

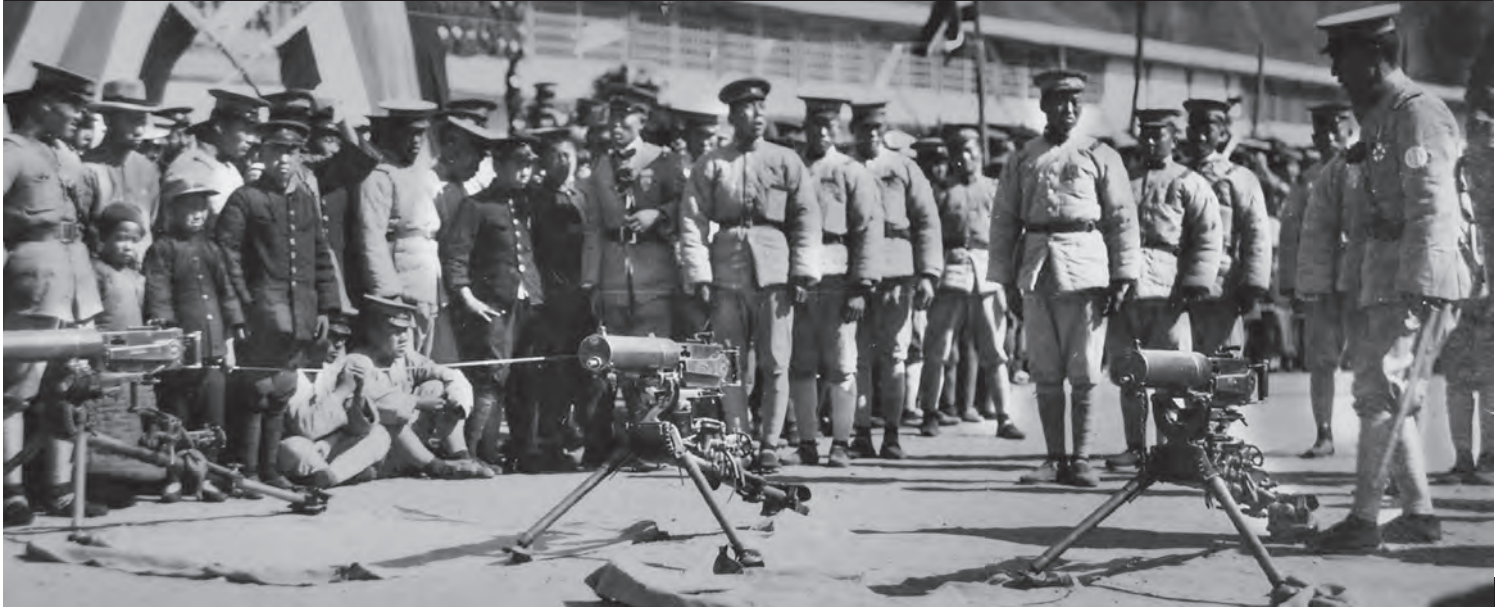
A Tale of Two Warlords

Republican China During the 1920s

By Matthew R. Portwood and John P. Dunn

When the wind blows, the grass bends with the wind.

—Yuan Shikai



Soldiers of Feng Yuxiang practice with their heavy machine guns ca. 1930.
Source: US Army Heritage and Educational Center.

Usually translated into English as “warlords,” *junfa* were the bane of Republican China. Some were highly trained officers, others self-made strategists or graduates of the “school of forestry,” a Chinese euphemism for banditry. In the words of a contemporary, they “did more harm for China in sixteen years than all the foreign gunboats could have done in a hundred years.”¹ Warlords struggled for power between the death of would-be Emperor Yuan Shikai in 1916 and the end of the republic in 1949. Holdouts dominated remote frontier provinces until 1950; some of their lieutenants fought a decade later to control drug trafficking in the Golden Triangle.

