Warlordism in China

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The Review is pleased to include this succinct summary of the elements defining, and the debates surrounding, the warlord phenomenon in China's history. Dr Roberts assesses the various ways in which the 'classical' warlordism of the period from 1916 to 1928 has been understood and interpreted. The focus is on the collapse of central state authority and the rise of provincial or regional military rulers exercising considerable power and autonomy over the locality. The paper presents a lucid account of how the origins of warlordism have been explained, what are considered to be the main characteristics of warlords and warlordism and what their effects were on the society and polity of China. A number of points raise interesting questions about the extent to which the concept might usefully be applied to some current problems in Africa. These include the decay of nationalism into regionalism and sectarianism; the extent to which such provincial power centres link up with foreign interests; the disintegration of the military hierarchy and the rise of lower-ranked officer strata; and the burdens imposed on civil society by the extortion and violence occasioned by warlordism and by the obstacles it places in the way of political solutions to problems. The paper concludes with a brief consideration of alternative possibilities that were thrown up in China by the 'space' created by the decline of political control which warlordism reflected and perpetuated.

Warlordism in China has had a long history. The historian Ssu-ma Ch'ien, who died c. 90 B.C., recorded the activities of warlords in the The Records of the Grand Historian. When the Han dynasty collapsed (in the third century A.D.) and when the T'ang dynasty fell apart (in the tenth century A.D.) no single authority was able to retain power and competing warlord regimes emerged. In the late seventeenth century, after the Manchu conquest, the invaders sought to consolidate their power by eliminating the semi-independent regimes of Wu San-kuei and those other generals who had connived with the conquest. In the 1960s, at the time of the Cultural Revolution, there were allegations that the independent activity of senior military officers who had established local power bases was heralding a return to warlordism (Whitson 1969).

However, in modern Chinese history, the period of warlordism usually refers to 1916-1928, that is to say, the period from the death of Yuan Shih-k'ai, first president of the Chinese Republic to the reunification of China under the Kuomintang or Nationalist Party. In that period the authority of the central government virtually
collapsed (though a regime in Peking continued to carry out some of the functions of a national government). Effective local or regional power fell into the hands of some dozens of tuchun, military governors who have become known in the west as the warlords. In those twelve years perhaps 160 wars were fought, the period therefore being known as that of warlordism.

To contemporary western eyes, warlordism was a phenomenon which combined comedy with tragedy. Accounts of warlords and their deeds concentrated on the brutal and bizarre. At the same time the assumption was that the decline into warlordism negated the hopes raised by the revolution of 1911 that China was transforming herself into a modern state. When the nationalists came to power in 1928 the contrast between the disintegration of the warlord period and the reintegration of the Nationalist period was stressed. The negative and insignificant assessment of the period has been echoed in modern interpretations.

In the last twenty years 'a minor industry has developed in warlord studies' (Lary 1985:7). About a dozen monographs and a number of important articles have appeared in English. Because of the extent of warlordism, the number of warlord regimes, and the quantity of source materials, the topic is awkward to handle. Most writers have concentrated on the career of a single warlord, or on the history of warlordism in a single province. However, some studies have attempted to deal more broadly with the subject (Pye 1971; Lary 1974; Ch'i 1976; Ch'en 1979).

A summary of the main themes which have arisen in the study of warlordism in China should begin with the terms of reference used. The best-known definition of a Chinese warlord was that proposed by James Sheridan in his biography of the 'Christian General', Feng Yu-hsiang:

In Chinese history, the term warlord ordinarily designates a man who was lord of a particular area by virtue of his capacity to wage war. A warlord exercised effective governmental control over a fairly well-defined region by means of a military organization that obeyed no higher authority than himself (Sheridan 1966:1).

