

The University of San Francisco

USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center

Master's Projects and Capstones

Theses, Dissertations, Capstones and Projects

Spring 5-15-2020

Making Opportunity Out of Chaos: The Misconceptions and Realities of Republican-Era Warlord Governance

Zachary Clark
zclark92@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/capstone>



Part of the [Asian History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Clark, Zachary, "Making Opportunity Out of Chaos: The Misconceptions and Realities of Republican-Era Warlord Governance" (2020). *Master's Projects and Capstones*. 1003.
<https://repository.usfca.edu/capstone/1003>

This Project/Capstone is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, Capstones and Projects at USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Projects and Capstones by an authorized administrator of USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. For more information, please contact repository@usfca.edu.

Making Opportunity Out of Chaos

The Misconceptions and Realities of Republican-Era Warlord Governance

Zachary Clark
APS 650: MAPS Capstone Seminar
Professor Dempster
May 18, 2020

Abstract

Chinese history has largely been defined by a transition of power from one major imperial dynasty to another, separated by notable times of division such as the Warring States (475 BC-221 BC) and Three Kingdoms (220-280) periods. The early twentieth-century collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1912 is no exception to this historical trend and gave way to a twelve-year period termed the “Warlord Era.” Dating back to the 1960s, Western scholarly discourse argued that these warlords lacked the ideologies or visions to implement any changes outside of their own personal and political interests. This research contends that warlords were not merely interested in gaining power through short-term pragmatic efforts, but possessed larger ideological concerns within their governing policies over their respective domains. Three prominent warlords to emerge out of this era who complicate the oversimplified claims of warlord governance as pragmatic self-preservation are Feng Yuxiang (冯玉祥), Zhang Zuolin (张作霖), and Yan Xishan (阎锡山). This research utilizes historical primary and secondary source material, as well as archival material (Passionist China Collection 1921-1980) and biographies (*Wo de Shenghuo: Feng Yuxiang Zizhuan*), to provide anecdotal evidence that highlights how these three warlords’ progressive policies were shaped by deeper motivations than mere political survival. By challenging the preconceived notions of warlord governance by past scholars and filling in omissions and gaps, this research paints a more holistic portrayal of these warlords and their contributions to early twentieth century Chinese society.

(Word Count: 249)

Keywords: Warlords, Militarism, Republican China, Governance, Confucianism, Public Works, Ideologies, Early Twentieth Century

Timeline Leading Up to the Warlord Era¹

- 1894-95** First Sino-Japanese War: War officially declared between Japan and the Qing dynasty.
- 1900** Boxer Rebellion: Starts as revolt against Manchu (Qing) dynasty, evolves into protest against foreign powers' intruding in China's affairs. Ends in humiliating defeat for Qing military and leads to calls for changes in way China is governed.
- 1905** The traditional Civil Service Examination system (*keju*) is abolished.
- 1900-1911** Due to previous military defeats in the Sino-Japanese War and lack of authority during the Boxer Rebellion, steps are taken to modernize the Chinese army.
- By 1901, troops begin to gather from multiple regions of China and are trained into modernized units. Units are organized on a local basis, with some provinces retaining their own individual armies. The main modernized army, Beiyang ("great ocean") army, is based in Zhili Province (modern day Hebei) led by imperial general Yuan Shi-kai (袁世凯).
- In this decade, young Imperial Army officers are sent abroad to Europe and Japan for training. Many of these trained officers would go on to become revolutionaries and overthrow the Qing dynasty, as well as become prominent warlords thereafter.
- 1911** Wuchang Uprising: Mutiny in city of Wuchang begins 1911 anti-Manchu Dynasty revolution. Uprising soon spreads to most provinces
- 1912** January: The Chinese Republic is officially proclaimed. Sun Yat-sen (孙中山) is appointed president.
- February: The Last Emperor, 6-year-old Puyi (溥儀), formally abdicates the throne, ending China's millennium long imperial governance stretching back to the Qin Dynasty (221 BCE) founded by Qin Shi Huang (秦始皇).
- April: Sun Yat-sen fails to build strong government, leading him to hand over power of presidency to Yuan Shi-kai. Yuan ushers in era of dominant military strongmen, controlling all political power in China.
- 1915** Yuan Shi-kai makes announcement of plans to install himself as emperor of new dynasty. Widespread pro-republican outrage sweeps across China and rebellions against the new "emperor" break out.
- 1916** Yuan Shi-kai's sudden death at age 59 ends rebellion against his government, but he fails to unite nation. Yuan's death ushers in the beginning of the period in Chinese history known as the "Warlord Era." For the next 12 years, warlords will largely ignore the central governments in Beijing, and fight for control of China as individuals or members of a military alliance. Over this twelve-year span, the warlords will number in the hundreds and fight to expand or maintain their power bases.

¹ Dates, information, and phrasing gathered from Phillip Jowett, *The Armies of Warlord China, 1911-1928*. For more detail of events from 1894 to 1930 defining the Warlord Era, see Jowett pp. 13-30.

Introduction

“Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.” This immortalized statement was made by Mao Zedong in 1938, but perhaps even better encompasses the preceding decades following the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1912.² Chinese history has seemingly been defined by the transition from one major imperial dynasty to another, separated by intermittent eras of division in which multiple individuals ruled over sizable regions and obeyed no higher authority than themselves. In some cases, the collapse of certain dynasties created a vacuum that gave way to extended periods of disarray and fragmentation. Prominent examples of this are the Warring States (475-221 BC) and Three Kingdoms (220-280 AD) periods. The early twentieth-century collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1912 is no exception to this historical trend. From 1916 to 1928, virtually all of China was divided among numerous regional militarists, leading this period to be termed the “Warlord Era.” The general scholarly discourse on Modern Chinese political history gives this period scant coverage, often only in reference and as an introduction to the Nationalist and Communist movements that followed. As a result, even the most famous of warlords and their contributions outside of the military remain a misunderstood phenomenon in modern Chinese history. Edward McCord describes this problem, asserting that “The lack of sustained Western scholarly attention to Chinese warlordism suggests that the historical relevance of this topic is still not fully appreciated.”³ Why have the contributions by warlords during this period been drastically overlooked? How has the oversimplified narrative of warlord governance

² Mao Zedong, “Problems of War and Strategy” (November 6, 1938), Selected Works, Vol. II, 224. Mao Zedong coined the phrase “*Qianggan zi limian chu zhe zhengquan*” (“枪杆子里面出政权”) in a November 6, 1938 speech at the sixth Plenary Session of the CPC's sixth Central Committee. Although often left out, the following line of the same speech reads, “Our principle is that the Party commands the gun, and the gun must never be allowed to command the Party.” This solidified an existing precedent emerging from the Warlord Era—that Chinese government authority lies in its wielding of military power. This precedent persists in China in the 21st century.

³ Edward A. McCord, *The Power of the Gun: The Emergence of Modern Chinese Warlordism* (University of California Press, 1993), 2.

created misconceptions about the larger ideological concerns of particular warlords from this era?

Previous paradigms have portrayed the warlords in a monolithic way, obscuring their true impact during this transitory period of Modern Chinese political history. Perhaps past scholarly attention has solely focused on the military and large-scale political consequences of the Warlord Era because, as a whole, the warlords were destined for destruction. However, the origins of a form of Chinese political authority that rest with a military strongman emerged out of the Warlord Era. The subsequent Nationalist (KMT) and Communist (CCP) movements were profoundly influenced by the warlord environment from which they originated. This research has a focused aim: to broaden restrictive paradigms about the Warlord Era and examine individual warlords' systems of governance in order to create a more holistic view of modern Chinese political developments and modernization. In addition, more in-depth understanding of the Warlord Era and the nature of warlord governing ideologies is needed to better recognize the significance of regionalism and fractal governance within Chinese governance throughout the twentieth-century.

China has always been a geographical space with strong local and regional variations in language, habits, and traditions. James E. Sheridan asserts that due to certain limitations, even some of the most effective Chinese dynasties with firm centralized authority struggled to develop transportation and communication facilities capable of uniting the vast regions of China at its political center. As a result, incentives toward national patriotism have historically been few and weak, whereas provincial and local loyalties were powerful.⁴ This long-standing Chinese habitual comfort in regionalism acted as the foundation for the emergence of warlord governance

⁴ James E. Sheridan, *Chinese Warlord: The Career of Feng Yu-hsiang* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), 1.

in the 1910s -1920s. With the emergence of fractal governance and opportunity to seize power, a new category of military-man emerged—one that consisted of prominent military leaders who were equally active in politics, *dujun* (督军).⁵

Amongst the numerous warlords who emerged in the *dujun* classification, a group of super-*dujun* separated themselves for their political and military acumen that situated them at the center of power clusters and focal point of political-military alliances.⁶ Three prominent warlords to surface from the super-*dujun* class and shape the governance of China in this era are Feng Yuxiang (冯玉祥), Zhang Zuolin (张作霖), and Yan Xishan (阎锡山). Feng Yuxiang is nicknamed “The Christian General,” and was notable for his use of aspects of Christianity, such as selflessness, integrity, and devotion, as tools to consolidate support for his progressive policies and gain favor among the foreign missionaries within his territory.⁷ Yan Xishan governed over Shanxi Province during the Warlord Era and implemented successful reforms that earned his domain the title of “Model Province.”⁸ Zhang Zuolin and the local elite allied with him formed the backbone of the powerful Fengtian Clique (*fengxi junfa* 奉系军阀) during the Warlord Era.⁹

⁵ Lucian Pye classifies the warlords of the period into three categories: localized field commanders with a limited support base; prominent military commanders who were also heavily involved in politics (*tuchun/dujun*) (督军); and national political figureheads with a military following. See *Warlord Politics*, 41-43.

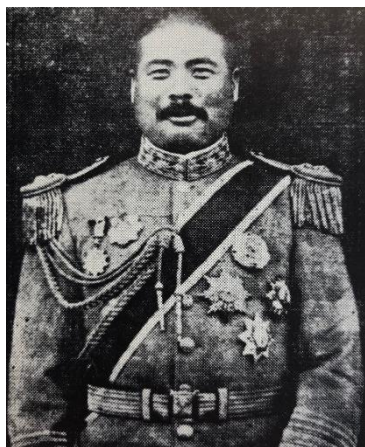
⁶ Lucian Pye, *Warlord Politics: Conflict and Coalition in the Modernization of Republican China* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 42.

⁷ Due to his shifting allegiances and military post constantly being repositioned throughout the Warlord Era, Feng Yuxiang established political and governmental control in multiple regions of China at different junctures of the period. The following locations where Feng was stationed for a period allowed him to have an influence on governing policies: Hebei Province (1916-1917), Hunan Province (1918-1922), Beijing (1923-1924), Northwest Hebei, Gansu, and inner Mongolia provinces (1925-1928).

⁸ Donald G. Gillin, *Warlord: Yen His-shan in Shansi Province 1911-1949* (Princeton University Press, 1967), 22.

⁹ The Fengtian Clique (*fengxi junfa* 奉系军阀) was a political-military faction that was influential not only in Manchuria, but also in China Proper from 1916-1928.

