Introduction

After a long period of political decay, China’s Qing Empire collapsed in 1911, ending a monarchical system that had existed for four thousand years. Chinese society faced a new problem of constructing a modern state, but in the resulting breakdown of central authority, contradictions between different political groups sharpened, and they failed to reach a consensus. With the traditional political order ineffective and a new one not yet in being, military groups moved to the forefront, but even though they were organized and effective forces, they nevertheless failed to achieve unity and provide a leader who could become a viable head of a state. Indeed, the power of regional warlords grew, reaching a zenith during 1916-1928, when centrifugal forces fragmented China into disparate fiefdoms. That China maintained its geographical and sovereign integrity was perhaps more a consequence of a nationalistic determination to expel Japanese invaders than of any change in the underlying localism, so explaining the origins of the warlord era should be central to any understanding of modern Chinese history.\(^{(1)}\)

There is a growing historiography in Chinese, English, and Russian dedicated to the warlord period. Prevailing explanations for the rise of warlordism fall into two schools, both of which acknowledge that the collapse of central authority—a power vacuum—made the phenomenon possible. In what I will call the military-governor school, Franz Michael (Michael 1964: xx–xliii), Fu Zongmao (徐勇 2009: 110), Li Zongyi (李宗一 1980: 99), and Wen Gongzhi (文公直 1971: 2) link the rise of warlordism to the influence of provincial governors and governors-general with military experience; Republican warlords were the direct heirs of nineteenth-century regional leaders. In the non-military-governor school, Cui Yunwu (崔運武 1998: 196-197), Jerome Ch’en, Edward McCord (McCord 1993: 24-30), and Mary Wright (Wright 1967: 199) refute this linkage, stressing instead—as Ch’en (1969) puts it—the “removal of imperial rule and hence of the Confucian legal and political restrain” (p. 23); Republican warlords emerged from the specific crisis of the early twentieth century. Yet it is strange that neighboring Russia—more ethnically heterogeneous than China and with a similar history of military cliques and political reforms during late imperial period—survived the overthrow of its monarchy in the February 1917 revolution (which was practically bloodless, exactly the same as Chinese revolution) and remained unified for almost eight months until the October revolution, while in China, within six weeks of the 1911 Xinhai
Revolution, all of the southern-central and some of the northwestern provinces declared their independence (Fairbank 1986: 162), laying the foundation for years of country's dissolution. Support for the military-governor school has dwindled since the 1990s, perhaps because it has not always presented the strongest or best-documented case. By drawing on a range of published memoirs, newspaper accounts, and contemporary histories in Russian as well as Chinese, this paper seeks to strengthen the argument for continuity from Qing-era governors to Republican-era warlords. (2)

Three prerequisites, I believe, cultivated the bloom of warlordism. First, emperors—from the Song forward—instituted a complex system of checks and balances to preserve combat effectiveness and curtail the power of certain military commanders. As long as provincial governors were literati without military backgrounds, the system worked. But in the wake of rebellions like the Taiping, such governors gained military experience, and they, along with army officers who increasingly rose to governorship, could now finance and hence control what were in effect private armies. Second, when central authorities were unable to quell the Taiping Rebellion of the 1860s, local army elites met the challenge, gaining political power and furthering a cycle that militarized Chinese society. Third, in response to this worrying politicization of local military elites, as well as mounting external threats, Qing central authorities in Beijing sought to reform the armed forces, but in the resulting confusion, and with the imperial treasury impoverished, soldiers came to depend for their survival on the largesse of commanders who could raise funds locally. Before analyzing these prerequisites in detail, and concluding with an account of the first Republican years when provincial armies became ruling powers, I will first discuss why I believe that the prevailing non-military-governor school inadequately explains warlordism, which created one of the most tragic and important periods in modern Chinese history. (3)

**Prevailing Historiography**

Four main arguments inform the non-military-governor school: First, provincial authorities were financially dependent on Beijing, which in turn gathered a large portion of its revenues from a new provincial tax on imports and articles in transit (lijin), by demanding special remittances for central expenses (McCord 1993: 27). Except for emergencies, provincial governors could only expend tax revenue on items that had received imperial sanction, and
their budget was under strict central control (Kamachi 2005: 9). And yet, practice fell far short of this ideal. In addition to *lijin*, local powers had three further sources of income: First, were so-called hidden lands or fields (*yintian* or *heidi*), the area of which was growing due to non-disclosure during the registration of tax rolls with the Board of Revenue, and mistakes during conversion of local *mu* (a sixth of an acre) into standard fiscal *mu*. (Feuerwerker 1980: 10). In 1887, the total area of hidden land reached 418 million *mu*, or a third of all cultivable land (Nepomnin 1980: 26). Second, in the post-Boxer Rebellion period, there was a marked growth of local additional taxes (*jiashui*) and compulsory donations (*juanshu*), compared with the national land and head taxes (*diding*) (Ibid., 110-111). Third, local authorities overcharged taxes when converting to the 1889 monetary system; villagers increasingly paid taxes using *fens* and *yuans*, while officials assessed taxes in old copper cash and taels (Wang 1973: 116-117). Governors thereby accumulated large sums in provincial coffers. Fairbank (1998) estimates that provincial authorities reported to Beijing just 20-30 percent of their collections (p. 248). These local taxes, and the regional armies they supported, were in nominal terms available to the state, but in reality created a new balance between central and provincial governments that steadily shifted in favor of the latter (p. 238).