Some writers have avoided the use of the terms 'warlord' and 'warlordism', because they regard them as too pejorative. C.Martin Wilbur used the phrase 'regional militarist' (Wilbur, 1968) and other writers, following this tendency, have referred to 'provincial militarism' (Kapp 1973). This tendency was denounced by Diana Lary:

While it is true that no warlord ever referred to himself as a warlord, but used much more high-sounding honorifics and titles, few of the individuals whom other Chinese called warlords manifested the kind of personal characteristics which would give them the right to have their sensitivities pandered to. A spade is a spade, and a rose is a rose (Lary 1980:442).

In a recent article James Sheridan reviewed the terms in use and concluded that

Since many leading warlords held the position of military governor of a province, the term t'uchun is used as a rough synonym for warlord or regional militarist (Sheridan 1983:284).

The most extensive debate about Chinese warlordism in the 1920s concerns its origin. Two views were put forward initially. On the one hand Franz Michael argued that throughout Chinese history there is evidence a pattern of recurrent decline in the authority of central government and the development of what he described as 'regionalist power centres'. The most recent example of this decline, the warlord
period of the 1920s, should be traced to the great rebellions of the mid-nineteenth century, and in particular to the effects of the Taiping Rebellion (1851-1864). In an attempt to recover its authority, the Manchu dynasty had made fatal concessions to the elite group, the gentry, and had permitted the raising of regional armies by the two outstanding leaders of the time, Tseng Kuo-fan and Li Hung-chang. This had led to a loss of central power which Michael described as 'regionalism' (Michael 1964:xxi). This view was echoed by Sheridan who saw regional militarism as the culmination of a pattern which had begun about a century earlier' (Sheridan 1966:1). C. Martin Wilbur emphasised the importance of regional differences in China as latent factors in the rise of autonomous military-political regions:

centrifugal tendencies were always powerful, and the area we think of as China was divided for periods nearly as long as those in which it was united. (Wilbur 1968:217).

He also identified the part played by the provincial or regional army leaders of the mid-nineteenth-century and by Yuan Shih-k'ai and the Pei-yang Army at the beginning of this century in bringing about this division. But he added that the development of military separatism did not imply an autonomous force, for other important historical processes interacted with it closely,

We may mention the gradual breakdown of the Chinese social fabric in the nineteenth century under the pressure of rapidly growing population and increasing economic inequality between social classes; the decay of the imperial institution and decline in the efficiency of the Ch'ing bureaucracy; and foreign competition for paramountcy over China's territory and wealth (Wilbur 1968:219-220).

On the other hand, Jerome Ch'en traced the origins of warlordism to China's military modernisation, and in particular to the role of Yuan Shih-k'ai who, in the late 1890s had created the Pei-yang Army, China's first truly modern fighting force. Ch'en detected the seeds of warlordism in the personal example which Yuan had set as a selfish opportunist and the relationship which he had established between himself and his generals. When Yuan died in 1916, his most powerful single legacy was the creation of a large number of warlords who were neither Confucian generals ... owing their allegiance to the throne nor officers of a national army pledged to defend the country's honor and interests (Ch'en 1972:214).

Both these arguments have been attacked. Wang Gung-wu challenged the view that regional militarism was 'an old and recurring Chinese problem'. He agreed that on a number of occasions in the past China had suffered from division or loss of central control. However he suggested that twentieth-century regionalism was a new phenomenon, at least in part because it was connected with 'the decay of an Old Order and the emergence of a New Order' (Wang 1968:268). The idea that the warlord period was in some general way related to the process of modernisation in China was given a broader treatment by Sheridan. He suggested that the modern period in Chinese history could best be seen as showing a pattern of disintegration and re-integration. The nadir of this process was reached in the warlord period, when the bonds uniting the traditional state had snapped and the new ties of the modern state had yet to be formed (Sheridan 1975:20).

The idea that Yuan Shih-k'ai was the 'father of the warlords' was attacked by Stephen MacKinnon who argued that the Pei-yang Army was less regional and private than the regional armies of the mid-nineteenth century, and that the
personal connection between Yuan and his senior officers was not as strong as has been suggested. He concluded that

the proto-warlord thesis of the rise of Yuan Shih-k'ai and the Peiyang Army ... simply does not square with the facts ... Yuan does not fit the basic definition of a warlord.

and he added

The question of warlord origins should be re-examined in a context wider than just the military one. The warlord phenomenon of the 1916-1927 period was also the result of an immediate break-down of class structure and of social and political institutions other than military — the how and whys of which are poorly understood (MacKinnon, 1973:423).

