not many differences and the relations between China and the Soviet Union were “very deep.” McCone also sent a memorandum to analysts stating that they were not to become fixated on the latest judgement (e.g., believing in a split) but instead should study the indicators, remain objective, and not be influenced by a preconceived conclusion. In McCone’s eyes, there was no split but rather “two competing and hostile Communist world centers.”<sup>59</sup>

The mindset of monolithic Communism was only strengthened during the Vietnam War, when there was concern in the Johnson Administration that China and the Soviet Union were cooperating to provide support for the North Vietnamese. At this time, it was the U.S.’s imperative to prevent the spread of Communism across the world. However, the cracks in the belief of monolithic communism began to emerge in 1969, when there was a border conflict between the Soviet Union and China. The “discord” between the two states then became leverage that the United States could exploit to rebuild relations with China between themselves and China in the 1970s.<sup>60</sup>

---

NIE 10-2-64, “Prospects for the International Communist Movement,” June 10, 1964.

57 Harold Ford, “Calling the Sino-Soviet Split,” 64-65.

58 464<sup>th</sup> NSC Meeting on October 20, 1960, FRUS, 1958-1960, XIX, China, 730.

59 Central Intelligence Agency, “Implications of the Sino-Soviet Rupture for the US,” OCI No. 1585/63, July 18, 1963; “McCone untitled Memorandum to Kirkpatrick,” February 25, 1963, *FRUS 1961-63, V. Soviet Union*, 634; “Kirkpatrick memorandum to Helms and Cline, “Group to Consider the Implications of Course of Action in Connection with Developing Situation Between Moscow and Peking,” Action Memorandum No. A-266, July 8, 1963; Tom Mangold, *Cold Warrior: James Jesus Angleton: The CIA's Master Spy Hunter*, (New York City: Simon and Schuster Ltd, 1993) 85-86; Central Intelligence Agency, “Memorandum for the Record: Morning Meeting of July 14, 1965,” CIA-RDP80B01676R001500060257-4, July 14, 1965, 1.

60 Harold Ford, “Calling the Sino-Soviet Split,” 67, 71.

While that viewpoint faded during the Nixon Administration it had already cost numerous CIA employees their careers for daring to think differently. The Sino-Soviet split is just one example of a clustering phenomenon that impacted analysis on Cold War China. The next issue to be examined is how the CIA analyzed Mao's health which led to a continued belief that Mao was never really in control of China throughout the 1960s-70s and was simply a puppet to the CCP elites.

## Clustering Phenomena No. 2 – Mao's Health

When the CIA engages in leadership analysis of a foreign leader, understanding the leader's health is a critical area of concern.<sup>61</sup> The CIA maintained a medical intelligence program that collected, analyzed, evaluated, and disseminated intelligence on state leaders. Medical intelligence was seen as a test of "guile and ingenuity" as analysts relied upon unclassified, open-source intelligence and human intelligence (HUMINT) while contending with state media disinformation seeking to hide the health status of their leader.<sup>62</sup> In the case of Mao, the CIA believed that he had a history of strokes and later Parkinson's syndrome. This put an emphasis on cat-

aloguing signs of myxedema (complications of hypothyroidism), obtaining examples of his handwriting to see if he displayed micrographia (for Parkinson's syndrome).<sup>63</sup>

According to a Department of State debriefing form given to those who had interactions with Mao questions focused on how alert was Mao, his weight, he was able to walk unassisted, his breathing ability, did he exhibit evidence of paralysis or aftermath of a stroke (eyelid droop, sagging shoulder, mobility issue), and how was his speech (e.g., was it intelligible, did he read from a prepared statement or did the person have an direct conversation with him).<sup>64</sup> The issue of Mao's health was of supreme importance noting in one CIA report that the CIA had called that Mao had died "over twenty times since the mid-1950s." When a foreign leader died this requires an immediate notice was sent to the Executive Branch, and for the China analysts managing Mao, there was no way to verify or discredit the reports of Mao's health status until Mao reappeared again. This frequently led analysts to erroneously conclude "tentatively" that Mao had died.<sup>65</sup>

Below is a chart depicting all different illnesses or false death calls related to Mao that have been declassified by the CIA. A full list of Mao's health issues is at the end as an appendix.

61 Jerrold M. Post, "Aging Communist Leaders: Psychological Considerations," *Studies in Intelligence* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 1.

62 Myles Maxfield and Edward G. Greger, "VIP Health Watch," *Studies in Intelligence* (Spring 1968): 54-55.

63 Myles Maxfield, Robert Proper, and Sharol Case, "Remote Medical Diagnosis," 13-15.

64 Department of State, "Health and Behaviour of Mao Tse-tung," February 3, 1964, 1.

65 "Gail Solin, "The Art of China Watching," 28.