Zhang Zuolin and the Fengtian Clique seized the opportunity to engage in the political, social, and economic struggles during this period to build a progressive authoritarian regime in Northeast China and successfully govern over the vast region of Manchuria.¹⁰



Feng Yuxiang (冯玉祥)¹¹



Yan Xishan (阎锡山)¹²



Zhang Zuolin (张作霖)¹³

These three warlords¹⁴ governed over vastly different regions of China and had to each overcome unique factors linked to geography, population size, and political allegiances. In addition, due to the evolving military developments throughout the era,¹⁵ the power and

¹⁰ Dating back to the 17th century, Manchuria has been used as an exonym to describe several large overlapping historical and geographic regions in Northeast Asia. The three northern most provinces of Northeast China that make up Manchuria during the Warlord Era are: Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning.

¹¹ Sheridan, *Chinese Warlord: The Career of Feng Yu-hsiang*, 250-251 (fig.5).

¹² Gillin, *Warlord: Yen His-shan in Shansi Province 1911-1949*, 64-65 (fig.2).

¹³ Gavan McCormack, *Chang Tso-lin in Northeast China, 1911-1928 China, Japan, and the Manchurian Idea*.

¹⁴ The term “Warlord” carries a negative connotation and is often used to suggest a confusing, fractal, and destructive period. Specialized scholars focusing on the subject, such as Edward McCord and Arthur Waldron, have suggested substituting the terms “militarist” and “militarism” for “warlord” and “warlordism” in order to provide a more neutral framework in observing the individuals of this era. However, for the purpose of this paper, I will use the terms of “warlord” and “warlordism” in order to maintain continuity with the historical sources being analyzed that use these terms.

¹⁵ Although the Warlord Era lasted from 1916-1928, the base of power and location of military battles shifted throughout the twelve year period. The overarching periods of influence can be understood as: Duan Qirui

influence of these three warlords power and influence reached their apex at varying times, further complicating the situational circumstances they needed to navigate. They each, however, deployed similar displays of military strength and methods of public appeal in order to implement their social reforms over their respective populations. In past discourse, scholars such as Lucian Pye constructed paradigms that argued warlords' ideologies were restrictive and incapable of implementing any changes outside of their own political survival and interests. Evidence suggests, however, that the three particular warlords, Feng Yuxiang, Yan Xishan, and Zhang Zuolin, all complicate oversimplified claims such as Pye's because these three individuals attempted progressive social reforms that transcended their own personal and political motivations. By observing the specific public works, social reforms, and popular support techniques implemented by these three warlords, we can better understand that these individuals made significant contributions that were driven by complex, thoughtful ideologies. While it is true that they sometimes drew from these ideologies to reach their own political aims, the assertion here is that their intelligent grasp of cultural and religious value systems allowed them to be effective leaders. As such, these complicated figures cannot be described through typical scholarly notions that emphasize chaotic and selfish warlord governance.

The Common View and Shifting Warlord Governance

Modern China, like many other nation-states today, was formed chiefly by war. As Arthur Waldron notes, "War is a powerful and capricious historical actor" that rarely follows the

(段祺瑞) and Anhui clique control (1916–20); Cao Kun (曹錕) and Zhili clique control (1920–24); Zhang Zuolin (张作霖) and Fengtian clique control (1924–28). I have categorized the era into these three periods with centralized focus on North China because the three warlords observed in this research all ruled in northern regions.

contours of economic, social, or intellectual developments.¹⁶ Understanding the significance of military paradigms becomes crucial to understanding the “Warlord Era” because of their widespread influence on the construction, organization, and governance of certain warlord’s armies and governing bodies. From 1970 to 1980, a trend emerged where scholars in the West, such as Anthony B. Chan and His-sheng Chi,¹⁷ concentrated on various warlords and their large-scale political struggles to form a new national identity. In their macro-sized approach to defining warlordism and the Warlord Era, they clustered warlords largely as a single thinking and acting entity. These scholars primarily emphasized that any action or ideology of one warlord was reflective of the greater whole. After this decade, however, the studies seems to go dormant and unexplored until the late 1990s when scholars like McCord and Waldron¹⁸ shift the focus toward the military tactics of certain warlords in a framework of overarching Chinese military history.

Two schools of thought emerged between scholars about where to place significance in defining the warlords that comprised the Warlord Era. The most notable disparity between the two schools is where the superlative value of analyzing the warlords should be positioned. On one hand, a micro-approach asserts that individual warlord’s actions are autonomous but capable

¹⁶ Arthur Waldron, *From War to Nationalism: China's Turning Point, 1924-1925* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 8.

¹⁷ Anthony B. Chan’s research in “Social Change and Political Legitimacy in Warlord China” and Chi His-sheng’s *Warlord Politics in China, 1916-1928* serve as pivotal examples of scholarly work in the late 1970s that sought to synthesize a generic framework for warlord’s ideologies that provide as contrast to the previous Confucian elements of imperial China.

¹⁸ Sources on the topic by Arthur Waldron— *From War to Nationalism: China's Turning Point, 1924-1925* and “The Warlord: Twentieth-Century Chinese Understandings of Violence, Militarism, and Imperialism”—as well as Edward McCord’s *The Power of the Gun: The Emergence of Modern Chinese Warlordism*, serve as foundational research into Modern Chinese Military History. The scholars emphasize China’s ongoing military struggles in the early twentieth century, particularly during the Warlord Era, as a means of highlighting the uncertainties from the warlords heavily influenced later developments in China’s military pre-WWII.

of reflecting greater warlord frameworks. On the other hand, a macro-approach proposes that warlords' actions should be seen in relation to one another and are interconnected in one framework. In contrast to scholars such as Chan and Chi's macro approach, the 1970s scholars James E. Sheridan, Donald G. Gillin, and Gavan McCormack¹⁹ take a more micro, or individualized approach, focusing their biographical studies on individual warlords, such as Feng Yuxiang, Yan Xishan, and Zhang Zuolin, to provide portraits that help create a general framework of organized warlord governance.

Previous scholars have conducted in depth research that is valuable in understanding the logic of and power struggles between major warlords. Foundational works, such as Lucian Pye's *Warlord Politics*²⁰ (1971), contribute compelling and insightful analysis of the numerous personalities of the period and the power relationships formed between them. Lucian Pye was notably making his research analysis on warlord governance at a time when the fate of China was being decided by military means. As a result of the Communist Party's ultimate success and Republican government's conclusive collapse at the time of his research, Pye's framework is understandable, as it may have been difficult to imagine contributions by warlords as possibly existing outside of military means and temporal attempts to maintain power.

Scholarly attention from the 1970s and 80s was shaped by a Cold War way of thinking in regards to Chinese history and, as a result, the role of militarism in Chinese politics became

¹⁹ Works by James E. Sheridan: *Chinese Warlord: The Career of Feng Yu-hsiang*, Donald G. Gillin: *Warlord: Yen His-shan in Shansi Province 1911-1949*, and Gavan McCormack *Chang Tso-lin in Northeast China, 1911-1928 China, Japan, and the Manchurian Idea*, serve as examples of analysis of the individual warlord's ideologies and backgrounds in order to, as Sheridan phrases it, "bring out the warlord character" (Quote from, *Chinese Warlord*, p. viii.)

²⁰ Lucian Pye's *Warlord Politics: Conflict and Coalition in the Modernization of Republican China* is a 1971 work that is considered to be a foundational analytical survey of warlord ideology, largely shaping the works of future scholars in the field. Pye uses a logical approach and focuses on the power struggles between warlords, their organizational bases, coalition forming, and methods of maintaining a balance of power with a portrayal of the warlords as occupying a world of all against all and endlessly seeking of power.

paramount to understanding the Chinese Communist Party. Analysis of China in the early twentieth-century focused briefly on the Warlord Era, and solely on factors pertaining to warlords' military maneuvers and politics such as alliances, military resources, and finances. While the approach of this discourse provides important context and has scholarly value, it largely ignores the complicated realities of warlord governance, leaving behind an unexplored gap regarding the social reforms they administered. Edward McCord describes Western historians of the warlords as seemingly “disconcerted by the difficulty in finding meaning in the constant civil wars and complicated political maneuvers that characterized the warlord period.”²¹ The gap in discourse has led to some Western scholars relying on pre-existing analytic frameworks centralized around warlord politics, such as Pye's, which rest on the presupposition that warlord governance is selfish, chaotic, and violent.

Historians of China today have inherited this preexisting framework and have similarly insisted on maintaining the idea that warlord governance simply embodies a rejection of authority and is self-serving. According to McCord, “In Chinese, the word warlord *junfa* (军阀)²² has a particularly pejorative connotation.” McCord continues to state that historically, the use of the term *junfa* “has resulted in attempts to distinguish, often on the basis of political criteria, between bad ‘warlords’ and good ‘military commanders.’”²³ McCord further observes that Chinese scholars studying “China’s modern history have often been more reluctant to

²¹ McCord, *The Power of the Gun*, 2.

²² For an analysis of the evolution of the term *junfa* as a pejorative within *Putonghua*, see Arthur Waldron, “The Warlord: Twentieth Century Chinese Understandings of Violence, Militarism, and Imperialism,” *American Historical Review* 96, No.4, (1991): 1073-1100.

²³ McCord, *The Power of the Gun*, 3. One example of bad “warlord” being invoked would be historical criticisms of Zhang Zuolin, whereas good “military man” would be reserved for individuals of the same era such as Mao Zedong (毛泽东).

acknowledge the political importance of military power in the founding and survival of China's Communist government. Explanations of the Communist Party's political strength have usually paid more attention to ideological or organizational factors than to the control and application of armed force.”²⁴ This Chinese scholarly historical analysis resonates with Mao Zedong’s dismissal of the Warlord Era and critique of the warlords as seeking a capitalist economy by means of Western imperialist policies of “division and exploitation by marking off spheres of influence.”²⁵ In contrast to the straightforward condemnation of these warlords, my project asserts that each of the three warlords—through their effective methods and attempts at progressive reforms as part of a larger transitional approach to governance in China—helped to lay the foundation for later Chinese government structure under the Nationalist movement, and ultimately, the Communist Party.

Indeed, since the 1990s, due to the concentration and focus by these scholars on military and political motivations, a large vacancy emerges: observation of the interaction between warlords and social institutions. The gap left behind by these scholarly works is where I assert my research, which is supported by more current scholars. Foundational scholarly works have served as exemplary models in creating simple black and white configurations of warlord governance that’s serve as helpful starting points. This research aims to analyze the similar methods deployed by three prominent warlords’ progressive ideologies and execution of social policies in their respective regions, as a means of providing further color and detail to these pictures.

²⁴ McCord, 1.

²⁵ McCord, 7.

Changing Political Fortunes: Power and Ideological Transitions

Lucian Pye's lauded analysis in his book *Warlord Politics* contends that the warlords were compelled to govern without any overlying moral or social ideology, but rather through pragmatic short-term policy decisions that were sensitive to threats to their organization and bases of power. Pye argues that the warlords were incapable of ideological reformation in Chinese society and implementing durable social reforms because "Their behavior was controlled too much by the nature and distribution of power in the Chinese society of that era to have been greatly influenced by values and objectives unrelated to the requirements of political survival."²⁶ By arguing that warlords only attempted to establish small areas of differentiation from others, Pye implies their ideologies and actions were informed by a common objective: to not be isolated from other leaders. He asserts "No leader was strong enough to champion great causes and any attempt in such a direction would establish him as a foe of all the other *tuchuns*."²⁷ The emphasis Pye places on warlords' inability to challenge the status quo of the political situations at hand validates his argument that they were utterly incapable of identifying with issues that were meaningful to the people.

