

HSI-SHENG CH'I

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Warlord Politics in China  
1916-1928



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To my parents

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## Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. The Emergence of the Military Factions	10
3. The Composition of the Military Factions	36
4. Military Capabilities: Recruitment	77
5. Military Capabilities: Training	91
6. Military Capabilities: Weaponry and Tactics	116
7. Economic Capabilities	150
8. Normative Aspects of Military Politics	179
9. The Chinese Political System	196
Appendices	
A. Political and Military Leaders, 1916–1928	243
B. Chronology	246
Notes	251
Bibliography	267
Index	277

## Maps and Figures

### MAPS

#### Provinces of China, 1916–1928

- Distribution of factional power in China, 1920, prior  
to the Chihli-Anhwei War 210
- Distribution of factional power in China, 1922, on the  
eve of the First Chihli-Fengtien War 212
- Distribution of factional power in China, 1924, at the  
conclusion of the Second Chihli-Fengtien War 216
- Northern Expedition, 1926–1928 228

### facing p. 1

### FIGURES

1. The Krech-Crutchfield-Ballachey sociometric model 62
2. Sociometric diagram of the Anhwei faction 69
3. Sociometric diagram of the Chihli faction 70
4. Sociometric diagram of the Fengtien faction 71

## Tables

### Warlord Politics in China 1916-1928

1. Educational Background of Division Commanders, 1916 and 1924	103
2. Educational Background of Highest Provincial Military Authorities, 1916-1928	104
3. Educational Background of Fengtien Militarists, 1924	105
4. Monthly Output of Armaments, China and Manchuria, 1923 and 1928	119
5. Highway Mileage in China, 1928	129
6. Mileage of Government-owned Railways, 1930	130
7. Number of Troops Mobilized for Major Wars, 1916-1928	137
8. Size of Major War Zones, 1916-1928	137
9. Casualties in Major Wars, 1916-1928	138
10. Distribution of Salt Gabelle Revenues, 1918-1928	155
11. Foreign Loans to China, 1916-1927	158
12. Revenue Received from Government Bonds, 1912-1926	159
13. Volume and Value of Feng-p'iao, 1916-1927	163
14. Opium Revenues Paid to Militarists in Eleven Provinces, 1924 and 1927	164

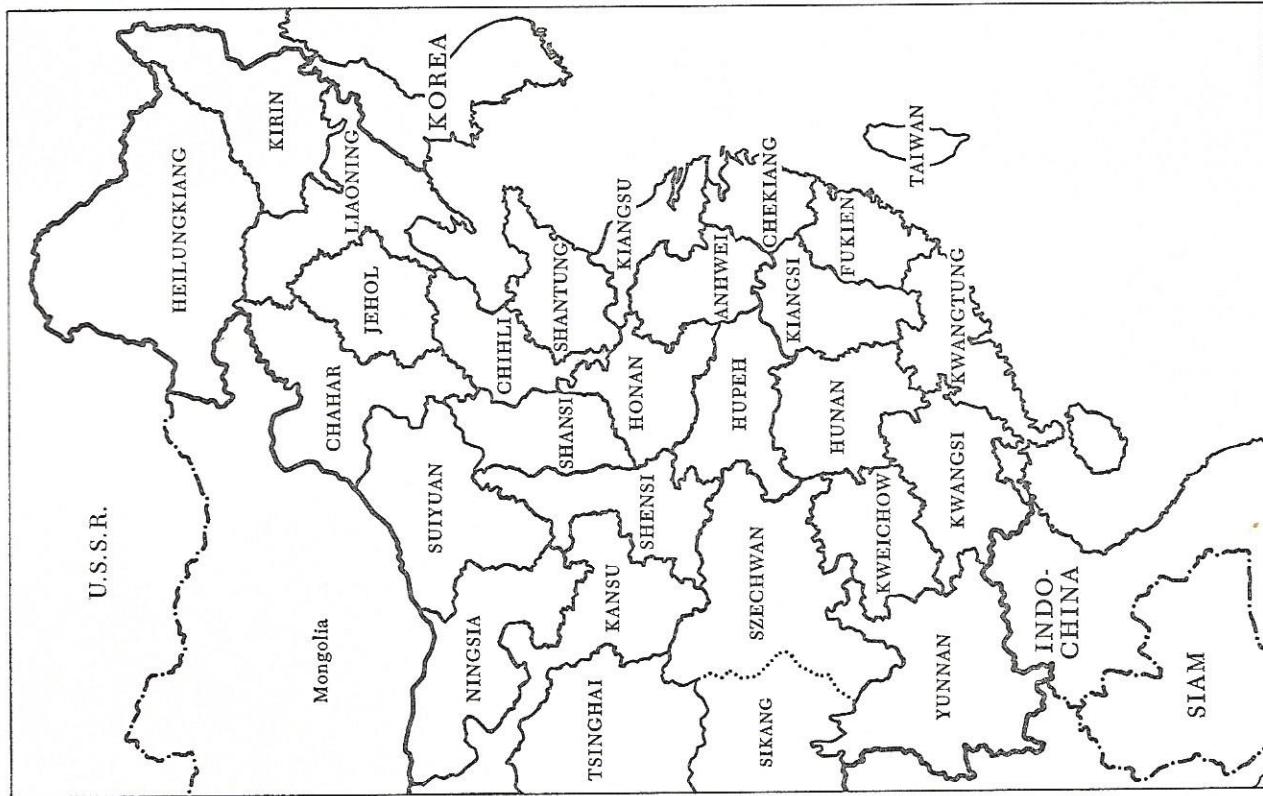
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## Introduction

