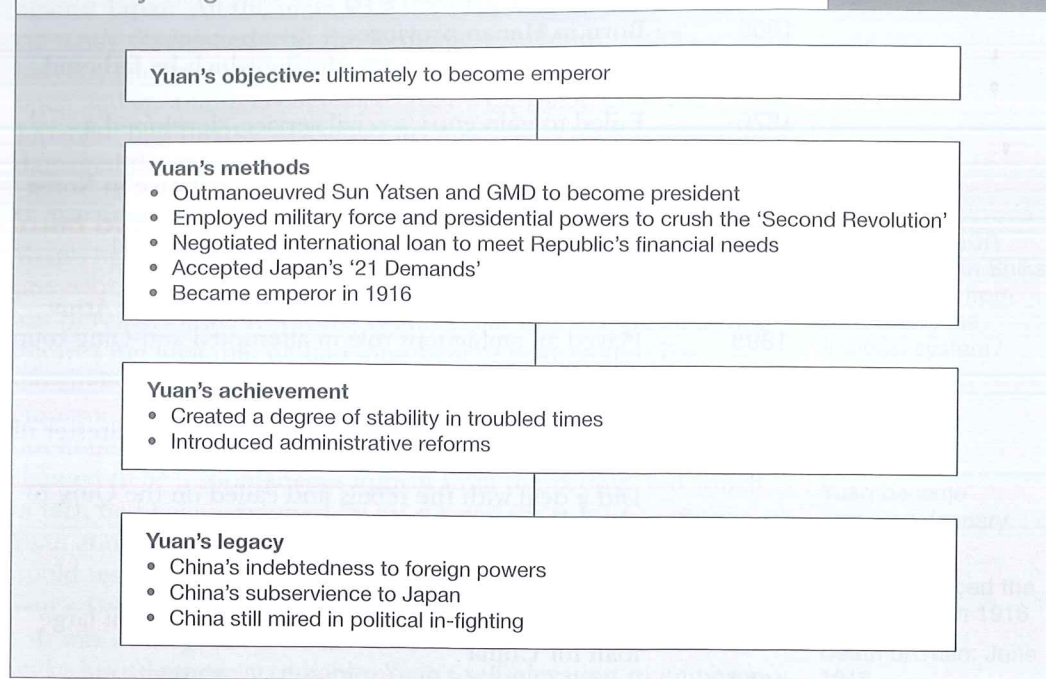


Summary diagram: The rule of Yuan Shikai 1912–16



2 | The Warlord Era 1916–27

On Yuan's death a confused period of in-fighting among Beijing army commanders followed, from which General **Duan Qirui** (Tuan Chi-jui) emerged as premier. Although his authority was very limited since central rule was breaking down in China, he attempted to crush his opponents by force. This resulted in violent clashes on the streets of Beijing. Hoping to exploit the disturbed atmosphere, General Zhang Xun (Chang Hsun) marched on the capital in June 1917 with the aim of restoring the Qing dynasty. Zhang's efforts ended in confusion and failure and Duan Qirui retained office as premier.

Absence of strong central government

The disorder and vying for power at the top that followed Yuan's death in 1916 clearly illustrated that central authority in China had become enfeebled. The Republican government under Duan Qirui continued nominally to function in Beijing, but it exercised little real power. It was split between rival factions, the most prominent being the Anhui, the Fengtien and the Chihli, groups named after the region from which they came. Although they styled themselves parties, none of them represented a clearly defined principle and they were barely distinguishable from each other. They were no more than cliques bidding for power. While the forms of central government remained intact, it was evident that the Republic was beginning to fragment.

The weakness of the Republican government was most evident in its difficulty in maintaining an army strong and loyal enough

Key question
Why did China decline into warlordism after Yuan Shikai's death?

Warlord era: 1916–27
Failed attempt to restore the Qing dynasty: June 1917

Duan Qirui
(1865–1936)
Prime minister of the Republic 1916–20.

Key dates

Key figure

Key question
What were the chief characteristics of warlord rule?