Donald Sutton challenged both explanations of the origin of warlordism. From a study of the Yunnan Army, he concluded that the evidence showed that the Yunnan Army, 'entered the Republic with an essentially modern, non-private structure' (Sutton, 1980:2). It was only after the revolution of 1911 that the revolutionaries became militarists, and the key development took place in the period 1920-22, when the unity of the Yunnan Army collapsed consequent upon a feud between two senior officers. A disintegration of the force occurred because the second level of command, the brigadiers, had been unable to maintain control, and so effective power had devolved to junior officers — a process which he likened to colonels' coups in developing countries in the 1950s and 1960s (Sutton 1980: 266-67).

In the discussion of the specific characteristics of warlord regimes, a number of themes have been explored. C. Martin Wilbur attempted an 'anatomy of the regional militarist system'. He pointed out that the great majority of the regional militarists were 'static', that is to say that their principal aim was to secure and maintain control of a particular tract of territory. The ease or difficulty with which this could be achieved depended on the desirability of the territory and the security of its frontiers. Valuable assets were the inclusion within the territory of cities whose inhabitants could be taxed, and access to the sea to enable the supply of arms from foreign sources. These considerations explained why the most powerful of the regional militarists were Chang Tso-lin and Chang Hsieh-liang, the warlords of Manchuria, who enjoyed all these assets, while the most durable of the warlords was Yen Hsi-shan, the warlord of the poor but defensible inland province of Shansi (Wilbur 1968).

Another important issue concerning warlord regimes is that of the relationship between warlord regimes and the nation. It has generally been argued that warlord regimes did not reject the idea of an unified China, the warlords commonly expressed their desire to see China re-unified and denied that their actions were responsible for the fragmentation of the country. This issue was taken up by Robert Kapp, in his book on provincial militarism in Szechwan province, in which he examined the relationship between provincial militarism and provincial separatism. He described 'provincial militarism' as a symptom of the times, a manifestation of specific conditions after the fall of the Ch'ing dynasty. But 'provincial separatism' was a 'manifestation of political tendencies and dilemmas as old as the Chinese Empire' (Kapp 1973:1). He argued that the Szechwan military elite at first continued to identify itself strongly with China proper, and that it had no wish to secede permanently from the Chinese state. However the failure of national political development led to second-generation militarists perceiving their interests in exclusively provincial terms and so they promoted provincial
autonomy. This provincial separatism continued after the Nationalist revolution of 1927-29, until a crisis of militarism in 1934 brought the central government back into the province (Kapp, 1973:20,98).

Diana Lary addressed herself to related issues with reference to the province of Kwangsi, which was dominated by a military clique from the mid-1920s until 1949. The ‘regional militarism’ which developed was

a self-protective, conservative phenomenon. It protected the region by detaching it from the turbulent state. It protected not the inhabitants of the region but its military rulers (Lary 1974:12).

Her main line of enquiry was whether the clique was regionalist or nationalist. Her conclusion was that it was both, at the same time. This was because the clique functioned in what she described as the ‘indistinct but real framework of layered loyalties’. The clique ruled the province as an autonomous unit, but this did not mean that it rejected national and nationalist concerns,

The Kwangsi leaders still felt themselves to be nationalists; but nationalism was a remote and rarefied ideal, a distant vision of a strong, rich, united China (Lary 1974:194).