ANYONE who is even faintly familiar with modern Chinese history knows two things about the 1916–28 period: first, it was the “warlord” period, and second, it was a confused and destructive period.

The general interpretative works of modern Chinese political history usually accord very scant coverage to this period, usually in the form of an introduction to the Nationalist and Communist movements that followed. Even the more specialized studies usually fail to give a full and accurate account of the role of the “warlords.” One suspects that the chief reason for this gap in the literature is the complexity and confusion that shroud the behavior of the political actors of this period, compounded by the difficulty of finding the appropriate conceptual tools to deal with them. The result is that “warlordism,” or more appropriately militarism, remains the least understood phenomenon in modern Chinese history.\*

\* Throughout this book, the term “militarist” will be used to refer to individual political actors. Although “warlord” is a commonly used term, and is so used in the title of this book to denote a period of modern Chinese history, it is loaded with pejorative connotations. Even during the 1920’s, there were always disagreements about who was a “warlord” and who was not and, more basically, about what the attributes of a “warlord” were. An admired military leader was never called a “warlord”; the term was reserved for a bad military leader. C. Martin Wilbur defines militarism as “a system of organizing political power in which force is the normal arbiter in the distribution of power and in the establishment of policy” (“Military Separatism and the Process of Re-unification under the Nationalist Regime, 1922–1937,” in Ho Ping-ti and Tsou Tang, *China in Crisis*, 1: 203). The following text similarly eschews value judgments; a “militarist” is simply one who exercises power in such a system.



Provinces of China, 1916–1928

Some scholars have examined this period within a traditional legal-institutional matrix. While they acknowledge the existence of powerful military figures in politics, they nevertheless view China as a single political entity with the central government as the hub of political activities. This view naturally leads to the identification of the constitution, the presidency, the cabinet, and the parliament as the major components of the Chinese political system.

If China had had a stable political system, this kind of study could give us a penetrating understanding of the basic structure and processes of the Republic. The trouble is, however, that in the thirteen years after the founding of the Republic, China had at least four different constitutions, and all of them became dead letters as soon as they were promulgated. Other laws and regulations also shed little light on the nature and functions of the regime.<sup>1</sup> Most political institutions were also in a state of flux; the form of government alternated among monarchy, republic, regency, etc., a number of times during this brief period. In addition to the major institutional changes, the head of state changed nine times in less than twelve years between 1916 and 1928 in the north alone; the average tenure was less than sixteen months. In the south the same "musical chairs" phenomenon was occurring in the rival KMT government with equal abandon.