## Mao's Reported Illness 1945–1976<sup>66</sup>

| Illness                 | Frequency |
|-------------------------|-----------|
| Nervous Breakdown       | 1         |
| Cancer                  | 1         |
| Stroke                  | 7         |
| Assassinated            | 2         |
| Death by Natural Causes | 5         |
| Tuberculosis            | 1         |
| Heart Disease           | 2         |
| Kidney Disease          | 1         |
| Lifestyle choices       | 1         |
| Unknown Illness         | 3         |
| Throat Cancer           | 1         |
| Partially Paralyzed     | 1         |
| Brain anemia            | 1         |
| Senile Disorder         | 1         |
| Unknown Incapacitation  | 1         |
| Parkinson's Disease     | 3         |

In a 1957, the CIA began to note that Mao “may” have suffered from “brain anemia.” This was further confirmed by a 1961 HUMINT report from Field Marshal Montgomery, who stated that in his meeting with Mao, that he needed assistance while walking. The CIA theorized, that this could be due to “cerebral ischemia, multiple strokes, senile dementia, or an overlapping of multiple health issues.”<sup>67</sup> Though the CIA did not see any “classical” signs of cerebral ischemia—asymmetry of the face, abduct and flexed position

(cramped position), or serious percentage of the body paralyzed. It was suggested that Mao could have suffered a significant cerebral ischemia without showing these classical signs. Other evidence was used to affirm that he was having health issues was his interest in swimming as this was a common physiotherapy to rebuild strength after a stroke.<sup>68</sup>

In 1959, Soviet Premier Khrushchev reported that Mao was an “old man that outlived his usefulness” and had

66 Please see Appendix A for the full chart of the CIA listings of Mao's illnesses.

67 Central Intelligence Agency, “The Decline of Mao Tse-tung,” POLO XV-62, April 9, 1962, 5, 7, 8.

68 Central Intelligence Agency, “The Decline of Mao Tse-tung,” 5, 7, 8.

“lost touch with reality.”<sup>69</sup> In 1961, the CIA believed the Soviets were responsible for spreading rumors throughout Western European Communist Parties that Mao had a “senile disorder” though there was no strong evidence to support that assertion of senility.<sup>70</sup>

By 1962, the CIA had concluded that Mao’s health had been “deteriorating due to a serious medical disorder,” and would end in either Mao retiring, his death, or the Party forcing his retirement due to health reasons. Buried within this intelligence monograph report was a note that contradicted that assessment, stating that the CIA’s evidence for Mao’s health issues was internally rated as “not impressive.” This contradicts the core assessments stating that Mao’s health was waning and impacting his political power to wane.<sup>71</sup> As for Mao being “pushed out,” the CIA saw it was a “slightly stronger possibility” and that Mao would voluntarily step down as seen as a weaker possibility.” Liu Shaoqi, at the time, was the most probable successor.<sup>72</sup> The CIA expected Mao to also relinquish his role as Party Chairman and he be given the title of “Honorary Chairman,” which the Party had created for him in 1956, and that

Mao was “already out of the picture” and no longer should be considered a power player in Chinese politics.<sup>73</sup>

Yet Mao stayed in power long past the CIA assessments stating he would have retired by 1960. What only further added to speculation he was not truly ruling the country was Mao’s frequent and extended disappearances from the public eye. One of the most notable incidents occurred when Mao disappeared from November 1965 into the summer of 1966. The CIA disregarded this disappearance as Mao, in the past, to retreat to either Eastern or Central China for the winter, which was why analysts ignored it. The CIA took greater concern for Liu Shaoqi’s disappearance due to the fact the longest time he was out of public view was only two weeks in 1957.<sup>74</sup> When Mao did not meet high-level visitors in Mid-March this was taken by the CIA that he suffered a second stroke. The CIA assessed that the first stroke occurred sometime between 1956 and 1957. Mao’s disappearance also coincided with “idolatrous propaganda,” which stated that the Chinese leadership had to prepare to transfer loyalty to Mao’s successor.<sup>75</sup> The CIA saw all of this as that there

---

69 Central Intelligence Agency, “The Decline of Mao Tse-tung,” 5, 7, 8.

70 Central Intelligence Agency, “The Decline of Mao Tse-tung,” 5, 7, 8.

71 Central Intelligence Agency, “The Decline of Mao Tse-tung,” III.

72 Central Intelligence Agency, “The Decline of Mao Tse-tung,” IV.

73 Central Intelligence Agency, “The President’s Intelligence Checklist,” CIA-RDP79T00936A0008 0022001-4, June 6, 1962, 3.