Second, because the leaders of the Xiang Army and other armies were literati, they had a profound interest in preserving and strengthening the existing state(Wright 1967: 199). And yet, while commanders with literati backgrounds certainly outnumbered those with military backgrounds in the Xiang Army, the situation in the other armies was far different.4 In Li Hongzhang’s Huai Army, only five high-ranking commanders out of twenty-six were literati (來新夏 2000: 27). This argument for the literati suggests, furthermore, that there was little corruption among Qing officials—which was manifestly untrue—because corruption undermined the power of the state, in the preservation of which the officials had a stake. For sure, governors and governors-general were not in open confrontation with Beijing when the state was powerful, but they were gradually increasing their own power at the expense of the state’s, thereby intensifying the process of regionalization. As early as 1895, the natives of distant provinces did not perceive themselves as citizens of a united state. Li Jiannong mentions a captain who demanded release of his captured warship, arguing that the ship was from Guangdong, and the province had nothing to do with the Sino-Japanese War (李劍農 1965: 5). Indeed, governors’ reluctance to assist Qing authorities caused Li Hongzhang to remark bitterly, “Only Zhili province stood against the whole Japanese state” (Ibid.). Five
years later, the Boxer Rebellion further eroded Qing power, and demonstrated the autonomy possessed by governors-general and governors who did not merely ignore Beijing’s orders but defied them. (5) A decade later when the Qing empire fell, fifteen provinces failed to recognize Beijing as the center of the country’s government, judiciary, financial, and military systems: Hubei, Shaanxi, Hunan, Jiangxi, Shanxi, Yunnan, which declared independence in October 1911, and Guizhou, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Guangxi, Anhui, Fujian, Guangdong, Shandong, Sichuan, which declared in November (Ch’en 1979: 26).

Third, the Qing court was able to order drastic reductions in militia battalion strengths after the rebellions ended (McCord 1993: 27). There was, for sure, widespread disbandment of the so-called private armies, and yet disbandment was far from complete. Zuo Zongtang used elements of his army, particularly officers, against Nian rebels, as well as in the drawn-out pacification of Northern China’s Muslim rebellion. Li Hongzhang led the Huai Army against Nian rebels, and, in 1870, ordered forty battalions against rebels in Shaanxi and Gansu. After becoming governor-general of Zhili, Li transferred his army to that province, controlling it until his death in 1901 (Powell 1955: 27). Yuan Shikai used troops from Li’s army when he created his Beiyang Army. (6) In Hunan, disbanded troops joined the Patrol and Defense Force (Xunfangying) (張朋圃 1982: 102). According to V.V. Zhukov, these Xunfangying troops were an important link between the local private armies of the mid nineteenth century and the early Republic’s warlord armies (Zhukov 1988: 20).

Fourth, up to its fall, the Qing court proved quite capable of transferring or removing top officials at will, rotating most provincial governors on a regular basis (McCord 1993: 26). It is true that the throne at various times after the Taiping Rebellion evidenced a considerable degree of authority in stripping titles or dismissing from high provincial offices such famous military leaders as Li Hongzhang, Zuo Zongtang, Zeng Guofan, Liu Mingchuan, and Guo Songtao (Powell 1955: 35). And yet, while provincial governors-general and governors continued to depend on the throne’s favor for their tenure, they nevertheless gained greater administrative leeway (Liu 1978: 409). Dismissal or rotation of governors hindered but did not stop the formation of specific zones defined by military and administrative control of different bureaucratic cliques, and indeed lent these zones changeability and mobility (Menshikov & Nepomnin 1999: 177).

Although in the decades following the Taiping Rebellion, the central government managed to retain in its hands enough power to deter the governors from open opposition, this
power was insufficient to prevent gradual regionalization. Power centers emerged in key areas that remained within the state framework and recognized the ideological authority of the dynastic center but assumed several of its important functions, undermining its authority and contributing to its downfall (Michael 1964: xxi-xxi). The basis for the ultimate disintegration of the country occurred in those decades, which were, to borrow Menshikov and Nepomnin’s phrase, the “incubative stage” of the future dissolution (Menshikov & Nepomnin 1999: 177).

Based on accepted periodization, I will now discuss the extension of influence of local elites due to the inability of central authorities to meet the challenges of the Taiping Rebellion. In these circumstances, the main driving force became local elites, from which the militarization of Chinese society had started (McCord 1993: 10-11; Gawlikowski 1973: 208-209).

Military Elites of the Empire in the Mid Nineteenth Century

By the end of the eighteenth century, a systemic crisis was overtaking the Qing Empire, affecting all spheres of life, including the armed forces. In the mid nineteenth century, it encountered serious internal and external threats, raising doubts about its survival and forcing a search for measures that could underpin the country’s security and its defensive capability. Two important peculiarities of traditional China were the undersized role of the military and its backbone of civil officials. A historical legacy of four thousand years governed relations between military and civil officials (徐勇 2009: 88). Confucius himself in the Analects stressed the priority of the civil sphere above the military sphere. Martial exploits were not on the list of Confucian virtues, hence Confucians held warriors in contempt. Military service was unpopular, as expressed in the ditty, “Good iron is not made into nails, good men are not made into soldiers.” A logical consequence of this was the tendency to impose strict control over the army. Evidence of the first such attempts were the so-called “tiger tallies” (hufu), used from the Warring States period through the Eastern Han and beyond. Rulers at the capital placed half of a pair of matching tallies with a local military commander and retained the other half; when the time came for action, rulers sent their half to the locality, thus authorizing the commander’s action. Throughout China’s history, especially during the Song, emperors worked to impose strict control over the armed forces. Preservation of the army’s combat effectiveness, and simultaneous curtailment of certain military commanders’ influence, lay at the heart of the court’s military policy. Within the scope of this policy, the
priority given to civil officials in any state affairs was expected and natural, which in turn promoted the civil service’s popularity.