Warlord rule

Two broad phases are identifiable in the warlord years, 1916–20 and 1920–7. The warlords of the earlier period achieved their position largely by default; that is to say, they happened to be holding provincial military governorships at the time when the central authority of the Republican government in Beijing began to break down. They tended to be strongly reactionary in outlook. Although there was continuity after 1920, many warlords holding power well into the 1920s and beyond, there was also a tendency after that date for new military commanders to appear who did not owe their positions to previous Republican appointment. They were opportunists who seized power knowing that the central government was incapable of stopping them.

The common military character of their rule has sometimes led to the warlords' being regarded as a single movement, but in reality they represented a wide variety of attitudes and aspirations. The following examples suggest how different the warlords were from each other:

- Feng Guochang (Feng Kuo-chang), who took control of Gansu (Kansu) in 1916, had also been one of Yuan's lieutenants and had played a central role in the 1911 rebellion against the Manchu; he had subsequently risen to become vice-president of the Republic.
- In marked contrast was Zhang Xun (Chang Hsun), whose base was in Shandong (Shantung) province. He was a staunch supporter of the Manchu dynasty and was styled the 'pigtailed general' because he continued to wear the **queue** as a mark of his belief in traditional Manchu forms. In 1917 Zhang made an unsuccessful attempt to restore Pu Yi to the imperial throne.
- Yan Xishan (Yen Hsi-shan) had become powerful in Shanxi (Shansi) by 1916 and tried to run the province as a separate region avoiding conflict with neighbouring provinces. Although he was a tough military dictator, his progressive policies earned him the title the 'model governor'. Prepared to do deals with both the Nationalists and the **CCP**, Yan was one of the longest surviving warlords, maintaining his control of the Shanxi

Key terms

Warlords
Powerful local generals who exploited the weakness of the central government to set themselves up as rulers in their own areas.

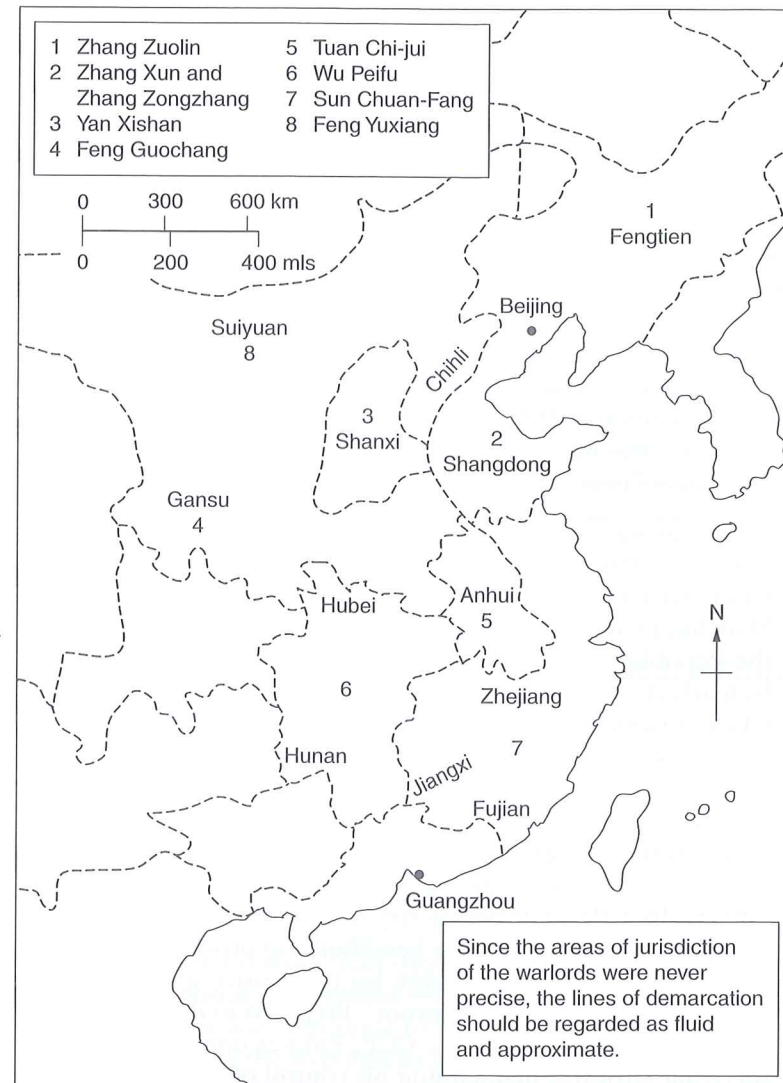
Queue
The traditional pigtail worn by men in the Manchu era.

