

# Research Article

## IMPERIAL JAPANESE ARMY INTELLIGENCE IN NORTH AND CENTRAL CHINA DURING THE SECOND SINO-JAPANESE WAR

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The Japanese today seek to improve their national intelligence apparatus, particularly in relation to human intelligence assets and higher echelon coordination. To be successful, Japan must examine its wartime past in the intelligence field. The Imperial Japanese Army maintained a prolific intelligence presence in North and Central China during the Second World War. Its intelligence apparatus encompassed all aspects of information collection, with considerable overlap between intelligence organisations in an effort to avoid gaps in intelligence coverage. Japan's intelligence system in North and Central China was nevertheless inefficient, exacerbated by inherent weaknesses and reactive rather than proactive alterations throughout the course of the conflict. This paper examines this lack of efficacy within Japan's intelligence system during the Second Sino-Japanese conflict, and the efforts made to overcome difficulties faced by Japanese intelligence in North and Central China throughout this period.

**Keywords:** Japanese intelligence, Second World War, China; puppet armies

Only recently has Japan sought to reestablish its foreign intelligence service to keep an eye on its near neighbours, a weakness in its intelligence capability since the end of World War II. Furthermore, Japan is all too aware of its lack of expertise in human intelligence capabilities (Dorling, 2011). With the formation of a National Security Council in December 2013, Japan has replaced former security and defense councils that have suffered from inefficiencies, and seeks to improve its modern-day foreign intelligence apparatus' and practices (Berkshire Miller, 2014). To guarantee requisite improvement in intelligence

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capability, Japan must objectively examine its wartime experience in the intelligence field. This paper provides an examination of Japan's military intelligence experience in North and Central China during the Second Sino-Japanese conflict, a period when Japan's intelligence apparatus' and operations were most abundant in an area in which it now seeks improvement. Factors found within this paper may easily be transposed onto a modern civilian intelligence system.

Following the Manchurian Incident (also known as the Mukden Incident), essentially a black flag operation that led to Japan's full annexation of Manchuria, Japanese forces in North China [and later to a lesser extent in Central China] became complacent in regard to their intelligence activities, this due to their having only ever faced inferior forces. Information on enemy forces had previously been inconsequential in Japan's previous victories, having only served to minimise casualties. As such, an ill-informed culture of inattention to intelligence matters and organisation developed (Strategic Services Unit, para. 32).

North China being furthest from Japan's strategic and tactical fronts, where fighting was still active, was considered occupied. Beyond the need to prevent subversive and guerilla activities, intelligence was no longer prioritised, and Japanese Army intelligence activities in this area were henceforth dealt with in the manner in which the commanding officer thought fit (Strategic Services Unit, para. 27). To demonstrate, in July 1940 the Chinese communist Eighth Route Army, previously held in low regard by the IJA (Imperial Japanese Army), undertook its "Hundred Regiments Offensive" resulting in the deaths of some 20,000 Japanese personnel. The offensive came as a surprise to the Japanese who at that time, despite having gathered some information on the Kuomintang, had little then on the Chinese Communist Party, this despite the conflict having been ongoing since 1937 [Kotani, 2009, pp. 44-45].

Within North and Central China, the Imperial Japanese China Expeditionary Forces (CEF), operating beneath Imperial General Headquarters in Tokyo (IGHQ), operated at the same level as the Southern Area Army in Southeast Asia and the Pacific and Kwantung Army in Manchuria. Its 2nd Section (Intelligence) was responsible for strategic information collection and intelligence coordination of forces under its command (including the collation of intelligence forwarded to it by commanders in China's North, South and Central

areas) for use by its commanding officer in the formulation of war plans and dissemination to IGHQ (Strategic Services Unit, 1946, para. 9).

