Article

Synarchy and the Chinese People: A Plea for Internationalization in Warlord China

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Abstract

In the wake of a major mutiny by warlord forces in 1921 that left much of the Yangzi port city of Yichang in ruins, a group of Chinese citizens appealed to the foreign diplomatic community to turn the city into a foreign concession under foreign protection. In a statement that seems shocking in the context of the burgeoning anti-imperialist sentiment that followed the May 4th incident of 1919, the petitioners concluded that if their wish was granted, "they would make no complaint, even if we become slaves without nationality." This incident suggests that in at least some cases many Chinese did not hesitate to make common cause with the foreigners in their midst against a mutual threat. The article seeks to retrofit John King Fairbank's concept of synarchy to explain how the Chinese people may have both perceived and negotiated the uneven and interpenetrated power relations of the central government, warlord authorities, and foreign powers in the Republican era.

Keywords

warlords, military atrocities, synarchy, imperialism

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On June 4, 1921, mutinying troops plundered and burned the major Yangzi port city of Yichang, leaving much of the city in ruins. While mutinies of this nature had become alarmingly frequent in Hubei in this period, the Yichang incident also drew attention because the troops attacked foreign businesses and residences, which, under treaty protection, had normally escaped devastation during China's internal disturbances. The foreign diplomatic community immediately issued protests to both the central and provincial governments, and demanded compensation for foreign losses. Going a step further, the foreign diplomats also proposed establishing an international settlement at Yichang to provide future protection for foreign interests. This incident has only been cited in the scholarly literature in passing, but it has been used to support two widely divergent views of its significance. Thus, a major study of Hubei under Beiyang warlord rule (Ni, 1989: 150–51) argues that the mutiny "gave imperialism an excuse for extortion." This interpretation sees the incident as yet another example of imperialist aggression and places agency for this demand for the internationalization of Yichang with the diplomatic corps. In contrast, John King Fairbank cited this event as an example of how "the unequal treaties, while humiliating in principle, were often of material help in fact [for the Chinese people]" (Fairbank and Goldman, 1992: 260). An examination of contemporary accounts and diplomatic archives supports Fairbank by revealing the surprising fact that this proposal to turn the city into an international settlement actually originated not from the diplomatic corps but in a public appeal from a group of Yichang citizens. Frustrated by the continued depredations of warlord armies, these citizens concluded that if their wish was granted, they "would make no complaint, even if we become slaves without nationality."

This wording directly engaged, and challenged, a Chinese discourse on national sovereignty, and even national survival, that had taken on new urgency following Japan's Twenty-One Demands in 1915 and the treatment of the Shandong issue at the Versailles peace conference (Chow, 1960: 19–25). By extension, this plea for internationalization, while not displacing, certainly complicates the narrative of nationalism, expressed through concerns over nationalist sovereignty and territorial integrity that historians have also seen as framing China's relations with foreign powers following the Versailles conference (Xu, 2005: 282). Similarly, any account of this incident also makes an uncomfortable fit with a conventional narrative, which also arose during the May 4th Movement and was perpetuated by both Nationalist and Communist historians, that postulates a close link between warlordism and imperialism, with China's warlords basing their power on support from imperialist powers and in return serving imperialist interests (Ch'en, 1979: 2–3).

A number of revisionist studies have challenged this narrative by examining more closely the actual relations between specific warlords and the foreign powers they are charged with serving as well as their attitudes toward anti-imperialist movements.[1] The Yichang appeal adds a new perspective from the vantage point of the Chinese people themselves. Rather than showing Chinese warlords and foreign imperialists on the same side of the barricade facing the ire of a united Chinese populace, the Yichang case suggests that there could be common interests between foreigner residents in China in the warlord era and China's own long-suffering population.

While certainly unusual, the Yichang appeal should not be seen in isolation from a broader history of Chinese-foreign interactions under the treaty system that came into being in the mid-nineteenth century. This interaction often took the form of Chinese citizens seeking foreign protection under the cover of institutional arrangements created by the foreign treaties. An early example was the flood of refugees fleeing Taiping armies who sought asylum in Shanghai's newly established International Settlement in the 1850s (Bergère, 2009: 44–45). Later, Chinese revolutionaries also used foreign concessions as secure bases for their operations (Rankin, 1971: 48–49). The civil wars of the warlord era provided new demands for foreign protection, with initiatives that often came from both sides. An enterprising French consul in Guangxi sold tickets to Chinese seeking refuge in his consular territory, and obligingly expanded its boundaries to accommodate them (Lary, 1974: 53). Amid warlord conflicts in Hunan, foreign merchants sold licenses allowing Chinese businesses seeking protection to display their foreign signs and national flags in front of their stores. Chinese Buddhist temples sought to build protective associations with Japanese monks, while Catholic and Protestant churches and foreign-associated philanthropic associations, such as the Red Cross, sought to create refuges for panicking civilians caught up in military conflicts (Hunan shanhou xiehui, 1919: 129–30). Such accommodations were a prelude to the international safe zones established to protect Chinese civilians following the outbreak of war with Japan in 1937 (Chang, 1997: 105–39; Ristaino, 2008).

Although not unique in this broader context, the scope and intensity of the appeal of Yichang's citizens to the foreign diplomatic community reveals with greater clarity the extent to which the treaty system was actually perceived by many Chinese as an accepted element in the structure of Chinese governance. As such, there may be some utility in reviving John King Fairbank's long-neglected concept of synarchy as a framework to understand how this continued foreign presence intersected with the political dynamics of the warlord era. While warlords in the early Republic enjoyed a considerable degree of

political autonomy, they were nonetheless embedded in a complex system of governance that included not only other warlords and a functioning, albeit weakened, central government, but also an overlay of treaty rights asserted by foreign powers. The result was a synarchic system of shared administration by competing layers of Chinese and foreign authorities, where respective political powers and responsibilities were not rigid conventions but tentative accommodations.

The point of this article is not to explore the synarchic system itself, but to suggest how the Chinese people both perceived and negotiated their way through it. Thus, residents of Yichang joined with their provincial compatriots to bring their protests against Wang Zhanyuan, the warlord governor who presided over the outbreak of troop disturbances, not only to the central government in Beijing but also to other military commanders, including both Wang's factional allies and his enemies. Through appeals to various layers of political authority, these protestors sought to use tensions within this synarchic system to their own advantage. At the same time, the residents of Yichang took this approach one step further by appealing to foreign powers to turn their city into an international settlement under foreign protection. This article argues that this appeal from the citizens of Yichang should not be viewed in isolation from the broader context of how public opinion was manifested and expressed in the warlord era. At the same time, an investigation into this case significantly broadens our understanding of how the Chinese people perceived, negotiated, and took advantage of the fissures and uneven power relations reflected in Republican-era governance. Incidents of this sort not only reveal the complicated relationship between the central government and warlord authorities in the Republican era but the capacity for, and limits on, foreign intervention in Republican China's domestic politics and governance under the treaty system.

Synarchy under Warlordism

In introducing the concept of synarchy, Fairbank (1957) sought to link the special characteristics he saw within the modern treaty port system to a longer history of "foreign rule" in China, including Manchu rule during the Qing dynasty. He saw this foreign rule as tempered through "joint" Sino-foreign administration, or synarchy, which included the use of Chinese bureaucracies by alien dynasties and incorporation of non-Chinese peoples into the Chinese empire through the "tribute system." Fairbank argued that this synarchic tradition ultimately facilitated the development of a new form of Sino-foreign joint administration under the treaties signed between China

and Western (and ultimately Japanese) powers starting in the mid-nineteenth century.

Fairbank's concept of synarchy has never gained widespread acceptance. On the contrary, the concept eventually came under attack as a historical artifact from those who saw the term as more obfuscating Sino-Western relations than explaining them. Tani Barlow (1993), for example, suggests that Fairbank's use of synarchy was a Cold-War–inspired act of "erasure," which sought to eliminate the concepts of imperialism and colonialism, along with their negative connotations, from the historical narrative of Sino-Western relations. Even granting Barlow's charges, though, using imperialism or colonialism, or even semi-colonialism, as overreaching concepts to define Sino-foreign relations in the nineteenth and twentieth century creates an overly simplistic binary of foreign dominance and Chinese subordination that, I would argue, does not do justice to the complexity of those relations in terms of actual political or administrative practice, to which Fairbank's concept of synarchy is actually more sensitive.

As an analytical term, synarchy allows us to conceptualize a political system under the conditions of semi-colonialism where a central government exists but does not, in fact, exert a monopoly over key elements of state power, such as military force or territorial administration. Thus, under the treaty system in both late Qing and Republican China, the military monopoly of the Chinese state was limited by treaty rights given to foreign powers to station warships in Chinese treaty ports even as its territorial monopoly was compromised by the creation of foreign-administered concessions in the treaty ports themselves. While the extent to which foreign powers established dominance over the Chinese state in key areas should not be ignored, this relationship was nonetheless both complicated and fluid. Thus, although Fairbank acknowledged the primary role of treaties in establishing the treaty port system, he also argued that the synarchic features of the system were as much the result of practice as of the legal terms of the treaties themselves. The advantage offered by the concept of synarchy, then, is to provide a framework for explaining the shifting political relations of semi-colonialism in practice, which often manifested as a form of negotiated and shared governance rather than as a simple construct of dominance and subordination.