Although Pye's framework provides an insightful theoretical approach to analyzing warlord governance as a product of power struggle, there are significant limitations in his exclusion of crucial factors within his framework. The absence of these human and cultural factors shaping individual warlords' actions in Pye's analysis overlooks the unique circumstances each warlord faced. This oversimplification of warlord ideology as a pursuit for survival and departure from the old, stable, uniform society muddies the waters about the

²⁶ Pye, *Warlord Politics*, 167.

²⁷ Pye, 129.

significant role played by certain warlords in transitioning Chinese society through social reforms into a more progressive political landscape.

Twenty-first century scholarly discourse on the Republican and Warlord Eras of Chinese history contains a wealth of sources available outside the Cold War method of thinking implored by previous scholars. Drawing from these more modern sources, the social reforms discussed in the next section of this paper display that warlords such as Feng Yuxiang, Yan Xishan, and Zhang Zuolin harbored visions for their governance that move far beyond motives of personal survival and political acclaim as depicted by Pye. In order to highlight these social reform developments, first we must understand the massive social hierarchical and ideological transition that occurred in the early twentieth century and how it shaped the policy aims of these warlords.

Uprooting Confucianism, Replanting its Values

Pye's framework presumes that warlords are incapable of governing with social or moral ideologies and rely on pragmatism in order to survive and maintain their power bases. However, the cases of Feng Yuxiang, Yan Xishan, and Zhang Zuolin, show that they possessed a capacity to develop their own personal ideologies from traditional Chinese sources. The greatest traditional Chinese construct that influenced and molded these warlords' governance strategies was that of Confucianism.

Since the Han Dynasty (221-206 B.C.), Confucianism has been ingrained into the fabric of Chinese civilization. As the prevailing ideology, advocates of Confucianism assumed integral societal positions as government officials, civil servants, and gentry. In imperial China the emperor wielded political authority, but the Confucian intellectuals can be considered as the

stewards of Chinese society. During the Tang Dynasty (618-906 A.D.) the imperial examination system, *keju* (科举) was established. The *keju* tested an individual's mastery of the Confucian classics, and, as a result, the highest political positions of power were reserved for the Confucian scholars. The *keju* system provided an effective source of scholars prescribing to the same ideology that would perpetuate Confucianism's elite status.

Traditional class social structure placed the Confucian scholars at its pinnacle. This socio-political status was derived from Confucian teachings of Mencius (*mengzi* 孟子) and his interpretations of the "natural inequalities of man":

Some work with their hearts-and-minds, others with their muscles. Those who work with their hearts-and-minds maintain order for others; those who work with their muscles have order maintained by others. Those whose order is maintained by others provide the food; those who maintain order among others receive food. Such is the propriety that is general throughout the world.²⁸

In traditional Chinese society there had always been powerful and cultural forces at work to discourage people from joining the military profession. Such sayings as "Good iron should not be used to make nails,"²⁹ "Good men should not become soldiers" were entrenched in Chinese society.³⁰ Although every new dynasty was established by military force and emperors relied on their armies for legitimacy, Confucian interpretations of government insisted that soldiers were insignificant and ranked near the bottom of the social scale.³¹

²⁸ Mencius, *The Sayings of Mencius*, trans. by James R. Ware, 55.

²⁹ The Chinese characters for the saying read "好铁不打定, 好汉不当兵" ("*Hao tie bu da ding, haohan budang bing*")

³⁰ Chi Hsi-sheng, *Warlord Politics in China, 1916-1928* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), 79.

³¹ Pye, *Warlord Politics*, 3.

The Qing dynasties' (1644-1912) humiliating defeats at the hands of the Japanese in 1895 and Boxer Rebellion (1900) led to imperial recognition of the need for militarism in Chinese society. In 1905, the traditional *keju* examination system was abolished and Chinese society fell into a state of political uncertainty. Anthony B. Chan describes this political turning point: "With the traditional avenue of political power effectively closed, many members of the gentry class who previously would have looked to military through the scholar-official class now looked to military service for upward mobility. Many sons of the gentry, in effect, were attracted by the expanding prestige and influence of military academies."³² The sudden acknowledgement of the military as a respectable profession presented an upheaval to the traditional social ideology and created a vacuum for military men to seek new forms of legitimacy.

The newly elevated recognition of warlords induced more individuals into military service, largely because it seemed to provide the most accessible road to political prominence. However, despite the departure of political and social power from Confucian bureaucrats, warlords and military-men alike were still required to legitimize their status as the new predominant political elite. Confucianism's philosophical influence on the social and political hierarchies of Chinese society for centuries positioned it as a prefabricated tool for warlords to cultivate their personal political goals.³³ Similar to the popularized interpretations of the venerable sages used to create Neo-Confucianism centuries earlier by Zhu Xi³⁴ 朱熹 (1130–

³² Anthony B. Chan, "Social Change and Political Legitimacy in Warlord China," *Asian Studies Journal*, 11:1 (1972): 157.

³³ Chan, 159-160.

³⁴ Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) was a Song dynasty philosopher, politician, and Confucian scholar. He founded the "rationalist" school (*lixue* 理學) and is noted as being the most influential Neo-Confucian scholar. His philosophy included his commentaries on the four books: *the Great Learning*, *the Doctrine of the Mean*, *the Analects of Confucius*, and the *Mencius* as the core curriculum for the later formed Civil Service Examination system (*keju*).

1200), the newly constructed Warlord-Confucianism³⁵ synthesized various elements of the distant past in order to validate its military presence.³⁶

Unlike the traditional Confucian scholars of imperial China, the Warlords who would champion Confucian elements into their ideologies learned core precepts of Confucianism through methods other than memorizing ancient classics. Jerome Chen notes that instead, the warlords became conversant with Confucian teachings “not from the classics and sutras, but from popular novels, operas, story-telling, and so on.”³⁷ This nuanced interaction with the ideas and morals preached through Confucianism left an impression on warlords that there was room for interpretation of its core virtues with their own individualized worldviews.³⁸ Feng Yuxiang, Yan Xishan, and Zhang Zuolin are all examples of men who believed China’s problems could only be solved through the moral rehabilitation of its people. Confucianism, in their interpretations, existed “as a historically effective means of inculcating respect for authority” and that their governance sought moral guidance of “the people” through virtue.³⁹

Perhaps the most integral component of both traditional Confucianism and the newly formed Warlord-Confucianism is references to governing on behalf of “the people.” Passages written in the *Shujing*⁴⁰ (“Classic of History”) emphasize “the people” in such ways – “heaven

³⁵ For more detail on the structure and tenants that constituted Warlord-Confucianism, see Anthony B. Chan. “Social Change and Political Legitimacy in Warlord China” (1972).

³⁶ Chan, 159.

³⁷ Jerome Ch’en, “Defining Chinese Warlords and Their Factions,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London, vol. 31:3 (1968): 569.

³⁸ The humanism focus of Confucianism emphasizes five specific virtues because they are believed to be manifestations of humanity’s sacred moral nature, *xing* (性): benevolence, *Ren* (仁); Righteousness, *Yi* (义; 義); Proper rite, *Li* (礼; 禮); Knowledge, *Zhi* (智); and Integrity, *Xin* (信).

³⁹ Gillin, *Warlord: Yen His-shan in Shansi Province 1911-1949*, 59.

sees as the people see [and] hears as the people hear” (11:10); “The common people are the root or foundation of a society” (6:3). These are only a few examples of the numerous Confucian teachings promoting benevolent rulership referenced by Mencius that enjoined princes of imperial China to cultivate moral power instead of relying on force and intrigue. In traditional Confucian ideology, the responsibility of governing that came with the Mandate of Heaven was to govern on behalf of the people and to their benefit. Thus, Confucianism established the societal norm that a government’s authority and validity rested in the hands of the people.

During the Warlord Era, warlords would often invoke Confucianism edicts justifying their actions in the name of “the people” to provide a sense of traditional legitimacy to their reforms. One example of warlord governance invoking “the people” can be seen in Zhang Zuolin’s 1924 justification of going to war with Wu Peifu and the Beijing government:

...Ts'ao K'un and Wu P'ei-fu with' their minds perverted are more than ever bent upon showing their ferocious fangs...Peking destroys what the people hope to set up, namely the self-government system; Peking tramples what the whole nation is praying to secure, viz: peace.⁴¹

Zhang follows his condemnation of their behavior and lack of moral virtue with the declaration:

“Since public opinion is unanimously opposed to the continuation of such wicked regime, I, Tso-lin for the sake of our nation and our people feel it my bounden duty to lead my army and swear to rid the country of the people’s traitors”⁴²

Superficially, justification of such military actions in the interests and benefit of “the people” held prospects of short-term political gains. Many prominent warlords came from uneducated

⁴⁰ The Book of Documents, *Shujing* (书经), is one of the Five Classics of ancient Chinese literature. This collection of dialogues and quotations of figures of ancient China has served as the cornerstone of political philosophy in China for 2,000 years.

⁴¹ Chan, “Social Change and Political Legitimacy in Warlord China,” 162.

⁴² See note 41 above.

and impoverished backgrounds, creating a stigma amongst the more politically elite that their harsh backgrounds delegitimized them from political participation. In order to seize political legitimacy, especially in the view of the people, individuals such as Zhang Zuolin would rely on Confucianism as a means of moral condemnation of those opposing their governance. Condemning the opposition as not having the interests of “the people,” and claiming they championed the public’s best interests, the warlords used these oblique methods to enhance their political prestige amongst their constituents. Despite the short-term political capital gained by invoking Confucianism amongst warlord peers, more authentic aspects of the ideology presented themselves in the implementation of governing policies toward the citizenry.

Warlord governance entailed a continuous balancing of the superficial and authentic Confucian elements comprising their ideologies. At the center of the ideologies of warlords who drew from Confucianism were the core concepts of social harmony, respect for authority, and interests of the people. A grounded understanding of the use of these core principles is a vital component in understanding a more holistic, in-depth portrait of who the warlords were, and what shaped their motivations.

Individualizing Confucian Principles for Personal Ideologies

Outside of justification for certain military actions and morally condemnation of opponents for political prestige, certain warlords managed to uphold high standards of certain Confucian doctrines they adopted into their governing strategies. The foundation provided by Confucianism and the Chinese populations’ familiarity with it allowed ample opportunity for the warlords’ ideologies to flourish, in the hopes of forging a new governing identity. Although coming from unique social backgrounds and upbringings, Feng Yuxiang, Yan Xishan, and

Zhang Zuolin all exemplified the unification of old Confucian values with new warlord ideological governing strategies.