IGHQ operated as supreme military command, issuing only the broadest direction for intelligence, often holding itself above intelligence matters, intelligence being delegated to the IJA and IJN (Imperial Japanese Navy) General Staffs and counterpart Ministries (Gorman, 1945a, p. 1). The intelligence apparatus of the China Expeditionary Forces included the following main sections:

- i) field or combat intelligence within its armies;
- ii) sabotage and fifth column;
- iii) espionage;
- iv) counterespionage;
- v) policing and peace preservation; and
- vi) economic control through government monopolies (Strategic Services Unit, para. 3).

Particular areas of intelligence were usually covered *predominantly* by one particular intelligence organ (for instance, counter-espionage was for the most-part a *Kempei Tai* concern, although it should be remembered that *Kempei* Units were assigned to IJA formations). Considerable overlap existed however between the different intelligence organisations, this was considered an acceptable practice so as to avoid gaps in intelligence coverage. In Shanghai, for example, there was the Army with its counterpart Army Bureau (*Rikugun Bu*), the Peace Preservation Corps, Puppet Armies, the *Kempei Tai* and its subordinate Police Force, the Foreign Office and its Consular Police and development companies, the railroad police, and others. All areas related to intelligence were thus covered in a most comprehensive fashion by one or all of the above organisations. Rather than liaise with one another to coordinate activity and exchange information however, each organ had its own channels of reporting and maintained its own network of informants and agents (Strategic Services Unit, para. 69).

Responsibility for each intelligence function lay not with Headquarters' Head of Intelligence, but rather remained predominantly the responsibility of army commanders and their respective intelligence staffs. Notably, each army commander was neither required nor obligated to report to Headquarters each

and every detail of intelligence operations within their area of operations. Armies operating within a particular area would thus operate their own intelligence organisations (Strategic Services Unit, para. 3).

Beneath the CEF operated the North China Expeditionary Force and the Central China Expeditionary Force (operations of the South China Area Army and its successor 23<sup>rd</sup> Army lay outside the scope of this paper). The North China Expeditionary Force's 2<sup>nd</sup> Section (Intelligence) served primarily as an office through which intelligence streamed, at irregular intervals, to the Supreme Headquarters in Nanking. Its role in direction, instruction and supervision of intelligence activities of those organisations within its jurisdiction, themselves only loosely connected, was only minor (Strategic Services Unit, para. 18).

The Central China Expeditionary Force Headquarters' 2<sup>nd</sup> Section (Intelligence) was located in Nanking, acting in a supervisory role over intelligence sections in formations under its command. Its scope of activity was limited, Area Army Intelligence Departments relaying information only on concerns deemed to be of particular importance to higher formation HQ. More often than not, Commanding Generals utilised information without relaying the same to CEFHQ (Strategic Services Unit, para. 62).

Area Armies maintained an intelligence section, Armies an intelligence unit, and beneath Army level Divisions and Battalions would have their own units. Reports were made to the unit commander, who would pass this information to the intelligence representative, who in turn would report this through his lines. Reports would hence be collated by progressively larger units, finally reaching General Headquarters who would assemble all available reports to develop a situational appreciation. As such, intelligence representatives and officers had no direct liaison with General Headquarters (United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS), 1945, p. 5).

Only at Army level was a full-time intelligence officer employed. Below Army level personnel were tasked with intelligence duties as only part of their duties. Notably, toward the latter part of the conflict even full-time intelligence officers were undertaking other duties due to a lack of personnel (USSBS, p. 5). Brigades and Regiments did not contain designated intelligence formations, with intelligence activity being undertaken by the service units themselves. It is understandable that of primary concern to these units was information related to immediate tactical combat conditions, this information being relayed to their

immediate superior formation. Other information of a non-tactical basis was no doubt collected but was incidental; reporting on the same was likely *ad hoc*, haphazard at best.

Military Intelligence Departments thus essentially operated as clearing houses for subordinate units. Furthermore, those tasked with information collection received only broad direction from upper echelon Intelligence Departments, and reporting was consequently subjective. Information relay was thus dependent on the relative importance placed on it by the officer involved.