A third general theme relating to warlords and warlordism concerns the analysis of different types of warlords, derived from the ideology which they expressed. J.E.Sheridan suggested three broad categories: reactionary, such as Chang Hsun, the ‘Pig-Tailed General’, who in 1917 brought about a brief restoration of the Manchus; conservative, such as Wu P’ei-fu, leader of the Chihli clique, who was a Confucianist, and about whom his biographer Odoric Wou wrote:

He regarded Confucian tradition and customs as the components of the Chinese nation. This pride in the indigenous Chinese culture and the identification of the Chinese tradition with the Chinese nation was actually a manifestation of his nationalistic feeling (Wou 1978:37).

and finally reformers, of whom the best-known was Yen Hsi-shan, the ‘Model Governor’ of Shansi (Sheridan 1975:59-77).

A number of studies of warlordism and of individual warlords have investigated the basis on which warlords formed alliances. In an attempt to see beyond the confusing impression of irrational and impermanent alliances, efforts have been made to identify the general principles which lay behind the forging and severance of relationships. Warlord alliances often had a personal basis, which might involve blood or marriage ties, but which also included non-familial links of patronage, shared education and training and provincial or local connections. Ties of self-interest were obviously important, but so too under some circumstances were those of a common ideological outlook (Pye 1971:77-93; Ch’i 1976:36-76).

Other studies have considered the military aspects of warlord regimes. Ch’i estimated the number of soldiers under arms in this period as rising from around 500,000 in 1916 to around 2,000,000 by 1928, his figures excluding those who should more properly be described as bandits rather than as the soldiers of warlords. He went on to discuss the military capabilities of warlord regimes in terms of recruitment and training of their soldiers and the use of weaponry and tactics (Ch’i 1976:77-149). Diana Lary considered the sources and methods of recruitment
of the soldiers in warlord armies, the conditions of army life and the consequences of militarism on Chinese society (Lary 1983).

The maintenance of warlord armies involved substantial expenses, and a number of writers have attempted to identify the sources of revenue of warlord regimes. Sheridan included material on this in his biography of Feng Yu-hsiang, and noted his use of railway revenues, his raising of an ingenious variety of local taxes, and his use of finance derived from the sale of opium, (notwithstanding his prohibition of the cultivation of poppies) (Sheridan 1966:156-8). Feng was a ‘mobile warlord’ (that is he did not command a territorial base), and this prevented him from regularly collecting the land tax, which in imperial times had been the principal revenue of the central government, and which now provided much of the revenue of warlord regimes. A general analysis of warlord finances was made by Ch‘i Hsi-sheng, who after an exhaustive survey concluded that during the warlord period the cost of fighting soared and that as a consequence warlords were drawn to extort more and more from the territories under their control, with the consequent impoverishment of the peasantry and the oppression of all forms of economic activity (Ch‘i 1976:150-178).

It was C.Martin Wilbur who suggested the importance of foreign contacts to warlord regimes and this point has been followed up by a number of writers. In his biography of Wu Pei-fu, Odoric Wou included a long section on what he described rather politely as ‘a pattern of multi-tier and multi-choice foreign relations’. He stressed how

It was certainly impossible for any Chinese militarist to wage a war in China without giving at least perfunctory attention to, if not actually cultivating relations with foreign nations (Wou 1978:148).

The complexities of the relationship between warlordism and imperialism was examined by Gavan McCormack with reference to that which subsisted between Chang Tso-lin, the warlord of Manchuria, and Japan. At the end of the book McCormack commented,

In the case of Chang Tso-lin it is impossible to sidestep the issue: yet it is also most difficult to answer it categorically. Certainly Chang was no Japanese puppet; yet neither was he in any sense a nationalist or an anti-imperialist.

Chang could not resist Japanese imperialism, so he strove to use it to obtain Japan’s benevolent neutrality, while he built up his own strength. This suggested that he was pro-Japanese, whereas in fact he remained committed to the integrity of China — a commitment which might be said to have led to his assassination by members of the Japanese Kwantung Army (McCormack 1977:253-4).