Feng Yuxiang was a unique warlord of this period in that his ideological motivations in his system of governance and reform were derived from Confucian values he synthesized with his faith in Christianity. Feng Yuxiang is generally known as the “Christian General” because of the emphasis he placed on Christianity being a moral beacon to bring about public order. One aspect of Feng’s reputation as a positive reformist and who effectively governed over a constructive civil administration was his conversion to Christianity. Feng is believed to have accepted Christianity on the grounds that its adherents exemplified social practices and individual virtues that Feng thought commendable.⁴³ Feng observed that the Christians “did not smoke opium; whether poor or rich, they saw to it their children were educated; there were no idlers among them; and Christian women did not bind their feet.”⁴⁴ Feng wrote:

These few simple points, elicited my extraordinary admiration. At the time [about 1912-14] I thought that if all the people of China could act in a similar fashion, the nation would gradually find a way, and society would indeed gradually improve.⁴⁵

Feng Yuxiang’s observations of the prospects of Christianity on individuals’ behavior and strict adherence to its moral guidelines influenced his belief in the religion as a possible long-term path to social harmony. Although Feng never forced citizens to convert to Christianity, his modeling of its virtues and promulgation of the benefits of his own conversion encouraged people to

⁴³ Sheridan, *Chinese Warlord: The Career of Feng Yu-hsiang*, 54.

⁴⁴ Sheridan, 53.

⁴⁵ Feng, Yuxiang, *Wo de Shenghuo: Feng Yuxiang Zizhuan* (PLA Literature and Art Publishing House, 2002), 367-68.

follow suit. However Feng viewed the long-term benefits on society, he appeared to be more concerned with what Christians did, not what they thought. James Sheridan describes Feng Yuxiang's concern with Christian doctrine as seldom going beyond moral platitudes that had as much Confucianism as Christianity in them.⁴⁶ Moral vigor and upstanding principles such as selflessness, integrity, and knowledge were at the heart of his "moral education" he sought to provide the people. In 1915, distributed amongst his men, was a booklet Feng wrote entitled *The Book of the Spirit*, *jingshen shu* (精神书). One chapter, "The Spirit of Morality" emphasized the cultivation of personal character and key Confucian principles by urging the reader to be serious in speech, cautious in action, diligent in study.⁴⁷ Feng's aims appear to be a balancing of superficial Christian religious practices to encourage short-term coercion with long-term benefits of a morally cohesive society. Feng aimed to channel principles of Confucianism through the package of Christianity, in order to assert to his soldiers, and governed population, sentiments such as "Sacrifice of one's own small self is the principle of humanity (*ren* 仁) and righteousness (*yi* 义)."⁴⁸

Another warlord forging their own ideology through the adoption of Confucian tenants was Yan Xishan. In the Warlord Era, Shanxi province gained the moniker The Model Province, making Yan Xishan its Model Governor. Donald Gillin describes Yan Xishan's newly styled governing strategy as capturing the ideal of Confucianism because his reforms and behavior "were offered in a spirit of *noblesse oblige* and with the intention of demonstrating to all that the

⁴⁶ See note 43 above.

⁴⁷ Sheridan, 80.

⁴⁸ Feng, Yuxiang, *Wo de Shenghuo: Feng Yuxiang Zizhuan*, 227. Ch'eng, 9-11, quotes or paraphrases over twenty of the sayings from Feng's booklet.

Model Governor was a chun-tzu (*junzi* 君子) or ‘superior man’ and thus the epitome of virtue from the Confucian point of view.”⁴⁹ Yan Xishan was able to endure the military and political minefield around his province, and maintain political control of Shanxi province from 1911 until 1949, long outlasting the Warlord Era itself. Despite its proximity to the capital of Beijing in Northern China, Shanxi province is very isolated from its neighboring provinces. Shanxi’s high rising plateau and incredibly mountainous terrain largely shaped Yan Xishan’s governing ideology. He interpreted the realities of Shanxi’s isolation, both internally and externally, as incentives to pursue reforms targeting rapid modernization and emphasizing grassroots local governance. Due to this epiphany and need for localized focus, Yan Xishan particularly borrowed from Confucian tenants emphasizing individual’s accountability to bettering their communities. He would inculcate his subjects with ideas “that each of them possessed an innate capacity for goodness, but in order to fulfill this capacity they must subordinate their emotions and desires, *ganzhi* (感知) to the dictates of conscious, *liangzhi* (良知).”⁵⁰ He adopted this Confucian concept of *liangzhi* into his own governing policy to suggest his assertive and invasive reforms into people’s daily lives were to help his subjects’ morality flourish. In Yan Xishan’s worldview, Confucian doctrine “held that men could suppress evil desires and attain perfection only by means of intense self-criticism and self-cultivation.”⁵¹ Sentiment that was reflected in many of Yan’s hard-lined policy reforms, which can be interpreted as overbearing on people’s lives, provided opportunities for them to rapidly modernize, both morally and socially.

⁴⁹ Gillin, *Warlord: Yen His-shan in Shansi Province 1911-1949*, 59.

⁵⁰ Gillin, 60.

⁵¹ See note 50 above.

Zhang Zuolin faced unique circumstances from the other two warlords mentioned, and these largely shaped the geographical and social limits of certain policies he attempted. Zhang ruled over Northeast China's Manchuria and, as a result, was surrounded by hostile internal opponents such as Feng Yuxiang, Wu Peifu, and Cao Kun, as well as external foreign threats from Russia, Japan, and most western powers of the time. Whereas a warlord like Yan Xishan needed to adapt to the isolated nature of his governed region, Zhang Zuolin needed to adapt to the multilateral politics and copious individual interests in his region. Kwong Chimman states it is "because of this complex geopolitical situation that Zhang was always cautious in his intervention in Chinese politics and sensitive to the international dimension of his governing actions."⁵² Zhang Zuolin was convinced that China's problem was the result of external encroachment and internal moral decline, and tried to play on these two themes to enhance his political authority.⁵³ Zhang relied on Confucian elements in order to establish his ideology as a form of cultural conservatism designed to promote tradition and upstanding morals. He proposed components of his Warlord-Confucianism would accomplish the goals of his moral rhetoric by promising to "punish the greedy ones, promote honesty, encourage creativity, and ensure cooperation between capital and labor."⁵⁴ He also argued for the vital nature of social order as the catalyst for the eradication of "classes" in China as all people should be equally protected by the government. In Confucian nature, Zhang Zuolin strongly believed order would naturally follow if the people "cooperated and played their appropriate roles in the society."⁵⁵ He

⁵² Kwong Chimman, *War and Geopolitics in Interwar Manchuria Zhang Zuolin and the Fengtian Clique during the Northern Expedition* (Brill, 2017), 89.

⁵³ Kwong, 89.

⁵⁴ "ChangTso-lin's Policy," *Week In China* (Peiking), Vol.8, No.100, 11-2.

⁵⁵ "San tulunhui kaimo," *Guowen Weekly* (Shanghai, Tianjin), Vol.4, No.5, 9-10.

emphasized in his personal ideology, like Confucianism, that social order would best be achieved if its members learned to subdue themselves to the benevolence of the overseeing governing body.

All three of these warlord's ideologies present varied adaptations of old imperial Confucian principles, especially on moral guidance, into their personal ideologies of the time. Contrary to Pye's assessment that Warlords' behavior was uninfluenced by values and personal moral judgments, these three warlords demonstrate capacity to develop their own personal ideologies from pre-existing societal notions from sources such as Confucianism. By drawing on Confucian values and synthesizing them into personal ideologies, these warlords at worst, saw the linkage between the use ideology and effective political leadership and, at best, aligned their morally and progressive social mindsets with their policies and reforms. In the next section, I discuss the specific policy contributions of these warlords through their public works, social reforms, and moral stewardship that emerged from their visionary ideologies and effective leadership.

Seeing the Bigger Picture

Discourse following Pye's reasoning constitutes that because warlords are merely concerned with navigating the short-term threats of the period, they are incapable of identifying long-term socially relevant issues that serve the interests of the people they governed. In this line of thinking, factors such as alliances, military resources, and finances confined warlords to ephemeral policies, and obscured their view of the bigger picture. From this perspective, one would assume the short-mindedness of their governance prevented them from enacting progressive social reforms. However, we see in the cases of Feng Yuxiang, Yan Xishan, and Zhang Zuolin that even in a country inured with corruption and governance at times more

concerned with living hand to mouth, leaders with constructive reforms and civil authority were not absent.⁵⁶

Public Works

The first area of major reform by these three warlords was their commitment to public works projects designed to energize the regional economies and best position them to assist the people in long-term modernization. The most visible projects were represented through ambitious infrastructure construction that was designed to unite their respective regions and allow rapid flow of resources. Of the three warlords discussed, Feng Yuxiang was most notable for using his own troops on construction projects that would at times involve repairing city walls, diverting river banks to provide cleaner drinking water, and widening and repairing roads.⁵⁷ In the case of Feng Yuxiang, throughout the Warlord Era he was stationed in multiple regions ranging from Central China's Hunan province to Northwest China's Gansu and Inner Mongolia provinces.⁵⁸ Despite this constant repositioning, he maintained similar ambitions to modernize the regions in which he governed. While situated in Northwest China, he placed a heavy emphasis on construction projects aimed toward economic development that would provide

⁵⁶ At the time of writing and conducting this research, the Covid-19 disease global pandemic has effectively shut down all businesses and institutions. Library resources for this paper as a result were limited to digital sources and prior research before the outbreak. With little to no access to primary source materials, many of the citations in the next three sections on specific warlord policies have been relegated to the secondary scholarly sources and use of them in the footnote section. In future research I will gain access to the primary sources for more accurate first-hand interpretations.

⁵⁷ Sheridan, *Chinese Warlord: The Career of Feng Yu-hsiang*, 92.

⁵⁸ Unlike the other two warlords in this research who maintained the same power bases throughout the Warlord Era, Feng Yuxiang was stationed and moved around multiple times due to his constant changing alliances. Although this movement hindered the long-term success of his policies, he would utilize similar methods of governance wherever he was positioned.

transportation facilities capable of connecting trade from the people to distant lands. One of his most ambitious projects was the construction of a 400-mile motor road from the city of Baotou in Inner Mongolia to Ningxia province.⁵⁹ This project effectively linked the long-isolated Northwestern China regions to major trade posts and cities along the Silk Road. It also served as foundation for more ambitious goals such as Feng Yuxiang's five-year colonization scheme designed to lure millions of poor peasants to the Northwest from the overcrowded Eastern regions of Zhili, Shandong, Anhui provinces.⁶⁰ Although construction projects such as these can be considered modest in achievement, their core purpose was to better the community and reflect the commitment to public service and represented the warlords' ideal of prosperous governance.

Another public works category these warlords all addressed with zeal was their commitment to reform the education systems of their regions. Unlike the more visible construction projects that could yield immediate economic results, educational reforms were designed to have a long-term generational impact and solidify the power bases of the warlords. Universal education, literacy, and vocational training would become pivotal components to the reforms. When Yan Xishan took over as governor of Shanxi province in 1911, the population had an alarmingly low literacy rate. Yan Xishan, like many warlords, relied on newspapers and other written material to communicate and distribute his ideology. When he became governor,

⁵⁹ The 400-mile road was formally opened September 30, 1925. Five months after its completion, the road was extended to Eastern Gansu Province. The road played an intricate role in connecting the isolated Northwest of China to Central China's major trade cities. For more details see (Sheridan, 153). It also served as a foundation for Feng Yuxiang's more ambitious goal of development of agriculture and industry to make the region self-supporting and capable of large revenues.

