1

These two questions are most closely linked in the period on which my current research focuses: the so-called “warlord era” from 1916 to 1928. This is a period of formidable political and military complexity: in the fourteen years from 1912 to 1928 China had nine presidents, forty prime ministers, and one abortive imperial restoration, of the deposed Qing ruler Puyi. There were also at least six civil wars, depending upon what you count. So historians can perhaps be forgiven for avoiding the headache of actually studying all this, by fitting it into the framework of revolution, by sociologizing it. This means that instead of looking at people and events—making their explanations what political scientists would call sequence and path dependent—they have looked for categories: nationalists, warlords, revolutionaries; tradition, modernity, in terms of whose general operations the specifics of this complex period can be simplified and grasped. I have shown elsewhere that this approach was not derived empirically, but rather imposed by imported theory, with even the word junfa (“warlord”) in its current usage being derived from Japanese.

Not only does such an approach simplify, however. It does seem, at least initially, to fit the facts. For the “warlord” period does not last forever; and it is swept away, it seems, by revolutionary popular movements, very much as advertised. The key turning point in the revolutionary wave is the May Thirtieth Incident of 1925, to which we will return below.

Although this approach still dominates the historiography, there are signs of change. Until recently, the closest one got to a balanced appraisal was an account in which a warlord was conceded to have had some progressive characteristics. The best example is Feng Yuxiang—


arguably in fact the most venal of them all—who, because of the importance of some of his relatives in the PRC government—was regularly portrayed somewhat positively. In the last five years or so, however, there have been some dramatic changes. First cautiously, then with increasing boldness, appreciative essays and biographies have begun to be written of many people previously vilified as reactionaries. Gu Weijun's [Wellington Koo's] memoirs, which were written in English, deposited at Columbia University, but never published in the West, have been translated into Chinese and published in five volumes in China. Wu Peifu, hitherto known as a puppet of American and British financial interests and portrayed in a left-wing cartoon as a small dog on a leash, being walked by Uncle Sam, appears in 1991 in Professor Guo Jianlin's definitive biography as *yidai xiaoxiong*, “hero of an age.” Many other examples could be adduced. Even Zhang Zongchang, the “dogmeat general” of Lin Yü-t'ang's caustic memoir, now has a comprehensive biography in Chinese.

From the perspective of contemporary Chinese politics, it is not hard to see what is going on here. Appreciative biographies of “warlords” and the rethinking of the China in which they lived, are part of the intellectual aftermath of the collapse of communism, and, in China at least, of Marxism as well. The Chinese are engaged in an imaginative recapturing and reconstruction of the past, with the hitherto leading role of the Communist party and of revolution largely written out. And just as the Chinese Communist Party is now trying to re legitimate itself by appropriating nationalism, so the emotional basis of much of the new historical writing is nationalism as well, but an intuitively satisfying nationalism that is broadly inclusive, and discards Mao Zedong’s dicta about the groups whose activities were “incompatible” with China’s future.

But what does all this do to our interpretative schemes? If all the erstwhile traitors turn out to have been patriots in their fashion, what becomes of revolutionary nationalism? Indeed, what becomes of the revolution? What was it? Did it even ever really happen? Chinese historians have not yet really begun to ask these questions explicitly. They are still at the initial pingfàn [rehabilitation] stage of historiography. But perhaps we can consider how they might be answered, using the evidence of the 1920s.

2

A good example of the problem is the historiography of the May Thirtieth Incident and the May Thirtieth Movement that followed. Until now the incident has been judged perhaps the most important breakthrough in the revolutionary struggle of the 1920s.

The incident took place in Shanghai on Saturday, 30 May 1925. At the time, no one expected the day to have any particular importance; it promised to be so uneventful that Kenneth John McEuen, commissioner of police for the Shanghai Municipal Council, thought nothing of leaving his office early that day. Some protests were planned, McEuen knew, but in Shanghai, already East Asia's greatest metropolis, something was always happening; furthermore, McEuen was an enthusiastic horseman—as a young man he had played polo in the interport league—and he did not want to miss the annual spring meet at the race course, which was taking place that afternoon. So at 12:15 P.M. he left the Municipal Building, going first to the Bund and lunch at the Shanghai Club, then out Bubbling Well Road to the racetrack.