After founding their dynasty in 1644, the Manchu systematically followed their predecessors’ policy towards the army, its organization, and its place in the state structure. Early Qing edicts repeated Ming military regulations, once again giving priority to civil officials (徐勇 2009: 102). The army’s organizational structure perfectly illustrated the traditional policy of creating a system of checks and balances. To prevent threats to their rule, Qing emperors deliberately did not create a single national army, instead dividing its command into two (Zarrow 2005: 90). One half was the Eight Banners Army (Baqibing), which in its turn consisted of eight Manchu, eight Mongol, and eight Chinese corps; these corps—the court’s main support—were posted in Manchuria, along the empire’s northern border, and at strategic points throughout the provinces. The other half, the Green Standard Army (Löyingbing), comprised mostly ethnic Han soldiers and was extremely fragmented, with thousands of outposts throughout the empire, being more like a great constabulary or gendarmerie force than a combat army (Powell 1955: 13). Green Standard commanders could not serve in their home provinces, military officers at all levels were frequently rotated, appointments were made directly by the court, and the central Board of Finance funded all military units (McCord 1993: 20). Central authorities worked to concentrate in their hands the levers of influence on the army, meanwhile curtailing personal or local bases of power.

During the nineteenth century, the Chinese army degraded. In the Eight Banners, many bannermen were reduced to the status of beggars. Members of the banners received special grants of land, but could not seek employment outside the service; over time, the growing number of bannermen dependents found that their land and pensions provided inadequate support. The situation with the Green Standard Army was no better. Officers embezzled funds, and discipline was often so lax that soldiers became indistinguishable from bandits (Gittings 1969: 191-192). The extent of corruption astonished contemporary observers. At Aihun in 1854, Russian traveler and military geographer Michael Venyukov(1871) observed that the Manchu garrison could only arm themselves with wooden pikes, “the blades of which were colored in gray paint to imitate steel.” Venyukov also learned about an imperial review of the Beijing garrison earlier that year when soldiers carried nothing but an iron saber. When officers had gone to retrieve their troops’ weapons from the armories where they had stored them for fear of mutiny, they discovered that corrupt
officials had sold them. Fearful of the emperor’s wrath, they had paid blacksmiths to cut sword-like shapes from sheet iron. Apparently, the hasty ruse worked. “Depraved Emperor Xianfeng, who by this time was probably in opium intoxication, did not notice the fraud” (pp. 110-112).

The Taiping Rebellion demonstrated how the Banners had “declined into a hoard of parasites no longer capable of performing elementary military functions,” to borrow Mary Wright’s (1967) assessment (p. 197). As defeat followed defeat, the Qing government realized that local militia—particularly the tuanlian, mintuan, and xiangyong companies—were making the best showing against the rebels. Hoping that the chance for dynastic survival lay in these units, the court in 1853 sent forty-three officials to supervise these local militia in the suppression of the rebellion and secure their loyalty. One of these officials was Zeng Guofan, who later played a central role in military reform. After receiving an appointment to Hunan province, he managed to organize an army around local militia. Numbering only 17,000 soldiers at the outset, this Xiang Army (Xiangjun) eventually exceeded 130,000 men (McCord 1993: 22). Zeng’s organizational approach was unique. He personally chose command staff, who in turn chose division commanders, and they chose platoon commanders, who dealt with enlistments. Consequently, certain detachments obeyed only the orders of the officer who enlisted them, and they often disbanded when the officer died or retired. Close ties between the commander and his immediate subordinates were reflected in the Xiang Army maxim, “Soldiers follow the general, soldiers belong to the general,” a harsh contrast to the old military dictum, “Soldiers had no fixed commander, commanders had no fixed soldiers,” and to the traditional motto of the Qing Army: “The soldier belongs to the state” (Powell 1955: 24, 32), (郭劍林 2000: 21). Such a pyramidal structure, based on kin and fellow-landsmen ties, subsequently became the organizational model for armies in other regions. In 1860, Zuo Zongtang, one of the Xiang Army generals, organized the 5,000-man Chu Army (Chujun), which fought mainly in Jiangxi and Zhejiang (郑天挺 2000: 651).

The most powerful army of such type was the long-lasting Huai Army (Huaijun), whose history began in late 1861, when Zeng Guofan ordered his subordinate Li Hongzhang to bring eight battalions of the Xiang Army back to Anhui—Li’s home province—and organize an independent force under Li’s command. Compared with the Xiang, the Huai Army was to be the stronger force, not only because of the qualities of its personnel but also because of the Western munitions available to them (Liu 1978: 425). In distinction from other armies, Li
paid little attention to recruits’ education and social background, favoring instead their skills and efficiency, as well as local ties: 64 percent of Huai officers and men were Anhui natives (郭劍林 2000: 27). Another important feature of these armies was the system of their financing. Beijing’s budget was static and unresponsive to either long-term change or sudden emergencies. Since the government insisted on preserving Green Standard and Banner troops, new militia forces only increased the financial burden. New armies fell outside the established military system and thus had no prearranged funding (Powell 1955: 25). In this shortage or even total absence of central funding, Zeng Guofan became reliant on the Yangtze provinces—Hunan, Hubei, Jiangxi, and Anhui—creating his own independent financial organization. Admittedly, he had imperial authorization to use provincial funds, as well as raise money through court-sanctioned sales of degrees, titles, and even offices, yet it is important to note that these funds were all local (Liu 1978: 410). Troops, moreover, knew that their pay and rations came not directly from the throne but entirely as a result of their leaders’ efforts, which quite naturally resulted in strengthening personal loyalties between the former and the latter.