⁶⁰ At the start of his project, the aim was to have 50 villages built, where each village could house upwards of 200 families, and provide each family with sufficient land to farm. An agriculture bank would furnish newcomers with capital and fair loans needed to purchase land, tools, livestock. Feng envisioned these villages to become self-contained communities, not unlike contemporary American suburban housing developments. In the end like most of Feng's projects, due to another war breaking out in 1925, Feng's plan could not be implemented to scale to greatly impact the population or economy of region. (For details see Sheridan, 151-152).

more than 99 percent of Shanxi's 11 million inhabitants could neither read nor write.⁶¹ In order to eradicate such conditions, Yan Xishan insisted children in his domain attend school for a minimum of four years.⁶² The result from this universal education policy was that by 1923 there was an estimated 800,000 children receiving some kind of education. This figure was a significantly larger number than the reported number of children attending primary school in any other province at the time.⁶³ In line with his emphasis on providing drastic educational reform to promote literacy, Feng Yuxiang established a "School for the Masses" program that deployed government officials as teachers and young students into the streets to gather in groups for instruction in elementary reading.⁶⁴ Feng would go as far as designating punishments in the form of fines and imprisonment for those that refused to study.⁶⁵ Zhang Zuolin shared sentiments of providing widespread education to the masses and built off previous Qing dynasty projects aimed at funneling resources into modernizing Manchuria's educational system. Under Zhang's leadership between the 1910s to 1931, the number of schools in his domain increased to 10,404 (including 4 universities, 271 high schools, and 10,101 elementary schools).⁶⁶

One of the prevailing issues confronted by warlords and governance during the Warlord Era was the presence of banditry. Banditry would become a viable survival means in war-torn

⁶¹ Gillin, *Warlord: Yen His-shan in Shansi Province 1911-1949*, 67.

⁶² See note 61 above.

⁶³ Gillin, 67. A few of Yan Xishan's biggest critics hostile toward his governance, such as Wang Chen-I, admitted that between 1917 and 1919 the number of children attending school in Shanxi rose 300 percent to 1,035,356. See Wang Chen-I, 8.

⁶⁴ Sheridan, *Chinese Warlord: The Career of Feng Yu-hsiang*, 159.

⁶⁵ See note 64 above.

⁶⁶ Guo Jianping, *Fengxi jiaoyu* (Shenyang: Liaohaichubanshe, 2000), 298.

times for those desperate enough to forcibly acquire resources they felt certain governing bodies were reluctant to supply. In order to combat the incentives that might incline people to engage in banditry, educational reforms by these warlords placed an emphasis on providing vocational training. In Shanxi province, Yan Xishan built more than 26,000 people's schools (*guomin xuexiao* 国民学校)⁶⁷ and spent exorbitantly to outfit them with modern amenities.⁶⁸ Yan aimed to design the schools to be as practical as possible and assigned vocational training as curriculum on subjects like sericulture, animal husbandry, and manufacturing pottery, furniture, clothes.⁶⁹ Similar to how Yan encouraged soldiers to learn a trade skill, he foresaw that children also gaining these skills would be less compelled to turn to banditry as a livelihood.⁷⁰ To fulfill this aspiration, Yan made the ambitious reform of providing tuition-free schooling for everyone. Although his dream of universal free primary school education ultimately failed, Yan presented a reform that radically departed from the traditional educational practices of past Chinese governments, and succeeded in drastically increasing the literate population.⁷¹ Feng Yuxiang is another example of a warlord who emphasized education and vocational skill training. Feng established numerous welfare institutions and orphanages, with a particular focus on organizing

⁶⁷ Yan Xishan's educational reforms have received criticism as being less interested in education and more indoctrination. Critics perceived that Yan's apparent goals of schools was to provide him with an army of trained farmers and workers able to read his propaganda, yet not educated enough to question it. For detail on Yan's educational policies and structure, see (Gillin, 71-78).

⁶⁸ Gillin, *Warlord: Yen His-shan in Shansi Province 1911-1949*, 68.

⁶⁹ Gillin, 69.

⁷⁰ Gillin, 31.

⁷¹ Some factors that led to resistance and failure of Yan's universal free education were the lack of qualified teaching; no official birth records so parents could withhold students from school in order to stay home and work on the farm. During imperial China, particularly the Qing dynasty, traditional social order constituted that only the wealthy land-owning gentry received an education. Yan's reforms of universal education received serious gentry intervention and pushback at the disruption to this traditional social order (Gillin, 77). Despite large scale failures, Yan's educational reforms were dramatically progressive and managed to influence the regional educational system and thinking going forward.

care for war orphans and abandoned children.⁷² He also prioritized establishing a fund for public education, and the schools were frequently inspected by himself.⁷³ He also instituted the School for the People, where adults with no education had the opportunity to study. Feng went as far as building opening recreation halls where the public was periodically invited for lectures personally from Feng or one of his officers.⁷⁴ The priority Feng placed on his educational reforms was that children, from ages five to fifteen, and adults would receive an education while also being taught a trade or skill so they could make an honest living without turning to banditry.

With these warlords aimed to dissuade banditry, their vocational educational reforms also positively impacted women and encouraged them to take a more active role in economic life. Due to social norms in Chinese society, women seldom took up an occupation aside from purely domestic duties. All three of these warlords realized the prospects of cultivating the vast population and potential of women in the workforce. In Shanxi province, women comprised nearly 25 percent of the potential labor force.⁷⁵ In response, Yan Xishan erected in every district at least one vocational school where peasant women could become literate and learn skills such as weaving, spinning, and sericulture.⁷⁶ The mobilization of women in the workforce that was facilitated by some warlords' policies represented the early stages of the societal normalization of women as crucial participants toward realization of the government's objectives. This sentiment later continued and was championed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP),

⁷² Sheridan, *Chinese Warlord: The Career of Feng Yu-hsiang*, 158.

⁷³ Feng, Yuxiang, 437.

⁷⁴ Sheridan, *Chinese Warlord: The Career of Feng Yu-hsiang*, 105.

⁷⁵ Gillin, *Warlord: Yen His-shan in Shansi Province 1911-1949*, 34.

⁷⁶ See note 75 above.

represented by Mao's famous political slogan "The times have changed, men and women are the same" (时代不同了, 男女都一样) which asserted that men and women were equal in political consciousness and physical strength.⁷⁷

The final front of progressive public works reforms by these three warlords was inculcation and investment toward modernizing medical practices. Due to the war-torn climate of the era, almost every region of China in this decade faced complications with disease, famine, and impoverished populations. A critical factor in the exorbitant death counts of the Warlord Era can be attributed to insanitary and antiquated medical practices at the time.⁷⁸

Feng Yuxiang, Yan Xishan, and Zhang Zuolin, like many other warlords, utilized influence from their governance in order to emphasize the vital nature of a modernized healthcare system to Chinese society. In addition to establishing numerous welfare institutions, Feng Yuxiang also placed great emphasis on homes with the facility to care for the blind, crippled, and elderly masses left impoverished by the wars.⁷⁹ Accompanying these care facilities were numerous civilian health clinics personally funded by Feng and often headed by American missionary doctors Feng had close relations with. One example is Feng inviting the American missionary Dr. Charles Lewis to establish and direct a hospital Feng personally financed in Northwest China.⁸⁰ In fact, prominent warlords who invested heavily in medical reforms often

⁷⁷ Yang, Wenqi. "The annihilation of femininity in Mao's China: Gender inequality of sent-down youth during the Cultural Revolution," *Sage Journals* vol 31, no. 1 (2017): 1.

⁷⁸ Due to limited records from the time, no official figures for the total death count of individuals during the Warlord Era exist. Projections from historian accounts estimate that from 1917-1928, over 800 thousand died from battle, and upwards of 6 million died from resulting non-democidal factors. (Matthew White, <https://necrometrics.com/20c300k.htm#Warlord>)

⁷⁹ Sheridan, *Chinese Warlord: The Career of Feng Yu-hsiang*, 158.

⁸⁰ Sheridan, 158-59.

relied on foreign doctors to maintain and design these self-financed hospitals to care for civilians. Zhang Zuolin approached medical reform primarily for the health of his own military. In his view, the more healthy and capable his military was, the more he could continue to rely on them for enforcing his internal government reforms.⁸¹ In the aftermath of his war with Wu Peifu, in 1924 Zhang Zuolin founded the single largest medical facility in Manchuria, the 400-bed Northeastern Military Hospital (*Dongbei lujun yiyuan* 东北陆军医院). The hospital may have served a certain military strategy, but Zhang insisted the priority was to provide top quality routine healthcare to all its patients.⁸² Yan Xishan also valued the expertise and influence of western medical missionary doctors. In the early years of Yan Xishan's governance, Shanxi experienced intense outbreaks of diphtheria, influenza, and bubonic plague, resulting in as many as 8,000 deaths in a single year.⁸³ Yan Xishan was so impressed by foreign doctors' knowledge and skill during the epidemic, he was inspired to build modern hospitals and medical schools across the province.⁸⁴

All three warlords notably made remarks on the ineffectiveness of Traditional Chinese Medicine in hopes of popularizing more western medical and surgical techniques. While in cities these new western medical techniques were adopted, in the countryside large populations still patronized herbalists using traditional lore of Chinese medicine. The traditional doctors implemented techniques such as acupuncture and cauterization, but were often ignorant of

⁸¹ On the driving factors of Zhang Zuolin's hospital construction in Manchuria, see Gavan McCormack, *Chang Tso-lin in Northeast China, 1911–1928: China, Japan, and the Manchurian Idea*, and Suleski, *Civil Government in Warlord China*.

⁸² DuBois, Thomas David. "Public Health and Private Charity in Northeast China, 1905–1945," *Frontiers of History in China*, Brill vol. 9:4 (2014): 517.

⁸³ Gillin, *Warlord: Yen His-shan in Shansi Province 1911-1949*, 36.

⁸⁴ See note 83 above.

elementary hygiene techniques and neglected to sterilize their instruments.⁸⁵ Pushback to modern western medicinal practices led warlords to, in masse, establish medical schools and enforce teaching countryside doctors the basic principles of modern medicine. The conflict and debate about the gains of eastern and western medicine would not subside under these warlords. However, their strong push for a modernized healthcare system and financial backing of medical education and facilities is a crucial step in encouraging Chinese doctors to blend more modern medical practices alongside traditional techniques.

A Crusade of Social Reforms

The second area of major reform targeted by these three warlords was their progressive measures designed to shape and cultivate a society in their respective spheres of influence that paralleled their personal ideologies. Each of these three warlords combatted unique circumstances in their attempt to reshape the societies and people they governed over. Despite each pursuing large-scale societal reconstruction in their respective regions that reflected their own personal ideologies, all three of them championed progressive social reforms that centered around effective governance and citizen participation. These measures showed an understanding of local needs, the importance of social stability, and kept long-term benefits of the governed people in mind.

Of the three warlords discussed, Zhang Zuolin was in a particularly unique situation in regard to his social reforms due to the massive geographic scale of Manchuria.⁸⁶ Since

⁸⁵ Gillin, 36.

