

Civilian and Military Power (China)

By [Lin-Chun Wu](#)

Summary

From 1916 to 1928, the Republic China was divided among military cliques in the regions of mainland China. Provincial military power holders, by proving the impotence of Beijing, undermined the efforts to centralize power and strengthened the forces of regionalism. Domestically, the legitimacy of the Beijing government was challenged by Sun Yat-sen's Guangzhou based Kuomintang (KMT) Government in 1917. The Prime Minister Duan Qirui, who was a commander in the Beiyang Army, and President Li Yuanhong, had reached a deadlock in a dispute they were engaged in regarding how to join the European war. In the spring of 1917, the "Dujun's Tuan [Military Governor] rebellion" led to political turmoil. After the failure of the Zhang Xun Restoration, Duan agreed to compromise his long term goal of joining the European war in exchange for a series of secret loans with Japan, called the Nishihara Loans.

Table of contents

[1 Military Power Overrides Civilian Power](#)

[2 The "Dujun's Tuan Rebellion" and the event of the "Citizens' Petition Corps"](#)

[3 The impact and effect of "Dujun's Tuan rebellion"](#)

[4 Conclusion](#)

[Notes](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

Military Power Overrides Civilian Power

The establishment of the new republican political order in 1912 bears testimony to the power of the militarists in [China](#) during this period, because its success can be directly attributed to the machinations of [Yuan Shikai](#) in collaboration with the top-ranking line commanders of the newly established army. Yuan reorganized the provincial governments during his presidency (1912-1916). Each province was now supported by a Military Governor (a *Dujun*) as well as a civil authority, giving each governor control of his own army. The Beiyang military faction was beginning to assert itself more aggressively and to intrude increasingly into the political arena. When Yuan died in 1916, almost instantly the militarists plunged into the vortex of national politics, and began to contest one another and the central government for territories as well as resources.^{[1](#)}

From 1916 to 1928, the country was divided among military cliques in the regions of mainland China including Sichuan, Shanxi, Qinghai, Ningxia, Guangdong, Guangxi, Gansu, Yunnan, and Xinjiang. Provincial military power holders, by proving the impotence of Beijing, further undermined efforts to centralize power and strengthened the forces of regionalism. As a broad generalization it can be said that in the north, the Beiyang commanders split into two warring cliques: the Anfu clique under [Duan Qirui](#), and the Zhili clique under [Feng Guozhang \(1859-1919\)](#). Both cliques were contending to gain power over the [government in Beijing](#), which would allow them to tap into the foreign loan market.

The warlords came from diverse backgrounds. There is a Chinese proverb that says “a good man will never become a soldier” (Hao Nan Bu Dang Bing), because most men were from modest backgrounds and thus did not have an alternative to becoming soldiers, even though this was an undesirable profession. Most military commanders indeed rose from very modest backgrounds, but some of them were men of education. [Yan Xishan \(1883-1960\)](#) of Shanxi came from a family of officials. General [Wu Pei-fu \(1874-1939\)](#) and [Feng Yu-hsiang \(1882-1948\)](#) both had good educations and followed Christianity. Feng Guozhang came from a poor family. [Li Chun \(1867-1920\)](#) of Nanking was a fisherman’s son, and [Zhang Zuolin \(1875-1928\)](#), the Viceroy of Manchuria, commenced his career as a bandit. All of these men dealt with political power as a commodity, which they sought to secure through the use of money and soldiers. The United States Minister [Paul S. Reinsch \(1869-1923\)](#) described the militarists: “They were somewhat like the condottieri of the Italian renaissance, looking ahead only to the goal of their personal ambition for wealth and power”.² Even among the militarists, however, there were those who gave some attention to matters of public policy, and the idea of national welfare and unity also had some import for them.

Though Yuan’s death fractured the army into competing factions, the government was under the control of Beiyang generals who hid behind a “constitutional” or civilian facade. Whichever faction controlled Beijing had the aura of legitimacy, and secured diplomatic recognition internationally, access to the customs revenue, and easier access to foreign loans. Domestically, the legitimacy of Beiyang government was challenged by [Sun Yat-sen’s](#) Guangzhou-based Kuomintang (KMT) government in 1917. For almost the entire following decade, although the fiction of a central government was maintained, provincial militarists (the warlords) made alliances and counter alliances to expand their territorial domains in an attempt to take over Beijing. As Ernest P. Young notes, it was in the wake of the Yuan government’s collapse in 1916 that: “military men, without significantly sharing power with civilian politicians, were asserting their predominance and independence in the provinces.”³