It might seem possible to summarise the significance of the warlord period in modern Chinese history in entirely negative terms. This is the often-expressed view, and the one reiterated by Diana Lary in her recent review of warlord studies,

For its victims, warlordism was a profound tragedy, an endless menace and degradation. For many peasants, warlordism was a burden which made hard lives unendurable. For merchants and businessmen, warlordism meant intolerable interruption and harassment. For China’s politicians and intellectuals, warlordism carried the despairing connotation of reducing the country to wrack and ruin without the promise of any salvation. It confounded their hopes for the future by showing that a country could continue to exist in degradation, without unity, without law, without order. Even foreigners who were committed to China
regarded warlordism as an unmitigated evil. It disrupted the trade of businessmen, ruined the lives of missionaries’ converts, and created an atmosphere of terror in which even the cosseted foreigner became fearful for his own safety.

Warlordism entrenched the military at the centre of Chinese life, it introduced hundreds upon thousands of young men to the military life as officers and soldiers. By its own actions, and by the adjunct actions of banditry, it institutionalized violence. It reduced politics and political solutions to impotence and ridicule; it substituted fear and force for due process. It undermined China's economy, threw her fiscal system into disarray, and retarded efforts at economic advancement, except in areas under foreign control (Lary 1980:439-440).

Can this be accepted as a balanced statement of the effects of warlordism on China? The ascription of all China’s problems in this era to the single, if widespread phenomenon of warlordism has been challenged. Lucien Pye in a book which, although published in 1971, was completed in all essential details some twenty years earlier, argued that one consequence of the warlord era was that in modern China political power cannot be divorced from military power (Pye 1971:169). Perhaps in the 1950s this assumption of the dominance of the military in Chinese affairs might have seemed justified, but to regard it as a permanent consequence of the warlord period was been challenged by Sheridan, who commented ‘this militarization was not profound or permanent’ (Sheridan 1983:319).

Another issue concerning the consequences of warlordism is that of its economic effects. The assumption that warlordism had a disastrous effect on China’s economic development was expressed at the time and has been repeated subsequently. However, J.K.Chang’s estimates of industrial production show that the first burst of rapid growth in the modern sector of the Chinese economy occurred in the 1920s. Admittedly much of this growth took place in the treaty ports. More recently questions have been raised about the alleged damage caused by warlordism in terms of a drain on the country’s wealth, and the degree of hardship caused by warlord exactions (Sheridan 1983:317-9).

It would be difficult to find a true apologist for warlordism in China, although some of the biographers of warlords have found things to say in favour of their subject. However the case has been made out that important benefits did derive from the dislocation of the warlord era. Lucien Pye argued that warlordism provided a period of political freedom,

A fundamental paradox of China’s modernization is that the phase of military domination brought competitive politics to China while the periods of party domination have brought monolithic authority and the denial of open competition — the exact reverse of the typical pattern in the currently developing countries (Pye 1971:vii).

Likewise it has long been noted that the warlord period coincided with the great burst of intellectual activity known as the May Fourth Movement. To conclude this review on the issue of warlordism, one may quote from James Sheridan's balanced summary on this theme.

Most warlords were conservative men, strongly attuned to traditional values. Paradoxically, the disunity and disorder they fostered provided rich opportunity for intellectual diversity and iconoclasm to flourish. Neither the central government nor the provincial warlords were capable of efficiently controlling the universities, periodicals, publishing industries and other agencies of China’s intellectual life. Chinese intellectuals in those years, partly in response to the evils of warlordism, engaged in the most intense discussion of ways in which China might be modernized and strengthened. The founding of the Communist Party in 1921 and the reorganization of the Kuomintang in 1924 stemmed partly from this intellectual flowering.
Thus, on the one hand, the warlord years represented the low point of political unity and national strength in the twentieth century. On the other hand, they also represented the peak of intellectual and literary achievement, and out of that tumultuous and bloody era, partly in response to the warlords, flowed the intellectual and social movements that culminated in the reunification and rejuvenation of China (Sheridan 1983:320-1).

**Bibliographic Note**


For a recent bibliographical study, see Diana Lary, 'Warlord studies', *Modern China*, 6.4. 1980.

**Endnote**

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