⁸⁶ The three Chinese provinces (Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning) that make up Manchuria are estimated at 380,000mi², slightly larger than the size of the U.S. states: California, Oregon, and Washington combined.

Manchuria had such a diverse and massive population, Zhang focused on a grassroots localized approach to his social reforms. Kwong Chiman argues that without the support of the local elites and the military, Zhang Zuolin could hardly have survived as a local strongman, let alone the leader of the Chinese in Manchuria. Kwong further highlights that Zhang's ability to enlist the support of the local elite distinguished him from other military leaders in Manchuria, and ultimately led to the preeminence of his support base.⁸⁷ In order to establish and maintain influence in local governing bodies, Zhang enacted the reform of establishing the "meeting of local elders" (*xianglao huiyi* 乡老会议) as a local constitutional body.⁸⁸ The selected "elders" voted with secret ballots and met with Zhang personally to comment on various issues in their locale—from the conduct of the officials and garrisons to infrastructure and education.⁸⁹ Another drastic social reform by Zhang that promulgated his nonpartisan vision for Manchurian society was his revival of the provincial assemblies in 1918. Zhang understood his rule could not exist without collaboration with civilian bureaucrats, but he also required institutional consent to enact localized policies. Although the provincial assemblies had minimal general public participation, they were progressive in allowing lower bureaucratic commercial and educational interests to be represented and consulted by the authorities.⁹⁰ In contrast to perceptions that warlords governed only in their own self-interest, Zhang Zuolin's reforms inspired regional governmental participation of grassroots level officials. This new approach positioned Zhang to be aware and conscientious of the needs of local areas, as well as knowledgeable of exact quantities of

⁸⁷ Kwong, *War and Geopolitics in Interwar Manchuria*, 62-63.

⁸⁸ Wei, Fuxiang, "ZhangZuolin yu dongsansheng xianglao huiyi," *Dongbei difangshi yanjiu* No.3 (1992): 117-23.

⁸⁹ Kwong, *War and Geopolitics in Interwar Manchuria*, 64.

⁹⁰ Kwong, 63.

resources and where they needed to be allocated. Zhang prioritized reconstructing Manchurian society governance and participation from a bottom-up approach, with himself at the helm of all transactions. In effect, Zhang's reforms and approach created a unique situation for his citizenry that for the first time in Chinese history, encouraged smaller localized voices to be heard on a regional level. By encouraging local participation, Zhang's reforms instilled confidence in local elites their interests were being heard, as well as bolstered Zhang's political position as the protector of the Chinese position and interests in Manchuria.

Whereas Zhang Zuolin aimed for his social reforms to strategically position himself as the arbiter of preserving Manchurian interests, Feng Yuxiang's social reforms utilized an ambitious moral approach toward curbing the populace into a more harmonious society. Christianity was foundational to Feng's reputation as governing a reformist and constructive civil administration. As previously mentioned, Feng's zealous faith in Christianity instilled in him values of selflessness, integrity, and devotion to development of moral vigor. These guiding principles were the foundation of Feng Yuxiang's steadfast commitment to stamp out in every area where he governed the three vices he labeled as corruptors of people's souls: narcotics, gambling, and prostitution.⁹¹ James E. Sheridan explains "Feng was strongly opposed to narcotics by temperament and background—his parents has suffered from drugs—and because he considered them to be one source of national debilitation."⁹²As a result of this belief, Feng's most critical social reform was the complete condemnation of the sale and smoking of opium.

⁹¹ Sheridan, *Chinese Warlord: The Career of Feng Yu-hsiang*, 91.

⁹² See note 91 above.

Individuals caught trading in any labeled narcotics were arrested, and the drugs were confiscated and burned.⁹³

Feng's reformist nature, however, did not consist of simple condemnation and criticism of narcotics users. In order to cure addicts, Feng set up sanitariums, stocked them with medicine, food, supplies, and employed specialists to supervise the rehabilitation. Addicts were encouraged to come voluntarily for treatment, but those who were unwilling to were brought by force.⁹⁴ To facilitate the successful treatment of addicts in Feng's program, after completing rehabilitation the recovered persons were sent to the same vocational schools that Feng's troops attended, where they were taught a trade so they could earn an honest living upon release.⁹⁵ Over the period of time Feng governed in Changde, Hunan, he declared three to four hundred people were cured of drug addiction from his reforms.⁹⁶ Sheridan comments that "given the circumstances of the time, Feng's anti-opium program was commendable, even by modern standards."⁹⁷ Accompanying the reforms seeking to eradicate narcotics, gambling was also forbidden. This was unquestionably more difficult to enforce as gambling can occur in private homes and be unnoticeable. The same can't be said for Feng's prohibition of prostitution. As soon as Feng's troops entered a new area, the brothels were immediately closed, and prostitutes were given three days to leave the area.⁹⁸

⁹³ Feng, Yuxiang, *Wo de Shenghuo: Feng Yuxiang Zizhuan*, 376.

⁹⁴ Sheridan, *Chinese Warlord: The Career of Feng Yu-hsiang*, 91.

⁹⁵ Sheridan, 92.

⁹⁶ Feng, Yuxiang, *Wo de Shenghuo: Feng Yuxiang Zizhuan*, 375-76.

⁹⁷ Sheridan, *Chinese Warlord: The Career of Feng Yu-hsiang*, 92.

⁹⁸ See note 97 above.

The attempted eradication and rehabilitation of drug use, as well as other condemnable vices, assumes a unique and progressive position and sets Feng apart from many of his counterparts of the Warlord Era. That said, it must be acknowledged that the policy of opium eradication concentrated on lower class citizens, since the education and vocational skill training were accompanying the policy, for which upper-class citizens likely would have no use. Unlike Feng Yuxiang, to most warlords that sought power and money, vices such as prostitution, gambling, and opium were taxable enterprises that easily could have been used to exploit lower class citizens. Feng Yuxiang himself was beholden to the circumstances of the time and at certain junctures of financial desperation in his governance resorted to taxing these enterprises. However, outside of these unique extenuating circumstances, such as financial motives driven by famine, Feng stood part from most warlords in that his initial policy intentions and beliefs were that society would be better without the existence and temptation of the three vices. Sadly, most places Feng visited were plagued for too long by disorder and disunion for him to effectively uproot the social vices permanently. While presiding in an area, solid gains and progress were made on massive societal reforms, but once Feng left an area, new leadership would come in and dismiss Feng's progress for short-term financial benefits to their own war effort. On one hand, Feng Yuxiang's intentions succeeded in curbing certain societal issues in a drastically progressive approach. On the other hand, they resulted in impermanent changes due to circumstances rampant within the Warlord Era that limited the capacity for morally progressive views.

Shanxi province's comparative immunity from outside invasion during the Warlord Era allowed Yan Xishan the ability to utilize more assertive, and at times excessive, means in implementing social reforms he saw as capable of rapidly modernizing his populace. Previously

mentioned was that the harsh geography and mountainous terrain of Shanxi played a large role in the isolationist social structure that existed. The individualized nature of governance and issues of particular regions of the province created obstacles for Yan Xishan's governance finding uniformity. To combat the detached social structure Yan Xishan relied heavily and ideologically on a grassroots and localized responsibility approach. He employed thousands of policemen to keep everyone in the province under continual surveillance and required police authorities to report to the Taiyuan government, Yan's regional power base, any violations of provincial laws.⁹⁹ According to one of Yan's followers, in 1924 the annual provincial crime rate from these reforms reduced appreciably to only seventeen robberies in the entire province.¹⁰⁰

Yan Xishan's governing ideology upheld the Confucian doctrine that people could suppress evil desires, but only through intense self-criticism and self-reflection. In order to inspire such endeavors, he established the Heart Washing Society (*xixin she* 洗心社). Gillin describes the Heart Washing Society as part of Yan's Good People Movement (*haoren yundong* 好人运动), aimed to "inculcate subjects with qualities of honesty, friendliness, dignity, diligence, modesty, thrift, obedience."¹⁰¹ At the weekly gatherings of the Heart Washing Society officials, gentry, and students gathered in temples and everyone was encouraged to confess their misdeeds for the week, inviting criticism from the rest of the community.¹⁰² Yan sought to spread the beneficial impact of such gatherings outside of the temples and into a large scale social system enforcing collective responsibility. He achieved this by adapting similar traits to

⁹⁹ Gillin, *Warlord: Yen His-shan in Shansi Province 1911-1949*, 31.

¹⁰⁰ Gillin, 32.

¹⁰¹ Gillin, 60-61.

¹⁰² Gillin, 60.

the Qing-like collective responsibility system, in which “local officials were punished for the misbehavior of anyone under their jurisdiction, heads of families suffered for the misdeeds of their relatives, and businessmen and landlords were penalized for the crimes of their associates or tenants.”¹⁰³ In short, Yan Xishan said “No individual must be allowed to slip through the net.”¹⁰⁴ This eagerness to shape behavior led Yan to release policies and statements that emboldened individuals to report one another’s transgressions to the authorities.¹⁰⁵ Yan’s reforms encouragement of self-surveillance by common people played a vital role in his ambition to wipe out “social evils,” such as foot binding of women, idleness, gambling, public sloppiness, brawling, and illiteracy.

The ability to draw upon collective guilt and shame played integral roles in how Yan Xishan reshaped Shanxi society. To curb people’s behavior without resorting to the need of a vast police force, Yan sought to utilize children and education to pressure local systems. When Yan challenged the convention of foot binding by outlawing it completely and established the Liberation of Feet (*tianzu hui* 天足会), he particularly encouraged students in all schools to wear badges proclaiming they would not marry girls having bound feet.¹⁰⁶ Donald Gillin asserts that children were also used as an instrument alongside adults in public shaming of miscreants:

“Often school children were encouraged to gather outside the homes of malefactors and curse the occupants until they came out and promised to mend their ways. Other miscreants were surrounded by crowds which lamented their behavior in language commonly reserved for funerals or were pursued through streets by bands of small girls chanting, ‘Bad man, won’t you be good!’”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Gillin, 32.

¹⁰⁴ See note 103 above.

¹⁰⁵ See note 103 above.

¹⁰⁶ Gillin, 34.

Yan Xishan established numerous local organizations designed to root out individuals participating in the “social evils” his laws condemned. The Early Rising Society (*zaoqi hui* 早期会) knocked on doors and reported persons still in bed after six o'clock and reported them to the authorities as being idle and not contributing enough. Often, these social reforms resulted in individuals being forced to redeem themselves through labor. This approach aligns Yan Xishan's policies as early stage techniques similar to those later used by the Communist Party, such as attempts to make habitual lawbreakers “redeemed through labor.”¹⁰⁸

Yan Xishan's ideal society may have entailed local villages and governances taking responsibility for its citizens to build a prosperous society from the bottom-up. However, in practice Yan's governing policy could be classified as invasive and bordering on a surveillance state. Critics of Yan Xishan have often struggled with discerning if his motives were oriented toward liberating people in a harmonious manner, or indoctrinating them for his own political gains. One example of criticism is in Gillin's own analysis on the progressive benefits of Yan's government structure, Gillin is sure to mention that when Yan Xishan was modeling his policies, “He (Yan Xishan) was impressed profoundly by the unanimity and enthusiasm with which the peoples of democracies supported their governments during the war and endeavored to secure comparable popular support for his own policies by draping his fundamentally despotic regime in the trappings of Western democracy.”¹⁰⁹ The resulting policy by Yan Xishan was called “government that makes use of the people” (*yongmin zhengzhi* 用民政治).¹¹⁰ Although this

¹⁰⁷ Gillin, 35.