Warlords began their rise to power during the 1911 Revolution that ended millennia of imperial rule. Leaders like dentist-turned-revolutionary Sun Yat-sen argued Western-style Republicanism was the new standard for governance. To succeed, a republic needed support from China’s armed forces and their commander, Yuan Shikai. A rocky marriage between this wily general and Sun ended with the former elected as China’s first president. Yuan never connected to Republicanism and shortly before his death attempted an imperial restoration (1915–16). His demise unleashed the warlords, who quickly carved China into a hodgepodge of nearly independent states.

This remarkable collection of alpha males repelled and fascinated contemporary observers. Journalists filled newspapers and magazines with accounts, some highly exaggerated, of warlord actions. Moviegoers gained a different perspective via films like *Shanghai Express* (1932) or *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933). Even seasoned diplomats and “old China hands” were mesmerized by warlord avarice and audacity. Still, to most American and Western readers, Chinese warlords were exotic foreigners whose antics were far too complex for comprehension. S. J. Perlman provides a sense of

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this in his *New Yorker* satire on the 1936 Xian Mutiny, in which warlord Zheng Xueliang kidnapped Guomindong leader Chiang Kai-shek:

*“Young” Chang (“Old” Chang’s son, but not “Scalawag” Chang or “Red” Chang) offered to return the Generalissimo to Soong, who didn’t give a hang, but was only negotiating for his sister (who is married to Chiang). Feng, who is called “the Christian Marshal” (as opposed to Feng, the Jewish Marshal, I suppose), had no real business there, but claimed the conductor had given him a wrong transfer.”*²

Chinese, who suffered from their misrule, were all too familiar with the warlords. Sun Yat-sen, acclaimed “Father of the Republic,” denounced them as “a single den of badgers.”³ Progressives regarded these militarists as a malignant force whose collective actions factionalized the nation. *Junfa*, the Chinese word for warlord, soon became a loaded pejorative for misuse of authority. Modern historians share this view; Andrew Nathan accused warlords of creating “the darkest corner in twentieth-century Chinese history.” Fellow China expert Lucian Pye argued they “set back whatever chances there may have been for China to develop a more open, competitive, and democratic system of government.”⁴

Getting a handle on 1920s Chinese warlords seems daunting. How do you introduce them to students? How could *junfa* illuminate 1920s



Zhang Zongchang. Source: Wikipedia at <http://tinyurl.com/ltaeapd>.

Zhang was the epitome of the wicked warlord. His life was so notorious that it is difficult to separate history from slander.

pejorative, bestowed by enemies who succumbed to Feng's crafty tactics. Indeed, Huang Huilan, a well-connected contemporary, described him as the "Tricky Warlord"; it was said he could even double-cross himself. Issues of treachery aside, Feng's place in Chinese popular culture is very different from Zhang's. The Christian General is not seen as a warlord but rather a patriot, steadfast in his opposition to imperialism and an early proponent of total war with Japan. He is also remembered for attacks on foot binding, reforestation of the northwest, and an austere personal life that is probably the most stark contrast to the flamboyant Zhang.

Yet travel back to Tianjin on December 29, 1925, as Feng's soldiers yanked Xu Shuzheng out of his train, then shot him in the back of the head. "Little Xu" had been a warlord and was still connected to Feng's enemies. He had also killed Feng's relative, Lu Jianzheng, under very similar circumstances in 1918. Always economical, the Christian General's murder of Xu gained both revenge and eliminated a rival.

The willingness to use violence for political gain marked the warlord. Feng had very different agendas from Zhang, but both men spilled copious quantities of blood to gain their objectives. This might be on the battlefield or on a very personal level, like the murder of Little Xu. Thus we'll use Feng and Zhang to illustrate careers that personify the story of warlordism in Republican China.

A few warlords came from prosperous families, but most, like our duo, were from peasant stock. Zhang was a Shandong man, born in 1881; Feng was born nearby in Zhili (Hebei) Province a year later. Both grew to manhood under the Qing dynasty and were saddled with less-than-stellar parents. For Zhang, there was a crusty mother who left her husband for another. Feng's family stayed together, mother and father united by a common addiction to opium.