The creation of new militia forces, and their victory over the Taiping rebels, had two consequences that played a crucial role in subsequent events. First, the time of instability, combined with the emergence of new militia forces, created social lifts, raising those of moderate origins. Guo Songlin (1833-1880) was a carpenter; Liu Mingchuan (1836-1896), who proved to be one of the best generals of the Qing period, was a former bandit and salt smuggler (Liu 1978: 425-426); Bao Chao (1828-1886) began his career as a stoker. The same process occurred during the warlord period. Jiang Baili (aka Jiang Fangzhen-蔣方震 (1971)), who rose to prominence as Wu Peifu’s chief of staff, identified a second important consequence of the Taiping Rebellion: “Because they [of necessity] raised citizen militia, literati achieved military merit [as field commanders]—that never happened since the ancient times” (p. 184). Although, prior to the Taiping, governors and governors-general were nominally the commanders of the troops stationed in their provinces, they had no military experience and were aliens to the soldiers and officers. But after the suppression of the Taiping Rebellion, of the forty-four governors-general appointed during 1861-1890, twenty rose to prominence as militia commanders. During the same period, of 117 governors selected, over half based their careers on militia leadership (Powell 1955: 33). Large numbers of governors-general and governors now had a record as effective commanders of militia battalions to add
to their literati careers; they had military experience, they knew how to handle soldiers, and they had troops personally loyal to them through personal control of recruitment, appointments, promotions, and funding. I will now address the period when Qing central authorities attempted to conduct military reforms, in response to mounting external threats.

The Implication of the Military in the Political Process, 1890s-1910s

The Great Powers’ aggressive policies towards China, and China’s inability to react, helped the Qing government to realize the necessity for structural reforms in all spheres, particularly the military. Defeat in the Sino-Japanese War, which dismayed Chinese, gave a decisive impulse to the total reconstruction of the military system, beginning in 1895 with the organization of the Self-Strengthening Army (Ziqiangjun) in Nanjing, and the Newly Created Army (Xinjianjun) in the provincial capital of Zhili. Qing officials organized the southern Self-Strengthening as a counterweight to the Newly Created, in line with the traditional policy of checks and balances. \(^{(17)}\) Self-Strengthening recruits, aged sixteen-twenty, came from farm families in areas near Nanking, which enabled recruiters to check their references. Neighbors, clan, and village heads had to vouch for them, and a foreign doctor had to examine them before admission. Historian Hatano Yoshihiro (1968) remarks on the unlikelihood “that each and every soldier passed all these stages of the selection process,” but Viceroy Zhang Zhidong’s insistence on the protocols is nonetheless revealing (p. 371). When Yuan Shikai modernized the Zhili forces after the Boxer Rebellion, he made similar efforts; according to Yuan’s requirements, recruits had to be taller than 1.6 meters, able to run ten kilometers in an hour, and have no criminal record (來新夏 2000: 113).

These armies had a distinctive feature: from the beginning, their organization copied the model of European armed forces. In terms of organization, they departed from the plain pyramidal structure of the most progressive among their predecessors, the Huai Army.\(^{(18)}\) Tailored according to the German pattern, they adopted a complex branched structure, with functional divisions into infantry, cavalry, and artillery, along with an engineering corps and other technical components, combined with centralized command and coordination of all branches, evidencing by prevailing standards the existence of a modern and multi-branch command system. When the Qing government found the experiment with the Self-Strengthening and Newly Created Armies successful, it decided to create a model New Army.
(Xinjun), with units formed in every province. At the end of 1903, in order to control the military reforms, the government created the Commission for Army Reorganization (Lianbingchu), which, in August 1904, issued regulations whereby each province would establish three-year elementary military schools. Two-year middle military schools were to be established in Zhili, Shaanxi, Jiangsu, and Hubei, and, in Peking, a military academy with an eighteen-month term, as well as a military college with a two-year program (Hatano 1968: 373). In 1906, it adopted a ten-year plan, setting the size of the Western-style New Army’s divisions in each province, and establishing a goal of thirty-six divisions nationwide (高銳 1992: 38). One important regulation the commission issued was a decree that the modernized army of each province was to be manned by provincials (大清新立新法令 1909: 58a-59a).

The main striking power among the new-type forces was the Beiyang Army of Zhili province, which Yuan Shikai—Li Hongzhang’s protégé—had the task of creating. After the death of his patron in 1901, Yuan became Zhili’s governor-general. It will be useful here to discuss Yuan’s influence in the Beiyang Army and the army’s loyalty to him. Stephen MacKinnon argues that Yuan’s power was limited, pointing out that although he enjoyed considerable influence, Peking had ultimate financial and administrative control, so it was clearly not Yuan’s personal, regional force (MacKinnon 1973: 406; 1980: 91). Officers, according to MacKinnon (1973), based their loyalty to Yuan more on professional expediency than on personal ties (p. 422). Still, I disagree with MacKinnon’s (1973) view that “Yuan’s influence over the army depended upon the strength of his political position in Peking,” (p. 406) because soldiers and officers perceived the generous financial support not as Beijing’s generosity but rather the result of Yuan’s continuous fundraising efforts, thus strengthening their personal ties.

