

America's Forgotten War in China: Psychological Warfare Against Imperial Japan's Chinese Puppet Army

Description

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Abstract: This article explores the little-known U.S. psychological warfare campaign against the Chinese Reorganized National Government under Wang Jingwei during World War II. Drawing on declassified Office of Strategic Services (OSS) documents, U.S. Air Force records, and interviews with former puppet soldiers, this piece examines how American psychological operations targeted Chinese collaborationist forces—not to destroy them, but to win them over at a crucial moment at the dawn of the Cold War.

Most scholars consider the [Boxer Rebellion](#) of 1900 or the [Korean War](#) (1950–1953) as the opening shots of 20th century military conflict between the United States and China. Yet beyond these two well-known confrontations, there was another overlooked episode: the World War II shadow war between the United States and China's Reorganized National Government under Wang Jingwei—an Imperial Japanese puppet government comprised of Chinese collaborationists. In the final stages of the war, the U.S. [Office of War Information \(OWI\)](#) and the [Office of Strategic Services \(OSS\)](#) executed psychological operations targeting the Wang Jingwei regime in China.

The OWI primarily employed so-called ["white propaganda"](#) using platforms such as the Voice of America and air-dropped leaflets to urge both Chinese military personnel and civilians in Japanese-occupied territories not to collaborate with the invading forces. In contrast, the OSS focused on ["black propaganda"](#) aimed at driving a wedge between the Wang Jingwei regime and the Japanese military. Such psychological operations involved disseminating false information and fabricating rumors to [exploit internal divisions within the enemy](#) camp to encourage the defection of Chinese puppet troops.

Examining the psychological dimensions of the conflict between Wang's regime and the United States offers valuable insight for today's U.S.-China rivalry. The physical landscape may have shifted from Imperial Japan to the PRC, but the lessons of OWI and OSS-style [morale operations](#) remain highly relevant for strategic competition into the future.

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Propaganda posters aimed at sowing discord between the puppet army and the Japanese forces were created by the Sino-American Cooperative Organization (SACO) and distributed in the capital of the Wang Jingwei regime under the name of the Nanjing Army Improvement Committee. The content of the posters demanded that the Japanese provide the puppet army officers and soldiers with ample food and clothing, equal supplies as the Japanese troops, and accept command from Chinese officers. They also fully exposed the unequal treatment the Japanese gave to the puppet army (source: National Archives and Records Administration).

Historical Context

A pro-Japanese collaborationist faction that split from the ruling Kuomintang established the Wang Jingwei regime on March 30, 1940. It adopted the exact same national symbols as the Nationalist government in Chongqing, which was resisting Japanese aggression. Likewise, it claimed to be the true heir to [Sun Yat-sen's](#) legacy. A key distinction between the two rival Nationalist governments was ideological: the Wang Jingwei regime opposed Western democratic values, aligning itself with Japan's vision of [Pan-Asianism and the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere](#) to eliminate Anglo-American presence in the region.

Wang Jingwei held seniority over Chiang Kai-shek within the Kuomintang. Still, unlike Chiang, who commanded the military as president of the Whampoa Military Academy, Wang lacked direct control over the armed forces. He established his own Military Academy in Nanjing and formed a personal Guard Corps but continued to suffer severe manpower shortages. As a result, Wang's Peace and National Construction Army, or the [Peace Army](#), was composed mainly of former Nationalist units that surrendered after being defeated by either Japanese or Communist forces. Most of these troops came from regional or second-rate formations, with some units even consisting of local bandits or pirates who previously disrupted public order. Their combat effectiveness was poor, and they were widely seen as opportunists who might defect again at any moment.

Although Wang Jingwei's Peace Army was large in number, it was poorly trained and lacked combat effectiveness, earning little trust from Japan's China Expeditionary Army. The United States

did not consider Wang's regime a political entity, but rather recognized Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government in Chongqing as the sole legitimate authority in China. On January 9, 1943, Wang Jingwei's government declared war on the United States—a move that Washington ignored, much as Japan had earlier dismissed Chiang's declaration of war on December 9, 1941. (See Note 1).

As 2025 marks the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II, familiar debates between the PRC and the Republic of China over Taiwan are likely to re-emerge over who led the resistance against Japan.

While the PRC emphasizes the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) role, Taiwan asserts that Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists, with American support, bore the brunt of fighting Japanese aggression. Lost in both narratives is the story of the Wang Jingwei regime—another expression of Chinese nationalism, albeit one that collaborated with the enemy.