Some might argue that the occurrence of the 1911 Revolution invalidates any continued identification of synarchy in China, insofar as the revolution eliminated one of the key players—a foreign dynasty—in Fairbank's original conceptualization. Nonetheless, beyond simply pointing to the survival of the treaty system into the Republican era, I would argue that synarchy remains useful as an overarching concept to describe the new variation of "joint

administration" that emerged under warlordism following the revolution, where political authority was derived from differing sources and where administrative control was unevenly distributed, or even interpenetrated, rather than hierarchically structured. An attempt to reconceptualize politics and administration in warlord China seems particularly justified due to the inadequacy of past efforts to describe the nature of warlord governance. Studies of warlordism, including my own (McCord, 1993), have emphasized describing how military commanders established and maintained their political autonomy. Much less attention has been given to the structures of governance that also continued, in fact, to limit this autonomy. The main exception to this neglect can be found in the work of scholars who have focused on the role of factionalism in warlord China, most notably Hsi-sheng Ch'i's classic study, *Warlord Politics in China* (1976). Even so, by equating warlord politics to the working of the international system, Ch'i again stresses the independence of the players in this system, although at a higher (factional) level than the individual warlord. Largely ignored is the extent to which all individual warlords governed within the constraints, not only of shifting factional alliances, but of a weakened—yet nonetheless substantive—national political system. The resulting political and administrative relations were, in turn, inter-layered with an international system created by the treaties that also impinged on domestic governance in significant ways.

The Chinese national government in Beijing in the warlord era is commonly portrayed as either an empty shell or as nothing more than an asset to be acquired by whichever warlord was able to seize it. Nonetheless, the national government did in fact persist as a separate entity and retained its distinct, albeit weakened, authority throughout this period, irrespective of which warlord or warlord faction controlled it. The central government in Beijing retained control over significant revenues, most notably customs duties. It also claimed ultimate authority over major military and civil appointments, whether or not it could actually enforce its choices in all cases. Equally important, even the most autonomous of warlords usually gave at least lip service to some national authority (if not to Beijing then to rival governments periodically established in Guangzhou). The actual relationship between the central government and individual warlords was not, however, constitutionally or legally derived (no matter what was stated in the constitution of the moment). Rather, this relationship responded to, and was constantly renegotiated based on, many shifting factors, including factional connections and relative resources (military and financial) at any one point in time. This lack of clearly delineated power or authority between the center and regionally based warlords suggests a relationship, and a political system, that might be

usefully described as "joint administration" or synarchy. At the same time, the deployment of this Fairbankian concept also serves as a deliberate reminder of the extent to which foreign powers, through the treaty system, also remained full participants in this system of governance.

The reluctance of Republican-era warlords to declare full independence or claim full sovereignty over their territories can be attributed in part to the rising and pervasive power of Chinese nationalism. There is no reason to believe that the warlords were any less susceptible to the power of nationalism than their fellow citizens. If nothing else, in the context of this nationalism, even the most ambitious of warlords also realized the weapon any declaration of independence would give his enemies to use against him. As recently noted by Ja Ian Chong (2009), there was also another, more structural reason for the survival of the central government in this period—namely the refusal of the foreign powers to recognize any government other than the administration at Beijing as the legitimate government of China. In this regard, the foreign powers still remained stakeholders in the "joint administration" of China. And this foreign participation was by no means limited to a relationship with the central government at Beijing. Warlords holding or claiming military or administrative posts were also constrained to operate within the bounds imposed by the treaty system, which required attention to the management of the foreign presence (whether in the form of gunboats or foreign settlements) and to the protection of foreign lives and properties. To the extent that the Hubei mutinies actually put foreign lives and property at risk, foreign attention to, and involvement in, the political controversy that arose over them was hardly unexpected.

Troop Mutinies in Warlord Hubei

The Yichang Mutiny on June 4, 1921, was one in a series of over twenty troop disturbances to break out in Hubei province from late 1919 through mid-1921 (Liu, 1922: 117). In most cases, the troops involved in these disturbances were responding to repeated arrears in their pay. Seeking to make up for their owed pay, mutinying troops turned to plunder the very communities they were assigned to protect. To the extent that arrears in troop pay drove most of the mutinies in Hubei in this period, the real root cause of these mutinies can be found in the rapid military expansion that had accompanied the rise of warlordism.

The dominant warlord in Hubei in the early Republic was Wang Zhanyuan. Yuan Shikai had sent Wang, as commander of the Beiyang 2nd Division, to take control over Hubei in 1913. Wang used the outbreak of the Anti-Monarchical

War in 1915 to extort an appointment from Yuan as Hubei's military governor. From this point on, Wang worked to consolidate his control over Hubei's military and civil administration. Inasmuch as military force was the base for Wang's power, Wang consistently worked to expand the size of his army. Building on the 2nd Division, Wang eventually created an additional division and seven independent brigades under his direct command. The failure of several efforts to extend Northern control into Hunan and Sichuan also stranded a number of other Northern military forces in Hubei. By late 1920, the province was host to at least five divisions and nearly a dozen brigades, totaling over 100,000 soldiers (McCord, 1993: 278–82; *Shibao*, September 19, 1920, and October 10, 1920; USDS 893.00/3742: Huston, December 16, 1920).

While some of the units based in Hubei with "national" designations (including Wang's 2nd Division) were, in theory, supposed to be paid by the central government, the depletion of the national treasury made it increasingly difficult for central authorities to meet their payrolls. Thus, in August 1919, troop pay for some national units in Hubei were four to eight months in arrears. One by one, the affected units began to mutiny. In the face of this problem, the government increasingly relied on Wang Zhanyuan to find the resources to support these troops within Hubei itself. Wang did this by raiding the provincial treasury, withholding national taxes and fees, negotiating major loans from foreign banks, and issuing bonds. As these sources also began to dry up, Wang began to demand loans or "advances" from public organizations, particularly chambers of commerce, to meet military payrolls. None of these measures were more than stopgap solutions to the ongoing problem of military deficits. Even though Wang attempted to keep the pay owed his own core troops to a minimum, payrolls for other forces remained deeply in debt. So mutinies by disgruntled troops continued (see McCord, 2011).

Yichang was to be the site of two of the most devastating of these mutinies. Yichang's importance derived from its position immediately below the gorges of the upper Yangzi. Given its strategic position and commercial wealth, Yichang was garrisoned by a large number of troops from a number of different units. In late November, one of these units, the 13th Mixed Brigade (Wang had assumed control over this unit, previously commanded by a rival warlord, in July 1920), had not been paid for nine months (*Shibao*, December 3, 5, 7, 8, and 10, 1920; USDS 893.00/3709: Huston, December 9, 1920). So on November 29, 1920, troops from this unit (possibly joined by soldiers from other forces) rose to take out their frustration on Yichang's citizens. Residences and shops throughout the city were looted, and in many cases set afire. As with many such incidents, it is difficult to reach an accurate accounting of total damages, if for no other reason than the military authorities whose troops were

behind the disturbances had no incentive to gather or provide this information. A newspaper report at the time, however, estimated losses at around five million yuan (*Shibao*, December 7, 1920).

A second mutiny, which broke out on June 4, 1921, was even more devastating. This time, the mutinying troops came from some of Wang's own core forces, the 21st Mixed Brigade and portions of the 18th Division (*Shuntian ribao*, June 7 and 8, 1920). In this case, the mutiny was provoked not only by pay issues but by plans by Wang to demobilize large numbers of veteran soldiers in his forces, who were paid higher than average salaries, in order to replace them with less expensive new recruits. Seeing their livelihood threatened, these soldiers sought to supplement their severance pay by a second pillaging of Yichang. Wang's troops may have been emboldened by the knowledge that the troops involved in the earlier plunder of Yichang had suffered little consequence for their actions (except disbandment) (McCord, 2011: 142). Large portions of the city, at least those parts undamaged by the 1920 mutiny, were burned by rampaging troops, reportedly including 60 percent of the stores and two thirds of the homes (Liu, 1922: 93). Total losses from both mutinies were eventually estimated at around twelve million yuan (*Guomin xinbao*, October 19, 1921). More shockingly, while in the previous mutiny the people had suffered few injuries (*Central China Post*, December 10, 1920, enclosed in USDS 893.00/3704: Huston, December 10, 1920), in this case large numbers, estimated anywhere from around 100 to over 1,000, were killed or injured by the rioting troops (Liu, 1922: 116; USDS 893.102Ic/8: Huston, June 10, 1921).

The horror of the second Yichang mutiny was, in the end, somewhat overshadowed by another mutiny that followed quickly in its wake, this time in the provincial capital of Wuchang. The Wuchang mutiny, which broke out in the early morning hours of June 8, involved large parts of Wang's 2nd Division. The Yichang mutiny may have provided a model for these soldiers. Earlier in the day, 2nd Division troops reportedly observed that many Yichang mutineers, who had been escorted under guard to Wuchang to be processed for disbandment, still carried with them the loot they had obtained in the plunder of Yichang. Thus they saw firsthand the advantages of following the Yichang example (Wang, 1989: 54). Shortly after midnight, 2nd Division soldiers began to leave their camps and headed into the city. There they first attacked the Provincial Assembly building, the governor's yamen, the provincial treasury, and the mint. They then systematically looted shops and homes, and set large sections of the city, particularly its commercial districts, afire (Liu, 1922: 74–81, 92–93; USDS 893.00/3947: Huston, June 9, 1921). Philanthropic organizations later estimated total property losses at between

thirty and forty million yuan (*Hankou xinwenbao*, June 21, 1921; *Hankou zhengyibao*, June 17, 1921; Liu, 1922: 80). Although there was no complete list of casualties, several hundred people were estimated to have been seriously injured or killed (Liu, 1922: 93).

