

1988**Nguyễn Thủ Thanh, 'A Study of the Use of a Number of Psychological Characteristics of Ethnic Chinese in the Interrogation of Accused and Suspected Chinese Spies'****Citation:**

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Summary:

In 1988 a classified Vietnamese Ministry of Public Security's in-house professional journal published this article offering ideas on how to utilize the "psychological characteristics" of the ethnic Chinese in the interrogation of suspected "Chinese spies". At the time the article was published, the once-close alliance between the Vietnamese and Chinese Communist Parties, which Mao Zedong described in 1967 as being "as close as between lips and teeth", had deteriorated into a vicious military and political conflict between the two former allies. Chinese efforts to collect intelligence on and to foment internal opposition against the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party were of special concern to Vietnam's security service, and ethnic Chinese residents of Vietnam naturally became a primary focus of Vietnam's counter-espionage efforts.

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A Study of the Use of a Number of Psychological Characteristics of Ethnic Chinese in the Interrogation of Accused and Suspected Chinese Spies

By Nguyễn Thủ Thanh [Nguyen Thu Thanh]

The decision on the specific interrogation tactics to be used should be determined by the psychological characteristics of the subject, the documents and evidence in the case, and the prosecution status of the person being interrogated. A study of the psychological characteristics of ethnic Chinese will help investigators determine the appropriate interrogation tactics to be used, and in this way to be able to obtain accurate statements from accused and suspected Chinese spies. After studying a number of Chinese espionage cases, I would like present a number of the psychological characteristics of subjects as they relate to interrogation methods.

1 - Heavily influenced by Greater Han nationalist ideology

Greater Han nationalist ideology took shape and survived under the different Chinese feudal imperial dynasties, and it is still an orthodox [standard] way of thinking in Chinese society today. This ideology still controls the lives of ethnic Chinese living abroad - and these people are the ones whom hegemonist forces use to carry out their plans to sabotage, commit aggression against, and control their neighbors. In Vietnam, ethnic Chinese usually have very strong nationalistic prejudices. Many of them still maintain a separate Chinese life-style. They speak to one another using their mother tongue, they wear Chinese-style clothing, and they venerate heroes and famous figures from Chinese history. They show little interest in the political situation in Vietnam, and they view themselves as "guests in a foreign land."

Accused and suspected Chinese spies exhibit Greater Han nationalist ideology in the following ways:

- Displaying a lack of respect for the interrogator, such as viewing the interrogator as an uncultured person, saying things that indicate a feeling of superiority, or stubbornly remaining silent and refusing to speak.

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- Reacting violently if the interrogator violates the subject's feeling of nationalistic pride. In prison, these individuals encourage each other by using Greater Han ideology to pressure and compel each other to stick together in opposing Vietnam. They demand to be treated like the "imperial emissaries" of ancient times.

- They commonly believe that anti-Vietnamese actions demonstrate their patriotism, their love of their Chinese Fatherland. And they believe if they admit to our investigating agencies that they have committed espionage, they would be "betraying their Fatherland." When they do make confessions of their acts of espionage, many accused spies are very fearful of having their confessions recorded or filmed. They are afraid that other people may overhear their confessions. They are afraid of making written confessions because such written confessions will show their handwriting, and they are afraid that perhaps we will alter what they wrote.

Based on the above psychological characteristics, the interrogator must make meticulous preparations to ensure that the interrogation is carried out in a serious manner. The interrogator must maintain a polite, proper attitude, and the location where the interrogation is conducted must be neat and proper in order to demonstrate the interrogator's role as the government's representative in investigating and questioning a subject who has violated Vietnam's national security. The interrogator must take care not to do or say anything that might be taken as an insult to the subject's ethnic pride. The interrogator should select good traditions and examples of the Chinese nation's struggles to defend their national independence and to defend the workers that he can use to persuade and win over the subject by letting him know that we respect the independence and freedom of other nations. The interrogator should exercise self-control and react skillfully to any negative reactions by the subject. Any display of anger, hot-headedness, or lack of self-control on the part of the investigator will make the interrogation more difficult.

2 - Strong feelings for their native area and their clan

This characteristic of ethnic Chinese is exhibited in the way that they live together in separate areas and form friendship associations made up of people who are all from

the same province (such as Chaozhou associations, Fukien associations, Guangzhou associations, Yunnan associations, etc) in order to protect and help one another in their daily lives. They form associations of people from the same areas, of people from the same age group, and people from the same clan. Chinese espionage organizations exploit this psychological characteristic to recruit their spies. When these subjects are arrested and put in prison, they quickly grow close to one another and cover for each other. When the investigator asks them about friends or acquaintances, the subjects usually remain silent and refuse to tell the investigator anything, or if they do tell the investigator something, it will be about an individual who is dead or who has emigrated to live in another country.