China's Peace Army

Although many scholars have studied China's puppet armies, few have examined the Peace Army using records from the U.S. National Archives. This oversight stems mainly from the Army's lack of real military strength. American narratives of war in the Pacific theater have traditionally emphasized naval and aerial campaigns. Even within China, the spotlight falls on the [Flying Tigers](#) or the [campaigns in Burma and Yunnan](#). The Peace Army, by contrast, played little to no role in these operations.

When Wang's government declared war on the United States, U.S. forces in China likely reacted with bemusement. Except three capital guard divisions, the Wang regime lacked any centralized or ideologically committed troops. Most units were cobbled together from defeated militias or guerrillas reconstituted for survival rather than conviction. These troops routinely avoided executing Japanese orders, were penetrated by both Nationalist and Communist agents, and showed little interest in fighting U.S. forces.

Japan's industrial limitations further constrained its ability to support its Chinese allies. Most puppet troops retained their original weapons, such as obsolete Mauser rifles, and only a few units received leftover German helmets or Czech machine guns from abandoned Nationalist arsenals. The Japanese never entrusted Wang's forces with tanks or aircraft according to [books written](#) by military historian, Philip Jowett.

Yet politically, these forces remained significant. As [General Albert Wedemeyer](#) and [Colonel Robert McClure](#) prepared to launch a counteroffensive with 39 Chinese Nationalist Alpha Divisions,•

Japan's potential deployment of puppet troops posed a real political and operational challenge. A 1945 OSS report estimated that the Wang regime controlled 520,000 regular troops, with total strength—including auxiliary forces—exceeding one million. Japanese planners may have considered deploying these forces against a prospective U.S. landing on the Chinese coast. (See Note 2).

Political Obstacles and Psychological Solutions

American planners understood that a direct military assault on puppet troops, most of whom were Chinese, embedded in occupied territory, could provoke a backlash. The Peace Army's sheer size, local roots, and lack of ideological commitment made it a delicate issue. Moreover, these forces sometimes aided in rescuing downed American pilots.

The solution, therefore, was psychological warfare to exploit existing Chinese-Japanese frictions.

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A leaflet dropped by the 14th Air Force featured a Chinese-language message on the cover, urging puppet army officers and soldiers to surrender to the anti-Japanese forces as soon as possible (Source: National Archives and Records Administration).

The [Sino-American Cooperative Organization \(SACO\)](#), a joint initiative led by U.S. Navy Commodore Milton Miles, directed early U.S. intelligence activities in China. With the arrival of General Wedemeyer as the Commander of U.S. forces in China in late 1944, the American intelligence structure in China was reorganized. The OSS gradually integrated SACO operations, establishing [Detachment 202](#) in Kunming and [Detachment 203](#) in Chongqing. These detachments were responsible for coordinating a range of sensitive missions, including [Secret Intelligence \(SI\)](#), [Special Operations \(SO\)](#), [Morale Operations \(MO\)](#), and activities of [Operational Groups \(OG\)](#), aimed at both Japanese occupation forces and collaborationist Chinese units under the Wang Jingwei regime. Colonel Richard Heppner, a [close associate of William J. Donovan](#), chief of the OSS, was appointed by General Wedemeyer to oversee all clandestine operations in China, including the Morale Operations.

A declassified May 1945 OSS policy draft titled "Draft Statement for U.S. China Theater Policy on Propaganda to Chinese Puppets" defined the target audience broadly: any Chinese national residing in pre-1931 Republic of China territory who knowingly collaborated with the Japanese. While the US would hold puppet collaborators accountable for actions against U.S. personnel or civilians, the policy emphasized leaving open a path to redemption for those willing to defect. (See Note 3).

Morale Operations in Action

The task of undermining puppet morale fell largely to [General Claire Chennault's 14th Air Force](#). In addition to bombing missions, long-range P-51 Mustangs from the 23rd, 51st, and 311th Fighter Groups, and the Chinese-American Composite Wing dropped leaflets deep into Japanese-occupied territory. These leaflets warned puppet soldiers not to assist in capturing Allied airmen and reminded them that aiding the enemy could result in the death penalty under Chinese Nationalist law.

The leaflets also advised puppet soldiers to steer clear of Japanese military targets, for their safety, and called on them to prepare for defection when Allied forces advanced. Those who rose would be forgiven and welcomed as contributors to the Allied cause. That was part of the OWI's White Propaganda Operations.