Even though the mutinies in Yichang and Wuchang were equally devastating for their inhabitants, the two cases were distinguished in the manner in which the foreign communities in each location experienced the mutinies. Both Yichang and Wuhan (the tri-city of Wuchang, Hankou, and Hanyang) were foreign treaty ports. In the case of Wuhan, however, the foreign presence was concentrated in a foreign concession in Hankou, across the Yangzi River from Wuchang. While certainly unsettled by the events in Wuchang, the commercial districts of Hankou essentially survived the mutiny unscathed. Chinese naval vessels blocked any groups of mutineers who tried to cross the river to Hankou and wharf police arrested any individual looters who got through this blockade (Yan, 1989: 97; USDS 893.00/3947: Huston, June 9, 1921). In Yichang, however, foreign residences and shops were scattered along the riverfront with no distinct foreign concession. This left the Yichang foreign community more vulnerable than their Hankou counterparts; and Yichang's foreign residents would not escape unscathed from the city's two mutinies. In the first mutiny, in November 1920, a number of foreign residences and shops were looted, some were burned, and over forty foreigners, representing six nationalities, were robbed. Total foreign losses were eventually reported at $1.39 million, along with 330,000 liang (taels) in silver (*Guomin xinbao*, October 19, 1921; USDS 893.00/3709: Huston, December 9, 1920). In the second mutiny, in June 1921, Yichang's foreign residents were again not spared. Eighty to ninety percent of Japanese, British, and American businesses were looted, as well as the Japanese consulate and several foreign residences (*Dagongbao*, June 10, 1921; Liu, 1922: 116; USDS 893.102Ic/7: Huston, June 9, 1921). This would not only draw foreign attention to the mutinies in Hubei, but also provide an opening for Hubei's people to make an appeal to foreign authorities for their own purposes. In the end, though, this appeal must still be seen as merely one facet of a broad range of public protests against, and resistance to, military outrages.

The Popular Protests and the Oust-Wang Movement

Accounts of military atrocities, such as those that accompanied the troop mutinies in Hubei, can leave the impression of a civilian population totally at the mercy of rapacious soldiers. For the immediate victims of such incidents,

this impression is largely true. Nonetheless, on a broader level, Chinese civilians were not, in fact, totally without avenues to protest, or even to resist, military depredations (see McCord, 2001 and 2005). Even though individual warlords could, and did, suppress opposition to their rule in the territories under their control, the fissures within the structure of warlord governance itself provided opportunities for protests by aggrieved citizens, which ultimately aided the rise of broader anti-warlord movements in a number of provinces. Thus, the repeated troop mutinies in Hubei, culminating in the June 1921 Yichang and Wuchang atrocities, provoked a public outcry that demanded, and ultimately contributed to, Wang Zhanyuan's ouster from his position as Hubei military governor.

Military atrocities in warlord-era China were commonly the work of armies on the move, as retreating troops sought to make up for their losses by plundering towns in their path or as winners advanced to savor the spoils of victory. Warlord commanders who gained administrative control over territories were more likely to restrain their troops in the interest of preserving the material bases needed for long-term revenue extraction. For the same reason, the exploitation of such resources also operated under constraints, in terms of both the capacity of the tax base and the willingness of the people to comply with the warlord's taxing authority. Such considerations opened the way for a range of public organizations to negotiate, if not necessarily resist, the level and nature of exactions imposed on their community. There was, then, usually a basis for at least some limited organization and expression of public interest even under the most coercive of warlord regimes. The most successful (that is, lasting) warlords were often those who were able to reach some accommodation with this organized public interest within their realms.

In the case of Wang Zhanyuan in Hubei, this accommodation broke down over the extraordinary demands placed on the Hubei people to support not only Wang's own growing forces but also the large number of other "guest" armies on their soil. Early in his rule, Wang had patronized the continued election of a provincial assembly to negotiate and approve tax increases to help meet the rising costs of his military expansion. By 1919, though, even this normally compliant body found it difficult to raise the increasing revenues needed to maintain troop pay levels. Wang thus began to turn to more extraordinary revenue sources—including currency manipulation and foreign loans collateralized with Hubei's public property and future tax revenues. When even these sources turned sour (as excess currency printing threatened to undermine the local economy and as lenders drew back), Wang began to make repeated demands for direct emergency contributions from Hubei public organizations, particularly the Wuchang and Hankou chambers

of commerce. Meanwhile, insofar as none of these measures was able to resolve the troop pay crisis, the phenomenon of military mutinies by unpaid troops continued unabated. Public outrage over Wang's financial exactions was further aroused when Wang began to use the threat of continuing troop disorder to back up his financial demands, arguing that he would be unable to maintain control over his troops unless the funds he required were forthcoming (McCord, 2011: 131–39).

With the military and police power in his hands, Wang was for the most part able to suppress any public expression of outrage over his rule within Hubei itself. Warlord regimes in Republican China were not, however, closed systems. So Wang was not able to keep the news of what was going on in Hubei, and the outrage it generated, from spilling over into areas controlled by other warlords and foreign concessions. Thus, one of the main sources of information on the Yichang and Wuchang mutinies, and the popular dissatisfaction that accompanied them, was (and remains for us today) detailed reports from newspapers from these areas outside Wang's control. Extensive accounts appeared not only in newspapers in major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, but also in other provincial capitals such as Changsha. While newspapers served as an important vehicle for the expression of public opinion, associations of Hubei sojourners (*tongxianghui*) in other provinces, and most importantly in Beijing, also played key roles in the organization of popular protests against the state of affairs in Hubei. Intensifying with each new mutiny, and culminating in the Yichang and Wuchang mutinies, this public opinion coalesced increasingly around demands for Wang Zhanyuan's removal. Thus, even as the fragmented nature of warlord governance provided space for the expression of anti-Wang public opinion, the fragmented nature of the political authority that underlay warlord governance also determined the channels the demands of the oust-Wang movement would take.

An important prelude to this oust-Wang movement, and a foundation for the organization of anti-Wang public opinion, arose in a controversy over the Hubei civil governor's post in late 1920. Beginning in 1916 Wang Zhanyuan had consolidated his control of Hubei's civil administration through his concurrent appointment, from the central government, as civil governor. In 1919, in a nod toward the principle of the separation of military and civil powers, Wang gave up the civil position, but he maintained control by insuring that his military chief of staff (who was coincidentally a Hubei native) was made civil governor (McCord, 1993: 242–43, 272–73). In August 1920, however, Wang provoked widespread popular outrage by recommending the appointment of a relative from Shandong with minimal administrative experience to this position (USDS 893.00/3675: Huston, November 18, 1920; *Shibao*, August 2 and 9,

and September 1 and 13, 1920). While opposition in Hubei itself was muted, leading Hubei figures in Beijing, with support from former president Li Yuanhong (a Hubei native), organized a campaign to force the Beijing government to reject Wang's recommendation in favor of a native Hubei candidate. After an intense struggle, the central government gave in to this popular opposition and announced the appointment of Xia Shoukang (a Hubei native who had served as Hubei's civil governor in the early Republic) as the new civil governor (*Shibao*, September 19 and 22, 1920).

Angered by both this popular opposition and the central government's disregard for his own recommendation, Wang resisted this appointment first by threatening that he would be unable to prevent disorder (from his own troops!) if Xia actually assumed his position and second by demanding more central funds for troop pay as a price for his acceptance of the appointment (*Shibao*, September 25, and November 16 and 17, 1920). It would not be until November 1920 that Wang, at least on the surface, acquiesced to Xia's assumption of the civil governor's post. Even so, the tension between the two men continued until February 1921 when Xia resigned and was replaced by a compromise candidate who was both a Beiyang Military Academy graduate on good terms with Wang and a Hubei native (USDS 893.00/3840: Huston, March 9, 1921; *Shuntian ribao*, March 3, 1921; Liu, 1922: 45–47). While the final outcome was hardly a triumph for the popular opposition, the initial appointment of Xia no doubt emboldened hopes that the central government could be appealed to as a counterweight to Wang's authority in Hubei.

Similar patterns of organized popular opposition also emerged in response to Wang's growing financial demands. Thus, in late 1920 a group of Hubei residents in Beijing denounced Wang's use of threats of disorder to support his demands for funds from Wuhan's chambers of commerce, representatives of which had traveled to the capital to alert them to this problem. They also expressed their opposition to proposed new taxes or banknote issues to cover troop pay, arguing that military costs should be reduced by military disbandment. Finally, suspicious of possible embezzlement, they asked for a government inquiry into Wang's own accounts (*Shibao*, December 29, 1920). Meanwhile, even the normally compliant Provincial Assembly held a secret meeting in late 1920 where a majority voiced their opposition to Wang's various financial proposals, noting that the Hubei people should not be held responsible for the payroll of national forces. There were also reports that various Hankou public organizations had overcome previous feuds with the Hankou Chamber of Commerce to unite in opposing Wang's proposals. If Wang could not maintain order, they proposed that the city organize a merchant militia for its own defense (*Shibao*, December 24, 1920). All these

instances revealed the growing dissatisfaction with Wang that was finding at least some voice within public organizations inside Hubei itself. Yet it was also clear that these organizations needed to find outside means of expressing their protests, whether through leaks to the national press or by collaboration with Hubei residents outside of the province. Not surprisingly, then, the Hubei residents association of in Beijing became a central focal point of a campaign against any new financial exactions on the Hubei people (*Shibao*, December 28 and 29, 1920).