74 Central Intelligence Agency, “Central Intelligence Bulletin,” January 15, 1966, CIA-RDP79T00 975A008700240001-9, 5.

75 Central Intelligence Agency, “Central Intelligence Bulletin,” March 15, 1966, CIA-RDP79T0097 5A008800290001-3, 4; Central Intelligence Agency, “Weekly Summary, CIA-RDP79-00927A005



was a “major morale problem” within the Party. That an indoctrination campaigns to inspire the youth would have “diminishing returns” and it was “doubtful” leaders would find success through “tired devices and methods” to inspire the younger generation.<sup>76</sup> By 14 March 1966, the CIA assessed in an Presidential Daily Briefing (PDB) that due to Mao's age, at the time being 72, he was “nearing the end of the road” and “likely incapacitated due to a stroke.”<sup>77</sup>

The CIA's view that Mao's health stymied his iron-clad grasp on Chinese politics was confirmed when Peng Zhen, sixth within the CCP, was purged, by Deng Xiaoping. The CIA believed it was carried out by Deng as way to counter Liu Shaoqi, Mao's successor. Peng would not have been purged if Mao had not been incapacitated.<sup>78</sup> In internal CIA memos dated 17 June 1966 to CIA Director William Raborn it was seen as “inconceivable” that the domestic events would not have occurred if “his [Mao's] grip on the party had not slipped.” This meant that the decisions were not being made by Mao and the

CIA believed that the purges were being carried by other elites in his name.<sup>79</sup>

The CIA also totally discounted the Cultural Revolution to former President Eisenhower as simply a “struggle” that would not have “any abrupt changes ... in domestic politics” and that “all senior leadership were deemed secure” as they were “all hard-line communists.”<sup>80</sup> In a 16 July 1966 memo between Abbot Smith, Acting Chairman of the CIA's Board of National Estimates to CIA Director Richard Helms the Cultural Revolution would simply “fade away,” to ignore the Chinese media as it was merely “standard exaggeration and ideological overtones,” and that the Chinese people had “increased apathy and resentment towards the Cult of Mao.”<sup>81</sup>

When the Cultural Revolution hit full force in August 1966 with the purge of Liu Shaoqi, the rise of Lin Biao as the new anointed successor to Mao, and Mao calling upon the Red Guards to save the Party, this took the CIA by total surprise.<sup>82</sup> In a 21 October 1966 PDB, the CIA saw the Red Guard's call-

---

2000500-1, March 10, 1966, 1.

76 Central Intelligence Agency, *The President's Daily Brief: Chinese Decision Making: Long March and the Long War*, CIA-RDP79T00936A004300270001-0, 24 February 24, 1966, 1-3, 5, 10.

77 Central Intelligence Agency, “The President's Daily Brief,” CIA-RDP79T00936A004300420001-3, March 14, 1966, 3.

78 Central Intelligence Agency, “Communist China – Developments in the Leadership Struggle: since last briefing on 26 May,” CIA-RDP82R00025R000700080002-9-1, June 1, 1966, 1-4.

79 Central Intelligence Agency, “The Leadership Upheaval in Communist China,” no. 1578/66, June 17, 1966, 1.

80 Central Intelligence Agency, “DCI Briefing for Ex-President Eisenhower,” CIA-RD-79T00827A00 0300120002-0, July 14, 1966, 13-14.

81 Abbot Smith, “The Crisis in China,” CIA-RDP79R00904A001300010012-6, July 15, 1966, 1-5.

82 Central Intelligence Agency, “The President's Daily Brief,” CIA-RDP79T00936A004600420001-0, August 18, 1966, 3.; Central Intelligence Agency, “Mahon Briefing,” CIA-RDP82R00025R000700

ing for Deng Xiaoping and Chen Yi to be killed as “yelping ... to little effect.” The Red Guard was also secretly being controlled by different factions within the CCP leadership.<sup>83</sup> However, the CIA still reported in their 15 December 1966 PDB that Lin Biao was the real orchestrator of the Cultural Revolution not Mao. This was because Mao was seen as “just a figurehead” that had “little to do with the [Red Guard] campaign.”<sup>84</sup>

Throughout the Cultural Revolution there was also strong belief within CIA management that Mao was never actually in charge of the country with those believing he had died in the 1960s and replaced with a body double.<sup>85</sup> Supporting evidence was commonly cited as Mao’s famous Yangtze River swim in August 1966 as being “impossible” and “staged” with one of Mao’s body doubles due to his “history of strokes, potentially advanced Parkinson’s, and high blood pressure” and the fact that no Western diplomats or news media were present during the event.<sup>86</sup>

It was not until 1972 that internal memorandum titled, “Intelligence

Memorandum: Some Reflections on Mao,” that puts onto paper that analysts were having “serious reservations” regarding the “accuracy and reliance of the CIA on long distance medical diagnosis” with regards to determining Mao’s health. Noting the following

That it would be a serious mistake to underrate his [Mao’s] physical capacity for action and decision-making ... as he launched the Cultural Revolution at the age of 72 ... at the time when reports were widely circulating, he was near death.<sup>87</sup>

The memo also highlighted reports from eyewitness accounts “[varied] widely’ but in every public appearance Mao made over the last two years [1970-72], he was described as ‘frail and tired looking.”<sup>88</sup> This marks the first time within the declassified CIA literature on Mao that analysts began questioning the usage of medical diagnosis, in writing, despite it being repeatedly used throughout the decades to call into question Mao’s ability to lead. The usage of medical analysis was addressed with-

---

150002-1, September 20, 1966, 3.