When studying this psychological characteristic, we must not forget to examine the ethnic and clan relationships of ethnic Chinese living within Vietnam's borders. General speaking, they have a history and background, going back many generations, of sharing the same ethnic identity. Even though they live in two different countries [Vietnam and China], historical factors have enabled them to travel back and forth to visit, to find wives or husbands, to do business with each other, and to help each other in production. Gradually, this relationship becomes a vital, indispensable element of their lives.

To exploit this psychological characteristic and determine the appropriate approach to use with the accused, we should:

- Select and employ interrogators who are from the same clan as the accused, who are the same age as the accused, and who know and understand the area that the accused calls his home. If the person is from an ethnic minority in China, then we should use an interrogator who is of the same ethnic minority tribe. During the course of the interrogation, we must clearly determine exactly what relationship the Chinese espionage agency used to recruit the individual.
- When interrogating a subject who does not speak Vietnamese, or who does not speak Vietnamese fluently (including subjects who have lived in Vietnam for many years), we need to have an interpreter, and we need to clearly delineate the responsibilities and duties of the interpreter.

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However, the best solution would be to train investigators/interrogators who can speak Chinese.

- During the course of the interrogation, we need to appeal to the subject's feelings of sympathy for his home, for his ethnic group, and for his family. We need to acknowledge and affirm the subject's duty to protect the honor of his nation, his ethnic group, his homeland, his clan, and his family, and also the subject's obligation to respect other people's duty to do the same thing for their nation, their ethnic group, etc. We need to expose the subject to the dark, evil schemes of the Chinese authorities and show him how they are taking advantage of the subject's ethnic sympathies to incite the subject to oppose Vietnam.

3 - Venerating and Idolizing Individuals

This psychological characteristic developed during the time of the maintenance of the imperial "golden thrones" of feudal China. Today the subject of veneration among ethnic Chinese is primarily Mao [Zedong] and Maoism. In their thoughts, these subjects believe that "the Soviet Union is revisionist, and Vietnam is a little hegemonist." If the accused is a member of the Chinese Communist Party or a cadre working for the Chinese State [Governmental] apparatus, then this ideology will be deeply ingrained and will be displayed with ferocity. They will frequently call themselves "true communists." For this reason, the battle to combat this "cult of the personality" way of thinking by these subjects will be very difficult and complicated.

While working to eliminate the subject's hostile way of thinking, the interrogator must recognize that Maoist ideology is deeply ingrained into them. For that reason, if we say things in front of the subject that insult or criticize Maoism as being wrong, and if we talk about big-power reactionary chauvinism, this can easily cause the subject to react negatively or to make him even more stubborn. The work of resolving the subject's hostile thinking must be carried out gradually, one step at a time, and it requires that the interrogator have good knowledge of politics and society. The interrogator must know how to gain the subject's respect; he must know how to get

the subject to respect the interrogator's knowledge so that the subject will be sincere and truthful with the interrogator. This applies even to those subjects who have a high level of education.

4 - Feudal Class Psychology

This psychological condition is reflected in the subject's concept of the differences between classes. Every subject wants to be viewed as a member of the upper class and will demand to be allowed to meet with leadership cadres in order to demonstrate the subject's own importance and also, hopefully, to receive better treatment. These individuals show respect to the interrogator, and some even bow down or prostrate themselves, when they believe their interrogator holds an important position. On the other hand, they look down on and will refuse to give statements to interrogators whom they know to be low-ranking cadres.

Almost all of the subjects who have been recruited as spies are afraid of the power and authority of their commanders. When they are arrested, they usually tell us very little about their key cadres and the leaders of their group. They will only dare to tell us about such people when they know that a particular key cadre or leader has himself confessed, or that the particular key cadre or leader is dead.

I believe that dealing with the subject's demand to meet with a high-ranking cadre by having the interrogator pretend to be a leadership cadre is not a good solution. If the subject discovers the truth, he will lose confidence and trust in the interrogator, and this will not be beneficial to our effort to persuade and win over the subject. The primary issue is determining how to convince the subject that the interrogator is the representative of a law enforcement agency, that the interrogator possesses the prestige necessary to enable the accused to have enough confidence in him to persuade the accused to tell him the truth, and that the interrogator has the necessary authority to provide the subject with his legal rights and benefits. In situations where such action is necessary, we can request that leaders personally meet with the subject in order to resolve this type of demand by a subject.