### PUPPET ARMIES

The Japanese command structure was held in high regard, and as such even the smallest of garrison units spread throughout North China might be considered frontline units of information collection. For this reason it is thought rarely were special intelligence units posted by Brigade, Division, Army or North China Army Headquarters' (Strategic Services Unit, para. 39). Aiding the Japanese, both in terms of combat troops, but also in relation to information gathering, were the "Puppet Armies" organised by the Japanese to aid in their occupation of China. The number of "puppet" troops in February 1944, according to British intelligence sources, numbered 627,200, including 299,800 regulars. Chinese Communist sources believed there to be 900,000 puppet troops in 1945, 410,000 thought to have been regulars (Jowett, 2004, p. 72).

Peace Preservation Corps were armed forces charged with military responsibility for maintaining order, including combatting guerilla forces (this in contrast to Pacification units who are thought to have dealt primarily with subversive elements, be they anti-Japanese, Communist, etc.) ("Peace Preservation," n.d.). Information was gathered by the Japanese through the use of agents and from frontline intelligence gathered by regular combat units, but also through these "puppet" formations. Combat patrols collected information on both Chungking and Communist forces. Agents were also used to infiltrate enemy lines under the guise of merchants, etc. Small towns at the front were filled with local informants, but were also covered by the Peace Preservation Corps.

By way of example, in 1938 the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade of 43<sup>rd</sup> Army Intelligence Department, known as *Tokumu Kikan* (see below), entered and occupied Tsingtao on the Shantung Peninsula. Most of its activities were directed at Communist elements through the use of combat intelligence teams who collected

information relating to enemy dispositions, public order in occupied areas, topography and weather conditions. Information was gathered through the use of local agents, including voluntary informers among the local populace, the Imperial Collaboration Army, Puppet Armies and Peace Preservation Units (Strategic Services Unit, para. 28).

The commander of the local Peace Preservation Corps in each province was concurrently the Provincial Governor, and each puppet intelligence unit within reported, through its head, to puppet civil authorities. In this manner, both civil and military intelligence were directed through the same channel. Conversely, those intelligence units not part of the Peace Preservation Corps, but within other puppet armies, came under direct control of the Japanese Expeditionary force in China, as did the army as a whole. These intelligence units came under direct command of the regular Japanese intelligence service of the Japanese army under which it operated (Byse, 1945, p. 3).

Puppet army intelligence units were then answerable to their respective army commanders yet units always had a Japanese official attached, ostensibly operating under direction of the Intelligence unit, but in actual fact the unit was under Japanese' command. A Japanese subordinate, usually placed as second-in-command, often accompanied these officers. All information was made available to these Japanese commanders but for those reports delivered on a clandestine basis directly to the puppet intelligence head or other superior officer within the puppet military (Byse, p. 3). Nevertheless, as the puppet intelligence chief, and the puppet army, answered to the Japanese at a different level, presumably such intelligence made its way to Japanese hands at a later time.

Although theoretically the puppet army intelligence organisation' was structurally separate and operated independently to that of the Japanese, it was however controlled by the Japanese, and was required to operate in Japan's interest. Intelligence products of the apparatus were provided to the Japanese commander, who, *when appropriate*, would forward these to their superiors (Byse, p. 3).

Of consequence, Japanese "liaison officers", obviously intelligence officers, were not solely employed in this role. Rather, these men acted also as the local Japanese representative in the area and as such were also charged with investigation of economic data, taxation, etc. These officials further employed

their own agents, predominantly Chinese, who reported directly to them (Byse, p. 4).