83 Central Intelligence Agency, “The President’s Daily Brief,” October 21, 1966, CIA-RDP79T00936 A004800030001-1, 4.

84 Central Intelligence Agency, “The Leadership Upheaval in Communist China,” no. 1578/66, June 17, 1966, 1.; Central Intelligence Agency, “The President’s Daily Brief,” CIA-RDP79T00936 A004900060001-7, December 15, 1966, 1-2.; Central Intelligence Agency, “The President’s Daily Brief,” CIA-RDP79T00936A004900060001-7, December 15, 1966, 1-2.

85 Central Intelligence Agency, “Mao’s ‘Cultural Revolution’: Its Leadership, Its Strategy, Its Instruments, and Its Causalities,” CIA-RDP85T00875R001000010022-2, February 18, 1967, i-iii, 10-12.

86 Atlantic City Jersey Times, “CIA Contends Mao Never Made Swim,” August 12, 1966, CIA-RDP75-00149R000500150026-6, 1.

87 Central Intelligence Agency ‘Intelligence Memorandum: Some Reflections on Mao,’ No. 0824/72, January 31, 1972, 9-10.

88 Central Intelligence Agency ‘Intelligence Memorandum: Some Reflections on Mao,’ 9-10.

in the CIA's classified intelligence journal, *Studies in Intelligence*, three times: 1968 ("VIP Health Watch") and 1979 ("Aging Communist Leaders: Psychological Considerations" and "Remote Medical Diagnosis") giving the impression that this tool was resounding success, Mao was repeatedly cited as a successful case study.<sup>89</sup> Yet, analysts within the China team were questioning in 1972 and it appears their reservation were disregarded. It is not known how long analysts had questioned the usage of remote medical diagnosis internally and why those reservations were only noted, in writing, at this time.

Intelligence reports continued to state that Mao's health was in jeopardy into the mid-1970s, with one report in 1976 that since 1975 Mao has become "incapacitated" and that "he would die in the next few months"; that since April 1976 he was using interpreter to "cover" for Mao, and he was "very enfeebled" and "partially paralyzed on the right side." and that China was under a "degree of collective leadership."<sup>90</sup> This

prediction was incorrect, and no correction or retraction issued when he outlived that assessment. Mao's health was addressed in a 15 June 1976 intelligence cable that his health had "deteriorated," no longer seeing foreign visitors, and the CIA predicted he would 'probably' die at the end of the year.<sup>91</sup> It was reported in the 10 September 1976 PDB that Mao had died on 9 September 1976.<sup>92</sup> When Hua Guofeng was anointed the successor to Mao over Deng Xiaoping this took the CIA by "total surprise" as he was not seen as a viable candidate but rather was a "compromise candidate" between someone who was neither aligned with the Gang of Four or Zhou Enlai.<sup>93</sup> When Hua stated he had the approval of Mao the CIA could not confirm that but they did not expect the country to descend into civil war but that Hua would not have the same level of political dominance that Mao had throughout his career.<sup>94</sup>

It was not until 1978 the CIA put out a report, "An Appraisal of Intelli-

---

89 Myles Maxfield and Edward G. Greger, "VIP Health Watch," *Studies in Intelligence* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1968): 53-63; Jerrold M. Post, "Aging Communist Leaders: Psychological Considerations," *Studies in Intelligence* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 1-9; Myles Maxfield, Robert Proper, and Sharol Case, "Remote Medical Diagnosis," *Studies in Intelligence* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 9-15.

90 Central Intelligence Agency, "After Mao: Factors and Contingencies in the Succession," CIA-RDP-79T00889A0080006001-5, August 1976, 1-7.

91 Central Intelligence Agency, "National Intelligence Daily Cable," June 15, 1976, CIA-RDP79T00975A02900010026-1, 7-8.

92 Central Intelligence Agency, "The President's Daily Briefing," CIA-RDP79T00024A000200050002-1, September 10, 1976, 2.

93 Central Intelligence Agency, "Leadership Politics in Post-Mao China: The Fall of Hua Guofeng," EA 82-10090, August 1982, 1; Central Intelligence Agency, "The Hua-Deng Relationship," RPM 10049-79, January 25, 1979, 1; Central Intelligence Agency, "Deng Xiaoping Dismissed from All Party Posts," LOC-HAK-113-1-13-0, April 7, 1976, 1.