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5 - *Paranoia*

This psychological characteristic of Chinese is clearly revealed in histories and literature, and is exemplified by the character "Tao Thao" in the book, "The Romance of the Three Kingdoms". During the Mao Zedong era, and especially during the Cultural Revolution, millions of people were driven to murder one another based purely on their suspicions of each other. They [the Chinese] usually do not dare to reveal their true thought, emotions, or personal political opinions.

Accused and suspected ethnic Chinese spies manifest this psychological characteristic in the following ways:

In prison, these subjects often tell each other to be on guard against possible investigative actions by our security agencies. They often try to feel out cellmates to determine whether our Public Security has given the cellmate some kind of mission or assignment. They seek to isolate or sometimes even kill individuals whom they suspect are working for our Public Security. In interrogations, the subjects refuse to believe the interrogator's explanations and persuasive arguments, and they often ask questions that demonstrate their suspicions. If any explanation that an interrogator gives turns out to be untrue, or if an interrogator makes a promise that is not kept, the subject will lose faith in us and will recant every truthful statement and confession that he has made.

A study of this psychological characteristic reveals that the interrogator can try to heighten the suspicions that subjects have about each other in order to encourage the subject to confess so that he will receive leniency. The interrogator should select facts, events, and solid, practical factors, especially matters that closely involve the subject and are suited to the subject's psychological needs, to give the subject explanations that will put him at ease and to make him believe in our government's policy of handling these cases in a just manner. During interrogations, the interrogator must be careful never to promise anything that the interrogator does not have the power and authority to carry out.

6 - *Fear of Harsh Punishment*

The Chinese dynasties of feudal times are prime examples of Eastern dictatorial regimes with harsh political and social systems that utilized brutal, barbaric punishments to enslave their own people and the peoples of countries that they had invaded and occupied. During the "socialist revolution," purges that involved the use of harsh punishments still took place, which means that the Chinese people have not been freed of their fears of such punishments.

The use of threats and punishments to recruit spies is a common practice among Chinese espionage agencies, so when Chinese spies are interrogated they are very afraid to tell us about the espionage activities that they and their cohorts have carried out. This is because they are afraid of being punished under Vietnamese law, because they are afraid that the ethnic Chinese community will accuse them of "betraying the Fatherland," and because they are afraid that their relatives and loved ones in China will be discriminated against and will suffer difficulties in their daily lives, or that these relatives and loved ones may even receive harsh, feudal-style punishments. As for the subjects themselves, they are afraid that if they return to China they will be imprisoned, or perhaps even killed. This is why many subjects, after they admit their acts of espionage, ask to be allowed to remain in Vietnam or to be sent to a third country, and it is also why they sometimes recant their confessions or tell a variety of different, contradictory stories.

To resolve the subject's concerns about this issue, the interrogator needs to convince the subject that the degree of severity of the punishments used by our legal agencies to deal with the crime of espionage depends in part on the sincerity of the subject's confessions.

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In addition, the interrogator must take into account the family situation of each individual subject, and he must also guarantee that the subject's statements to us will be kept secret. Such actions will certainly encourage the subject to provide us with honest and sincere statements. During trials, we should select those charges that we consider to be the most effective in order to sternly punish the crime of espionage and to denounce the enemy's plots and actions, but that also will not cause the opposition's espionage organization to harm the subject's family. This will induce other subjects to turn themselves and will prevent additional Chinese espionage activities.

7 - Material Demands Are Clearly Apparent

Ethnic Chinese subjects have clear material demands that they want to satisfy. Chinese espionage agencies employ this psychological characteristic to recruit people by using money and promises of material rewards to the subjects and to their families in China. This psychological characteristic is very clearly exhibited in younger subjects when they run into the difficult conditions of life in prison.

- When they are first arrested, they moan about the hardships and appeal to their relatives, loved ones, and friends in Vietnam to supply their material demands [i.e., bring food, money, clothing, etc. to them in prison]. In prison, they fight among themselves for every morsel of food, and there are many cases that is the reason that accused individuals beat each other up or kill one another.

- During interrogation, the subject will, on the one hand, display stubbornness and pride in his Chinese ancestry, but he will also furtively look for cigarettes, and if he is invited to smoke, he will smoke continuously, without any further thought of maintaining his original stance. If we provide a pot of hot tea and cigarettes during interrogation sessions, the subject will feel comfortable and satisfied, and he will provide full statements. Some subjects will even "inflate the truth" to try to make the interrogator believe the subject is important and should receive special treatment, and some subjects will demand better material conditions as a condition before agreeing to give full and complete statements.