To assure his command staff’s loyalty, Yuan regularly transferred senior officers, preventing divisional commanders from creating their own private armies, while Yuan’s most trusted officers always headed the best-equipped and trained divisions (Ch’en 1961: 79)\(^{(19)}\). Even MacKinnon (1973) admits that the Beiyang Army “was organizationally structured so as to maximize dependence upon Yuan within the army” (p. 414). A portrait of Yuan in one particular barracks became an object of oblation, with soldiers fostering their loyalty by burning incense next to it (野史氏 1916: 76). Even when Yuan fell from grace after the Empress Dowager Cixi’s death in 1908, was relieved of command in January 1909 by the regent Prince Chun II, and retired for three years to the village of Huanshang, close Beiyang
comrades regularly kept him informed of the latest developments, suggesting loyalties were personal rather than professional (来新夏 2000: 185). The Beiyang was admittedly not Yuan’s private army, yet it is obvious that he did his best—and successfully so—to extend his influence over it, suggesting that historian Li Zongyi is correct to call it “half-private” (李宗一 1980: 57). Although Yuan could not openly stand against Peking, his accumulated authority and influence among officers allowed him later to regain the leading role in Chinese policymaking.

The emergence of political ambitions among the military, and their implication in China’s political life, affected not only the highest military ranks but also the lower echelons of army structure, a process facilitated by the social transformation that occurred among the New Army’s ranks, in comparison with the Banner troops and even with Zeng Guofan’s Xiang Army. The modern military academies stressed intellectual rather than physical development, which elevated the prestige of military service in the eyes of Chinese society.\(^{(20)}\)

Admission requirements became stricter, starting in 1905 when secondary education was essential. Even company-grade personnel now came from the well-to-do, those who could afford to send their sons to school. Members of the imperial family and children of high-ranking officials, who joined to demonstrate the necessity of military reforms, further elevated the status of military academy graduates. The abolition of the traditional examination system in 1905 drew into the New Army’s ranks large numbers of the elite’s children, making modern school education more expensive than before. At the same time, the army training program of 1907 created career openings to talented, inspired youths of modest means; in comparison with civil educational institutions, the training period in military academies was shorter and thus cheaper (Ch’en 1979: 14). Graduates of military academies, furthermore, enjoyed a guaranteed, stable, and relatively high material standing, as well as clear perspectives on their career development. The abolition of the examination system had another important consequence: the elimination of the main source of recruitment of the powerful civil bureaucracy—the foundation of the Chinese state—the fundamental principle of which for centuries had been the subordination of the armed forces to civil rule (Powell 1955: 194). Rising nationalism was a further factor explaining why many of those who earlier would have preferred civil service to the military still chose the latter. Attitudes to military service changed dramatically after the Sino-Japanese War, when many discerned the military and economic threats of the foreign powers. Growing numbers of young men started to enroll
in military schools, since they inclined to the opinion that the creation of a strong, combat-effective army was a matter of national survival against the Great Powers (Hatano 1968: 373).

In such a manner, a stratum of young, educated elites formed in the army. Peter Gue Zarrow (2005) notes how the “new respectability of the military in the late Qing legitimated military careers, attracting idealistic, ambitious and capable men” (p. 90), a radical departure from the mores of prior decades. One of the peculiarities of this stratum was to take the most active part in the political process, instead of passively overseeing governmental duties. Traditionally, all political initiatives had originated from Beijing, but now elites could access the levers of state power, just as they were dissatisfied with the scale and speed of the reforms they initiated. The most active advocates of the county’s reconstruction were students, who had the experience of studying abroad. Although students from Europe and America were comparatively few in number, students from Japan grew rapidly, from several hundred in the 1890s to 12,000 by 1906, with ten percent being students of military academies. Like many other students, they had joined political societies to study Western systems and the applicability of those systems to Chinese reality, thereby working out plans for state reorganization. Upon returning home, their high level of education enabled them to take senior appointments in military schools or among command personnel of the New Army, and from these positions spread their ideas to subordinates.

Paradoxically, military reforms failed to create a strong, unified national army. The traditional system of checks and balances ensured that, after the Xinhai Revolution, the army could not play the role of a single force able to solve the problem of unification, appearing instead as several large and a dozen small groups. Further hastening the process of regionalization was the introduction of provincial assemblies for each province, in accordance with a palace edict of 19 October 1907. In a number of provinces—Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Guangdong, Guangxi—provincial assemblies were established independently, in compliance merely with the outline given by the central government before the official promulgation of regulations in 1908. Nevertheless, they promptly went to work, turning into loci for the expression of unrest and dissatisfaction, becoming chief agencies of provincial interests in conflict with the central government, and emphasizing the legitimacy of provincial power. Central authorities found it increasingly difficult to control local power centers, or as the classic Chronicle of Zhou quipped at the time of the Warring States, “the
tail was becoming too big to wag”-“wei da bu diao” (Min 1989: 153-154; Vinacke 1945: 211; Sheridan 1975: 39-40).