94 Central Intelligence Agency, "China After the Purge," CIA-RDP85T00353R000100350005-3, December 23, 1976, 1-3, 7-8.

gence Sources and Analyses in the Fall of Deng Xiaoping and in the Rise of Hua Guofeng,” which discussed the review of the CIA and the IC’s accuracy regarding China from 1965–1975. In its review the CIA noted that it had failed at all levels to predict the Cultural Revolution, Mao’s role throughout the Cultural Revolution, and the purges of senior leadership (Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping, Lin Biao, and the Gang of Four). CIA blamed the Chinese language as being “insuperable,” and while events may have “out-run analytical assumptions” there was no need to revise or review their models or analytical techniques. There was also a profound disregard that the first generation of Chinese leaders as active rulers. Rather, they were seen by the China department as “octogenarians” who were “deaf, blind, lame, or quite fragile.” This mindset was not seen as something that needed to be corrected. Rather the report put the brunt of the blame on the policymakers for wanting the “impossible” and analysts who “continually catered to their needs.”<sup>95</sup> If there were individual analysts that were prone to this behavior, they were not listed in the report.

## **Key Drivers of Intelligence Mistakes**

First, it appears that the CIA committed the cardinal sin in the world of intelligence: politicization. Throughout the 1950s–60s aspects of the reporting inside the CIA from

the top at Directorate level down to the management level altered intelligence to ensure vital information inside China was not seen by the President and his staff.

Second, the discussion of mind-sets and assumptions was given the briefest of acknowledgements, with the CIA saying that there was no reason to question or review any of their core assumptions, models, or techniques. This outright dismissal and refusal for self-reflection is profoundly frustrating, considering that even in 1972, analysts were questioning the usefulness of medical analysis for their research methods. Despite the CIA regularly stating for at least a decade (1962–72) that Mao was too sick to function or not running the country, he continued to outlive every prediction that he was at death’s door. This was one of the few in declassified reports that genuine introspection regarding analytical tradecraft was seen.

Such introspection was never seen again based on what was released pertaining to Chinese issues on the 1970s. It appears whatever objections that were raised, internally nothing was changed as the CIA continued to use the same methods in their analysis as there have been no documents to show it has been discontinued or altered.

Third, when their own internal review document openly discussed how they missed almost every major milestone over twenty years and justified each event as being “surprised.” Then

<sup>95</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, “An Appraisal of Intelligence Sources and Analyses in the Fall of Teng Hsiao-p’ing and in the Rise of Hua Kuo-feng,” DCI/IC 78-238/CIA-RDP82M00311RP00010 070001-3, January 31, 1978, iii, 1.

rated their own knowledge of what was occurring inside China as “not much” these shortcomings do not equate to a passing review. There appears to have been widespread systemic intelligence failures across the board with practices that were continued with no thought of reviewing or fixing them.

Fourth, the issue of mindsets at the analytical level or the impact of organizational-level mindsets was discussed in the report. From the CIA being unable to separate China from the Soviet Union and Mao as a Moscow plant. Moreover, there was the outright and repeat assessment that there was no need to even understand other countries’ versions of communism, as the only true version was Moscow. All this colored and affected the analysis within the China team.

Fifth, the failure to study China during the Cold War profoundly hampered the China analytical team from the very beginning. It appears that China analysis since the 1950s was, in a way, set up to fail. It never received any of the core resources it needed in terms of budget, and the Directorate of Operations and China Coordinator did not provide the assistance in the development of a clandestine program. This left the CIA, effectively, totally blind to what was occurring inside China.<sup>96</sup> While the 1978 report may have downplayed the lack of clandestine in-

formation, one could make a case that a potentially more robust clandestine program would have provided more information to fill in the intelligence gaps. It would also reduce the reliance on the Hong Kong embassy. Instead, it appears that intelligence by the end of the 1970s was still just as it was in the 1960s—“fragmentary, incomplete, and irregular.”<sup>97</sup>

Lastly, the organizational failures within CIA to manage China with multiple working groups diminished the CIA’s ability to effectively analyze the situation. The China Coordinator did not have the time to oversee the growing intelligence requirements with his limited tenure in the position. Nor the capacity to resolve the lack of communication between the Coordinator, Senior Intelligence Analyst (SIA), CIA Management, and IC representatives. All of this led to infrequent meetings with no set agenda and a coordinator who was not informed of his own teams’ activities, issues they were having, or long-term plan.