Young Feng entered the army at eleven, progressing to full-time soldier by eighteen. Zhang had a more varied career that included pickpocket, bouncer, prospector, and bandit. He also worked in Siberia, picking up a command of Russian that would pay significant dividends in the 1920s. During the 1911 Revolution, Zhang led a troop of revolutionary desperados.

As both men rose through the ranks, with the help of patrons, they became connected to warlord alliances, often called cliques. Feng joined the Zhili Clique, whose star was Wu Peifu, the "Jade Marshal." A master tactician, Wu was that rare warlord with a classical education. Zhang followed a more circuitous route to the Fengtian Clique, whose chairman was the unrelated Zhang Zuolin, the so-called "Tiger of Manchuria." These alignments guaranteed Feng and Zhang would become enemies, for both cliques sought to dominate Beijing, the weak but still valuable capital of China.

As historian Arthur Waldron makes clear, the realities of 1920s Chinese warfare were intense, with battles and campaigns that could replicate events from either the Eastern or Western Fronts of World War I. Warlords combined in cliques, because, unless you operated in a faraway border province, survival of lone wolves was problematic. By the mid-1920s, warlord armies could include more than 500,000 soldiers. They were armed with an array of such diverse weapons that each unit was a collector's dream, or a quartermaster's nightmare. Smart warlords kept up on military technology and practiced innovation. Feng, perennially short of cavalry horses, "mounted" some of his troopers on bicycles. Zhang, using linguistic skills attained during his Siberian career, employed White Russian mer-

China? Is it possible to provide some spice but avoid overwhelming neophytes with a galaxy of exotic names and their bigger-than-life biographies?

All are possible by limiting our focus. Let's examine just two warlords—possibly the most colorful, and certainly among the most powerful. Very different in their goals, outlooks, and strategies but united by the rules of warlordism, these two men were the embodiment of this breed.

Zhang Zongchang was born to a practicing witch, and his father was an alcoholic musician. As an adult, he was a self-described graduate of "the school of forestry" and at six-foot-six was the tallest of the warlords. His troops terrified local civilians—famous for their rapacity and "splitting melons" (bashing skulls with rifle butts). Zhang was the epitome of the wicked warlord. His life was so notorious that it is difficult to separate history from slander. All that was bad in 1920s China was laid at his door; victims and enemies magnified Zhang into a poster boy for evil and avarice.

Feng Yuxiang was different. While the bemedaled Zhang proudly sported an opulent marshal's uniform, Feng was more likely to appear in the quilted gray tunic of a private soldier. Another tall warlord, he was a convert to Methodism, thus nicknamed the "Christian General." Feng was also noted for his highly disciplined troops that paid for any requisitions and rarely abused civilians. Next, he morphed into the "Red General" after turning to the USSR for military support. The "Lying General" was another

Feng accepted military aid from the USSR, allowing reporters to coin yet another nickname, the “Red General.”

cenaries. They might have lost out to the Red Russians by 1921, but these men were veteran soldiers, and as a bonus, they knew how to build and operate armored trains—a formidable fighting platform from the Russian Civil War.

With armored trains or old-fashioned rifles and swords, warlord soldiers fought bloody contests from 1916 to 1928. Successful generals learned not only to deploy an infantry brigade or conduct aerial operations, but also how to employ treachery. For instance, generals might use “silver bullets” (bags of silver dollars) to encourage key enemy players to switch sides. Offers of cash, power, or revenge reached high levels in the 1920s, leading Wu Peifu to complain that “betraying one’s leader has become as natural as eating breakfast.” Zhang could play this game, but when it came to treachery, Feng was an authority. Chiang Kai-shek, who suffered as a result, complained that “the so-called Christian General was a master in the art of deception.” Feng’s greatest triumph was the 1924 betrayal of Wu Peifu, an event that completely unhinged the formidable defenses at Lengkouguan Pass. This ended Wu’s career but propelled Feng to the top ranks of the warlords. Ironically, the betrayal also helped Zhang, who conquered this part of the Great Wall, gaining significant credit within the Fengtian Clique.

