

# Yuan Shikai and Warlordism (1916-1926)

## Introduction

### Topic:

From 1916 to 1926, China was engulfed in a period of internal conflict among warlords, which according to James Sheridan were commanders of personal armies who controlled or sought to control territory, acting independently of any central government.

(YSK question) China's descent into political fragmentation was signaled by the death of Yuan Shikai, who ruled over the new Republic in the aftermath of the 1911 Double Ten Revolution.

### Time frame:

1. Rise of warlordism: 1911 (Double Ten Revolution; overthrow of the Manchu dynasty) to 1926 (beginning of the Northern Expedition; nominal reunification of China)/1928 (establishment of the GMD as the sole legitimate ruling government in China)

2. Role of Yuan Shikai: 1895 (Yuan's appointment as the commander of the New Army) to 1916 (Yuan's death)

### Thesis:

While warlordism found its roots during the late Qing dynasty, which saw a weakening central government and the accumulation of power in the hands of provincial leaders, it was primarily the role of Yuan Shikai that enabled regional tendencies to erupt into a period of warlordism.

<b>Role of Yuan Shikai</b>	<p><b>Political</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Yuan's deliberate attempt to oppose and betray the new Republic undermined its centralized rule while creating a power vacuum that facilitated the rise of warlordism</li><li>• Right from the very beginning, Yuan's actions showed that his allegiance lay neither to the Qing or the new Republic</li><li>• His ambitions were mainly self-serving</li><li>• Wanted only to consolidate and centralize his own power rather than promote national unity</li><li>• During his term as president of the Republic, Yuan sought to eradicate all opposition to his rule</li></ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Yuan's forces crushed the GMD during the 1913 "second revolution", before proceeding to outlaw the party and evict its members from the Assembly</li><li>• Disbanded parliament in 1913 and re-wrote the constitution in 1914 to ensure his absolute control over the Republic</li><li>• Culminated in the restoration of the imperial title and his enthronement as emperor in 1916</li></ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Yuan's opposition to democracy and republicanism thus diminished the legitimacy of the new Republic and the principles on which it was founded on, setting the precedence for the authoritarian nature of the warlords that were to follow</li><li>• Moreover, the concentration of power in the hands of Yuan alone resulted in a government overly dependent on the authority of one man</li><li>• Yuan's death thus created an enormous power vacuum that no other single figure had the ability to fill</li><li>• Encouraged provincial military commanders to establish control over various regions through the use of their armies</li></ul>
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	<p><b>Military</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Jerome Chen</b> suggested that warlordism was a modern phenomenon that could be traced to the effects of military modernization, during which Yuan had a critical role</li> <li>• Yuan was responsible for the creation of a culture of militarism that would dominate the landscape of the warlord period</li> <li>• Yuan's political clout in the new Republic stemmed solely from his military power</li> <li>• Headed the New Army since the time of the Hundred Days Reforms in 1898 and had played a crucial role in the 1911 Revolution</li> <li>• His ascendancy to presidency of the new Republic was a product of Sun's recognition of Yuan as an indispensable ally owing to his superior military power</li> <li>• Yuan was thus inherently a military leader who had gained loyalty due to military superiority rather than genuine support for his policies</li> <li>• Could possibly have encouraged other military commanders to seize authority through the use of military force</li> <li>• <b>McCord</b> argued that the most important factor for warlordism was the establishment of Yuan's dictatorship and the reliance on military coercion to enforce political authority</li> <li>• Military power became a means to resolve conflicts</li> <li>• Moreover, Yuan was responsible for strategically positioning officers from the Beiyang Clique in his cabinet, who had pledged allegiance to him</li> <li>• Not only contributed to the increased militarization of Chinese politics, but also did not improve political stability</li> <li>• They were disunited and were only clusters of military men tied together by various connections</li> <li>• As long as Yuan remained as president, he was able to keep them in check</li> <li>• The collapse of his authority in 1916 would thus see a struggle for power among his military commanders when underlying rivalries surfaced, leading to the rise of warlords</li> </ul>
<p><b>Limitation</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• However, there had been signs as early as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that suggested the materialization of warlordism if central authority was not properly established</li> <li>• While Yuan's role was undoubtedly critical in the events leading up to the warlord period, his responsibility in the formation of many warlords was limited</li> <li>• To credit him for such a widespread phenomenon would be unrealistic</li> </ul>
<p><b>Impact of changes during the Late Qing period</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inept leadership during the Late Qing period served to exacerbate the conditions that led to the continued devolution of power away from the central government, leading to the rise of warlords</li> <li>• <b>Franz Michael</b> argued that Chinese history showed a pattern of recurrent decline in the authority of the central government and the development of regionalist power centers</li> <li>• The Manchu court was on the decline dating back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century</li> <li>• The imposition of massive indemnities on the Manchu court through the unequal treaties of Nanjing and Tianjin, along with numerous rebellions stemming from widespread discontent with Manchu rule weakened it as a centralized power</li> <li>• The decay in the government's ability to establish firm control over the entirety of China made it heavily reliant on regional powers</li> <li>• Provincial leaders like Li Hongzhang, Zhang Zhidong and Zeng Guofan were responsible for much of China's economic development and were often used to suppress rebellions and deal with foreign threats</li> <li>• However, these provincial leaders were uncoordinated and divided</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developed provinces independently of the central government</li> <li>• Seen most evidently during the 1894-5 Sino Japanese War, where there was no effort by provincial leaders to send military forces to aid Li Hongzhang's Beiyang fleet</li> <li>• Additionally, according to <b>Peter Zarrow</b>, the late Qing reforms designed to modernize and professionalize the military resulted in a more politicized officer corps, whose loyalty lay with provincial leaders rather than the Manchu court</li> <li>• Accelerated the development of provincial power centers and exacerbated regionalism</li> <li>• Hence, the inability of the Manchu court to arrest the problems associated with dynastic decline led to the rise of regionalism</li> <li>• Many provincial military governors eventually emerged as warlords during the warlord era</li> </ul>
<b>Limitation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• According to <b>Zarrow</b>, there was no direct line from the growing militarization of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the full-fledged warlordism of the 1920s</li> <li>• The first two years of the Republic from 1911-12 could hardly fall under the category of warlordism as shown by extent of control by the civilian government</li> <li>• Rather, the warlords only became dominant due to the decline and disintegration of civilian politics, as well as its militarization due to Yuan's repressive policies</li> </ul>

### Conclusion

- Political and military turmoil plaguing China during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century exacerbated regionalism, which pre-empted the warlord era
- However, while the roots of warlordism may be found during the late Qing dynasty, none of the conditions would have erupted into a full-scale period of political fragmentation without the role of Yuan Shikai and his self-serving policies, whose eventual death became the trigger of the warlord period