¹⁰⁸ Gillin, 36.

¹⁰⁹ Gillin, 41.

¹¹⁰ See note 109 above.

policy was innovative in establishing village assemblies with village headmen elected by the local communities, Gillin highlights how Yan instructed his personal magistrates to “visit the villages and designate those who should be elected.”¹¹¹ Critics interpret such actions as Yan’s refusal to grant the people true power in electing their representatives and playing a more active role in determining state policies. Gillin presumes that “To Yan representative government did not mean the achievement of popular sovereignty, which they equated with anarchy; it was instead simply a device for arousing public enthusiasm for the policies of their governments.”¹¹² Despite appropriate criticism of the extent his policies interfered with people’s private lives or hindered true political representation, his reforms brought about social reform in Shanxi and resulted in the province being identified as the “Model Province” because of the peace enjoyed during arguably the most disorderly era of Modern China.

Despite critics asserting these warlords were limited by short-term pragmatism, there is ample evidence they each sought to reshape their spheres of influence into their idealized image of Chinese society and improve the living conditions and stability of their respective populaces while reducing problematic behaviors and practices by promoting social responsibility. Despite certain inhibiting factors that arose out of the Warlord Era that would ultimately impede their long-term success, each of these individual warlords’ social reforms were rooted in outlooks at durable prosperity for their subjects.

¹¹¹ See note 109 above.

¹¹² Gillin, 42.

Popularized Support Aggrandizes Warlords' Ideologies

In addition to the public and social policy reforms, these three warlords demonstrate their crucial leadership contributions in their maintenance of popular support. In most cases of warlords occupying territories with their armies, the local populations often lamented the excruciating tax that resulted on their resources. Particularly due to the reality that the warlords and the territory they controlled was in continuous fluctuation, local populations endured this volatile oversight as helpless bystanders. However, some warlords of the era were particularly effective in persuading their populations that their joined interests were aligned. The methods relied upon was often the warlord as moral steward who possessed charisma and disseminated information to the masses. Feng Yuxiang, Yan Xishan, and Zhang Zuolin were all efficient agents in utilizing these effective methods to gain, and more importantly maintain, the support of their subjects.

Similar to other political leaders, Zhang Zuolin enhanced his political reputation and respect amongst civilians through postured regionalism and by speaking out against the problems he viewed as corroding Chinese society. Zhang's most relatable criticism that reflected common perceptions in Manchuria was his view that the moral decline among the nation's political elite was as important as imperialism and socio-economic problems. One example is of Zhang voicing his outrage at the "unscrupulous politicians" and corrupt officials in a 1918 telegram, claiming: "It has been seven years since the establishment of the Republic, but disasters and upheavals struck repeatedly as if there was no end...the unscrupulous ones seized opportunities to stir up troubles and put their conspiracies in motion"¹¹³ Zhang Zuolin would maintain his stance that the

¹¹³ Kwong, *War and Geopolitics in Interwar Manchuria*, 79.

soldiers fighting in the wars were often misled by “immoral” politicians. For instance, in a public statement issued in mid-1926, he states:

“The source of endless internal strife was undoubtedly the soldiers’ intervention in politics(*junren ganzheng*)...; the greatest obstacle to the rule by the people (*minzhi*) was dictatorship...Our central government is now impotent; telegrams flooded from all sides discussing the appropriate political solution...On the surface, all these ideas are constructive, but if one takes a closer look they might be attempts of the disgraced and unemployed politicians who want to use the soldiers as a puppet to restore their position...”¹¹⁴

These two statements are critical examples of Zhang’s ability to rally support from Manchurian citizens behind his stance of cultural conservatism through representing the peoples’ interest in a just government. It also gained heavy support with soldiers who appreciated public declarations that they would not be heedlessly thrown into battle for selfish political gains. He presented himself as the moral leader capable of protecting the integrity of the Republican institution and preventing the “corrupted politicians” from having their way.¹¹⁵

Zhang Zuolin grasped the significance of legitimacy and coalition building. He made a cornerstone of his governance his reluctance to act rigidly when considering courses of action navigating the political minefield that swamped Northeast China. He maintained political support in his region because he was open to negotiation and considering alternative political solutions. Zhang was considered to be a different kind of political leader, one who did not see politics in all-or-nothing terms and did not resort to use of force easily.¹¹⁶ As Ch’i Hsi-sheng notes, the Northeastern warlords, including

¹¹⁴ Kwong, 80.

¹¹⁵ Kwong, 81.

¹¹⁶ Kwong, 89.

Zhang Zuolin, “always demonstrated a willingness to negotiate for a peaceful settlement.”¹¹⁷ Pivotal to Zhang Zuolin maintaining support in Manchuria was his uniqueness from warlords of outside regions.

The most crucial facet of Zhang’s continued success in maintaining Manchurian citizens backing was his posturing for a secure and prosperous Manchuria. Prevailing anti-Qing and anti-Manchu sentiments within China proper did not disappear with the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912, but carried over into the politics between Manchuria and Beijing in the Republican-era as well. Zhang believed that Manchuria’s position would not be secured from its surrounding enemies unless it was supported by a friendly central Beijing government or unless he actually controlled it.¹¹⁸ The centuries-old mistrust that existed between Manchuria and the central government of China led the Chinese leaders in Manchuria to latch onto concerns that the Republican government failed to protect their interests and would sell them to foreign world powers.¹¹⁹ This concern was justifiable. One case in 1913, Beijing borrowed money from Japan in order to build a railway in Manchuria, but after three years was incapable of paying back Japan and Republican president Yuan Shikai was forced to accept many clauses in the Twenty-Two Demands treaty between China and Japan. Zhang Zuolin received reports that Yuan Shikai proposed to cede Jilin Province (a third of Manchuria) to Japan in exchange for further financial support of his regime in Beijing.¹²⁰ Manchurian distrust of the central

¹¹⁷ Ch’i, 218.

¹¹⁸ Kwong, *War and Geopolitics in Interwar Manchuria*, 241.

¹¹⁹ Kwong, 76.

¹²⁰ See note 115 above.

government's willingness to sell them to Japan further left them feeling isolated, allowing ample opportunity for a man such as Zhang Zuolin to champion Manchurian interests. Under Zhang Zuolin Manchuria seemingly prospered, leading people to recognize that their political survival depended on their vast support for him.

Unique from the regionalism championed by Zhang Zuolin, Feng Yuxiang was highly scrupulous in maintaining good relations with the diverse geographical communities in which his troops were quartered.¹²¹ Feng Yuxiang gained local support primarily through the example of proper behavior he sought to set forth through his troops. During the Warlord period, when many soldiers were in poor physical condition, had little spirit, and antagonized the populace by their unruly behavior, Feng's troops adhered to his strict rules with religious undertones: no smoking, drinking, gambling, and use of profane language¹²² Feng Yuxiang was highly aware of the benefits of creating a favorable public image to his governance. Previously discussed was Feng's commitment to propagating Christianity in his reform policies and the persuasion of the public that arose from himself and his soldiers exemplifying their spiritual discipline. Conversion amongst citizens was not required, but his spiritual devotion did have a coaxing element to the citizens who rallied in support for his governance. In towns occupied by Feng, daily religious services were held, Bible classes organized, and citizens, regardless of being believers or not, were encouraged to read bibles and pray on their own. Every Sunday officers and communities assembled to hear religious services from foreign missionaries or Feng himself.

¹²¹ Sheridan, *Chinese Warlord: The Career of Feng Yu-hsiang*, 93.

¹²² Sheridan, 81. For insight into the rigorous training and behavior trained into Feng's army, See (Sheridan, 74-90).

The sense of community and moral stewardship that Feng Yuxiang provided led to a trickle-down effect and appreciation for the moral guidance he preached in his reforms. Peasants in the vicinity of Feng's governance frequently remarked on Feng's sense of justice and fair play.¹²³ Sheridan provides evidence of this in his insightful background detailing of Feng's life, stating under Feng's leadership that "His men were honest in their dealings with people. There was no thievery, and when troop's found it necessary to occupy a portion of man's land, he was compensated."¹²⁴ Feng often had food brought in from other towns to relieve pressure on local food supplies and demanded troops to pay fair price in currency for needed supplies.¹²⁵ He prioritized gaining the trust of the people in his domain, and when leaving an area he ordered his troops to return all borrowed articles and settle all of their local debts.¹²⁶ Such exemplary behavior at times led to citizens lauding Feng's governance and drawing clear distinctions in their mind between him and the typical warlord. One correspondent remarked while Feng was in Hunan:

"Changde is peaceful, kept so by the excellent rule of general Feng. It is really a pleasure to see 'business as usual' progressing in spite of military occupation...the soldiers are not billeted on the people and live in public buildings and at the government's expense. In addition to excellent discipline, General Feng provides for the moral uplift of his men."¹²⁷

¹²³ Sheridan, 93.

¹²⁴ See note 119 above.

¹²⁵ See note 119 above.

¹²⁶ Sheridan, 93.

¹²⁷ See note 122 above.

Sheridan writes that “most communities where Feng stayed were sorry to see him leave, for things usually got worse when his troops departed.”¹²⁸ This reputation followed Feng Yuxiang to the various provinces he governed and he was able to solidify and expand his power base through the illustration of himself as an arbiter of moral fortitude. His use of religion and shaping of behavior through example proved to be distinguishing factors separating him from other warlords of his time.

Unlike the other two warlords discussed, Yan Xishan had the massive benefit of Shanxi province being incredibly isolated geographically. The biggest advantage from this isolation was that Yan Xishan was freer to focus his army on the massive regional issue of suppressing banditry within his domain. Yan understood that to maintain public support for his hardline policies, he would need to convince the people they were protected. Shanxi province during the Warlord Era was brimming with bandits looting local populations. Although local populations sought refuge in walled cities, they too were stormed and looted often, with the bandits disappearing into the mountains before Yan’s troops could arrive. In accordance with Yan’s grassroots ideological belief of regional prosperity stemming from local governments’ responsibility to protect its citizens, he sought to supplement his army by organizing villages into local militia (*paowei tuan* 炮位团)¹²⁹ These trained local militias, combined with an effective reward bounty system, proved instrumental in Yan Xishan’s quelling of banditry in the region.

Yan’s effective curbing of banditry within the region afforded him and his army various avenues to mingle and convince the civilian population that their best interests were protected. In

¹²⁸ See note 122 above.