The succession of mutinies in Hubei added even more fuel to the anti-Wang flames, particularly as any concession to Wang's financial demands did not seem to have any effect in restraining troop disorder. Thus, following the first Yichang mutiny, another meeting of Beijing's Hubei residents called for a removal of all "guest" armies from Hubei as a means of preventing further atrocities (*Shibao*, December 4, 1920). Since Wang and his armies were themselves Northern outsiders, this was a veiled call for Wang's own removal. Another angry delegation of Hubei residents in Beijing traveled to Tianjin to seek the support of former president Li Yuanhong for the removal of the main commander they saw as directly responsible for the Yichang incident (*Shibao*, December 11, 1920). Finally, in the wake of other minor mutinies, a group of over two hundred Hubei residents in Beijing issued a plea to President Xu Shichang to remove Wang from his position for his inability to control the troops under his command (*Shuntian ribao*, March 8, 1921). At the same time, a group of Hubei natives operating within the Hunan-Hubei guild house in Beijing began publishing a newspaper (with surreptitious financial support from the head of the Hankou Chamber of Commerce) dedicated to publicizing Wang's crimes (Liu, 1922: 57; Rao, 1989: 95). Finally, on May 15, 1921, a crowd of over 800 Hubei residents in Beijing marched from the guild house to Tiananmen Square for an anti-Wang rally. They then proceeded to surround the office of the president for four hours, refusing to leave until an official representative received their petition calling for Wang's removal (*Dagongbao*, May 29, 1921). This then was the backdrop for even more energetic popular protests following the Yichang and Wuchang mutinies in June 1921.

A series of public meetings in both Hubei and Beijing gave immediate voice to the outrage over the June mutinies. At a meeting of over 200 public organization representatives called in Wuhan to discuss post-mutiny rehabilitation measures, the head of the Provincial Assembly was shouted down when he tried to deny that any deaths had resulted from the mutiny, while the chamber of commerce also came under attack for an overly fawning attitude toward Wang following previous incidents. The public anger was such that Wang felt compelled to meet with representatives from this meeting to offer

his apologies and to promise relief for victims of the mutinies (*Hankou zhongxibao*, June 12, 1921). In an unusual display of public anger, a group of six to seven hundred victims of the Wuchang incident gathered for a protest march on Wang's yamen, only backing down after the police and the chamber of commerce promised to deliver their banners and petitions personally to Wang (*Shenbao*, June 12, 1921). An "all-circles" (*gejie*) meeting of representatives in Wuchang also condemned Wang for allowing his troops to riot and called for his punishment (*Shuntian ribao*, June 21, 1921). The resolution of one such meeting in Wuchang acknowledged, however, that the "bare-handed" people of Hubei could not oust Wang on their own, and so needed to appeal to "outsiders" (*wairen*) for help. In this case, then, they channeled their appeal for aid through the Hubei residents association in Beijing (Liu, 1922: 123).

This appeal found a ready audience. Already on June 9, a meeting of Hubei residents unprecedented in size (reported at over a thousand people) met at the Hunan–Hubei guild house in Beijing in response to the news of the Yichang and Wuchang mutinies. They immediately called for the establishment of Hubei self-government and pledged to petition the Beijing government for Wang's removal. Delegates from this meeting followed up with several meetings with Premier Jin Yupeng and his representatives to present their demands (*Dagongbao*, June 14 and 16, 1921; Liu, 1922: 116–17; Rao, 1989: 94). Similar calls would eventually arrive in petitions from Hubei native associations in Tianjin, Shanghai, Guangdong, Hunan, and even Singapore (*Dagongbao*, June 19, and July 20, 1921; Liu, 1922: 101–2, 123–25). Due to their presence in the capital, though, the Beijing association took the lead in a concerted campaign to pressure the central government to remove Wang from power.

The Hubei residents' June 9 meeting was only the first of a series of actions in a growing anti-Wang campaign. A Hubei "salvation" (*jiuwang*) meeting on June 21, again attended by nearly a thousand Hubei residents, listened to reports from Yichang and Wuchang representatives and laid the blame for the mutinies at Wang's feet. The main decision of the meeting was to continue to call on the central government for Wang's removal. In pursuit of this end, the participants closed their meeting with a decision to march en masse, carrying anti-Wang banners, to the president's office to demand not only Wang's removal and punishment but also the seizure of Wang's personal wealth to compensate the victims of the mutinies. The marchers only agreed to disperse after a representative from the president's office acknowledged the justice of their demands and agreed to present them personally to the president (*Dagongbao*, June 26, 1921; Liu, 1922: 128–31). Additional meetings followed as days went by

without any sign of government action. Seeking to reinforce their demands, meeting participants first decided to send teams of four to five representatives in rotation to continue to present their petitions. This was followed by a vigil outside of the president's office, which was forcibly dispersed by the police. While the president's representative continued to assure the protesters that Wang would indeed have to be removed at some point, he openly admitted that the government faced difficulty in implementing this decision (Liu, 1922: 132, 137–40).

In pressing the president to remove Wang Zhanyuan from office, the Hubei petitioners in Beijing sought to force the central government to live up to its own claim of ultimate authority over the provinces. The problem, of course, was that the central government had little ability to enforce this claim without the cooperation of the military commanders in the provinces themselves. Faced with the government's inaction, one Hubei petitioner confronted the president's representative with this direct question:

> In coming here today, we recognize President Xu as the ruler of the Republic; if the president personally admits that he has no power to rule over the Republic, then we would definitely not set foot inside the Xinhua Gate [the president's office]; so in coming this time, we only want the president to provide the simplest answer, namely, does he have power over Hubei or not? (Liu, 1922: 141)

The response they received sought to finesse the question by shifting responsibility. Maintaining that the government did indeed have authority to remove Wang from office, the president's representative nonetheless noted that under the country's "responsible cabinet" system the president himself could not personally act but had to refer the matter to the premier. When the petitioners pressed their appeal to the premier, a representative from his office again expressed sympathy with their goals but noted that the cabinet itself could not take direct action, but would have to refer the case to the Ministry of War (*Dagongbao*, June 30, 1921; Liu, 1922: 141–42). Each of these responses provoked yet another "emergency" meeting of Beijing's Hubei residents over how best to press their case. In their "final" petition to the premier's office, the Hubei representatives refused to leave until they were given a positive response. After eight hours, the premier's representative simply snuck away (*Dagongbao*, July 6 and 23, 1921; Liu, 1922: 142–43).

Even though these appeals for action from the central government failed to achieve their objective, the structure of warlord governance also presented anti-Wang activists with other options. Proponents of the oust-Wang/Hubei

self-government movement were actually divided over a number of different strategies. Some believed a new Hubei government needed to be organized from the ground up, with a new army recruited from local county forces. Most, however, agreed that to succeed the anti-Wang movement would have to rely on "outsiders." Thus, one group sought to gain central government support for the appointment of a native Hubei military governor. The efforts of Beijing's Hubei residents seemed to show the futility of this strategy. There were, however, other "outside" forces that could be appealed to aid in Wang's removal, namely other warlord commanders. Supporters of this strategy were in turn divided over which warlord to appeal to. Some thought an alliance with the emerging leader of the Zhili faction, Wu Peifu, would have the greatest chance of success. Wu, however, did not respond positively to initial approaches by anti-Wang activists. More success was found in an approach to the new "self-government" regime in Hunan led by the commander of the Hunan army, Zhao Hengdi. With Zhao's approval, Hubei activists met in Changsha on July 22 to organize an alternate Hubei government. Zhao meanwhile also sought an alliance with Sichuan commanders who had carried out their own "self-government" movement by ousting Yunnan militarists from their province. In late July 1921, Hunan and Sichuan forces initiated a coordinated advance into Hubei to "aid" the people of Hubei in their struggle against Wang Zhanyuan (*Hankou xinwenbao*, June 21 and 22, 1921; Zhang, 1962: 105–6; Liu, 1922: 147–52).

The "Aid Hubei" war did ultimately bring about Wang's fall from power, but hardly in the way envisioned by the proponents of the oust-Wang movement. With Northern control over Hubei threatened, the central government and its affiliated warlords finally agreed they could no longer allow Wang to remain at his post. One of Wu Peifu's commanders, Xiao Yaonan, who happened to be a Hubei native, was sent with a large military force to "aid" Wang against invading Hunan and Sichuan forces. After reaching Wuhan, though, Xiao refused to advance to assist Wang's beleaguered forces at the front. Seeing the writing on the wall, on August 11 Wang resigned his position and retired to Tianjin. Xiao then mobilized his forces to block the further advance of Hunan and Sichuan troops, while he himself replaced Wang as military governor (Zhang, 1962: 107; Liu, 1922: 173–74). In an argument over strategies to achieve self-government, one group of Hubei residents in Hunan had originally warned against seeking the support of another general to aid in Wang's removal as simply "rejecting the tiger while welcoming the wolf" (Liu, 1922: 123–24). Ironically the original wolf (Zhao) invited into Hubei by the oust-Wang movement did not in fact replace the tiger (Wang), but provided the opportunity for different wolf (albeit a Hubei native) to seize Wang's base.