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• can be seen in the back of the leaflet. It said:
No matter day or night, you are being bombed. To shrink their defensive lines, Japanese troops are retreating from all areas except a few strongholds. Chiang Kai-shek's forces have already launched a counteroffensive in eastern Henan in May. The Japanese will soon dispatch troops from eastern China to reinforce the central front. Their forces are being stretched thin and their defeat is inevitable. The puppet regime, without hope of victory and already abandoned by the Japanese, will soon collapse. Sensible comrades among you have already chosen to defect to the national forces. The righteous people welcome you with open arms. The time for decision is now—if you remain with the puppet forces, you will perish along with the Japanese. The Chinese and American forces will wipe you out. If you wish to survive, defect quickly and join the resistance. Otherwise, you will be destroyed along with the Japanese. (Source: United States Forces in China, CA-178).

Beyond the skies, the SACO and Chiang's Bureau of Investigation and Statistics (BIS)—the Republic of China's military intelligence agency before 1946, engaged in psychological operations on the ground. Agents infiltrated major cities like Shanghai and Nanjing from advanced bases in Anhui, Zhejiang, or Fujian provinces, spreading slogans, rumors, and radio broadcasts designed to sow distrust and encourage passivity among puppet forces. That was part of the OSS's Black Propaganda Operations to cause distrust between the Chinese puppets and the Japanese. Some of the Fujianese operatives trained by SACO even used their linguistic advantage to infiltrate Japanese-occupied Taiwan, then a colony for nearly half a century known as Formosa, to promote U.S. policy.

Evidence of Success

The OSS and SACO propaganda efforts, combined with the Japanese's pervasive distrust of the puppet forces, led to a wave of defections among collaborationist troops in the final phase of the war.

According to declassified OSS documents housed at the U.S. National Archives, a group of personnel from the puppet air force defected to the Nationalist government in Chongqing on January 7, 1945. These individuals, who flew their aircraft directly into Nationalist-held territory, had been persuaded to defect through underground efforts coordinated by Kuomintang operatives based in Shanghai. (See Note 4). While the Japanese Army Air Force refused to provide fighter aircraft to the puppet air force, the United States had already supplied advanced combat fighters such as P-51 Mustangs to the Republic of China Air Force pilots of the Chinese American Composite Wing under the command of Claire Chennault. The US successfully won the hearts and minds of the Chinese airmen.

Even if many soldiers did not openly defect, they often engaged in subversive actions that benefited the Allies and undermined Japanese efforts.

Interviews with former puppet soldiers suggest these efforts paid off. Thomas Ha, a member of the Nanjing Garrison Command who later emigrated to California, recalled receiving a lone anti-aircraft gun from the Japanese during U.S. bombing raids. Rather than use it to defend Japanese positions, his unit pointed it at Japanese fighters, prompting the weapon's confiscation. (See Note 5). Another veteran, Wang Ting-hsien recalled watching American B-25 bombers strike Japanese-held rail stations at Xinhiang, Henan province, while puppet troops applauded. Far from resenting the Americans, many collaborationist soldiers welcomed the attacks. (See Note 6).

Another OSS report to the China Theater Command indicated that not only puppet soldiers but also civilian officials from the collaborationist regime were in contact with Allied agents. Mr. Jerry Hsu, the chief of Asiatic Affairs in the Nanjing regime's Foreign Ministry, had also declared his loyalty to Chongqing. The report further noted that Chen Kun-po, who succeeded Wang Jingwei as head of the puppet regime following Wang's death in late 1944, had also expressed a desire to defect to the Allies. (See Note 7). Colonel Richard Heppner, the chief of OSS in China, even received a report in early summer of 1945 indicating that Madame Wang Jingwei wished to bring the entire puppet government to the side of Chongqing through one of her close friends, Leong Yew Koh, a British Malayan-born Chinese. (See Note 8).

The aim of the OSS and the China Theater Command was not to kill the puppets, but to give them a chance to redeem themselves. A report from Colonel John Whitker to Richard Heppner pointed out that, "On the one hand, we want to bring Chinese puppets out of occupied territory, we can consider

that this is for the purposes of interrogation and exploration and therefore it is a routine intelligence operation which does not require theater approval. On the other hand, we could consider that in bringing out such a man, we risk his interception and possible execution by Chinese Nationalist with the possibility resulting political incidents.â€• (See Note 9).

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SACO also attempted to stir up tensions between the Wang Jingwei regime and another Japanese puppet state, Manchukuo. For example, they produced posters emphasizing that Manchukuo had previously sent troops to southern China to assist the Japanese in driving out American forces. Therefore, when a crisis arose in Manchukuo, the Wang regime was likewise expected to dispatch southern Chinese to the north to join the fighting (Source. National Archives and Records Administration).

Chang Yee-chow, a collaborator militia commander operating in Xiamen, Fujian, supplied convoy intelligence to SACOâ€™s Coast Watcher network. His assistance directly contributed to the [USS Barbâ€™s successful attack on January 23, 1945, during which three Japanese ships were sunk](#). This was the most significant damage inflicted on Japanese forces with the assistance of puppet troops.