The demonstration was to protest the killing two weeks earlier of Gu Zhenghong, a Chinese worker, by a Japanese textile factory guard whom he had threatened. A large crowd turned out in the Nanjing road, and as the day progressed, it became more and more angry. This area was patrolled from the Louza police station, off the Nanjing Road. Shortly before 2:00 P.M., its commander, Inspector Everson, had arrested and brought in for questioning five students who had been demonstrating. Other students gathered outside the station. By 3:00 P.M. about two thousand protestors filled the street in front. At about this time McEuen passed by on his way to the spring meet, but was not concerned. In the station, however, were only one hundred police, and they became more and more alarmed as the crowd grew in size. Seventy protesters broke in and demanded the release of the students, but were driven back. Then the crowd began to shout, “Kill the foreigners!”

Everson was afraid that the station would be stormed. At 3:37 P.M. he shouted warnings in both English and Chinese; ten seconds later he ordered his men, Sikh and Chinese policemen, to fire. Forty-four shots rang out. Four people were killed immediately, seven more would die of


their wounds, and about twenty were wounded. The crowd fled, stunned by what had happened.13

Riots and violence were not uncommon in Shanghai. The Louza police station itself had been attacked and burned by a mob in 1905. Only a landing party from the British warships in port had ended the ensuing riot.14 May 4, 1919, had also been violent in Shanghai. Yet these earlier violent incidents had, effectively, no consequences. May 30, 1925, was very different. This time a conflagration erupted, not just in Shanghai, but across China.

Within days of the incident in Shanghai, all of China was being swept up in a tide of protests, which was quickly named the May Thirtieth Movement. In Shanghai, large-scale disorder began immediately after the shooting; foreign troops began patrolling the streets; more Chinese were killed in exchanges with them. In Beijing on 3 June perhaps thirty thousand students demonstrated. In Hankou, the great port up the Yangzi river from Shanghai, eight demonstrators were killed by British machine-guns on 11 June and violent protest began. A general strike against the British started in Hong Kong on 19 June, and spread quickly to Guangzhou. That city in turn became tense. On 23 July an incident occurred there that was even bloodier than that of 30 May in Shanghai. Sixty thousand demonstrators, among them armed cadets from the Kuomintang’s Huangpu [Whampoa] Military Academy, tried to force the bridge leading from Guangzhou proper across the Shaji [“Shakee”] creek into the foreign settlement on Shamian Island. Afterward it was never agreed who had started to shoot, but some fifty-two Chinese were killed as British troops and Chinese demonstrators exchanged fire.15 A national general strike was called in Beijing on 25 June, and one hundred thousand demonstrators demanded that the Chinese army be used to expel the British from China.16

And the consequences continued. A little more than a year later, on 1 July 1926 the Nationalist military commander Chiang Kai-shek ordered the beginning of the Northern Expedition, an audacious attempt to carry revolution from Guangzhou, which had been Sun Yat-sen’s

base, through all of China. By March of the following year, Chiang's armies had reached and taken the key cities of Shanghai and Nanjing, and on 5 April a new National Government had been proclaimed. The passage of another year brought the collapse of resistance in the North, and the retreat of the paramount "warlord" leader, Zhang Zuolin, from Beijing. In a little more than three years from the May Thirtieth Incident, China had a new government. To observers, Chinese and foreign alike, this was the real "revolution"—and that terminology would stick until 1949. Here, surely, was confirmation of Mao Zedong's prophecy. For Chiang's progress North had involved fighting only to an extent. His troops, with Soviet advisers, placed great emphasis on revolutionary mobilization and the slogans of nationalism. For the first time in Chinese warfare, propaganda teams preceded the army, explaining the revolutionary nature of the new war. The demoralized Chinese people listened and were galvanized, and all was swept before them. Such, at least, has been the general historical verdict. The study of the history of war raises some questions about it.