One must be careful not to let this outcome, the replacement of one warlord with another, obscure the importance of public protests in setting the conditions, and justifications, for this war and its outcome. Warlord politics cannot be totally understood without recognizing the context of public opinion in which it operated. At the same time, popular protests not only found opportunities in, but were also constrained in turn by, a synarchic structure of shared governance characteristic of the warlord era. The Hubei case, however, also goes a step further by providing insights into the way foreign powers also shared in this system of governance, and as such also provided other opportunities for the organized expression of anti-warlord public opinion.

Synarchy in Practice

The main political manifestation of semi-colonialism in early Republican China was foreign participation in Chinese governance, albeit in different contexts and uneven levels ranging from direct control over foreign leaseholds to more limited interventions to uphold specific treaty-based privileges. While most-favored-nation clauses in foreign treaties basically equalized the rights and privileges held by foreigners in China, and encouraged a unified approach to relations with the Chinese government through the diplomatic corps in Beijing, the fragmented structure of warlord power combined with the localized nature of many foreign rights and interests (such as the location of treaty ports) to create a more dispersed pattern of foreign participation in Chinese governance at provincial or local levels. Thus, most provinces had commissioners of foreign affairs assigned to deal specifically with issues that might arise with foreign citizens in their territories, and local and provincial officials often interacted directly with foreign representatives, such as consuls, at their levels. Chinese officials at all levels acknowledged their obligation to uphold foreign treaty rights, even as the representatives of the foreign powers jealously guarded these rights and intervened if necessary to maintain them. In this way, foreign powers can be seen as sharing in a synarchic system of governance. For the Chinese public, then, foreign powers did not simply exist and operate in a separate arena but appeared as partners in the era's fragmented structure of political authority. It should be no surprise, then, that the foreign powers not only took active steps to protect the interests of their citizens in response to troop mutinies in Hubei in 1920–1921, but that they were also sought out and appealed to by the different players in the political controversy that arose in the wake of these disturbances.

The foreign response to the mutinies in Yichang and Wuchang followed a fairly standard playbook that was deployed in any instance of indirect threat

or direct harm to foreign interests. Foreign gunboats were dispatched to provide additional protection to the affected cities and to deter any repetition of troop disturbances. In the case of Yichang, foreign consuls met with gunboat commanders to develop a plan to divide responsibility among British, American, and Japanese gunboats for the defense of different portions of the city where foreigners resided (*Dagongbao*, July 3, 1921; USDS 893.102Ic/14: Huston, July 2, 1921). In an example of synarchy in practice, following Yichang's second mutiny the local Chinese military commander sought the assistance of foreign gunboats to prevent new threats from a passing Chinese military force even as civil officials rushed to prevent any situation that might lead to foreign intervention (USDS 893.102Ic/24: Smith, July 1921). Besides dispatching gunboats, the foreign diplomatic corps in Beijing and individual foreign consuls issued protests to the central government and to local authorities respectively. Finally, they demanded that the Chinese government provide compensation for foreign losses (*Shenbao*, June 17, 1921; *Shuntian ribao*, June 8, and September 21, 1921; *Hankou zhongxibao*, June 12, 1921; *Dagongbao*, June 13, 14, and 23, 1921).

In making these protests, the foreign powers did not hesitate to offer political criticism or to suggest political remedies. Thus, in the case of the first Yichang mutiny, the diplomatic corps in Beijing was reported to have considered a proposal that in the future no troops be garrisoned within thirty miles of a commercial port (*Shibao*, December 14, 1920). Following the 1921 Yichang and Wuchang mutinies, the foreign consuls in Hubei issued a call for the removal of all "guest" armies from the province and the disbandment of excess troops, and demanded that the authorities establish better control over military officers and resolve troop pay issues (*Shuntian ribao*, June 24, 1921).

There was an implicit threat in such protests. The Chinese press reported that the British ambassador in Beijing had warned the Chinese government that if it could not get results from its own orders to provide adequate defense against troop depredations, then the British government would be forced to take independent action to defend its citizens (*Dagongbao*, June 23, 1921; Trotter, 1994: 25, 48). In most cases, though, the foreign powers were not, in fact, prepared to turn to force to achieve their ends. Rather, such expressions of displeasure were meant to put pressure on officials, such as Wang Zhanyuan, to remedy conditions that put foreign interests at risk. Under the Qing dynasty such protests "worked" to the extent that civil officials who failed to manage foreign affairs effectively often found themselves cashiered or worse. Thus, reporting on conditions at Wuhan following the Wuchang mutiny, the American vice-consul at Hankou noted, with obvious nostalgia, that "in the days under the Empire had a similar occurrence taken place, the

Tuchun [military governor] would long since have committed suicide after having been degraded and removed from office" (USDS 893.00/3981: Huston, June 22, 1921).

Obviously the central government in the Republic had less capacity to dismiss warlords like Wang Zhanyuan outright in the face of such foreign criticism. Nonetheless, Wang's status as governor was reinforced by the acknowledgment of his position by the central government, and it did not serve his interests to become a source of trouble for the government in its relations with the foreign powers. Likewise, evidence of an inability to manage foreign affairs could also undermine his reputation as an effective administrator and reveal political weakness to potential enemies. Indeed, a declaration by Hubei residents in Hunan drew specific attention to the danger to the nation implicit in these foreign protests to make a case not only for the ouster of Wang Zhanyuan but for the establishment of a system of self-government to eliminate military governorships entirely (Liu, 1922: 123–25).

It was hardly surprising then that Chinese officials, including supposedly powerful warlords, made considerable effort to maintain good relations with foreign authorities. This included interactions where officials, in effect, reported to foreign representatives on their activities. Thus, Wang Zhanyuan was said to be distressed by the "harsh" tone of the "inquiry" he received from the foreign consuls in Hankou following the mutinies, and sought the aid of the provincial commissioner of foreign affairs to draft a suitable reply (*Shenbao*, June 17, 1921). Accompanied by his new civil governor, Wang Zhanyuan personally visited each of the foreign consulates in Hankou to apologize for the disorder and to give his spin on the cause of the mutiny, suggesting it was instigated by bandits and political rebels (*Dagongbao*, June 26, 1921; USDS 893.00/3981: Huston, June 22, 1921). Likewise, after the formation of a provisional Hubei government by a group of Hubei self-government activists in Hunan, the man chosen to head this government, Jiang Zuobin, made courtesy calls on the foreign consulates in Changsha (USDS 893.00/4028: Adams, July 28, 1921). The activists in Hunan also forwarded a letter to the diplomatic corps in Beijing announcing their enactment of a Hubei self-government constitution and Jiang's election, and explaining why they felt it necessary to take up arms to force Wang's removal (USDS 890.00/4036: Adams, August 3, 1921). Such reports by Chinese officials, or even, as seen in the later case, by Chinese political claimants, can be read as implicit recognition of shared governance.

Another important aspect of this shared governance, and one that particularly complicated Wang Zhanyuan's relations with the foreign powers, was the existence of foreign concessions on Chinese soil. Removed from direct

Chinese administrative control, these foreign settlements became, in essence, safe havens for political activists and conspirators for the relatively free expression of public opinion. The foreign concessions at Hankou had, for example, served as a base for revolutionary activists preparing for the Wuchang uprising in 1911, and they continued to be a thorn in Wang Zhanyuan's side as a sanctuary for his political opponents (Liu, 1922: 110; USDS 893.00/3985: Huston, June 24, 1921). Even the civil governor Xia Shoukang moved his office to the protection of the foreign concessions in Hankou when he found his official residence in Wuchang threatened by Wang's troops on his first day on the job (Liu, 1922: 11–12)!

Following the Wuchang mutiny, Wang tried to make use of the crisis to resolve this problem with anti-Wang activists in the Hankou foreign concessions. Insofar as he claimed that these men were actually responsible for instigating the mutiny, he used his visits to the foreign consuls in Hankou to request their assistance in preventing the use of the concessions as their base of operation and asked that they be handed over to Chinese police (USDS 893.00/3994: Huston, June 30, 1921; *Dagongbao*, June 26, 1921). Ni Zhongwen seeks to use this incident to confirm his portrayal of Wang as a "loyal running dog" of imperialism and to substantiate the close cooperative relationship between the imperialist powers and warlords. Thus, Ni claims that the foreign consuls not only expressed their appreciation for Wang's efforts to maintain order but approved his request for the round-up of "bandits" who had sought refuge in the Hankou concessions (Ni, 1989: 152). The newspaper account cited as evidence by Ni, however, actually reports the consuls responding more cautiously to Wang's request, simply noting that any extradition of "bandits" would be handled by the courts (*Dagongbao*, June 26, 1921). A report by the American consul likewise took note, without approval or disapproval, of Wang's request. But there is no mention of any agreement to aid Wang in making arrests within the concessions themselves. Indeed, what arrests were made are noted to have occurred in the Chinese city, not in the foreign concessions (USDS 893.00/3994: Huston, June 30, 1921). In the end, a report written after Wang's fall noted that leading figures in the Hubei self-government movement continued to live, and engage in anti-Wang propaganda, in the Hankou foreign settlement, mainly in the Japanese concession, despite Wang's efforts to have them expelled (USDS 893.00/4115: Heintzleman, September 9, 1921). This suggests that although shared governance required some degree of cooperation, this hardly meant that either side simply concurred with the requests of the other. The relationship between warlords and foreign power implied by labeling men like Wang Zhanyuan "running dogs of imperialism" likewise does little justice to the actual practice of negotiated

diplomacy, where each side drew on competing bases of authority to pursue and defend their own separate interests.