Preventing silver bullet attacks required trusted lieutenants and dedicated soldiers. These were rare commodities among warlord armies, which tended to recruit desperate men incapable of finding employment back home. Most warlord soldiers suffered from weak morale, often exacerbated by poor rations; pay sometimes months in arrears; and mercurial discipline. Feng partially avoided these problems by indoctrination, charisma, and by insisting his officers took good care of the rank and file. He pushed Christianity as glue that could bind soldiers together; his best units boasted 50–60 percent Christians across the board. Feng provided pastors and Chinese missionaries to encourage conversions, and there were cases where entire companies became Christian. Journalistic reports that Feng “baptized entire regiments with a fire hose” were false, but he was known for exhorting his men to sing hymns on a regular basis.

If religion didn’t make a soldier more loyal to Feng, nationalism was another argument. By 1925, Feng became hostile to the “unequal treaties” that privileged European, American, and Japanese interests. Via posters, plays, songs, and instruction, his soldiers were told they served the *Guominjun*, or National Army, and were indoctrinated on the evils of imperialism. This stressed that their service was not simply to a warlord, but rather in support of the nation. Simultaneously, Feng accepted military aid from the USSR, allowing reporters to coin yet another nickname, the “Red General.”

Keeping track of Zhang’s nicknames required a score card. He was the “Dog Meat General,” a northern Chinese euphemism that recorded his extreme fascination with a domino-like game called *pai jiu*. Huang Huilan recalled him arriving at poker games with sacks full of silver dollars. He may have paid his soldiers in worthless script, but gambling debts were sacred and required hard money. Zhang was also the “Three Don’t Knows General,” supposedly because he could never say how many soldiers were under his command, how much money he owned, or the number of his many wives and concubines. Reference to the latter provided even more nicknames, but as journalist John Gunther noted, “for reasons unprintable in a family magazine.”²⁵



Feng Yuxiang. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <http://tinyurl.com/p8h9fe2>.

The careers of Zhang and Feng meshed in the mid-1920s. The former, with his White Russian mercenaries in front, raced down to capture Shanghai after Wu’s debacle. Feng, now aligned with the Fengtian Clique, continued plotting. On November 5, 1924, his troops expelled Puyi from the Forbidden City, declaring the former emperor a simple citizen of the Republic. This sent Puyi into the arms of militarists like Zhang, who gathered significant wealth in exchange for vague promises of support. In the end, Feng’s actions drove this Manchu royal to Japan, laying groundwork for the puppet state of Manchukuo and Puyi’s infamous role as China’s number one Quisling.

Feng next supported a failed coup d’état against Zhang Zuolin, fought for a year, then “retired” to “study abroad.” This was a standard junfa tactic and always considered temporary. The “student” visited an international section of a Chinese “treaty port” or traveled to Europe. It could draw heat away from his army by refocusing enemy attention elsewhere and thus making possible a return in the near future. Feng toured Moscow, cementing Western suspicions that the Christian General was really a Bolshevik at heart.

Zhang briefly enjoyed the pleasures of Shanghai, connecting his interests to the criminal gangs and their drug business. Driven out by another junfa, he was made governor of Shandong Province in 1925. Zhang helped



Communist Party women's militia holding their red-tasseled spears in Yanan, 1938.
Source: *The Kung Fu Tea* website at <http://tinyurl.com/pgm7a82>.

defeat Feng a year later and, sadly for his home province, stayed in charge of Shandong until 1928. During those three very hard years, Zhang and his soldiers destroyed the local economy through graft, mismanagement, and outright destruction. Starved of funds, the entire provincial educational system collapsed by 1927; the provincial currency, issued as fast as printing allowed, was nearly valueless. Criticism could lead to imprisonment, and resistance produced more “split melons,” with severed heads hung from telegraph lines as a reminder to survivors. Peasants, already angry with warlord misrule, responded by forming the Red Spear militia. Known for their red-tasseled spears and not too many firearms, these were men and women angry enough to take on better-armed warlord troops. They made life difficult for Zhang's smaller units, and woe betide any stragglers caught by the Red Spears.