Yuan Shikai was succeeded by [Li Yuanhong \(1864-1928\)](#) who had been Vice-President under

Yuan, and who did not belong to the Beiyang clique. Li revived the 1912 constitution, recalled the members of the old National Assembly, and reconstituted the cabinet with Duan Qirui, the commander in the Beiyang Army, as Prime Minister. Working under the old constitution, which weighted the Prime Minister over the President, Duan tried to make himself the center of executive authority, although he depended more on his comrades-in-arms, the Beiyang military governors, than on the National Assembly. The issue that brought matters to a head was the debate over whether or not China should join the Great War.

The “Dujun’s Tuan Rebellion” and the event of the “Citizens’ Petition Corps”

In the spring of 1917, the disagreement between the Premier Duan Qirui and the President Li Yuanhong widened. Duan Qirui favored a declaration of war but the parliament insisted that the cabinet first be reorganized in order to prevent it coming under the control of reactionary elements. The Duan and Li camps both saw the opportunity to participate in the war as an avenue to personal victory. Li Yuanhong ordered the deprivation of Duan Qirui’s premier post. After Li Yuanhong revoked his post as Premier, Duan encouraged the Governor-Generals to support a declaration of “independence” from the Beijing government. On 29 May 1917, [Ni Sichong \(18681924\)](#) declared independence of Anhui Province. Manchuria, Shandong, Shaanxi, Henan and Shanxi provinces followed suit. Duan organized a so-called “*Dujun’s Tuan*” (warlord delegation) to exert pressure on President Li to have China declare war on [Germany](#).⁴

The provincial authorities should have been trustees of the central government, with which they were closely and vitally connected for the defense of the country and the protection of the homesteads. Nonetheless, the *Dujun* rebellion turned many of them against the government. All of the northern military commanders were united against President Li and threatened coercion. All the southern provinces remained loyal to President Li and to parliament and strongly denounced the rebellion.

To rally support for his policy favoring a declaration of war, Premier Duan called all the *Dujuns* to Beijing for a conference. Nine Governor-Generals came in person, and all of the other provinces sent delegates. Under pressure from Duan and the military governors, President Li agreed to pass Duan’s request for a declaration of war on to the parliament. On 10 May 1917, while the House of Representatives was holding a committee on the issue, a mob of several thousand calling themselves the “Citizen’s Petition Corps,” which included the petition corps of military, political, and commercial circles as well as other organizations, gathered in front of the House. Secretly, under the direction of the *Dujuns*, their goal was to “persuade” representatives to pass the war declaration immediately. Three thousand

members of various petition corps surrounded the building and refused to disperse until a bill supporting participation in the war was passed. Ten or more congressmen were beaten. On 19 May 1917, the House of Representatives agreed to pass this bill only if Duan's government was reorganized. This demand resulted in a deadlock between the Parliament and Duan.⁵ The revolutionary *Dujuns* gained strength as several more responsible and constructive politicians began to support them, for example the leaders of the military of the Chin Pu Tang, [Liang Qichao \(1873-1929\)](#), and the pro-Japanese Party, as well as [Liang Shiya \(1869-1933\)](#) and his followers.

At the same time that the *Dujuns* were exerting pressure on Duan, a new and even more serious crisis emerged. Li issued a mandate inviting [Zhang Xun \(1854-1923\)](#), a Qing-loyalist general to come to Beijing to act as an arbitrator. Zhang represented the "last hope of peace" according to Li. Taking advantage of the general disorganization that Duan's government was experiencing, Zhang Xun initiated a *coup d'état* on 1 July by calling upon the President to resign in favor of the emperor. [Pu-Yi, Emperor of China \(1906-1967\)](#) was returned to the throne once again as Xuan Tong, and the Qing Dynasty was restored. Li had not only failed to solve the problem of the *Dujun* rebellion, he had unwittingly helped to bury the Republic. Li Yuanhong resigned his presidency in Beijing and sought asylum in [Japan](#). Duan responded to the Zhang Xun Restoration by organizing an army of 50,000 men. On 15 July 1917, Duan entered Beijing calling himself the savior of the republic and, after very little fighting, was reappointed as prime minister. Zhang Xun retired from politics, and the young emperor disappeared from view. Duan consolidated his position by forcing Li Yuan-hong to retire in favor of a new Vice-President the Beiyang general Feng Guozhang, who became the acting president.⁶ The restoration of the Qing Dynasty provided an excellent opportunity for Duan to return to power as a defender of the Republic.⁷