3

Let us note the interpretative issues posed by the May Thirtieth Incident and Movement. First, there is success. In a way previous events (even including the culturally more significant May Fourth Incident of 1919) had not, the violence that day in Shanghai ignited a conflagration: it was followed, in a matter of days and weeks, by strikes, riots, and demonstrations across China, which were never controlled, and which culminated in the overthrow, by 1928, of the Chinese government that had ruled since 1912, and its substitution by the radical nationalist regime of Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang. So the May Thirtieth Incident comes close to approximating the cliché of revolutions everywhere that is summed up in the Chinese phrase xìng xìng shí huò kuài liào yuán.17

Second, there is the seemingly decisive role in this story of an abrupt and thoroughgoing change in consciousness. The nationwide response to what happened in Shanghai that Saturday seems at root to have been not a matter of economic change, or of shifts in social structures or hierarchies, or indeed of any of the things materially minded historians like to look at. Instead it looks very much like a sudden but commonly shared shift in the way masses of Chinese people thought about themselves, their country, and its relationship to the rest of the world. Those who play with words might call it a "national

moment,” when inchoate feelings of hundreds of thousands of people crystallized around an event and into a program.

There are similar incidents in the histories of other countries: they occur regularly in the history of radical nationalism. One is the Amritsar, or Jallianwala Bagh, massacre of 13 April 1919, in which British colonial troops killed nearly four hundred demonstrators in Punjab, an atrocity which, by some accounts at least, changed fundamentally the whole tenor of the nationalist movement.18 Or consider the incident at Sétif in Algeria on 8 May 1945, when shooting broke out during a parade, ostensibly to celebrate victory in Europe, but used by Muslims to call for independence, which led to shootings throughout the colony, an eventual death toll of 103 Europeans murdered, and perhaps five times that number of Muslims killed in revenge.19

Both incidents are almost universally recognized as defining moments in the emergence of respective nationalisms; moments when identities that had hitherto coexisted suddenly and abruptly disentangled themselves, when habits of thought and socializing developed over decades and generations became history, when person after person, regardless of their previous beliefs, made not just or even an intellectual choice, but a total emotional choice for one side or the other, becoming willing to engage in the most appalling brutality against others previously neighbors at best and strangers at worst, in the service of goals which had become all-encompassing and opposed in a way that puzzled all of them.

May Thirtieth fits the category exactly. It is important above all because of its psychological consequences. The events that started it were real enough, but they moved people less by changing anything physical than by transforming the way people thought. The sight of blood on Nanjing Road in Shanghai, as on Changanjie in Beijing, changed everyone’s mind. Here is how Ba Jin [Li Feigan, b. 1904], a radical novelist of the time, described one student’s reaction:

At the entrance to Yunnan Road [he] saw the child who had been killed a short while before. He thought: about half an hour ago the crowd was marching peacefully toward the police station to ask the police to set free the students who had been unjustly arrested. They thought the police were human beings endowed with reason and human sympathy, that human blood flowed in their veins. They thought that uniforms and weapons could not have destroyed their human nature. But reality proved that they


were bloodthirsty beasts. On the most crowded street of the city they deliberately slaughtered unarmed people. For this there was no precedent in Chinese history. The imperialist oppression that had endured for so many years ached like a deep wound in [his] heart. He struggled inwardly. He felt the time for patience was over. He felt he wanted to spill his blood, to sacrifice his young life that he might show that not all among this people were lambs that allowed themselves to be led without resistance to slaughter. He looked again at the corpse of the murdered child. His eyes shone with fire, his whole body began to burn as though on fire, his heart beat violently.20

Ba Jin’s words reflect what a modern Chinese scholar calls the “change in political atmosphere” marked by the May Thirtieth Incident.21 Chinese scholars call this largely psychological force “world shaking”; it had “the power to topple mountains and turn over seas.”22 The spark of May Thirtieth is thought of as having set China “aflame with the fever of nationalism.”23 In the mass movement that it sent surging over China, Harold Isaacs saw “a weapon of immense power.”24