The devastation of Shandong was far removed from Zhang's headquarters in the capital of Jinan. More like a medieval court, it featured extravagant entertainment; elaborate feasts; “heroic quantities” of French champagne; and, at its center, puffing a trademark Cuban cigar, Zhang. Sometimes benefactor to artists, writers, or entertainers, he also attracted arms dealers, drug kingpins, diplomats, and a stream of Western journalists. Popular cross-cultural writer Lin Yutang, who Zhang's police chased out of 1926 Beijing, sarcastically described this regime as “the most colorful, legendary, medieval, and unashamed in modern China.”⁶

Zhang's “legendary” fiefdom ended via the Northern Expedition (1926–1929), a seminal event in modern Chinese history. Planned by Sun Yat-sen and directed by his most trusted lieutenant, Chiang Kai-shek, this introduced the *Guomindang* into north Chinese warlord politics. Also known by their English title, “Nationalists,” the best *Guomindang* soldiers were far better motivated and trained than their warlord counterparts. Although warlord allies were part of this force, the Northern Expedition was supported and led by a cadre of elite men and women, dedicated to Sun's Republicanism and very willing to fight hard and, if needed, die for their country. Supported by the nascent Chinese Communist Party, the *Guomindang* in the Northern Expedition aimed to reunite China by capturing Beijing. Both Feng and Zhang played significant roles in this contest.

East Asia historian Donald Jordan provided a masterful account of the Northern Expedition. He stressed the confusion this campaign caused for militarists, mainly because it was a revolutionary movement, one that broke many of the established patterns or “rules” of warlordism. The complex internal dynamics of the *Guomindang*-Communist “united front” are beyond the scope of this article, suffice it to say that Mao Zedong was lucky

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to be sidetracked from this campaign when Chiang Kai-shek, who turned on the communists, staged his 1927 purge that killed several thousand leftists. The Northern Expedition was a Communist debacle but also an opportunity for Mao, who could now advance his argument that peasants rather than workers were the key for opening the locks of Chinese political power.

Feng also benefited from the Northern Expedition. He returned from Moscow; reorganized his armies; and, ever the schemer, became deeply involved with internal *Guomindang* power struggles that nearly derailed the Northern Expedition. Zhang, steadfast in his loyalty to the Fengtian Clique, briefly reoccupied Shanghai and then conducted a fighting withdrawal to Shandong. His complete mismanagement of that province became evident as *Guomindang* forces advanced on Jinan. Zhang, guarded by his White Russians, escaped with a small fortune, but throughout Shandong, deserters, stragglers, bandits, and Red Spears spread havoc. Lawlessness on that level served as an excuse for Japanese intervention, creating the Jinan Incident (May 3–11, 1928), where Japan sent troops to occupy the provincial capital and nearly started a full-scale war with the *Guomindang*.

Chiang Kai-shek defused this incident with some loss of face, as he could not afford to fight Japan. Feng, now elevated as an important ally, had cleared warlord troops blocking the roads to Beijing. Together with Yan Xishan, the “Model Governor,” and yet another warlord player, Jiang and Feng ended the Northern Expedition with the conquest of Beijing on June 8, 1928. Although cooperating warlords survived as *Guomindang* allies, their 1920s heyday was past. This became clear during the 1930 Central Plains War, when Feng and Yan attempted to unseat Chiang with a coalition of the disgruntled. When the smoke cleared, Chiang was victorious. He still employed warlord allies, such as Ma Bufeng, who dominated fellow Muslims in eastern China until the 1949 triumph of Communism, but established a much more powerful center, one poised to create a truly centralized administration but for the Japanese invasion of 1937.⁷ Warlords might still have influence in post-1930 Republican China, but not like the men who tore the country apart in the 1920s.