This tension of interests was particularly important because it provided space for the expression of anti-warlord public opinion through newspapers that were able to publish free of official Chinese jurisdiction within the foreign concessions. The main example of this was the *Huguang xinbao* edited by Xu Zhuping, which operated out of the Japanese concession. Xu was a consistent critic of Wang's rule. For example, an exposé by Xu's newspaper forced an inquiry by the Provincial Assembly into Wang's manipulation of currency in the Hubei mint. Nonetheless, when Wang requested that the Japanese stop the newspaper's publication, they refused (Liu, 1922: 111). Xu's newspaper also provided detailed, and damning, accounts of the mutinies that broke out over 1920 and 1921 (USDS 893.00/2684: Huston, December 4, 1920; USDS 893.00/3835: Huston, March 18, 1921). Following the June 1921 mutinies, Xu led a group of Hubei citizens in publishing a letter that contested Wang's version of the mutinies and a widely circulated anti-Wang manifesto (Liu, 1922: 103–9; USDS 893.00/3985: Huston, June 24, 1921). As a result of such actions, Wang included Xu on the list of men presented to the foreign consuls for apprehension following the Wuchang mutiny. The Japanese consul, however, refused to accede to Wang's request. He noted that he and the other consuls all knew Xu personally, and were sure that the charges were false. In any case, he noted that since Xu's newspaper was an organ of public opinion, it would be hard to intervene (Liu, 1922: 111). To the extent that consular authorities were committed to defending their jurisdictional authority over their concession territories, they clearly felt no obligation to serve or support Wang's political objectives. This created an arena for the expression of public opinion that facilitated oppositional politics such as Hubei's anti-warlord movement.

Beyond offering a haven for political activists and space for the more open expression of public opinion, in the context of growing troop disorder many Chinese also looked creatively to foreign concessions as resources that could be deployed in other ways for the benefit of the Chinese people. For example, in December 1920, the Chinese chamber of commerce in Hankou joined with other public organizations to plan a merchant militia to defend themselves from military mutinies. If unable to obtain the weapons needed to supply this militia from Wang or the central government, they proposed creating this militia through a cooperative venture with Hankou's foreign concessions (*Shuntian ribao*, December 24, 1920). Following the Wuchang mutiny, the idea of organizing militia was revived and, finding no official support for this idea, some again proposed the formation of a joint Chinese-foreign volunteer

corps. One commentator argued that this should be done no matter what harm to Chinese authority or prestige, if for no other reason but that the threat of this cooperative venture alone might make the Chinese government listen to their demands (*Shuntian ribao*, June 19 and 21, 1921). Clearly many Chinese were willing to explore ways to make use of foreign resources for the greater public good.

Interestingly, the central government itself was not beyond using foreign pressure in attempts to bolster its own authority. While the government was clearly alarmed over the strongly worded warning issued by the foreign diplomatic corps following the Yichang and Wuchang mutinies, it was cognizant of its own limited ability to control the warlord forces that caused this warning. Therefore Premier Jin Yupeng forwarded the text of the warning to news outlets and officials around the country in the hope that it would help to "awaken" military and civil officials, in both the North and the South, to the crisis arising from these mutinies (*Dagongbao*, June 23, 1921).

The unfolding anti-Wang struggle following the Yichang and Wuchang mutinies resulted in even more direct popular appeals for foreign support. In an early and widely publicized response to the mutinies, a prominent Hubei provincial assemblyman, Bai Yuhuan, called on Chinese and foreigners to unite to demand Wang's execution and to create a joint committee to oversee troop disbandment (*Shenbao*, June 10, 1921; *Dagongbao*, June 15, 1921). At the same time, a newspaper reported a telegram from Yichang and Wuchang public organizations noting a loss of hope in the ability of the government to protect the people, followed by another wire arguing that foreign governments should be asked to provide this protection if the Chinese government could not (*Shenbao*, June 10, 1921). At the very first meeting of Hubei residents in Beijing on June 9, one participant was reported to have exclaimed that if the government failed to pay attention, then the only choice would be to petition (*qingyuan*) the foreign diplomatic corps (*Dagongbao*, June 14, 1921). The resolution of the June 21 assembly of Hubei residents to take their anti-Wang petitions directly to the offices of the president and the premier also warned that if they were ignored they would have no choice but to present their case to the diplomatic corps (*Dagongbao*, June 26, 1921; Liu, 1922: 129).

The June 21 resolution clearly meant to use the threat of an appeal to foreign diplomats to prod their own government into action, and it did not remain just a threat. Frustrated in their repeated efforts to get the central government to act, the Hubei residents association in Beijing issued a special plea to the foreign diplomatic community to exert its own pressure for the removal and punishment of Wang Zhanyuan, compensation for losses from Wang's property, and the disbandment of mutinous troops. A perceived commonality of

interests created by the mutinies eased this approach to the foreign powers as potential allies. They noted that the situation in which only Chinese suffered from the effects of troop mutinies changed with the first Yichang mutiny, when "foreigners shared in losses." At that point, the document continued, "The people of Hupeh [Hubei] requested you to take up the matter with the Chinese Government so that Wang Chan-yuan [Wang Zhanyuan] might be instructed to impose strict discipline on his troops." Despite Wang's promises, new mutinies broke out in Yichang and in Wuchang, where not only Chinese citizens' lives and property were lost, "but foreign residents of various nationalities sustained innumerable losses." After noting their own efforts to seek redress, they boldly asserted, "In order to protect your nationals and their trade, it is your duty to request the dismissal and punishment of Wang Chan-yuan so as to eradicate the root of disorders" (USDS 893.00/3981: Huston, June 22, 1921, enclosure). The association was not unaware of the criticism that might arise by such an appeal to the foreign powers. Thus they took offense with press reports that they had forwarded a petition (*qingyuan*) to the foreign diplomatic community, noting that this document was simply a "presentation" (*shensu*) to make their case. But in the end, they noted that since they were unable to get a suitable response from the central government, they felt they had no other way (*budeyi*) but to take this action, in the hope that it would produce extra pressure for Wang's removal (Liu, 1922: 133). This, then, was the tenor of the times in which the citizens of Yichang would also make their appeal to the diplomatic community to turn their port into an international settlement.

The Yichang Plea for Internationalization

Immediately after the second Yichang mutiny, a public notice, signed by seventy-seven prominent gentry and merchants, announced a meeting to be held for the specific purpose of proposing the establishment of an international municipal government and the formation of an "international volunteer corps" for the protection of the city. The turnout for the meeting, held just ten days after the mutiny, was clearly substantial, although claims in subsequent reports by meeting leaders of up to fifty thousand attendees seem improbable. After agreeing on the points raised in the original announcement, the meeting generated a committee of around 70 men (divided into various subcommittees) to implement the proposals under the supervision of six directors (including the manager of the Yichang branch of the Bank of China, the chair and vice-chair of the local chamber of commerce, and three prominent gentry). The committee, identifying itself as the "society for the

consideration of measures for the preservation of order on behalf of the public of Yichang which has been visited by disaster," then submitted a petition to the local circuit intendant (*daoyin*) making the case for the establishment of an international settlement, and asking him to forward their petition to the military and civil governor. The circuit intendant accepted this request and included the proposition for the establishment of an international settlement into a broader eight-point proposal to the provincial government that also dealt with relief for mutiny victims and measures for insuring troop discipline.[2] Meanwhile a circular telegram, issued under the name of the "People's Union of the Seven Districts of Yichang," recounted the suffering created by the mutiny and expressed their anger over the government's seeming acceptance of Wang Zhanyuan's evasive attribution of the mutiny to "robbers and disbanded soldiers" and over the government's rejection of their demand for Wang's dismissal. The telegram concluded with a "plea for internationalization":

> We have decided to petition the Diplomatic Corps in Peking [Beijing] to send a strong protest to the Chinese Government. We also hope that the City of Ichang [Yichang] may be opened as an International Concession, so that the Chinese Government may not place any more garrisons within it. *We will make no complaint even if we become slaves without nationality* [italics added]. We trust that those who uphold our idea will join our party in this action.[3]

There is no question that the initiative in the proposal to create an international settlement at Yichang came from the citizens of Yichang themselves, not from the foreign powers. Its proponents clearly identified the opportunity for making this proposal in terms of a commonality of interest brought on by the losses suffered by the city's Chinese and foreign residents. The petition to the circuit intendant also suggested a legal foundation for this proposal in the Chefoo Convention of 1877, which originally opened Yichang to foreign trade, and which generally provided for the creation of special zones in treaty ports for foreign residents. In their approach to Chinese officials with this request, though, the proponents put a nationalist twist on their request by suggesting that, given the situation resulting from the mutiny, the foreign powers themselves would probably now insist on the establishing a settlement. In that case, "If foreigners force us into giving one it will injure China's prestige and it would be better for us to make the proposal ourselves" (USDS 893.102Ic/26: Smith, July 16, 1921, enclosure 1). By taking the initiative, the Chinese side would be in a better position to have more say in how the settlement would be run.