The Powers, furthermore, were confronted with new and unanticipated demands. “The question was no longer what the Western nations and Japan would demand of China, but what an intensely vocal and nationalistic China would demand of them.”25 Since that time, and continuing in the present, this radical nationalism, arising so it seemed suddenly and explosively, is taken as the background for diplomatic developments as well, most recently in the work of Edmund S. K. Fung.26

26. The Diplomacy of Imperial Retreat: Britain’s South China Policy, 1924–1931 (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1991); among earlier examples should be numbered Harley Farnsworth MacNair, China in Revolution: An Analysis of
The stress on the psychological dimension in this case is at least superficially congenial to the currently dominant approach to nationalism. Interpreters of nationalism tend to concentrate on consciousness, although there is deep disagreement among them over whether the consciousness in question is one that has accreted over the very long term, or is instead the product of modern capitalism and its associated intellectual consequences. Anthony D. Smith has called these two groups "primordialists" and "modernists," and it is not my intent in this essay to do more than suggest how this Chinese evidence may affect their arguments.27

But it is important to note that even if we concede that some sort of fundamental change in collective thinking, whether deep rooted or recent, is associated with nationalism, explaining that mental change—which is what the primordialists and the modernists disagree about—does not explain either the initiation or success of nationalist violence. This fact is of critical importance to understanding May Thirtieth.

This is where war comes in. Students of institution building and its consequences will note in China, from the mid-nineteenth century continuing unabated through the present century, what can best be called a military revolution. As in Europe, this military revolution had a number of manifestations. There was a rapid improvement of weapons, with consequent changes in strategy and tactics and, above all, a great increase in the power of the military in comparison with the rest of society. The Chinese always recognized that modernization had been forced on them in the first instance by gunfire, and military reform received a high priority.28 During the roughly half-century from the Treaty of Nanjing to the Sino-Japanese War of 1895, numerous military texts were translated; cadets were sent abroad, and state-of-the-art weapons were purchased—all with such apparent effect that on the eve of the Sino-Japanese War, qualified foreign observers believed that China's modern battle fleet would easily defeat Japan's.29 There was a


shift in military status as well. At the top, specialized professional officers with formal education, though often of humble origin, gradually displaced the privileged military amateurs who formerly held command, while at the bottom the mass army increasingly took the place of the trained mercenary force. And there was the transformation of ways of fighting and of battlefields, owing to industrialization. All of these changes occurred in China as well as Europe although about a decade later.

The result was a great increase in China’s ability to inflict harm: both on foreigners (how the army would have done against the British after 1925 was never tested, because the British unilaterally handed over some of their most important concessions, notably at Hankou) and on themselves, through civil wars. These developed and grew more bloody through the 1920s.

Beginning in earnest in 1920, contenders for power in China began to use armies against one another. The results were never conclusive, however. As a result, military conflict escalated, along with every kind of political competition. 1922 saw a major war between Zhang Zuolin, overlord of Manchuria, and the Zhili group that controlled North and Central China. As for the May Thirtieth Incident, the autumn before it occurred had witnessed the largest modern war to that point in Chinese history. It began in the summer of 1924, with a struggle between Jiangsu and Zhejiang for control of Shanghai, which by autumn expanded into a showdown in Beijing and the north as well, the Second Zhili-Fengtian War. The combatants mobilized more than 420,000 troops at the outset.30 (By comparison, the force that Chiang K’ai-shek led north from Canton at the beginning of the Northern Expedition on 9 July 1926, numbered about 100,000 men).31 All the rolling stock in north China was pressed into service to carry men and weapons to the front. The technology and the style of fighting used had been learned from World War I. Mines and barbed-wire protected entrenched positions; armored trains and military aircraft were employed; artillery fire could be intense. Both sides used machine gun corps to kill their own troops if they retreated without orders.32 Casualties, among both officers and men, were heavy, and hospitals for miles around the fronts were quickly filled to overflowing. But no clear victor emerged.

In the wake of this war, however, China’s existing institutional, political, economic, and social structure emerged severely weakened.