Puppet commanders held considerable influence over their areas of jurisdiction, and due to a history of Chinese loyalty to their respective commanders, puppet commanders were essentially let be by their Japanese overseers in so far as nothing overly serious was committed against Japan's interests. Many puppets were thus involved in selfish criminal enterprise at the expense of local populations (Jowett, p. 69). Dissemination of information by the puppet apparatus was made on a particularly informal basis, based on personal communication between puppet commanders (Byse, p. 4). Furthermore, when safe to do so, the majority of puppet troops and officials were likely to act against the Japanese (Office of Strategic Services, Research and Analysis Branch, 1943, p. 6). Information gathered by these units and relayed to Japanese leadership was hence likely of minimal consequence, meeting minimum requirements to maintain Japanese support and patronage. Such systemic weaknesses exacerbated, even created, the need for those Japanese-in-command to develop their own agent networks as described above. These Japanese then were spread rather thin in their intelligence functionality and effectiveness.

## TRAINING

The quality of the intelligence staff was lacking. When asked as to how officers were selected for intelligence duties, Lieutenant-General Arisue Seizo, Chief of the 2nd Department (Intelligence), Army General Staff, IGHQ in Tokyo from August 1942 to the end of the conflict, stated it was safe to say only second-class officers were chosen, or rather "...the dregs were thrown into the intelligence service. There was no way of choosing." (USSBS, p. 7).

Low-level intelligence staff, both officers and civilian, were selected according to their previous military service, language ability and residence in the locale of operations. Minimal training was provided. They learnt via experience (Strategic Services Unit, para. 70). No particular class or type of officer then received training solely and specifically for intelligence work. Language officers, or those who had spent some time stationed overseas, "naturally" fell into intelligence duties (Gorman, 1945b, p. 6).

Furthermore, in-depth training for intelligence staff who would hold higher position in China was essentially non-existent for the greater part of the conflict.

This lack of basic intelligence training was attributed to Japan's relatively successful operations in China without intelligence, leading to sentiment amongst General Staff Army officers that intelligence was not essential. This complacency continued until the onset of hostilities with the U.S. when Japan found itself in a war without an obvious front line, the I.J.A. finding itself without lines of communication and no intelligence planning (USSBS, pp. 6-7). Only by 1943 were many Staff Officers of CEFHQ transferred to other fronts and theatres, replaced with graduates of the Nakano Special Military Officer's School. These replacements nevertheless lacked experience, and were thought to be generally inferior (Strategic Services Unit, para. 22). Although the Nakano School, established July 1938, would train credible intelligence personnel educated in elements of intelligence outside the immediate tactical field, only a small number of graduates were available to the Japanese throughout the conflict, these being primarily sent to theatres outside China (Mercado, 2002, pp. 1-23).

Up to the Pacific conflict, little heed was paid to recruitment of Special Service personnel in China. Expatriate Japanese residents in China for some time were often employed on the assumption that their time spent in country somehow best qualified them for the work involved. Officers of IJA units stationed in China were also inducted despite having no experience, training nor aptitude for the duties involved. Such recruitment required no particular amendment prior to the "China Incident" of 1937, up until which the duties of the SSO revolved around clandestine operations and information collection (South-East Asian Translation and Interrogation Centre (SEATIC), n.d., p. 16). Practical experience served as mentor, missions of small scale being followed by those progressively larger and more complex (Leake, 1944, p. 10). Agents employed were predominantly Chinese, chosen for their contacts, intelligence, local area knowledge and reliability and trustworthiness, mentored by senior agents through field missions of increasing importance (SEATIC, 1944, p. 13).

Promotions within Intelligence, at least prior to 1943, were thus only offered after substantial service with the IJA. Activities of these officers were often not in accord with any formal plan, but rather reflected the individual interests of the intelligence officer involved. It is thought that this practice resulted in the formation of special service units (*Kikan*), formed for a specific purpose and dissolved following completion or failure (Strategic Services Unit, para. 76).



## SPECIAL SERVICE ORGANISATIONS

Separate then to standard Army intelligence organisations were the *Kikan* (Special Service organisations, alternatively referred to as agencies), created by higher echelon Army Headquarters to perform particular duties and/or missions. These *Kikan* reported only to their respective Headquarters (Strategic Services Unit, para. 4).