Duan was convinced from the start that China could use the European war as a vehicle for renewal. Ideally, he would have preferred China to enter the war at its outbreak, a desire that he held secretly. As historian [Guoqi Xu](#) reminds us, Duan's war policy was consistent. Two points are worth mentioning: first, [Liang Qichao \(1873-1929\)](#), the leader of the Chin Pu Tang Party, might have been the force to support China's drive to participate in the war in 1917, but it was Duan who actually carried out the policy. Second, a point often missed is Duan's attitude toward his associate [Xu Shuzheng \(1880-1925\)](#) regarding this matter. Xu was Duan's confidant, and Duan relied heavily on him for many things. Yet Duan did not listen to Xu with respect to China's war policy, for Xu Shuzheng strongly opposed the declaration of war on Germany.⁸ With regards to Duan's wish to participate in the war, we may say that his desire for a new China, and in particular his wish for a strong China, made the pursuit of military power a national priority for him. At the same time, the invitation of the military governors to

Beijing in April 1917 to discuss the possibility of a declaration of war on Germany also triggered the rise of warlordism across China, in that it was the first time that local warlords intervened in central politics.

The impact and effect of “Dujun’s Tuan rebellion”

Li Jian-nong, a leading scholar of the political history of early republican China, has suggested that: “if the Peiyang military clique had not used harsh methods, the Participation War Bill would have passed without trouble”, since all parties, except a leftist wing, intended to pass the Bill.⁹ While it is true that the most mature motives of self-interest had led to the defection of the military governors, it is also true that the cleavage between them and the constituted authorities of the Central government deepened over the question of whether or not to enter the war. The reactionaries had had to force the issue ostensibly on that point and had succeeded to the extent that they created the general belief that their movement had the tacit approval of the powers at war with Germany. The war participation issue thus ostensibly presented is, in fact, fictitious inasmuch as the Parliamentary Party was actually no less sympathetic with the cause, having already taken the initiative to associate China with support for the [United States](#), and to severing relations with Germany. However, it had been reluctant to give a free hand to the military in the adoption of this policy, not because it distrusted the potential for these actors to extort the situation politically, but because it had reason to suspect that the reactionaries planned to commit China to participate in the war in such a way that China would become dependent on Japan.¹⁰

In early 1917, Paul S. Reinsch, the United States Minister in Beijing, who was sympathetic to President Li and to the parliament, invited China to break off relations with Germany, in return for direct aid from the American government. On 5 June 1917, [Wu Ting-Fang \(1842-1922\)](#), the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Beijing, confidentially made a request to U.S.

President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#) to make a public statement supporting President Li.¹¹ Unfortunately, Washington was reluctant to support China’s entry into the war. After the *Dujun* rebellion, the U. S. Secretary of State, [Robert Lansing \(1864-1928\)](#), instructed Renisch to communicate a message officially to the *Waijiaobu* (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and unofficially to the military leaders opposing Li, saying that China’s unity was more important to the U.S. than her participation in the war. On the same day Lansing sent a circular telegram to the American ambassadors in Japan, [France](#), and [Great Britain](#) inviting these powers to make identical representations to the Chinese government: “expressing regret for the factional disorder that has arisen and that the maintenance by China of one central, united and responsible government is of first importance to itself and to the world”.¹² For the U.S., China’s entry into war with Germany, or the continuance of the status quo with regards

to her relations with Germany, were matters of secondary consideration; the principal concern was for China to resume and continue as a stable political entity.¹³

Japan's refusal to allow China to join the Allies in 1915 was part of her strategy to eliminate Yuan Shikai. Duan's pro-Japanese inclination resulted in him engaging in secret negotiations with Japan regarding his war-participation policy. A new Japanese policy toward China was adopted at a cabinet meeting held on 23 July 1917. The cabinet decision called for an immediate offer of economic and military aid to the Beijing government intended to win China's good will, to facilitate Japan's economic expansion, and to secure the approval of the British and American governments. On 14 August 1917 China declared war on Germany, and Duan negotiated another loan from Japan. Under the administration of Prime Minister [Terauchi Masatake](#), a series of secret loans totaling 145 million yen, called the [Nishihara Loans](#), were issued to China between January 1917 and September 1918. In exchange for these loans, China made territorial concessions and secured rights for Japan in northern China. The Duan government, which was determined to continue to fight in the south of China, could look only to Japan for the loans it so desperately needed. Encouraged by these loans, Duan decided to delay his long-term goal of joining the European war, even while he was trying to secure the means to achieve it.