Confusion and instability also prevailed in the cabinet. Altogether, there were 24 cabinet reshuffles, and 26 persons held the position of prime minister during the 1916-28 period.<sup>2</sup> The longest tenure was seventeen months, the shortest was two days; the average tenure ranged from three to five months. The cabinet did not hold office long enough to lay down long-range policies. Furthermore, the cabinet was not an independent decision-making body functioning according to the fundamental laws of the Republic; rather, it was the most pliable administrative tool used by the militarists to impose their will upon the Chinese people.\*

\* If the cabinet had indeed been an institution to reckon with in national (northern) politics, one would expect the northerners to have kept this political power among their own fellow provincials. The opposite, however, was true. Of the 26 prime ministers and 95 cabinet ministers, the southerners outnumbered the northerners by almost two to one. (For biographical sketches of these ministers, see Ch'en Hsi-chang, *Peiyang 2: 57-40*.) In view of the emphasis on interpersonal relations and local ties in political circles during this period,

Little needs to be said about the parliament, which was even more discredited in the public eye than either the presidency or the cabinet. It followed a tortuous course of survival and was put out of business several times. It became an utterly corrupt, incompetent, and parasitic organization filled with petty politicians. During the 1920's it was split into the pro-Peking and pro-KMT factions, and it later simply withered away in the midst of public contempt. The acceptance of bribes by many members of parliament in 1923 to help T'sao K'un get elected president earned them the nickname of "swine-representatives." It is difficult to treat these people as serious political factors.

This brief discussion should suffice to show that the traditional legal-institutional approach to explaining Chinese politics suffers from severe limitations. For there never was an independent central government during this period, if we understand this to mean a government that stood at the apex of the power structure, with the various militarists subordinate to it within that structure. When the political actors acted, they seldom felt constrained to conform to any kind of institutional criteria. The most important decisions were made not by the government in Peking but by the local governments independently.

There is a variation of the legal-institutional approach, which might be called the bipolar approach. This approach does emphasize the political disintegration of the country. Furthermore, it recognizes the militarists as the most potent political forces in the north. However, in dealing with the situation in the south, most scholars of this persuasion try to impute to it a high degree of political awareness and cohesion under the leadership of the KMT. In talking about the "north" and the "south," they convey the impression that China was somewhat analogous to a bipolar situation, i.e. a direct confrontation between two political/geographical areas.<sup>3</sup> This approach presents a gross distortion, because it greatly inflates the significance of the role played by the south and lumps all northern politico-military forces into one undifferentiated category. It also tends to attribute to the south certain structural characteristics that it did not actually possess during much of this

<sup>3</sup> the only plausible explanation of this anomaly is that cabinet posts did not carry much power. In fact, cabinet members were often mere errand boys for the powerful militarists and could be appointed or dismissed at their pleasure.

period. In addition, the ideological position that most scholars using this approach take also causes them to drag in many issues—such as constitutionalism and legitimacy—which were at best of marginal relevance to most other political actors.

The bipolar approach is unsatisfactory for four further reasons. First, the so-called “northern bloc” was far from being a homogeneous and consolidated group. During most of the period, serious struggles went on among supposed members of this group. Second, the south was equally troubled by incessant internal strife and was also far from being a united bloc. Third, there were frequent cross-boundary alliances among important elements from both of the two “blocs.” Finally, the KMT did not actually gain a stronghold in the south until the later part of the period. Its earlier existence was nominal and inconsequential. During those years, political activities revolved around certain key northern militarists, and the existence (or nonexistence) of the KMT made little impression upon the northern militarists. At best, then, this approach offers a victor’s interpretation of history, but it hardly does justice to the northern militarists who dominated the political scene long before the KMT started playing an active role.