The IJN had first sought to form a Special Service Organisation (SSO) in China around 1929, the IJA establishing its own a few years prior (Leake, p. 6). Before the “Manchurian Incident” of 1931, Japanese intelligence in China relied on Foreign Office embassies and consulates, with military intelligence dependent on Attachés. In order to avoid posting further Attachés to China, an action that would draw ire from the then Chinese Government, Japan created the position of *Chuzai Bukan* (Resident Officer), and posted these to important Chinese cities (Leake, p. 6).

From 1929 to 1937 IJA SSOs effectively came under control of the General Staff in Tokyo as their main activities related to espionage and counter-espionage, which the General Staff in Tokyo had always been responsible for (Leake, p. 6).

Numerous changes and reorganisations in the Japanese Special Service organisation occurred throughout the Chinese conflict over the span of months or even years. Around 1930 a sister organisation to the *Rikugun Chuzai Bukan Fu* (Army Resident Officer Department) was formed, known as the *Tokumu Kikan*, whose duties mirrored those of the *Rikugun Chuzai Bukan Fu* (the term *Tokumu Kikan* is here used as an overarching title rather than as a descriptive term used to identify individual Special Service units). *Tokumu Kikan* (a term also used to identify individual units) operated in area of less importance and further afield, and were established or dismantled as present conditions dictated (Leake, p. 6). The majority of *Tokumu Kikan* personnel were *Gunzoku* (civilian attachés or non-career personnel), with the largest *Kikan* having only four to five IJA personnel, with civilians, recruited there and then (Gorman, 1945b, p. 3).

With the onset of the Second Sino-Japanese conflict in 1937 came a second reorganisation. Following Japan’s occupation of Nanking, IJA *Chuzai Bukan* continued to operate in Canton and Hankow, but elsewhere were dispensed with as SSOs were restructured and remodeled (Leake, 1944, p. 7). The IJA

withdrew, if temporarily, their Attachés until the establishment of the Wang Ching-wei puppet government (Leake, p. 7).

The IJA SSO at this time adopted the title *Rikugun Tokumu Kikan* across all China, coming now under direct command of Supreme HQ Nanking. The *Hokushi Rikugun Tokumu Kikan* (North China IJA Special Service Department) was headquartered in Beijing, commanding IJA SSOs in Tientsin, Tsingtao, and some others in northern cities. Conversely, SSO in Nanking, Shanghai and Hankow were answerable only to IJA Supreme HQ in Nanking. The *Hokushi Rikugun Tokumu Kikan* held no jurisdiction over these areas (Leake, p. 7).

The IJA in 1938, due to the name *Rikugun Tokumu Kikan* becoming associated with espionage and counter-espionage activities, altered its title to *Tokumu Bu* but for those operations in Shanghai and Nanking. The reason for these apparent exceptions appears to lay in the function of these two formations, which were now primarily involved in collaboration with their respective puppet governments (Leake, p. 7).

With the growing importance of political intelligence, linked inextricably to the establishment of these puppet regimes by the Japanese, came the establishment of a most successful *Tokumu Kikan*, the *Ume* (Plum) *Kikan*. *Ume Kikan* was formed in 1939 under Major-General Kagasa Sadaaki with the objective to install the puppet government of Wang Ching-wei (Leake, p. 7). Following its establishment, *Ume Kikan* would remain in place to liaise with, and to further advise and lead Wang's regime (SEATIC, 1946, p. 4). Notably however *Ume Kikan* was disbanded soon after achieving its aim (Leake, p. 7). The practice of disbandment arguably diluted the pool of experienced intelligence officers available to the Japanese who were well versed in local political conditions, bearing in mind the lack of intelligence training and thus experience in the field required. The same may be said of the innumerable other *Kikan* dissolved over time.

The importance of *Ume Kikan* in the continuing evolution of Japanese intelligence in China appears nevertheless to have been substantial. Despite its disbandment in 1940, the term "*Ume*" continued to be associated with Japanese intelligence, primarily in the Shanghai area, with a particular series of intelligence reports entitled "*Ume*". Information found within these reports was however of a broad nature, often without obvious merit and of dubious credibility (Military Intelligence Service WDGS, 1945, pp. 34-36).