Ultimately, the 1978 retrospective document provides a few insights and even less accountability as to why the analysis went wrong. This was due to a myriad of failures over decades that led the U.S. to profoundly misjudge China for the entirety of Mao’s reign. No blame was apportioned inwardly, nor were any significant course cor-

96 Central Intelligence Agency, “Memorandum for: General Reynolds Subject: Self-criticism in March 1967,” 3-4; Central Intelligence Agency, “First 1969 Meeting of China Intelligence Activities Coordination Group,” March 14, 1969, CIA-RDP73B00148A000200030040-4, 1-5.

97 Central Intelligence Agency, “Memorandum for: General Reynolds Subject: Self-criticism in March 1967,” 3-4.

rections defined and applied. Instead, the CIA blamed the policy makers for their “impossible standards,” which is profoundly telling as to how the CIA viewed the problem.<sup>98</sup> No subsequent documents have been released to show what follow-up work was done. Thus, unfortunately, this could have ended up being a “one and done” document that was filed away once complete, leaving the bureaucratic machine to continue without changing anything.

In the end, multiple issues impacted how the CIA analyzed Mao Ze-dong and Chinese politics during his reign. The core issue being one of an institutional mindset bias that impacted not just the CIA, but the IC, and multiple Presidents who were resistant to new information that challenged their belief systems and conventional wisdom. The refusal to believe in the Sino-Soviet split or the mischaracterizing of Mao's health are two core examples that highlight this issue within the analytical writings. Lastly, the profound organizational mismanagement of the Chinese teams played a role in ensuring that the analysts received limited resources. In the end these institutional mindsets enacted by the CIA management left the analytical teams ignored and disregarded. This led to the Agency and thus the President profoundly blind to the inner workings of China and the Agency forever having to play catch-up on understanding China throughout the Cold War.

---

98 Central Intelligence Agency, “An Appraisal of Intelligence Sources and Analyses in the Fall of Teng Hsiao-p'ing and in the Rise of Hua Kuo-feng,” 15.

## **Appendix – Mao's Reported Illnesses from 1945–1976**

| Date           | Illness or Event  | Source   |
|----------------|---|--|
| Spring 1945    | Nervous breakdown due eldest daughter illness   | Protected Source <sup>99</sup>   |
| 1949           | Cancer, stroke, assassinated, or died by natural causes   | Protected Source <sup>100</sup>  |
| Summer of 1949 | Stroke  | Unknown but photographic evidence showed he had the appearance of a stroke   |
| 07 July 1949   | Death by assassination or natural cause   | Unknown <sup>101</sup>   |
| January 1951   | Tuberculosis, heart or kidney disease, or death   | Allegedly confirmed by Beijing's Foreign Ministry. CIA assessed he could be mourning for the death of his son in the Korean War <sup>102</sup> |
| March 1951     | Reported to have died due to lifestyle afflictions or high blood pressure. Liu Shaoqi appointed to act for him. | Chinese source of unknown reliability. <sup>103</sup>  |
| 1952           | Unknown illness   | Dispelled by a Western observer who interviewed Mao and said he was in good health <sup>104</sup>  |
| 1953           | Appeared thin and rumors he was "seriously ill"   | Redacted Source <sup>105</sup>   |
| 15 July 1954   | Throat cancer or kidney problem. Given a year to live.  | Second-hand information from a source that says they knew Mao's doctor <sup>106</sup>  |

99 Central Intelligence Agency, "The Decline of Mao Tse-tung," POLO XV-62, April 9, 1962, 14.

100 Central Intelligence Agency, "The Decline of Mao Tse-tung," 14-15.

101 Central Intelligence Agency, "Rumored Death of Mao Tse-tung," July 15, 1949, CIA-RDP82-00457R 003000020004-6, 1.

102 Central Intelligence Agency, "The Decline of Mao Tse-tung," 15.

103 Central Intelligence Agency, "Office of Current Intelligence: Daily Digest," CIA=RDP79T01146A 00100410001-6, April 17, 1951, 6.