The Revolution created a power vacuum, and the military filled the void. The overthrow of the monarchy removed the only understandable concept of loyalty in the eyes of common folk and soldiers in particular (Ch’en 1968: 567). Within six weeks, all of the southern-central and some of the northwestern provinces declared their independence. In almost every case, heading the new provincial government was an army commander. In effect, the local elites broke free of Peking’s control, maintaining their political and economic dominance at the local level, and showing little interest in the Revolution (Fairbank 1986: 162). Had there been a unified army under centralized command, as was the case in Russia after the February 1917 revolution, this shift in power would not have occurred. China faced the new era with an army lacking a central structure, consisting instead of heterogeneous, loosely bound elements. Troops, recruited from within the provinces in which they served and often subsidized from provincial coffers, had loyalties that were local and personal, so provincial military leaders had, in effect, personal armies at their disposal (Sheridan 1975: 47). In combination with the power vacuum, and regionalization exacerbated by the introduction of provincial assemblies, the presence of these personal armies boosted the militarization of society. “Militarism,” observed Russian diplomat Ivan Korostovetz, “had never been so openly chanted….from the height of the throne.” It seemed to Korostovetz that instead of its traditional scorn of the military arts, China looked “less and less [like] a solely peaceful country.” Within six months of Korostovetz’s gloomy prognostication, the Qing monarchy fell, and then, as J.K. Fairbank (1986) puts it, “the main problem was how to bury it and what to put in its place” (p. 161). I will now discuss the first years of the Chinese Republic, when—in the words of Menshikov & Nepomnin (1999)—the army changed its role “from a purely supporting tool into a ruling power” (p. 208), a time when the final shaping of the future military cliques took place, which in turn gave birth to the warlord era.

**Military Groups in Post-Imperial China (1912-1916)**

The Xinhai Revolution of 1911 led to the practical loss of China’s political unity and a concomitant growth of warlordism. Chinese with ideas of democratic norms and principles but little direct experience of how these principles worked, gravitated to Nanjing, where a
short period of provisional government rule under Tongmenghui leadership demonstrated that the majority of political parties—from revolutionists to conservatives—lacked self-discipline and influence. Under these conditions, power, at least in the northern and central part of the country, gradually fell into the hands of regional leaders. Yuan Shikai had managed to preserve control over the large Beiyang Army, which by that time consisted of seven divisions and four composite brigades. Divisional officers formed the core of the influential Beiyang clique. The fact that in the context of political instability, Yuan had actual military power, as well as the political support of the Great Powers who perceived him as a guarantee of their interests, allowed him to become president, replacing the resigned revolutionary leader, Sun Yat-sen. With such support, he did not need to defer to his political opponents and he began to usurp power, first by dissolving parliament and then by closing the provincial assemblies. His new constitution of 1914 replaced the provisional constitution of 1912, worked up by Sun’s Guomindang revolutionists.

Trying to prevent the disintegration of the country, Yuan took measures to rein in the southern warlords. In April 1912, he implemented a less than effective plan to halve the million-man Chinese Army, thereby disbanding troops over which the central government had little control, while the size of his Beiyang Army remained almost unchanged. Two years later, he began to separate administrative and military offices in the provinces, and reform China’s administrative divisions. He changed the title of military governor (dudu) to general (jiangjun), at the same time making clear that a general’s powers would be the same as those of a military governor’s. On 22 June 1914, he announced a list of twenty-two generals who had the character wu (martial) in their title, which implied that they were actually in control of provinces. There was another list of generals with the character wei (law-inspiring), who had neither their own troops nor spheres of influence. Still, both wu and wei generals were nominally equals, and thus could replace one another. In the capital itself, a Generals’ Headquarters (Jiangjunfu) was set up, with Gen. Duan Qirui at its head. The ultimate target was the gradual transfer of all wu generals into wei ones, to deprive them of military power. The same month, Yuan renamed the title of civil governor from minzhengzhang to xunanshi, making explicit the “governor of a province” role of the position. All civil functions were taken from the military governor and given to the civil governor. In addition, the command over all old-style troops still numbering in the thousands as well as over sub-provincial, local forces went to the civil governor (Ch’en 1961: 199; 陶菊隐 1983: 61)
Yuan took these measures to limit the power and influence of local warlords, who were growing more and more independent of the central government. Still, his measures did not produce the expected results, since the civil governors sent to the provinces became the political hostages of local military leaders (Zhukov 1988: 31-32). His only significant reform was fiscal. In 1913, the provinces agreed to remit 32,250,000 to Beijing but only about 5,600,000 was sent. From 1912 to the end of 1913, only 2,600,000 had in fact reached the central government from the provinces (Ch’en 1979: 23-24). As late as June 1913, the Chengdu government of Sichuan was not even budgeting any remissions to Beijing. It was more common for provincial governments to request financial assistance from Beijing than it was for them to contribute to it, in the old pattern (Young 1977: 103).

According to this reform, revenues were to be sent to the center, and only then distributed among the provinces. This reform failed to achieve its main task of depriving regional warlords of their financial base, but nevertheless significantly increased government coffers. In 1916, the income from the provinces reached 20,000,000 (Ch’en 1969: 28).

When Yuan saw that his measures had not helped to overcome the growth of centrifugal forces, he no doubt realized that the transformation from imperial officers to warlords was due to the elimination of the monarchy and hence of legal and political restraints imposed by the Confucian moral code (Ch’en 1969: 23). He presumably decided that the cure for disorder lay in strong executive leadership and personal loyalty to the power holder, because he turned to the symbols of monarchy as the last resort to cement national unity (Fairbank 1986: 171; Bailey 2001: 73). But when he restored himself as emperor, he ran into opposition not only from Republicans led by Sun Yat-sen and representatives of other social classes, but also from warlords in the southern and southwestern provinces who started the National Protection War (Huguo Zhanzheng). The main blow that fell on Yuan’s monarchic plans was the loss of support from Duan Qirui, Feng Guozhang, Xu Shichang, and other previously loyal generals, perhaps resulting from the arrogance of Yuan’s son, Yuan Keding, who was the main pretender to his father’s throne; this by all means could not inspire Yuan’s brothers-in-arms, who of course had their own political ambitions (沙舟 2006: 62). Yuan’s attempt to recover a monarchic form of government died with him on 6 June 1916.