31. Huang and Hao, Shijianrenwulu, 125.
War destroyed existing authority, creating a vacuum at every level from legitimacy of rule to simple city policing. *When disorder broke out in Shanghai, there was no one to stop it*, as Wu Peifu's elite forces had stopped the strike of workers on the Beijing-Hankou railroad in the summer of 1923. Wu's forces had been destroyed in the war of the previous autumn.

Much the same process was involved in the cases of Amritsar, and Sétif. In all three cases the existing relationships of power had been shifted, not so much as a result of nationalist sentiment, as through the agency of war. Amritsar is scarcely surprising: World War I had bled England white; it had furthermore greatly reduced the psychological advantages Europeans once held over their colonial subjects. Sétif cannot be understood outside the context of World War II, which had been far more than a defeat—an abject humiliation—for France. Likewise, the May Thirtieth Movement would never have succeeded had not the indigenous forces of order in China—the governments, armies, and police forces of the Peking government—been destroyed in civil wars.

That destruction made possible the expression of sentiments that had previously been only imperfectly visible. It also intensified them: civil war and economic destruction turned people who had hitherto supported the government against it. In addition, the simmering resentment of foreign privilege came to a boil. All of these effects are to some extent the *results* of violence whose origins were quite different. From this perspective, then, nationalism is not so much a cause as a consequence. To understand China in the 1920s we must look closely at war and the forces it fed or unleashed. From this perspective, nationalism is not so much a cause as an effect.

5

To move one step further, understanding what has traditionally been called "the rise of nationalism" in China requires looking at the interaction of warfare with politics, something historians have done only incompletely. In particular, two events must be brought into the explanatory framework. Here we can only suggest a few key events and turning points.

Military order in China was severely shaken by the chaotic conclusion of the Second Zhili-Fengtian War on 3 November 1924. Until a few days before its end, most observers had believed that the war would be won by Wu Peifu, the able Zhili leader. But one of his allies, Feng Yuxiang, became dissatisfied with the way the war was going, left the front, and marched on Beijing, where he carried out a coup d'état to create what he proclaimed as a new national government. Wu was therefore forced to abandon his troops at the front in the North, and hasten to the
provinces of the Middle Yangzi, where he hoped, vainly as it turned out, to rally reinforcements against both Feng, and the original adversary, Zhang Zuolin. The true victor, Zhang Zuolin, however, did not seize the capital immediately. Instead, he moved initially only as far as nearby Tianjin. But it was only a matter of time before Zhang would move; when he did, Feng would be forced to withdraw. A struggle would then develop among Feng, Zhang, and Wu for control of a new civilian administration in Beijing under Duan Qirui.

This struggle is often called in Chinese hunshan or “chaotic warfare,” and skipped over by historians. It is complicated, although not more than military operations involving alliances usually are. It has several stages.

The first is a war, which begins late in 1925, between Feng Yuxiang and the cooperating forces of Zhang Zuolin and Wu Peifu. In this, Feng managed to take Tianjin, suffering heavy casualties. But his plan to bring Zhang Zuolin down through the rebellion of a subordinate failed. As a result, Feng’s position became difficult: he departed from China to travel, eventually to the USSR, leaving his armies under the commands of subordinates. The decisive battles of this war came when Zhang Zuolin drove down on the capital, through the Shanhaiguan and Nankou passes in the Great Wall, both strong defensive positions that were costly to take. In April 1926 Feng’s forces abandoned Beijing, and it looked as if Feng Yuxiang, who had been the major obstacle in the way of restoring unity to China, had been overcome.

What had been the scale of this war? About 600,000 troops were mobilized on all sides; eight provinces were engulfed in the war zone; much of the equipment was World War I surplus; casualties, which are difficult to estimate, were in the tens of thousands.