Similar concerns for both treaty precedents and national prestige were deployed by the circuit intendant in passing this proposal on. He noted that the foreigners had been discussing the possibility of a settlement at Yichang as far back as 1883, without ever coming to a decision. He also noted a previous unsettled dispute in 1915, when he was serving as commissioner of foreign affairs, over an attempt to set the boundaries of the treaty port at Yichang. At that time, the foreign ministers had insisted that the treaty ports were not territorially defined, while the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs insisted that the ports were defined by the boundaries of the foreign settlements within them. The circuit intendant was thus suggesting that establishing a settlement might actually limit any expansion of foreign claims of authority. At the same time, he repeated the strategy of the Yichang petitioners, noting that

> The two outbreaks at Ichang, which have involved foreign interests, affect our national prestige. It will be difficult therefore to avoid laying out a settlement in the future. It would be better for us to take the initiative in making the proposal . . . ourselves than to wait for foreigners to extort it from us. (USDS 893.102Ic/26: Smith, July 16, 1921, enclosure 2)

Ironically, it is the circuit intendant's support for the proposal on these terms that encouraged the foreign legations in Beijing to conclude that the idea of a settlement was supported by Chinese officials, and thus that the chances of gaining Chinese compliance for this were "not unfavorable" (USDS 893.102Ic/26: Ruddock, August 1, 1921; USDS 893.102Ic/12: Craigie, August 6, 1921).

The original idea for the proposal to establish a foreign settlement did not occur without some foreign involvement, but the nature of this involvement shows that foreign desires were not the initial driving force behind this measure. What is shown, however, is the extent to which Chinese official and community leaders routinely consulted with local foreign representatives in matters of shared interest. Thus, even before the mass meeting at Yichang, Chinese representatives visited the British consul, J. L. Smith, to inform him about their plans to make this proposal and to inquire about his attitude toward it. Smith remained noncommittal in regard to the specific proposal, simply noting that he would "support in principle any reasonable project which would ensure greater security for life and property." As the proposal moved forward, Smith continued to meet not only with these Chinese representatives but also with the circuit intendant to share his views on their

actions. In these meetings, Smith began to put forth his own, slightly different proposal. In essence he argued that there would be little value in an international settlement unless a permanent foreign garrison guarded it. (In his report to the British legation, he also noted that foreign residents in Yichang were too few to support an international volunteer force as suggested in Chinese proposals). Inasmuch as the real danger was from the presence of Chinese troops, he returned to a proposal made after the first Yichang mutiny for the demilitarization of the treaty port, forbidding the garrisoning of any Chinese troops within a certain radius of the city. He argued that the proposal for an international settlement should take second place to this solution (USDS 893.102Ic/26: Smith, July 16, 1921).

In his reports, J. L. Smith comes across as a behind-the-scenes conspirator, promoting his own views even while attempting to hide their origins. Thus, besides his advice to his Chinese visitors, he also met with foreign businessmen and missionaries, and the foreign commissioner of customs, to press his idea for demilitarization on them, and he also suggested that they exert their own influence on their compradors or prominent Chinese acquaintances to present this proposal as their own. In the end, he was disappointed to discover that while his Chinese interlocutors seemed, to his face, willing to accept his plan, in their own proposals they only suggested a reduction in the number of Chinese troops stationed at the port rather than a total ban on any Chinese garrison. Clearly they feared that the idea of total demilitarization would be rejected out of hand by the military governor and higher Chinese authorities. Thus, even as he attempted to hide his own hand behind this proposal he concluded that ultimately the Chinese preferred that the foreign powers take the lead (and the "odium") for such proposals even while reaping their benefits (USDS 893.102Ic/26: Smith, July 16, 1921). He had more success in swaying foreign public opinion in Yichang toward his view. After Smith met with the missionary organizer of a meeting of foreigners (including British, American, Belgian, Dutch, Swedish, and Japanese representatives) called to discuss a response to the mutinies, this group made the demilitarization of the port their first demand, followed by a call for the organization of an international settlement.[4] Both proposals would move forward for discussion by the diplomatic corps, but in the end the only real consensus on both Chinese and foreign sides was for the establishment of a foreign settlement.

There were, nonetheless, also differences over what form the proposed international settlement was to take. Indeed, a later memorandum composed by the U.S. Department of State, following a meeting with a representative from the British embassy, came to the conclusion that "there was a great difference between what the Chinese really wanted and what the foreigners

wanted" (USDS 893.102Ic/20: "Memorandum," August 16, 1921). The initial announcement for the mass meeting in Yichang in early June 1921 had cited a very specific, and desirable, model for adoption, namely the municipal government at Chefoo (Yantai). All subsequent Chinese petitions or reports repeatedly expressed a desire to follow the Chefoo example, or that of other settlements organized in a similar fashion (USDS 893.102Ic/26: Smith, July 16, 1921; *Shenbao*, July 4, 1921). The main feature, and attraction, of the Chefoo model was that it created a system of joint administration under an elected municipal council with an equal number of Chinese and foreign members, which was mainly concerned with the maintenance of public works. By avoiding the creation of a foreign administered "concession," this model lessened the compromise to Chinese sovereignty. Indeed, the Chefoo municipal council still reported to Chinese officials, and the police of the settlement still remained under official Chinese control (USDS 893.102Ic/26: Smith, July 16, 1921, enclosures 1 and 2; USDS 893.102Ic/14: Huston, July 2, 1921, "Report on the Mass Meeting of the Community"). For this reason, some members of the foreign diplomatic community, such as J. L. Smith, noted that the Chefoo situation was not "really" a settlement in the usual sense, and proposed instead other models that provided for more substantial foreign control. Nonetheless, the consensus seemed to be to accept the Chinese preference for the Chefoo model, if necessary, to avoid offending Chinese sensibilities (USDS 893.102Ic/26: Ruddock, August 1, 1921, and Smith, July 18, 1921; USDS 893.102Ic/20: "Memorandum," August 16, 1921).

In examining the specific proposals for the establishment of an international settlement at Yichang, then, there is little to suggest that the people of Yichang were in fact willing to become "slaves without nationality," as was rhetorically proclaimed in the People's Union circular telegram. This language was shocking precisely because it tapped into a nationalist discourse, common since the turn of the century, that expressed alarm over the possibility that the Chinese might become a "lost people" (*wangguo zhi min*) (see Karl, 1998). To a certain extent, the circular telegram's language might simply have reflected momentary despair in the face of extraordinary devastation. Thus, in forwarding this telegram to the legation at Beijing, the American consul at Hankou noted that

> the Chinese are indeed in a desperate plight when they have to appeal to the foreigners to establish an International Concession at Ichang in order that they may obtain the protection which they have right to expect from their own government. (USDS 893.00/3986: Huston, June 22, 1921)

It was not an outcome, however, that most Chinese were willing to accept. Thus, an anti-Wang manifesto published in the Hankou-based *Huguang xinbao* concluded with a statement that "in the future there may be a time when we wish to be treated as the Annamites" (i.e., to become colonial subjects), but the authors immediately rejected this "dangerous" idea, fearing that "once the province and the home are gone, our lives cannot be preserved," and calling on their compatriots to continue to "struggle for existence" (enclosure in USDS 893.00/3985: Huston, June 24, 1921). The proponents of the international settlement at Yichang therefore had to walk a fine line between the opportunity they saw to protect their own lives and property through a collaborative arrangement with the foreign powers and the demands of Chinese nationalism. The end result, as seen in their proposals, was actually a careful consideration of the best way to bring the supposed benefits of an international settlement with the least effect on Chinese sovereignty.

For all the controversy the Yichang foreign settlement issue may have caused, the proposal never reached the stage of implementation. Ni Zhongwen (1989: 152) credits the Chinese government with ultimately blocking both the proposals for a foreign settlement at, or a demilitarized zone around, Yichang. Ni neglects to mention, however, that the newspaper account he cites to show Beijing's opposition also reports strong disapproval of the international settlement scheme by the U.S. ambassador as an unwarranted "aggression" that was unsuited to the times (*Dagongbao*, July 17, 1921). The diplomatic record likewise gives little indication that official Chinese opposition was an important, let alone determining, cause in the decision by the foreign powers not to pursue this initiative. Rather it was persistent obstruction by the United States, combined with a tradition that the Beijing diplomatic corps only act in unanimity, that sealed the fate of this proposal.

The foreign diplomatic corps in Beijing originally reached an early consensus to press for both an international settlement of some sort at Yichang and a demilitarized zone (of thirty miles) around the port.[5] In this case, they were responding not just to Chinese suggestions but also to pressure from foreign public opinion in China in support of taking stronger action to protect their interests from military outrages.[6] Thus, the chargé d'affaires at the American legation in Beijing wrote to the Department of State, "it appears to the legations in Peking that the delimitation of an international settlement at Ichang in the governing of which the Chinese shall bear an equal part with other nationalities, and the promulgation of regulations relieving Ichang and other important trade centers where foreigners are residing from the immediate presence of lawless Chinese troops, constitute steps that could be taken without great loss of prestige by the Chinese Government and that would

undoubtedly be acclaimed with great approval by the mass of Chinese citizens affected" (USDS 893.102Ic/18: Ruddock, July 11, 1921).

The response of the U.S. Department of State, however, was negative on both counts. First, the secretary of state noted that the United States had a long-standing policy against the principle of "military neutralization." Second, he found no reason to believe that the establishment of a foreign settlement at Yichang would make the port any safer, and instead feared such an action might backfire to produce even worse results (USDS 893.102Ic/9: Hughes, July 30, 1921). The State Department in particular sought to avoid the possibility of direct foreign military action if the Chinese government proved incapable of removing local Chinese troops from Yichang (Trotter, 1994: 74). The U.S. reply then was to present a three-part alternative proposal that

> in the event of injury to foreign interests, the Powers will insist upon the Chinese Government upholding the higher military authorities concerned personally responsible, and will deny them refuge in their own territories, or in the foreign settlements and concessions in China, and will reserve the right of exacting from the Chinese government punitive damages for any such injuries. (USDS 893.102Ic/9: Hughes, July 30, 1921)

The other powers raised a number of objections to the practicality of this alternative, and the British government took the lead in trying to get the United States to reconsider its position. But the Department of State would not be moved (USDS 893.102Ic/10: Ruddock, July 21, 1921, Hughes, July 25, 1921, and MacMurray, July 30, 1921; USDS 893.102Ic/27: Ruddock, August 22, 1921, enclosures 1–5; Trotter, 1994: 74).