After Yuan’s death, China lost its last traces of unity. No leader with sufficiently strong will and popularity rose from the disintegrated military environment to claim the role of national dictator. Sun Yat-sen (孫中山 2009) blamed bureaucrats for the Revolution’s defeat:
“The destruction was incomplete and the soil under the old building was not excavated and thrown away. What is that soil? Neither more nor less than bureaucracy, the evil we inherited from the Qing dynasty” (p. 544). For sure, many of the early Republic’s officials were either former members of the Qing administration or patronage appointees who brought the old bureaucracy’s faults and drawbacks with them, such as formalism, red tape, corruption, and a despotic, inhuman attitude toward people (Houn 1957: 47). Still, many of Sun’s new Republican institutions were at odds with the values of a majority of Chinese. And there was no hero or talented, charismatic leader to become the symbol of national inspirations and thus unify the country. Throughout Yuan’s presidency, the generals worked steadily to strengthen their armies, and the number of men under arms expanded significantly.\(^{27}\) Provincial officials—in Henan, Zhejiang, Guangxi, and Guangdong—on occasion simply bypassed the central government and dealt directly with foreign financiers regarding the development of provincial resources or the arrangements for a foreign loan (Sheridan 1975: 52-55).

Yuan’s attempt to proclaim himself an emperor and the strong opposition of military establishment which such attempt caused demonstrated among other things Yuan’s weakness in his dependence on military force. Yuan’s lack of control over China’s disorganized armies was his chief weakness which was combined with his failure to gain enough power and strength to reorganize these raggle-taggle military forces into a single structure loyal to the central authorities (McCord 1993: 206).

While the provinces often acknowledged Beijing’s authority and executed its orders, if only to avoid the risk of running into open confrontation with Yuan Shikai and the troops at his disposal, a fully centralized state was more a facade rather than a reality, and the Beijing government could never achieve complete order. Furthermore, the proliferation of new taxes and the increase of old ones caused unrest. With the dissolution of provincial assemblies, local gentry were no longer consulted systematically, which naturally caused discontent. Another reason for local elites’ dissatisfaction was that they had to remit to the central authorities a significant share of the funds they raised through self-government bodies for local needs. Yuan’s death proved that he had been the only nationwide accepted symbol that helped to preserve at least a semblance of national unity. Income from the provinces plummeted, and the reality of provincial militarism and regionalization that had been gaining momentum for several decades now emerged unobstructed (Sheridan 1975: 54).\(^{28}\) Because of the rapid increase of centrifugal tendencies, power in the majority of provinces fell into the
hands of warlords, who, using military force, tried to put a halter on the prevailing chaos and achieve at least a semblance of order in the territory they controlled. In spite of the predominance of local over national interests, the Republic formally continued to exist as a single state with a central government in Beijing, which a majority of the foreign powers officially acknowledged. Yuan’s death also ended the unity of the Beiyang military clique, initiating a fight for power with the aim of controlling the Beijing government, through which to access international loans and custom dues. The main confrontation was between the Anhui, Zhili, and Fengtian cliques, built—like all alliances of this kind—on kinship, on ties of people from the same area, ties of comrades-in arms and class-fellows.

Unlike other petty warlord groups whose leaders cared only about preserving their rule over the territory they controlled, these Beiyang warlords took turns in Beijing, attempting to claim the role of national leader, but they each failed. After his Northern Expedition terminated Beijing’s government in 1928, Chiang Kai-shek relocated the capital to Nanjing and began to construct an effective central administration. Still, the unification of the country was nominal rather than factual; it would not be until the Chinese Communist Party’s 1949 victory in the Civil War that anything resembling a united, centralized government, such as China had enjoyed prior to 1916, came into being. Warlordism continued to define political struggle into the 1930s, most notably in the northeast where, in September 1931 the Japanese Kwantung Army staged the Mukden Incident as a precursor for the annexation of Manchuria, an event that opened another tragic page in China’s history and led to Pearl Harbor and global war.
Footnotes

(1) All translations by author, unless stated otherwise or from previously translated works. I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Michael E. Chapman, Associate Professor of History at Peking University, in the preparation of this article.

(2) Because of the paucity of Chinese archival sources, Russian accounts provide important evidence.

(3) Menshikov, V. B., & Nepomnin, O. Y. (1999: 208); McCord (1993: 2). China’s army finally changed its role “from a purely supporting tool into a ruling power”. McCord moreover, points out that studying the emergence of warlordism is important for an understanding of military-civil relations in contemporary China.

(4) 羅爾綱（1939：64）。Commanders with literati backgrounds outnumbered those with military backgrounds on all levels except that of the battalion (fifty-two battalion commanders with military background against thirty-nine with literati); altogether, there were a hundred commanders with literati background against seventy-five with military.

(5) Fairbank, J. K. (1998: 231). A number of provincial governors-general like Li Hongzhang at Canton, Zhang Zhidong at Wuchang, Liu Kunyi at Nanjing, and the others decided right away in June to ignore Peking’s declaration of war against the foreign powers, issued on 21 June 1900. They insisted that it was a luanming, an illegitimate order issued without the throne’s proper authorization.

(6) 郭劍林（2000：39）。Such commanders of the Beiyang army as Gong Youyuan, Meng Enyuan, Jiang Guiti, Ni Sichong, Zhang Xun, Ruan Zhongshu, and Wang Huaichuang started their careers in Li Hongzhang’s Huai Army. Some scholars believe that this gives them ground to call the Beiyang army “a leftover evil of the Huai Army’s organization system”.

(7) See, for example, Lunyu, Chapter 12, verse 7.