104 Central Intelligence Agency, "The Decline of Mao Tse-tung," 15.

105 Central Intelligence Agency, "The Decline of Mao Tse-tung," 15.

106 Central Intelligence Agency, "Current Intelligence Bulletin," July 15, 1954, 3-4.

|                            |  |   |
|----------------------------|--|---|
| May 1955                   | Reported inability to use his left hand which suggested possible stroke and was partially paralyzed  | Redacted Source <sup>107</sup>  |
| November and December 1956 | In films Mao appeared “old, slow, and vague” and was absent in December with no explanation  | Reviewed potentially state propaganda films <sup>108</sup>                        |
| 1957                       | Potentially had a stroke in the first six months of the year; locomotion issues, and had “brain anemia”  | Western correspondents; Unknown sources; and reporting from Moscow <sup>109</sup> |
| 1958                       | State media emphasized Mao’s activities – swimming in cold weather, “walking swiftly,” and appearing at Party meetings. Films show his left arm stiff but able to use it. Potential first stroke occurred this year.                       | Chinese state media review and unknown sources <sup>110</sup>                     |
| December 1958              | Mao intends to give up duties as Chairman; had trouble walking, fatigued, and forced to delegate responsibility  | Chinese state media <sup>111</sup>  |
| 1959                       | Mao walked slowly and visitors said he looked “unwell, tiring easily, and coughing a lot.” Khrushchev reported Mao was “abstracted.” Western observers said Mao looked good and showed no medical problems.                                | Unknown sources <sup>112</sup>  |
| 1960                       | Disappeared from January-February and source stated he had “grown old and is very tired.” Appearance of slump on his left shoulder.<br><br>Edgar Snow stated that Mao remained “quite meticulous” regarding statistics and economic issues | Confidential source and Edgar Snow <sup>113</sup>                                 |

107 Central Intelligence Agency, “The Decline of Mao Tse-tung,” 16.

108 Central Intelligence Agency, “The Decline of Mao Tse-tung,” 19.

109 Central Intelligence Agency, “The Decline of Mao Tse-tung,” 20-21.

110 Central Intelligence Agency, “The Decline of Mao Tse-tung,” 23-24; “CIA Contends Mao Never Made Swim” Atlantic City Jersey Times, 12 August 1966.

111 National Security Council, “Mao Tse-Tung’s Status,” CIA-RDP79R00890A001000080003-5, December 17, 1958, 1.

112 Central Intelligence Agency, “The Decline of Mao Tse-tung,” 25.

113 Central Intelligence Agency, “The Decline of Mao Tse-tung,” 28.



|                |   |   |
|----------------|---|---|
| 1961           | Soviet state media, <i>Pravda</i> , stated Mao had “senile disorder” and similar stories were spread throughout Western European Communist Parties  | Soviet state media <sup>114</sup>   |
| December 1963  | Soviet send birthday greetings which is referencing Mao's senility  | Soviet state media <sup>115</sup>   |
| August 1964    | Italian heart surgeon dispatched to Beijing to treat Mao Zedong   | Protected sources <sup>116</sup>  |
| May 1965       | Despite denial from Beijing Mao may be seriously ill or suffered a serious decline. Not seen in public since March. Missed May Day events, received foreign visitors, and attended funeral of Ko Ching-shih (Mayor of Shanghai) in April.           | Monitoring of domestic events <sup>117</sup>  |
| Jan 1966       | Mao's last public appearance since 26 Nov. Long withdrawal leaves possibility of serious illness  | Monitoring domestic events <sup>118</sup>   |
| Feb-March 1966 | Mao was out of public view for 3 months, his longest disappearance in six years. Previous lengths were 15 weeks in 1956–76 and 12 weeks in 1960. Believed to be suffering a stroke, incapacitated, or dead. Has failed to meet high-level visitors. | Confidential Sources <sup>119</sup>   |
| September 1969 | Rumors that Mao is severely ill or dead from a stroke and the country is being run by Lin Biao, Zhou Enlai, and Chen Pota.  | ‘Very authoritative’ Soviet official to the Moscow correspondent at Times Magazine <sup>120</sup> |

114 Central Intelligence Agency, “The Decline of Mao Tse-tung,” 29.

115 Central Intelligence Agency, “The President's Intelligence Checklist,” 27 December 1963, CIA-RDP79T00936A002200010001-1, 4.

116 Central Intelligence Agency, “The President's Intelligence Checklist,” 5 August 1964, CIA-RDP79T00936A002900210001-2, 6.

117 Central Intelligence Agency, “The President's Daily Brief,” 31 May 1965, CIA-RDP79T00936A003700220001-2, 6.

118 Central Intelligence Agency, “Central Intelligence Bulletin,” 15 January 1966, CIA-RDP79T00975A008700240001-9, 5.

119 Central Intelligence Agency, “Presidential Daily Briefing,” 15 February 1966, 4; “Presidential Daily Briefing,” 14 March 1966, 3; “Current Intelligence Briefing,” 15 January 1966, CIA-RDP79T00975A008700240001-9, 5; “Current Intelligence Briefing,” 10 March 1966, CIA-RDP79-00927A0052000500-1, 4; “Current Intelligence Briefing,” 15 March 1966, CIA-RDP79T00975A008800290001-3, 4.