In the end, the British considered unanimity of action as essential to maintaining the broader influence of the diplomatic corps in China (Trotter, 1994: 29–31, 81). Therefore, they accepted the United States' three-part proposal as the best that could be achieved (USDS 893.102Ic/27: Clive, August 6, 1921, and Alston, August 13, 1921). After gaining the support of the other legations, the American proposal was presented to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (USDS 893.102Ic/28: Schurman, September 29, 1921, and enclosures). Ironically, by the time this policy was approved, Wang Zhanyuan had already resigned his position, and the arguments of those who thought the American policy was impractical were proven correct. Wang was never personally held responsible for the losses caused by his troops, and he lived out his days in Tianjin, with his wealth largely intact, until his death in 1934 (Zheng, 1962: 258–60).

Ultimately, the Department of State remained skeptical of the evidence and assurances that the Chinese people themselves supported the idea of the formation of an international settlement at Yichang. In rejecting this proposal, the department remained particularly sensitive to the possibility that foreign action in this area might ultimately provoke a Chinese nationalist response inimical to longer term foreign interests. An internal Department of State memorandum composed following one final negotiation with the British noted,

> if we took advantage of their weakness and fear at this time to obtain rights, which, later on, they might judge to be in derogation of Chinese sovereignty, it would be very easy for disgruntled demagogues to inspire them to carry on a crusade against the foreigners. (USDS 893.102Ic/20: "Memorandum," August 16, 1921)

Clearly, there was an understanding that an opportunity to extort an extension of foreign power in China had presented itself. By the 1920s, though, the United States government, if not the other powers, recognized, and was reluctant to provoke, the potential ire of Chinese nationalism.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is neither to act as an apologist for imperialism in China nor to deny the importance of anti-imperialism as a major political force in the May 4th period, but rather to serve as a reminder of the extent to which, even in the early Republic, the foreign presence, and more specifically foreign participation in Chinese governance, was part of the normal political reality in which both Chinese officials and Chinese citizens operated. As such, when confronted with military depredations such as those seen in the Hubei mutinies, many of the Chinese affected realized that there could be room for common cause with the foreigners in their midst against a mutual threat. At the same time, their appeal for foreign intervention must be understood in the context of a broader effort to take full advantage of all the competing authorities and powers that presented themselves within the fragmented synarchic political system of the warlord republic.

To a large extent, the plea for the establishment of an international settlement by the citizens of Yichang can be understood as a tactic in an emerging anti-warlord movement. Concerns about the establishment of military governors had been raised at the very beginning of the Republic, and these concerns only intensified as the control of government by military men seemed to result only in continuing political instability and recurring civil war. Although the

term "warlord" itself did not come into common usage until the period following the May 4th incident (Waldron, 1991), a nascent anti-"warlord" movement was already apparent in the early Republic, expressed in demands for the division of civil and military administration (*junmin fenzhi*), the abolition of military governors and the disbandment of troops (*feidu caibing*), and the end of military control of government (*junren buganzheng*) (McCord, 1996).

Against this broad backdrop, a number of political struggles emerged that were directed at particular military governors, or warlords, in individual provinces, with the movement to oust Wang Zhanyuan being a prominent example. The driving force behind these struggles was most often specific grievances against the individual warlords and reflected public anger at increasing financial exactions, civil wars, general misgovernment, and military atrocities. To the extent that "foreigners" became targets in such struggles, these "foreigners" were actually military commanders, like Wang Zhanyuan, who ruled over provinces other than their own. The removal of such invaders was framed as the first step toward the restoration of provincial self-government. Cases like the struggle against Wang Zhanyuan, then, actually reflected a narrow focus on the removal of individual warlords rather than an assault on the condition of warlordism itself. The advantage of a personalized struggle against an individual warlord was that it opened the way for tactical appeals for assistance, not just from foreign authorities but also from military commanders in neighboring provinces. The disadvantage of this tactic, as seen in the Hubei case, was that it could simply result in the replacement of one warlord with another. As noted above, this danger was actually foreseen by Hubei self-government activists, who warned against "rejecting the tiger, while welcoming the wolf." To the extent that their prediction came true, one can see the denouement of the anti-Wang movement, and similar struggles in other provinces, as preparing the way for a new and broader conceptualism of anti-warlordism, one that would increasingly reject the synarchic features of early Republican warlord government in favor of a strong centralized state.

In a similar way, the tactical appeal for the establishment of an international settlement in Yichang as a means of defending the community against warlord depredations also reveals a transitional stage in the development of Chinese anti-imperialism. The Yichang petitioners themselves were hardly reactionary traitors to Chinese nationalism. Their advocacy of a specific form of an "international" settlement that preserved both formal Chinese sovereignty and a degree of local Chinese self-government belied their clearly manipulative claim that they were willing to become "slaves without nationality." And yet, their appeal to foreigners for protection also suggests that the demands of anti-imperialism had not completely jelled. Thus, in the minds of

at least some Chinese, the proposal for the establishment of a foreign settlement at Yichang could still be accommodated within the synarchic practice of Chinese-foreign relations rather than being framed as a simple matter of imperialism versus anti-imperialism. Nonetheless, the American rejection of the proposal showed that even some foreigners understood that the time for such accommodations was passing. In just five years, the Nationalist Party's Northern Expedition would sweep through Hubei on a platform of anti-imperialism calling for the elimination of all foreign concessions and settlements. As Hubei's citizens marched to overwhelm and reclaim the Hankou international concession, any suggestion of Chinese willingness to join with foreigners in the extension of synarchic practice through the creation of an international settlement was no longer imaginable.

Acknowledgments

The inspiration for this article originated in a casual conversation in the early 1980s when I related my discovery of documents on the story of Yichang's plea for internationalization to my PhD advisor, Ernest Young. Focusing on making my contribution to "China-centered" history, I disregarded his suggestion that this case might argue for the continued utility of John King Fairbank's concept of synarchy. Nonetheless, the idea burrowed into my subconscious until my further research on military atrocities led me back to the topic, and to this article. Beyond this original debt to Ernie Young, I also wish to thank Wang Ke-wen and an anonymous reviewer for *Modern China* who helped me sharpen my focus.

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Notes

1. Odoric Wou showed that even an important warlord such as Wu Peifu, despite all his best efforts, was largely unsuccessful at gaining concrete support from the foreign powers (1978: 147–260). Gavan McCormack, meanwhile, argues that while Zhang Zuolin received substantial Japanese aid, he was far from a simple tool for Japanese interests (1977: 253–54). More recently, Chen Zhongping (2011) has revealed that many and perhaps even the majority of provincial warlords, including Wang Zhanyuan, actually supported the anti-imperialist

goals of the May 4th demonstrators, even as they suppressed demonstrations they saw as threatening the maintenance of order in their territories.

2. These events are recounted in a July 16, 1921 letter from the British consul at Yichang, J. L. Smith, to the British minister in Beijing. This letter is enclosed in USDS 893.102Ic/26: Ruddock, August 1, 1921. Smith's letter includes translations of the Yichang citizens' petition to the circuit intendant (enclosure 1), and the circuit intendant's proposal to Hubei's military and civil governors (enclosure 2). A translated copy of a "Report on the Mass Meeting of the Community" issued by the meeting's leaders is included in USDS 893.102Ic/14: Huston, July 2, 1921.
3. A translation of this circular telegram is attached to a letter from J. C. Huston, Vice Consul in Charge, Hankou, to A. B. Ruddock, American Chargé d'Affairs, Beijing, June 22, 1921 (USDS 893.00/3986). This plea for the establishment of an international settlement in Yichang was also reported in the Chinese press (*Shuntian ribao*, June 21, 1921). The original Chinese text of this document was published in *Shenbao*, June 18, 1921.
4. The resolutions of this meeting can be found in Smith (July 16, 1921), in USDS 893.102Ic/26. They were also reported in an article on the meeting recorded in the *Central China Post* (July 11, 1921), attached to Huston (July 11, 1921), in USDS 893.102Ic/19.
5. The British minister in Beijing reported the agreement of his colleagues on June 24 to these points. Oddly, the minister makes no reference to the Chinese origin of the settlement proposal, simply noting that the action was taken "at my suggestion" (Trotter, 1994: 27). It was only much later, as he continued to press for the acceptance of this agreement, that the minister reports that the Chinese in Yichang had "meanwhile" also petitioned for the creation of a settlement (Trotter, 1994: 115).
6. An article in the English-language *Central China Post*, June 13, 1921, blamed the foreign ministers for remaining aloof from the "horrors" seen in cases like the Hubei mutinies, arguing that at times it was necessary for nations to be their "brother's keeper" (USDS 893.00/3986: Huston, June 22, 1921). Subsequent foreign public opinion became more explicit in support of both a demilitarized zone and an international settlement at Yichang (USDS 893.102Ic/18: Ruddock, July 11, 1921; USDS 893.102Ic/19: Huston, July 11, 1921).

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