(8) Zhukov, V. V. (1988: 14).「好男不當兵，好鐵不打釘」。

(9) Falkenhausen, L. (2005: 86). As the inscription on the Xinqi tally indicates, even the commanders of relatively small detachments required special permission for action: “Whenever one is to levy troops and equip them with armor if more than 50 soldiers are used one must match the king’s tally, only then shall one undertake it.”

(10) 徐勇（2009：96-97）。Zhao Kuangyin, founder of Song dynasty, organized the military to
ensure that the army could not threaten imperial control. The Northern Song’s Military Council operated under a chancellor, who had no control over the imperial army. The imperial army was divided among three marshals, each independently responsible to the Emperor.

(11) 高銳（1992：38）。The main drawbacks of the Green Standard Army, according to Zeng Guofan, were immorality, retreat from the battlefield before the arrival of the enemy, murder of the civilians, low level of operational teamwork in combat, and disobedience of orders.

(12) Liu, K. (1978: 442-443); 羅爾綱（1939：22-24）; 來新夏（2000：86）。Not all of these militia troops had equal combat effectiveness. For example, Zeng Guofan spoke depreciatingly of tuanliang: “When I hear people saying that tuanliang has won a great victory against the rebels, I can never contain my laughter, and I put my hands over my ears and walk away”. For the distribution of these officials across the provinces.

(13) Fairbank, J. K. (1986: 107). Li Hongzhang benefited from the fact that father had been a classmate of Zeng Guofan in the top examination of 1838. In 1859, he joined Zeng Guofan staff became his chief secretary and drafted his correspondence.

(14) Porter, J. (1972: 103). early in 1854 to stimulate this source of revenue, Zeng requested 4,000 blank certificates (kongbai zhizhao) for use in raising funds in Hunan, Jiangxi, and Sichuan, with one half for official ranks (zhixian) and one half for imperial academy students (jiansheng).

(15) Ch’en, J. (1968: 568). Of the 1,300 officers of the rank brigadier and above who flourished in the period 1912-1928, approximately 370-400 obtained a professional military education or were holders of traditional degrees, so the number of “educated” warlords hardly exceeded 30 percent of the total. The rest were mostly illiterate or semi-literate people from extremely modest origins.

(16) Kuhn, P. A. (1970: 122-123). “The upper levels of provincial administration had ultimate responsibility for both civil and military affairs within their jurisdictions, but they were in poor position to fulfill their military responsibilities. Transfers from post to post insured that they were always in charge of unfamiliar bodies of troops. whose officers were strangers to them, and with those training and selection they had nothing to do... The whole weight of the system tended to keep provincial official well apart from the management of the troops he was charged with commanding in time of military emergency”.

(17) Ch’en, J. (1961: 73). Later in 1901, this system of checks and balances was strengthened
even further; Yuan offended viceroy Zhang Zhidong and gained an enemy in him, for in July that year he was ordered to assume command and responsibility for the training of a large section of Zhang’s Self-Strengthening Army.

(18) Hohlov, A. N. (1968: 223). On 26 April 1876, Russian ambassador Eugene de Butzow mentioned that although the soldiers and officers of the Huai Army were drilled and taught how to use modern weapons, “the ancient” Chinese army organization remained almost untouched in Li Hongzhang’s troops and they, as well as the Chinese army as a whole, were “nothing but an irregular mob with notably lax discipline, total absence of professional educated officers, and quite a prehistoric structure of different units of military administration”.

(19) 郭劍林 (2000: 44)。This process was not limited to the Beiyang Army; two departments of the Commission for Army Reorganization were headed by Yuan’s protégés, who later became key figures in the Beiyang military clique, with Duan Qirui in charge of the Department of Military Orders (junlingsi) and Wang Shizhen in charge of the Department of Military Education (junxuesi).

(20) 高銳 (1992: 107)。One such academy, which opened on 27 May 1906 in Beijing, was called Lujun guizhou xuetang.

(21) Bailey, P. J. (2001: 59). In 1903, the Shinbu Gakkō (Military School) was established in Japan exclusively for Chinese military students, and up to one thousand trained there until the school closed in 1914.

(22) 張朋園 (1982: 106)。For example, since the Hunan provincial government did not have enough funds to hire German or Japanese military instructors they were replaced by Chinese who had graduated from Japanese military schools and academies.

(23) 戴執禮 (1959: 511-512)。See, for example, the “Declaration of Independence Issued by Sichuan’s Military Government of Chendu”. The statements about the constitution and future Chinese state are vague. It could have been just a tactic to avoid, at least for a time, conflict with revolutionists until the storm calmed down, and the outcome of the Qing’s overthrow would become clear.

(24) Ivan Korostovetz’s dispatch of 10 April 1911, was cited in Hohlov’s (1968) paper, (p. 241).

(25) 趙學聰 (1996: 5)。高銳 (1992: 92-95)。Zhao, Xuecong (趙學聰) states that altogether, the New Army numbered sixteen divisions and sixteen composite brigades. Gao Rui
（高銳）gives different numbers; before the revolution, the New Army numbered fourteen divisions and eighteen composite brigades, giving a total of about 200,000 men. He also provides a distribution of these forces over the provinces.

(26) Zhonghua Minguo Yuefa and Zhonghua Minguo Linshi Yuefa respectively.

(27) Vinacke, H.M. (1945: 229). Recruits came mostly from those on the economic margins of existence and from those living as brigands, men who entered military service because of the guarantee of pay and certainty of food and clothing.

(28) 賈士穎（1932：58-59）。In 1917, the Peking government received from the provinces more than 18,000,000, but three years later, in 1920, only 4,260,000.
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