In June 1945, an American officer newly transferred from Europe even proposed using 105mm howitzers to fire propaganda shells, citing their successful use in encouraging Eastern European defectors from the German Army. (See Note 10). But the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki ended the war before this plan could be implemented. The Peace Army quickly dissolved, and the Nationalist and Communist factions immediately absorbed its members into their ranks.

Strategic Significance for the New Cold War

Over the past century, the US has often succeeded against China not through brute force but by breaking enemy morale. In the Boxer Rebellion, advanced weaponry shattered the myth of spiritual invincibility. In Korea, psychological operations persuaded 14,000 [Chinese Communist](#) POWs to defect to Taiwan. During World War II, American psychological warfare [collapsed the puppet army](#) without firing a shot. The Japanese occupation policy was fundamentally hindered by a lack of trust toward its allies, making it impossible to implement a comprehensive â€œtrain and equipâ€• program like what the US conducted with Nationalist forces. Coupled with atrocities committed against Chinese civilians in the early stages of the war, this mistrust ensured that puppet troops never completely followed the Japanese command.

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SACO propaganda posters warned Chinese civilians to avoid military targets that were likely to be struck by Allied forces. The posters further declared that those who chose to die alongside the Japanese should be left to perish (Source: National Archives and Records Administration).

Though militarily insignificant, the Peace Army played a politically sensitive role in occupied China. The US never recognized Wang Jingwei's regime, but it treated his troops as a key target in the psychological dimension of the war. The OSS campaign offered these men not annihilation, but a path to reject their overseers for the broader goal of defeating Imperial Japan. In the context of today's U.S.-China rivalry, the likelihood of [militarily defeating the PRC in a war over Taiwan without incurring immense costs](#) remains extremely limited, particularly given Beijing's status as a nuclear-armed major power. It will be a cold war rivalry focusing more on technology, influence, and ideology rather than arms.

The adversarial battlefield may have shifted from Imperial Japan to the PRC, but the lessons of OSS-style morale operations remain highly relevant for strategic competition today.

The [CCP continues to face significant challenges](#) in its governance of China, creating fissures between the party and Chinese society ripe for influence like the Japanese-Chinese frictions in WW II. Young Chinese who believe in democratic values—including a segment of younger officials—will increasingly become a constituency the United States can and must engage.

Notes:

(1) Wang Jingwei cabled Xu Liang, stating that on the night of January 7th, Japanese Foreign Minister Mamoru Shigemitsu conveyed that the Tokyo directive regarding the declaration of war against Britain and the United States appeared to have already become known to the British, Americans, and the Chungking government. Therefore, it should be promptly announced, and the declaration was thus rescheduled to be issued today. January 9, 1943. Academia Historica, Taipei, Taiwan, ROC, Archive Number: 118-010100-0051-053.

(2) Puppet Reorganization, Policy-Puppets, July 9th, 1945, Box 54, RG 493, US Forces in the China Burma India Theater of Operations, National Archives and Records Administration.

(3) Draft Statement for US China Theater Policy on Propaganda to Chinese Puppets, May 28th, 1945, PW Directives & PWB Minutes, Folder 183, Box 9, Entry 148, RG 226, OSS Field Reports, National Archives and Records Administration.

- (4) Puppet Air Force Personnel, Puppets, June 2nd, 1945, US Forces in the China Burma India Theater of Operations, Folder 148, Box 54, Entry 148, RG 226, OSS Field Reports, National Archives and Records Administration.
- (5) Interview of Thomas Ha, Alhambra, California, August 30th, 2014.
- (6) Interview of Wang Ting-hsien, Hsinchu, Taiwan, March 12th, 2017.
- (7) Approval of Prospective Contacts with puppets, Puppets, June 2nd, 1945, US Forces in the China Burma India Theater of Operations, Folder 148, Box 54, Entry 148, RG 226, OSS Field Reports, National Archives and Records Administration.
- (8) Defections of Nanking puppets, Puppets, May 4th, 1945, US Forces in the China Burma India Theater of Operations, Folder 148, Box 54, Entry 148, RG 226, OSS Field Reports, National Archives and Records Administration.
- (9) Relations with puppets, Puppets, June 5th, 1945, US Forces in the China Burma India Theater of Operations, Folder 148, Box 54, Entry 148, RG 226, OSS Field Reports, National Archives and Records Administration.
- (10) Propaganda Shell, Leaflet Distribution Records March â?? July 1945, June 20th, 1945, Box 51, RG 493, US Forces in the China Burma India Theater of Operations, National Archives and Records Administration.
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About the Author

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