¹²⁹ Gillin, *Warlord: Yen His-shan in Shansi Province 1911-1949*, 30.

his in depth of analysis of Yan Xishan's life, Donald Gillin describes Yan Xishan's power largely coming from his political charisma, graciousness, charm, and unusual level of accessibility. Gillin goes on to say that, "He readily accommodated anyone who came to him seeking a small loan in order to buy land, build a house, or finance a marriage."¹³⁰ In his accessibility, Yan Xishan would empathize with Shanxi subjects from all walks of life. In order to distance himself from the vastly despised previous Manchu rulers, Yan would openly discuss his humble origins and lack of education as pivotal distinguishing factors from the previous aristocratic rulers. He deliberately mingled with ordinary farmers and shopkeepers to find out how they felt about his policies, hoping that personal contact with them would convince them to support his rule.¹³¹ Gillin describes Yan's behavior during his trips as "behaving much like a person seeking election to public office. When he initiated a scheme aimed at radically changing the structure of village government, for example, he visited a multitude of villages where he shook the hands of the local gentry, dined with them, and distributed gifts among the villagers."¹³² Yan Xishan's accessibility and charisma demonstrated his acumen for possessing what could be called "the common touch." Yan Xishan's effective ability to conveying himself as one of the people laid a new foundation in Chinese governance, and foreshadows the decades later conduct of the Chinese Communist Party's attempts to persuade the masses that party leaders were fellow members of the working class.

In navigating the impact of geographic isolation on his popularity and accessibility, Yan Xishan implemented an aggressive use of media in order to disseminate his ideas. As discussed

¹³⁰ Gillin, 46.

¹³¹ Gillin, 46-47.

¹³² Gillin, 46.

earlier, Yan invested heavily in educational reform and emphasis on improving literacy. The growing literate population allowed Yan the opportunity to publish multitudes of newspapers, lectures, plays, slogans, posters. One major method of distributing his ideology and policy information was issuing millions of handbooks in which he conveyed his opinions on aspects and behavior of everyday life. Authorities distributed these booklets free of charge to students, teachers, officials, and businesses, who were all expected to read them aloud to their illiterate neighbors. Titles of Yan's booklets ranged from *What People Must Know* (*renmin xuzhi* 人民需知) to *What Families Must Know* (*jiating xuzhi* 家庭需知).¹³³ Yan Xishan's manipulation of media and his public charisma were solidifying factors in establishing his support from the citizens of Shanxi province during this period. His quelling of banditry and the aura of societal order served as further evidence to convince people to cede to his assertive reforms, and in return Shanxi province would undergo a state of perceived prosperity.

Conclusion

In this research I have presented specific reforms by three prominent warlords, Feng Yuxiang, Yan Xishan, and Zhang Zuolin, that stemmed from the execution of their ideological styles of governance onto their domains. The mid-twentieth century western scholars discussed in this paper, by and large, viewed governance during the Warlord Era as a contorted and convoluted history. This scholarly discourse has largely held the view that this period symbolizes a moment of Chinese society where it had lost its direction and succumbed to evil times. Early scholars, such as Lucian Pye, provide paradigms that warlord governance lacked overlying social or moral ideologies. Indeed, these scholars assert warlords were reliant on short-term pragmatic

¹³³ Gillin, 64.

policies that solidified their power bases and assured their political survival. This paradigm has served as a guide for other scholars who have assimilated the notion that warlord governance was simply selfish, chaotic, and violent.

In this research I have provided a more in-depth overview of the public works, social reforms, and popularized support that these three warlords established through the governance of their respective regions. Their ideologies were forged from the synthesis of old imperial Confucian principles with new modern ideas. This newly synthesized warlord ideology, although unique to each individual, infused their reforms with moral and socially progressive ideas. Respectfully, each of these three warlords attempted reforms designed to modernize their regions economically. Through construction projects involving schools, hospitals, and intricate roadway systems, they sought to connect their regions to valuable resources and trade markets, as well as provide modern health and education opportunities previously absent in Chinese society. They also sought to reshape and mold their societies into moral havens more aligned with their visions of social harmony. Lastly, these three warlords were especially prudent in maintaining support amongst their populations by acting as moral stewards, possessing political charisma and relatability, and championing the concerns of the civilian population.

While this research has investigated specific reform policies implemented by three warlords on a comparative basis, it is not intended to be all-encompassing. Indeed, there is a vast spectrum of policies and governance carried out by the countless number of warlords in this period. In addition, this project does not argue that all the policy reforms instituted by these three warlords were durable reforms that outlasted their respective governance. Factors, such as geography, local gentry, and necessity of war, hindered the long-term prospects of these institutional reforms. Similarly, more analysis into the three warlords discussed is necessary in

order to further understand the motivations behind their particular governance policies. As indicated, certain policy reforms by Feng, Yan, or Zhang may have had alternative aims and been driven by outside aims of altruism. An argument can be made that these three warlord are representative of a smarter class of warlords who understood short-term predatory extraction of resources clashed with long-term political survival. Perhaps they weren't morally superior than other warlords through their governance, but simply understood their long-term success and power was derived from the people being happy and working. These arguments possess some validity but still too closely follow frameworks that mark warlords as merely power-hungry and politically driven. Further discussion on individual warlords is vital to understanding and developing more holistic arguments. The aim of this research has been to observe more comprehensively the governing strategies utilized by certain warlords as they became trailblazers in discovering how social harmony should be sought in a modern competitive world.

More so, the aim of this research has been to further the understanding of warlords as a non-monolithic group. Instead, the warlords are best understood as a diverse group of actors who combine traditional Chinese governing values with modern views in a new Chinese political landscape. The Warlord Era pre-exists the much more observed clash between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Nationalist Party (KMT), in effect making the warlords a crucial piece of the transitional period to modern Chinese history. The Warlord Era marks the origin of the military strongman as the superlative political authority in Chinese politics. Although the role of military in centralizing power arguably served different purposes for the warlords than the later CCP and KMT, the later two political parties utilized various governing policies and strategies implemented by the warlords.

Feng Yuxiang, Yan Xishan, and Zhang Zuolin are warlords that governed with short and long-term visions for the development and cultivation of Chinese society. They contributed much more than they are given credit for. Many warlords failed to provide China with a tolerable and respectable system of governance during this transnational period, leading to the era's reputation as a chaotic mess. In this light, these three particular warlords remain overlooked and largely forgotten in modern Chinese history. Future scholarly discourse has an extensive well of potential research to draw upon regarding these and other unexplored warlords of this period. By more deeply examining the contributions and style of governance other individual warlords utilized, we can more objectively analyze the significance of this overlooked time period. If Chinese history is defined by the transition from one major imperial dynasty to another with intermittent eras of division, then a situation of decentralized power in Chinese politics may reoccur. Closer observation of the individual actors within the Warlord Era is integral to understanding the fragmentation of power within China, and—if it decentralizes again—how its leading actors can effectively navigate the competitive power vacuum.

Bibliography

- Alitto, Guy. *The Last Confucian*. University of California Press, Berkeley, California. 1979.
- Chan, Anthony B. “Social Change and Political Legitimacy in Warlord China.” *Asian Studies Journal*. 11:1 (1972): 151-164.
- Ch'en, Jerome. “Defining Chinese Warlords and Their Factions.” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London, vol. 31:3 (1968).
- Ch'eng, Marcus. *Marshal Feng – The Man and His Work*. Shanghai, preface dated 1926. Ch'eng was Chaplain General in Feng's army when he wrote this book, which praises Feng. However, it contains much information on Feng's reform programs.
- Chi, His-sheng. *Warlord Politics in China, 1916-1928*. First Edition. Stanford University Press, 1976.
- Chow, Yung-Teh. *Social Mobility in China*. New York: Atherton, 1966.
- DuBois, Thomas David. “Public Health and Private Charity in Northeast China, 1905–1945.” *Frontiers of History in China*, Brill, vol. 9:4 (2014).
- Dunn, John P. “The Junfa and Their Armies: 1916-1937.” *China and International Security: History, Strategy, and 21st-Century Policy*, by Donovan C. Chau and Thomas M. Kane, Praeger, 2014, 59–78.
- Feng Yuxiang, *Wo de Shenghuo: Feng Yuxiang Zizhuan*. PLA Literature and Art Publishing House, 2002. 冯玉祥。《我的生活·冯玉祥自传》。解放军文艺出版社, 2002.
- Gillin, Donald G. *Warlord: Yen His-shan in Shansi Province 1911-1949*. Princeton University Press, 1967.
- Guo, Jianping. *Fengxi jiaoyu*. Shenyang: Liaohaichubanshe, 2000. 郭建平。《奉系教育》。瀋陽: 遼海出版社, 2000.
- Guowen Weekly (Shanghai, Tianjin) 國聞周報.
- Jowett, Phillip. *The Armies of Warlord China, 1911-1928*. Schiffer, 2014.
- Kwong, Chi Man. *War and Geopolitics in Interwar Manchuria Zhang Zuolin and the Fengtian Clique during the Northern Expedition*. Brill, 2017.
- Mao Zedong. “Problems of War and Strategy” (November 6, 1938), Selected Works, Vol. II.

- McCord, Edward A. *The Power of the Gun: The Emergence of Modern Chinese Warlordism*. First Edition. University of California Press, 1993.
- McCormack, Gavan. *Chang Tso-lin in Northeast China, 1911-1928 China, Japan, and the Manchurian Idea*. Stanford University Press, 1977.
- McDonald, Angus W, JR. *The Urban Origins of Rural Revolution: Elites and the Masses in Hunan Province, China, 1911-1927*. University of California Press, Berkeley, California. 1978.
- Mencius. *The Sayings of Mencius*. trans. by James R. Ware. New York: New American, 1960.
- Myron, Paul and Anthony Linebarger. *Government In Republican China*. McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc. New York. 1938.
- Powell, Ralph L. *The Rise of Chinese Military Power, 1895-1912*. Princeton: Princeton University, 1955.
- Pye, Lucian W. *Warlord Politics: Conflict and Coalition in the Modernization of Republican China*. Praeger Publishers, New York, N.Y. 1971.
- Sheridan, James E. *Chinese Warlord: The Career of Feng Yu-hsiang*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1966.
- Suleski, Ronald Stanley. *Civil Government in Warlord China: Tradition, Modernization and Manchuria*. New York: Peter Lang, 2002.
- Waldron, Arthur. *From War to Nationalism: China's Turning Point, 1924-1925*. Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Waldron, Arthur. "The Warlord: Twentieth-Century Chinese Understandings of Violence, Militarism, and Imperialism." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 96, no. 4, 1991.
- Wang Chen-I, "Mo-fan tu-chun chih-hsia shan-his chih kai-kuan" ("A Picture of Shanxi under the Rule of the Model governor"), Hsin min-kuo, June 1924, p. 1-10.
- Week In China. "ChangTso-lin's Policy," *Week In China* (Peiking).
- Wei, Fuxiang. "ZhangZuolin yu dongsansheng xianglao huiyi," *Dongbei difangshi yanjiu* (1992), No.3, 117-23. 魏福祥, 〈張作霖與東三省鄉老會議〉《東北地方史研究》, 第3期, 1992年。
- Yang, Wenqi and Yan Fei. "The annihilation of femininity in Mao's China: Gender inequality of sent-down youth during the Cultural Revolution." *Sage Journals*, vol 31, no. 1, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X17691743>

Yen His-shan, *Yen Po-ch'uan hsien-sheng yen lun lei-pien* (The Collected Addresses of Mr. Yen His-shan). Volumes I-IX. Shanghai, 1939.