It is only recently that some scholars have begun to show concern over the glaring gap that exists in our knowledge of early Chinese Republican history. Either explicitly or implicitly, they have shifted the intellectual focus and have sought new horizons and new factors in interpreting Chinese politics. Some have concluded that the most important political phenomenon was neither the defunct government in Peking nor the north-south struggle, but the role of the military in politics. Ralph Powell and F.F. Liu have contributed significant studies of this phenomenon.<sup>4</sup> There are also at least two published monographs on individual militarists (Feng Yu-hsiang, and Yen Hsi-shan) and a number of unpublished Ph.D. dissertations on other individual militarists.<sup>5</sup> The literature is still relatively scarce, however, and the years 1916–28 remain to be explored.

One way to narrow the gap in our knowledge would be to produce more biographical monographs of prominent military figures of this period. In general, these monographs share the view that there was no national polities at the time, that Chinese politics can best be understood in terms of the various regional or

local governments dominated by powerful militarists. When a large number of case studies have been accumulated, the theory goes, the findings will enable us to arrive at generalizations valid for the whole of China through the inductive process. Put differently, it is hoped that the multiplication of studies on individual militarists or their regimes will eventually enable us to piece them together into a mosaic and to generate a body of propositions, hypotheses, and even perhaps systematic knowledge about Chinese politics in its entirety.

This scheme, however, must remain unfulfilled until many more case studies, covering most of the important local regimes in the country, have been undertaken. The studies now available, though highly stimulating in themselves, cannot claim to have approached that goal. Furthermore, the few militarists who have been studied were anything but typical of their ordinary contemporaries. We cannot draw a generalized picture of China under military rule by inferring from the conduct of these exceptional members of the group. We need to know more about the majority of militarists who controlled the rest—and by far the most important parts of China. That knowledge, however, is not likely to be available for a long time to come.<sup>6</sup>

While the study of individual militarists as a way of understanding Chinese politics is certainly a sound strategy, it is not the only strategy, nor is it necessarily the best one. For even when we have obtained detailed knowledge about all the individual militarists and their local regimes, much will remain to be learned. One of the dangers of concentrating exclusively on individual militarists or regimes is the tendency to be too deeply involved in the details and to produce a set of disjointed and fragmented pictures of Chinese politics. Because there are inevitable divergences and similarities among the numerous militarist regimes, we will still have to go through a distilling process to sort them out and put them in appropriate categories in order to draw an accurate total picture.

If this view is valid—and I believe that it is—then we need not be too distressed by the dearth of information about most major militarist regimes. For an understanding of the “national” politics of China, the pattern of *interaction* among the militarists is probably more relevant than the particular aspects of their internal rule. Any political system is what it is partially because the

participants conduct their political behavior according to their own will, and partially because they have to act under certain systemic constraints beyond their control. In other words, while we do not deny that political actors (or, for that matter, human beings) are generally action-oriented or goal-oriented, there are certain environmental factors that constrain their behavior in important ways. The examination of these factors may reveal certain crucial aspects of the militarists' behavior that might be neglected if only internal conditions of militarist regimes were studied. In this book, then, we want to shift the focus away from discrete political phenomena *within* the individual militarist regimes and toward the relationships *among* them in our search for an overview of the Chinese political process during the 1916–28 period. What we aspire to construct is a coarse-screen macroscopic view rather than a fine-screen microscopic study of the period.<sup>7</sup>

Our analysis differs from the microscopic studies in some essential ways. A typical microscopic study deals with a single militarist or his regime and is usually eclectic in organizing the data. While the author may focus on certain aspects of the man or his regime, he usually does not spell out the underlying theories that guide his research interests, nor does he articulate the relationships among the diverse aspects he has chosen to study. He selects and processes the facts according to his own implicit criteria. Each of the few existing microscopic studies of early twentieth-century militarism is marked by a different approach and focuses on different aspects. Thus it is rather difficult to draw generalizations about militarism from them.