120 Central Intelligence Agency, “Presidential Daily Briefing,” 22 September 22, 1969, 1.

|                |   |  |
|----------------|---|--|
| October 1969   | Mao and Lin Biao appeared on Beijing Radio and appeared in “excellent health and full of vigor”   | Chinese state media <sup>121</sup>               |
| March 1971     | Mao’s death is being anticipated and indirect evidence suggests rivalries amongst members post-Cultural Revolution  | Protected sources <sup>122</sup>                 |
| October 1971   | Mao met with Emperor Selassie, dispelled ill health rumors and Lin Biao has not been seen since June, speculation in poor health. Source says people have been arrested for spreading rumors about Lin’s health | State media and protected sources <sup>123</sup> |
| September 1971 | Mao has not appeared in public since 7 August and missed National Day Celebrations which he had always previously attended. State media proclaimed him in excellent health                                      | Western and Chinese media <sup>124</sup>         |
| October 1972   | Mao has not presided over an important domestic event in eight months. Mao met with Prime Minister Tanaka who said he was “mentally alert and reasonably healthy”   | Confidential sources <sup>125</sup>              |
| October 1974   | Mao was not present at the 25 <sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the PRC  | Chinese state media <sup>126</sup>               |
| January 1975   | Mao did not appear at 4 <sup>th</sup> National People’s Congress could be due to health issues or political reasonings  | Chinese state media <sup>127</sup>               |

121 Central Intelligence Agency, “Presidential Daily Briefing, October 1, 1969,” CIA-RDP79T00936A 9976999199910-2, October 1, 1969, 6.

122 Central Intelligence Agency, “Presidential Daily Briefing,” CIA-RDP79T00936A009300190001-4, March 22, 1971, 1-2.

123 Central Intelligence Agency, “Presidential Daily Briefing,” CIA-RDP79T00936A01000009001-6, October 9, 1971, 1.

124 Central Intelligence Agency, “Weekly Summary,” CIA-RDP79-00927A009100030001-0, September 24, 1971, 1-2; “Presidential Daily Briefing,” CIA-RDP79T00936A009900210001-5, September 23, 1971, 1.

125 Central Intelligence Agency, “Presidential Daily Briefing,” CIA-RDP79T00936A01120020001-0, October 3, 1972, 1-2.

126 Central Intelligence Agency, “Presidential Daily Briefing,” CIA-RDP79T00936A012300010008-2, October 2, 1974, 2-3.

127 Central Intelligence Agency, “Presidential Daily Briefing,” CIA-RDP79T00936A01240010040-5,

|                   |  |                                    |
|-------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| May 1975          | Mao has not been seen in the public since January. Not known if was due to criticism to his regime or his relationship to the Chinese leadership   | Protected sources <sup>128</sup>   |
| August 1975       | "very frail" and "old and sick"  | Protected sources <sup>129</sup>   |
| November 1975     | Between an unknown 10 – 20 Nov meeting occurred with VIP officials from provincial capitals. It was deemed unlikely related to health of Mao or Zhou Enlai   | American embassy in Beijing        |
| January 1976      | Premier Zhou Enlai passed away on 8 January and noted that Mao's health was "frail" at 82.   | Chinese state media <sup>130</sup> |
| January 1976      | "his health remains reasonably good" and "his absence ... may have a political justification."   | Protected sources <sup>131</sup>   |
| June 1976         | "deteriorated," no longer seeing foreign visitors, and the CIA predicted he would "probably" die at the end of the year.   | Protected sources <sup>132</sup>   |
| August 1976       | "already incapacitated ... may become incapacitated, or die, in the next few months," using an interpreter to potentially "cover" for him, appearance was "enfeebled," and "partially paralyzed on his right side" | Protected sources <sup>133</sup>   |
| September 9, 1976 | Chinese state media announced Mao Zedong's death   | Chinese state media <sup>134</sup> |

---

January 20, 1975, 1-3.

128 Central Intelligence Agency, "Presidential Daily Briefing," CIA-RDP79T00936A012600010027-8, May 6, 1975, 5-6.

129 Central Intelligence Agency, "China in 1974-1975: The End of Era?" LOC-HAK-120-6-18-2, August 1975, 8-9.

130 Central Intelligence Agency, "Presidential Daily Briefing," CIA-RDP79T00936A013000010025-5, January 9, 1976, 1-2.

131 Central Intelligence Agency, "Presidential Daily Briefing," CIA-RDP79T00936A012400010040-5, January 20, 1976, 1-2.

132 Central Intelligence Agency, "National Intelligence Daily Cable," June 15, 1976, CIA-RDP-79T00975A02900010026-1, 7-8.

133 Central Intelligence Agency, "After Mao: Factors and Contingencies in the Succession," CIA-RDP-79T00889A0080006001-5, August 1976, 7.

134 Central Intelligence Agency, "Presidential Daily Briefing," CIA-RDP79T00024A0002000500001-1, September 9, 1976, 1-2

**Nicholas J.S. Miller** is a doctoral candidate at the University of Edinburgh and holds a MA in International Relations. His primary area of research is focused on analytical issues facing the U.S. Intelligence Community, Chinese and North Korean politics, Cold War, and leadership analysis. He previously served as an East Asian Security Analyst for the U.S. Department of Defense. He also welcomes opportunities for continued research and collaboration.