Zhang makes this very clear with the end of his career. Hounded out of China by the victorious *Guomindang*, he launched several failed efforts to regain control of Shandong. Claiming he wanted to help the nation during Japan's invasion of Manchuria, Zhang visited some of his old colleagues in Jinan on September 3, 1932. Preparing to leave for Beijing via the railway station, the “Dog Meat General” was gunned down by the nephew of an officer executed by Zhang. Current scholarship strongly suggests that Feng, “retired” at nearby Tai Shan, helped organize the assassination of Zhang. Captain David Barrett, the American military attaché, noted that Zhang's last words were “No good!”⁸

Zhang's funeral cortege stretched for two miles, including family, former retainers, paid mourners, and the curious. He was buried outside Beijing in Xishan, the “Western Hills”; due to rumors of Zhang's immense wealth, tomb robbers struck several times in the 1930s. Red Guards entered during the Cultural Revolution but reported finding only a tablet. Feng



Soldiers of Zhang Zongchang with their Chinese copies of the Bergmann submachine gun.
Source: US Army Heritage and Educational Center.

lived much longer and continued his role as supporter of the Republic and gladly to Chiang Kai-shek. He died under mysterious circumstances while traveling to the USSR in 1948. Five years later, his ashes were interned with full honors near Tai Shan, a mountain retreat he had often enjoyed.

Mao Zedong reminds us that “political power grows from the barrel of a gun.”⁹ He learned this the hard way during the Northern Expedition. It is hard to imagine disagreement from either Zhang or Feng. Guns, and soldiers to wield them, were the currency of power in early Republican China. Warlords consumed government revenues for both and retarded economic growth in doing so. They produced over a thousand conflicts big and small, reducing China’s international standing and encouraging foreign imperialists.

Modern Chinese nationalists might prefer to cast Zhang as the wicked warlord but Feng as a patriot. Zhang was the poster boy for warlord excess, while Feng claimed he was a “chameleon,” because he stood with “anyone supporting China, and against anyone whose own interest came first.”¹⁰ Both men were key players in the era of the warlords, an era of hyper-militarism that supported the Chinese adage that “good iron is not made into nails, and good men are not made into soldiers.” ■

Author’s Note: Thanks to Dr. David Buck for providing a hard-to-find journal article, and to Y. C. Chen and Stephen Rynerson for providing online data. Three readers, whose names are correctly unknown via the “blind review process,” also deserve praise for corrections and new sources. If this article deserves merit, it is shared with all; if it retains flaws, those belong to the authors.

WANT TO KNOW MORE? (ADDITIONAL RESOURCES)

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NOTES

1. No-Young Park, *Making a New China* (Boston: Stratford Co., 1929), 25.
2. Sidney Joseph Perelman, “Footnote on the Yellow Peril,” *The New Yorker*, January 30, 1937, 14.
3. Edward A. McCord, *The Power of the Gun: The Emergence of Modern Chinese Warlordism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 309.
4. Lucian W. Pye, *Warlord Politics: Conflict and Coalition in the Modernization of Republican China* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 1971), 170.
5. John Gunther, *Inside Asia* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1939), 81.
6. Lin Yutang, *With Love and Irony* (New York: The John Day Company, 1940), 195.
7. Chiang Kai-shek came across as a warlord, and he certainly had numerous allies, like Ma Bufeng, with genuine warlord credentials. The Generalissimo had many failings, but to see him as just a larger version of a 1920s warlord is unreasonable.
8. John N. Hart, *The Making of an Army “Old China Hand”: A Memoir of Colonel David D. Barrett* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1985), 12.
9. “Mao Zedong on War and Revolution,” *Asia for Educators*, accessed September 19, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/q34dvsh>.
10. Anatol Kotenev, *The Chinese Soldier* (Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh Ltd., 1937), 120.

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