In contrast, this work is guided by the criteria of systems theory. While microscopic studies organize historical materials to describe discrete and unique events concerning a militarist or his regime, the systems approach tries to organize historical materials into separate but related categories. Through the selection of a set of variables, systems theory attempts to establish a pattern of behavior that characterizes the system and separates it from the environment. The data are selected and examined in a systematic way, in accordance with certain explicit criteria.

This study is based on the premise that certain variables are more crucial to the understanding of militarism than others, and their relevance will be shown in the course of the book. Thus, while

the end-product is a macroscopic analysis of Chinese militarism, the bulk of the book will deal with what we consider to be the system's crucial aspects—organization, weapons technology, military training, financial resources, and value systems. Each in its own way affected the system of behavior among the militarists. Although some of the following chapters may look rather detailed, the primary intention is not to tell the reader which militarist did what, but to describe how such behavior may provide clues to how the system operated. That is, our purpose is to provide a fresh perspective toward understanding Chinese politics in a systematic way.

The reader will soon realize that this work is primarily concerned with the general attributes of the politics of militarism. Our underlying assumption is that political disintegration and fragmentation in China had gone so far as to make it inadmissible to treat the country as having a single political regime. There is some evidence to support this assumption. First, the Peking government was formally challenged at all times by one or several rival "governments" during this period. Jurisdictional confusion and disputes constituted a major portion of political activities, and durable and stable "national" organization was nowhere in sight. Second, the relationships among political actors were not well defined by either institutional norms or stable expectations and were constantly changing. The decision-making process was decentralized and informal. Most militarists resorted to diplomacy, implicit coordination, alliance, and eventually war to establish their positions. Political decisions often could determine whether a political unit would survive or perish. Third, in contrast to the shifting power configuration on the national level, there were a number of militarist factions whose internal organizations were of a higher order of integration, better defined and more stable. The sense of community was stronger within these organizations than among them, and it was sanctioned and reinforced by a large number of psychological as well as physical forces. They were therefore able to play a continuing role in the political arena, though their political fortunes might change from one year to the next. If these observations are accurate (they will receive further elaboration in subsequent chapters), then a new conceptualization of the problems and a new set of analytical tools are required for an

understanding of this period. For these aspects of Chinese politics during the 1916–28 period seem more to resemble an international than a domestic situation. Certainly, the issues of war and peace, of bargaining and negotiation, of alliance and counteralliance can be better understood by drawing upon related knowledge from the discipline of international relations. Hence, in the course of our inquiry we will use concepts, hypotheses, and theories developed in international relations whenever they seem to apply.

Now that I have described the conceptual framework guiding the study, let me briefly outline what I aspire to accomplish in this book. Broadly speaking, I have set for myself three tasks. The first task is to identify and to define the militarists, the actors in the political system, in terms of their personal and social characteristics. The socioeconomic backgrounds and the attitudes of men can have a profound impact on the way they perceive and analyze their political environment, which in turn gives shape and meaning to the norms and rules that guide their political activities. Therefore, we need to answer these questions: Who were these militarists? How and why did they join the military profession? What forces brought them into different political groups? What were the basic ingredients of their value system and how were these values manifested in their outward political behavior?

The second task is to describe the environment surrounding them. To talk about environmental limits is to talk about capabilities. Here the most important questions are: What kinds and amounts of economic resources did the militarists have at their command? How efficiently were they mobilized, distributed, and utilized? In what ways did technology affect the political decisions of the militarists? With respect to the more intangible capabilities: What was the quality of education received by the militarists? How cohesive were their organizational ties? What kind of politico-military organizations did they create? How skilled were they in diplomacy, and what kind of political and military leadership did they exert? In order to bring the study within reasonable bounds, it is necessary to classify the actors, especially when there were a large number of them, according to their capabilities. The more powerful actors will necessarily receive more attention, and the less powerful little or no coverage. There are pitfalls in comparing

actors on the basis of their capabilities, but comparison is inevitable. Although we cannot devise a scientific method of measurement, we can try to rank the actors on a scale, thus sidestepping the more serious problem of translating the power elements of the actors into numerical terms.