The weakness of the Northern armies, however, which had been fighting with someone now since summer 1924, presented Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalist army in Canton far to the south, with their opportunity. As we have seen, Chiang ordered the beginning of the Northern Expedition just as the battle for Nankou was reaching its climax, and with the other participants distracted by the action near the capital, pushed rapidly into Central China, an area which had been without functional authority since 1924. Changsha and Yuezhou in Hunan fell within two months, and the response from the North, taken by surprise, was weak and ineffective. Wu Peifu, their best general,

33. An exception is Zhang Tongxin, Guomindang xinjunfa hunshan shilue (Ha-er-bin: Heilongjiang renmin chubanshe, 1982).
34. There is no definitive account. One of the better is Lai et al., Beiyang junfa shigao, 307–72.
35. Ch’i, Warlord Politics, 137–38.
arrived at Hankou with a large force on 25 August, but was unable to prevent the conquest of the key Wuhan cities, which fell to the Nationalists in September.

With the tide of battle shifting, however, Feng Yuxiang returned from the USSR, resuming control of his armies near the Mongolian border, and thus opened a second front on the right flank of the Northern forces. Meanwhile, the Nationalist armies continued their rapid progress north, taking Nanchang, the capital of Jiangxi, in November.

Only at this point, with Wu Peifu defeated in the South, and Chiang moving North with unexpected speed, did the leadership in Beijing actually form a military organization. On 1 December 1926 in Tianjin, Zhang Zuolin was inaugurated as Commander in Chief of the National Pacification Army [Anguojun].

The years 1927–28 saw the showdown between this army and the insurgent Nationalists, now profiting by defections from units who appreciated their momentum. Progress continued to be rapid in South and Central China, with Shanghai falling in March 1927, and the new National Government being proclaimed in Nanjing on 24 March 1927. The climax came a year later when the forces of Yan Xishan, who had controlled Shanxi, joined the hostilities, which made possible the capture of Beijing on 8 June 1928.

How big had this war been? Perhaps 1,100,000 men were involved; twelve provinces were war zones; estimated casualties were at least 50,000 (only a partial figure).36

These events, it should be stressed, are what bring to power the new Nationalist government. They are not best understood as manifestations of nationalism or social revolution. Rather, they are above all military tests. Chiang Kai-shek was an able general, able to take advantage of the complacency, suspicion, and disorganization of his opponents, choosing his moment to strike boldly with numerically inferior forces. His opponents, however, were by no means doomed.

The reasons for the success of the whole Nationalist Northern Expedition, then, look rather similar to those that explain why the May Thirtieth Incident was not crushed immediately. Not only had the military forces of the Beijing government been too weak to suppress the May Thirtieth Movement when it began; although numerically superior from the beginning almost to the end, they proved unable as well to form an effective force against the Nationalist army. This was largely owing to personal distrust among the anti-Nationalist leaders. What it caused was military effort that first misidentified the threat, and

36. Ibid.
then, when the threat was recognized, was unable to carry out an effective strategy against it.

Such is the story of the May Thirtieth Movement and the Northern Expedition, without nationalism, and without revolution: “battle history” if you will—we will meet that term of dismissal shortly.

6

At a time when the last political succession was determined by military intervention (after Mao Zedong’s death in 1976) and a popular movement for democracy crushed by armed force (in June 1989), “battle history” may have a certain appeal in China. Certainly the bookstores are full, as never before, with military histories, monographs on campaigns, memoirs of commanders, and even military historical novels.

To the extent that this development signals a more balanced and realistic historiography, it must be welcomed. But on the other hand, force alone is usually no explanation either, and that they should embrace it probably tells us more about the disillusionment of the Chinese people than it does about the actual course of their history. Undeniably, it makes complicated what was once a remarkably simple business of historical interpretation. It requires a rethinking, for the Chinese case, of the relationships between the technical and intrinsic elements of war and the broader social, economic, and political context. Gradually weakening is the idea that the 1920s were a period of war between nationalists and anti-nationalists, with ideology determining the victory. Chinese historians are increasingly seeing the 1920s as a period of civil war (among nationalists of various styles), with war determining the outcome. I suspect Westerners will soon follow.

This brings me to my final questions. This symposium deals with the history of war as a part of general history. For historians of Europe and the United States, that question is enough. But to a historian of my specialization, it sounds very much like another question, with which we deal frequently: how to understand the history of China as a part of general history. Both are problems, and interestingly, both are—to some extent—the same problem.

I have deleted the rest of the article because the main points are already finished and, well, he isn't a very good writer...