Conclusion

China was too weak to acquire better terms from the Allied powers because her energy was being spent on internal quarrels. As mentioned above, since Duan had clashed with parliament in May over the war policy and *Dujun's* interference, he was not in favor of restoring the old parliament. Instead he pushed to bring in a completely new parliament. Sun and his followers, along with some of the southern provincial governments, immediately protested. Sun Yat-sen, now back in Shanghai, started the Constitution Protection Movement. On 1 September, Sun was elected as head of Guangzhou government. China was once again divided into northern and southern entities.

Like Yuan, Duan wanted to free himself from the parliament, which was vociferously attacking his autocratic actions, and, he abrogated the provisional constitution, revised the organic law of the parliament, reduced the electorate still further, and created a new National Assembly packed with members who were his followers. Once again the southwestern provinces expressed their opposition, and Guangdong, Guangxi, and Yunnan declared their independence.¹⁴

Thus at the end of the First World War it looked as though China's fortunes might take an upward turn. Internally the country was still divided in two, with warlords in the saddle in both

governments, but actual fighting had ceased. A peace conference was held in Shanghai on 20 February 1919. Externally, Japan's aggressive policy appeared to have been modified. Contrary to her practice in the early years of the war (for example the [twenty-one demands](#) of 1915) Japan had actually acted in concert with the Allies to reconcile the contending parties in China. The Chinese would soon be disappointed, however, because both the peace conferences in Shanghai and [Paris](#) would prove to fall far short of her expectations.¹⁵

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Notes

1. For a more detailed discussion see Chi, Hsi-Sheng: Warlord Politics in China, 1916-1928, Stanford 1976. ↑
2. Reinsch, Paul S.: An American Diplomat in China, Garden City 1922, p. 262. ↑
3. Young, Ernst: The Presidency of Yuan Shih-k'ai. Liberalism and Dictatorship in Early Republican China, Ann Arbor 1977, pp. 242. ↑
4. Jannon, Li: Political History of Modern China, Zhongguo Jin Bainian ZhengZhi Shi, pp. 437-439. ↑
5. Xu, Guoqi: China and the Great War: China's pursuit of a new national identity and internationalization, New York 2005, p. 217. ↑
6. Feng was Vice-President from 8 November 1916 to 6 July 1917 and then the Acting President from 6 July 1917 to 10 October 1918. ↑
7. Jannon, Li: Political History of Modern China, pp. 439-445. ↑
8. Xu, Guoqi: China and the Great War 2005, pp. 214. ↑
9. Jannon, Li: Political History of Modern China, pp. 438. ↑
10. Minister Reinsch to the Secretary: June 6, 1917, in FRUS, 1917, p. 55. In Wu, Lin-Chun: Meiguo yu Zhongguo Zhengzhi. America and the Disintegrated China, 1917-1928, Taipei 1996, pp. 23-27. ↑
11. Wu Ting-Fang (Minister of Foreign Affairs, Beijing) to Reinsch: 5 June 1917, in FRUS 1917, pp. 50. ↑
12. The Secretary of State to Ambassador Sharp: 4 June 1917, in FRUS, 1917, pp. 49. ↑
13. The Secretary of State to Minister Reinsch: 4 June 1917, FRUS 1917, pp. 49-50. ↑
14. Vohra, Ranbir: China's Path to Modernization: A Historical Review from 1800 to the Present, Englewood Cliffs 1987, pp. 118. ↑
15. Chi, Madeleine: China Diplomacy, 1914-1918, Cambridge 1970, pp. 142-144. The Shanghai conference broke up in May 1919 without accomplishing anything, and civil war resumed. For many Chinese, the Versailles treaty was not only disappointing but brought anger and revulsion against immorality of the West. ↑

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- [Young, Ernest P.: **The presidency of Yuan Shih-k'ai. Liberalism and dictatorship in early republican China**, Ann Arbor, 1977: University of Michigan Press.](#)
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External Links

- [McCord, Edward A.: **The power of the gun the emergence of modern Chinese Warlordism**, Berkley 1993 \(University of California Press\) \(Book\)](#)

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