Control of Japanese SSOs in China was relegated in 1939 to Expeditionary or Area Army Headquarters' as "control could not be effectively exercised from Tokyo." (MacArthur, 1944, p. 15). As the puppet regime in China strengthened its position, and as military control decentralised, smaller SSOs were established, operating beneath local Area Army HQ or even Brigade HQ. One source states that around this time the Chief of Staff of the local Area Army was tasked with responsibility for SSOs, and subsequently the head of the SSO now became the former's subordinate, in effect combining Operational HQ and the SSO (MacArthur, p. 16).

With the Second Sino-Japanese War Japanese political and economic interest in China rose dramatically, as did the scope and range of SSO operations. As puppet administrations were established following the China Incident in 1937, military duties gradually became subordinate to administrative concerns, so that by 1944 military activities were only a very small proportion of SSO activities (Leake, p. 6). Expertise in areas including Political Affairs, General Affairs and Economics was now required, but the pool of recruits with such qualifications was insufficient to the end of 1941 (SEATIC, n.d., p. 16). From the beginning of 1942, SSO personnel began to be substituted by specialist civilians known as *Bunkan*, essentially educated civilians in a particular field (SEATIC, n.d., p. 17).

Between July 1942 and early 1943 an increasing number of IJA SSO functions were delegated to autonomous and provincial Governments. Both espionage and counter-espionage were separated from the newly formed *Renraku Bu* (Liaison Department) and centralised in HQ, Nanking under the title *Tokushu Kikan* (official name unknown) (MacArthur, p. 16). The IJA *Renraku Bu* was, officially, now limited to liaison with the puppet regime, economics and propaganda, with branches throughout all centres of the Nanking Government (MacArthur, p. 16). Irrespective of how delineation was now drawn, Japanese retained all key roles, and the *Renraku Bu*, through its commercial control, exercised "just as much power as its predecessors" (MacArthur, p. 16).

Functions once held by its predecessors in relation to operations of the puppet Government were absorbed into the *Renraku Bu* (in Shanghai this department operated under the title *Rikugun Bu* (Army Department)). The *Renraku Bu* differed from previous change in command structure in that its branches now answered directly to IJA HQ in its respective area (Leake, p. 8). The section of the IJA SSO concerned with espionage and counter-espionage,

*Tokushu Kikan* and its detachments, remained responsible to Supreme HQ Nanking (Leake, p. 8).

## CONCLUSION

Within China the Imperial Japanese Army did not from the onset of hostilities maintain a fully coordinated intelligence system with direct information relay to Imperial Headquarters in Tokyo. Within military intelligence, but across the intelligence apparatus as a whole, little direction was received from Imperial General Headquarters as to what was of importance, leading to rather subjective information collection by both local commands and staff involved.

Repetition and overlap of duties by different intelligence organisations was commonplace. IJA Special Service organisations, initially strategic intelligence units, had ostensibly been under command of the Second Department, IJA General Staff. In practice, Japanese intelligence units operated independently within their area of operations, decentralising further throughout the course of the conflict. Efficacy of Japan's intelligence apparatus was further hampered by a lack of coordinated and specialised training of its Intelligence Staff. With the establishment of puppet regimes in China, primary focus in intelligence collection by Special Service units shifted largely from tactical to political concerns.

Continuous reorganisation and decentralisation of Japan's intelligence apparatus, plus reactive rather than proactive practices in response to circumstances on the ground in China, lead to inefficiency for the duration of the conflict. Despite its prolific presence on the ground, a lack of cohesion over time circumvented the potential of Japan's intelligence apparatus. Were the conflict lengthened lessons learnt and subsequent modifications to the intelligence apparatus by the Japanese may well have overcome its short-term inefficiencies, leading to a more efficient and effectual intelligence apparatus.

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