By understanding this psychological characteristic as it applies to individual subjects, the interrogator can appeal to and encourage this psychological trait by providing small material amenities to the subject during interrogation - things such as candy, cookies, tea, and cigarettes. When possible, we can also allow the subject's family to regularly bring or to send him supplies.

7 - Concealing one's personal thoughts and emotions

Ethnic Chinese seldom reveal their personal thoughts and emotions to others. Their motto is, "do not lift your shirt to let others see your back" [don't expose yourself to the scrutiny of others]. They do not like to speak loudly or brag when in crowded places, but rather speak softly to single individuals. They only confide their thoughts to close friends and loved ones, and then only after they know one another and sympathize with one another. They usually do not discuss their relatives and loved ones with outsiders.

With regard to subjects who are spies or suspected spies, after these subjects are arrested they usually try to cover for one another, and they seldom confide in other prisoners. Whenever a subject does tell the interrogator something, he will ask that the interrogator keep secret whatever it is that the subject tells him, and the subjects are always afraid that someone else will overhear what they are saying. However, a subject may talk more easily to interrogators who utilize a light approach and who conduct the interrogation in a quiet place where there are very few people in the area. When conducting interrogations in the form of a natural, normal conversation, without pressure or coercion, if the interrogator resists jumping straight into the questioning right at the start of the session, the subject will feel more at ease and will more easily reveal his inner thoughts and feelings.

8- Heavily Influenced by Feelings of Obligations and Grudges

In their dealings with one another, ethnic Chinese hate people who violate their promises and do not keep their obligations, and they hate to do anything that would violate another person's trust.

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When they owe someone a favor or feel obligated to someone, they look for opportunities to repay that favor or debt. If they are unable to repay the obligation themselves, they will pass the obligation down to their children, for their children to repay it, and they consider these obligations to continue beyond death. On the other hand, if they have a grudge against someone, if they hate or resent someone, they will maintain a hostile attitude toward that person for a long time, and sometimes they may even undertake very vicious and brutal actions to exact revenge. This is the reason that ethnic Chinese subjects will try to cover up and conceal the crimes of people who have taught or advised them, people who have rescued them, and people who have helped them during times of difficulty and hardship. The target will not only refuse to tell us about such people; he will also be very afraid to be brought face-to-face with the person to whom he owes an obligation.

Because of this psychological characteristic, during interrogations the interrogator should avoid any action that might cause anger or resentment on the part of the subject - the interrogator should not display anger, he should not be brutal or coarse, and he should not exhibit a lack of sensitivity toward the subject. The interrogator should instead study the subject's material and spiritual needs, give the subject those things to which he is legally entitled, and gradually cause the subject to feel sympathy toward us and feel indebted to us for treating him well. Practical experience shows that if a subject is wounded or injured when trying to escape the country, or if he has a serious illness, the subject will be very fearful that he will be treated badly. However, if the interrogator pays attention to his needs and if the subject is given proper medical treatment, the subject will have a strong emotional reaction. He will feel indebted to us and will give sincere and complete statements. Sometimes a subject has even felt indebted to an interrogator simply because the interrogator provided him with clean living conditions. On the other hand, when the interrogator employed physical abuse, used threats, or broke his promises, the subjects have become even more stubborn.

10 - Feelings of Self-Importance

During interrogations, accused and suspected ethnic Chinese spies often boast of the contributions that both China as a country and they as individuals have made to the Vietnamese revolution. They say that China made a major contribution to the success of the Vietnamese revolution, and they use that claim to make very strange and outrageous demands. They demand that we treat them as a "honored guests." Frequently the subject will think that because he previously made contributions to the success of our two resistance wars [the war against France and the war against the

United States], the Vietnamese government will release him, and the subject will refuse to give us an honest and sincere confession.

Although we know that the subject's understanding and his actions were wrong, when a subject tells us of his contributions, we should not interrupt him. Instead we should give explanations to the subject to demonstrate to him the respect that our Party and our Government have for the assistance given to us by the Chinese people and for the positive contributions made by ethnic Chinese to the cause of the Vietnamese revolution. However, we must also explain that we will resolutely punish anyone who opposes and disrupts the Vietnamese people's efforts to build socialism. We must explain to the subject that the subject's achievements and the contributions he previously made to the Vietnamese revolution will be a factor that will be considered during the investigation and trial, but that these achievements and contributions cannot erase his responsibility for crimes that he has committed.

The above are a number of psychological characteristics of ethnic Chinese that have applications in the conduct of interrogations of subjects who are spies or are suspected of espionage activities. I would welcome a dialogue with our readers on this topic.

N.T.T.