The third and final task is to describe and analyze how the actors behaved. We will demonstrate that politics in the 1916–28 period is not nearly as hopelessly confusing as has been generally assumed. The militarists were quite shrewd and calculating, and they followed rules in dealing with each other. Once their rules and norms are deciphered, it is easier to comprehend their political behavior. In the final chapter, the dynamics of politics will be analyzed. Many of the findings in the earlier chapters will be synthesized, and we will then be able to suggest some plausible explanations of why the militarists thrived in the 1910's and 1920's, and how their influence waned in the late 1920's.\*

\* That this study stops at 1928 should in no way be taken to mean that the Northern Expedition of the KMT successfully eliminated militarism in China. Rather, in this year a particular pattern of interaction among the political actors was terminated. As a matter of fact, the conditions and forces that brought about this termination are crucial to an understanding of the politics of the subsequent Nationalist era.

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## The Emergence of the Military Factions

alive, the Peiyang Army remained a highly cohesive force, even though some rivalry might have existed among his chief lieutenants. After Yüan's sudden departure from the scene in 1916, there was no one military leader capable of inheriting his mantle. In the search for a formula that could both preserve the power of the Peiyang Army and subdue the southern rebels, a schism gradually developed between Tuan Ch'i-jui and Feng Kuo-chang which in time involved most of the leading Peiyang members. Thus, ironically, what began as an effort to restore Peiyang's political paramountcy ended in its hopeless division into opposing factions.

IN THEIR discussions of the early Republican period, all writers employ the terms "faction" or "clique" to describe the broad lines of conflict among politico-military groups. But their definitions are often vague: misidentifications are made, and misconceptions go unchallenged. Clearly, a term or concept is not very useful unless its full meaning has been explored. Since a political analysis of the early Republican period must rely heavily upon an analysis of factional struggle, common sense requires that we seek information in four basic areas: First, we should provide a chronological interpretation of the origin of the major factions. Second, we should examine the immediate causes prompting militarists to form factions, and how they actually did it. Third, we should identify as accurately as possible the constituent membership of major factions. Fourth, we should identify the basic sources of cohesion of the factions or their lack thereof.

A detailed historical review of the period becomes necessary in order to provide the factual basis for a better understanding of the issues raised in the first two areas. The composition and cohesiveness of the factions will be analyzed in subsequent chapters.

The purpose of this chapter is to lay the ground for a more detailed analysis of the strength and weakness of the military factions in early Republican China. The first part of the chapter traces some of the developments of the role of the military under the Ch'ing dynasty that might have precipitated the rise of military power in the Chinese polity. The second part examines the events from 1911 to 1920 that led to the emergence of military factions. In the story told here we shall see that while Yüan Shih-k'ai was

### *Historical Background*

In order to understand the historical as well as the social and political factors that produced modern Chinese militarism, it is necessary first to review briefly the origin and structure of the military in the Ch'ing dynasty.

The forerunner of the Ch'ing military was the Banner armies created by Nurhaci in 1601. Another type of military forces, the Green Standards, so called because they used green-colored flags, came into being somewhat later. From the beginning of the Ch'ing empire until the 1850's, these two forces constituted the bulwark of imperial defense, and together they were called the *chin chih ping*, or national army. But by the early nineteenth century both forces had outlived their usefulness. The hereditary system of the Banner forces, which was created to monopolize military power in the hands of a small elite and to make its members feel that their personal interests were intertwined with those of the empire, in the long run contributed significantly to the Banners' undoing. Their exclusiveness gave them a distorted sense of importance and complacency. They became reluctant to innovate and were slow to respond to new challenges. Since the job usually came as a birth-right, there was no particular incentive to work hard for advancement. The creeping influence of a civilian style of life in the barracks also led to a more relaxed atmosphere and made it all but impossible to enforce military discipline.

For the Green Standards, corruption became a major problem. It became a usual practice for officers to conceal vacancies in their units in order to pocket salaries for nonexistent soldiers. The situation deteriorated so much that by the middle of the century it