CCP
The Chinese Communist Party.

region from the first year of the Republic in 1912 until the defeat of the Nationalists in 1949.

Among the warlords who took power after 1920 were:

- Feng Yuxiang (Feng Yu-hsiang), known as the 'Christian general', became celebrated for baptising his troops *en masse* with a hosepipe; spraying them with water while shouting the baptismal prayer through a megaphone. Feng had risen from an illiterate peasant background in Sichuan to become a self-taught upholder of a bizarre mixture of Confucian, Christian and Buddhist teachings. A strikingly individual feature of Feng's rule was his conviction that the province should be governed by moral values. He would not tolerate improper behaviour by his troops and made them sing improving hymns in place of the coarse marching songs they customarily bawled.
- As different from Feng as it was possible to be was Zhang Zongzhang (Chang Tsung-chang). Zhang was a depraved



Warlord China.

bandit who fought his way to power in Shandong province by 'splitting melons', his jokey euphemism for slicing open his opponents' heads with a sword. He took a pathological delight in terrorising the population and destroying the resources of the province.

Whatever their separate aims and individual quirks, the warlords did have one common characteristic: none of them was willing to give up his private army or submit to outside authority. As long as they ruled, China would stay divided. Moreover, in spite of the rare warlord who had genuine concern for the people of the region he controlled, the prevailing pattern of warlord rule was oppression and terror, as expressed in this lament of one of the victims:

Poor people of Sichuan, for 10 years now we have suffered the scourge of militarism, more destructive than the floods, more destructive than savage beasts. Will it continue until not a single man, not a single hut remains in this wretched land? Ah! These military governors and their officers! We must have soldiers, people say, so that the country will be strong. We must have armies to protect ourselves from foreigners. And the armies are continually recruiting men. And the people become poorer and poorer! ... where an army has passed, nothing grows but brambles. This is the case with us, where armies pass through again and again. Our situation has become intolerable.

Key question
What was the political effect in China of warlord rule?

The impact of warlordism on Chinese politics

Warlord authority was inadvertently strengthened by the Republic's political divisions. The competition for power between Sun Yatsen's Nationalist government in Guangzhou and the Republican government in Beijing meant that neither was strong enough to impose itself on the warlords. Indeed, the reverse happened. To maintain such authority as they had in their respective regions the Nationalists and the Republicans were obliged to compromise with the more powerful warlords and do a series of deals with them, sometimes appealing to them for military assistance.

Although, the GMD would later become the internationally acknowledged government of China, there was little in the early 1920s to distinguish the Nationalists from the other warlord groups. For obvious expedient reasons, foreign governments in seeking to protect their interests tended to liaise with those Chinese leaders who, regardless of their legal status, seemed to have genuine power. One prominent example was Wu Peifu, the warlord of Hubei and Hunan provinces, who defied the authority of Sun Yatsen's Nationalist government in Guangzhou. Another was Zhang Zuolin (Chang Tso-lin), warlord in the Beijing area, whose power was such that it was he rather than the nominal Republican government in Beijing whom foreign diplomats chose to recognise.

The warlord record

Despite its manifest tyranny, there were some positive features to warlord rule. Advances were made on a number of fronts.

Economic

Some of the warlords had modern ideas regarding agriculture and industry. Zhang Zuolin adopted an industrial development programme with the specific intention of preventing a Japanese economic takeover of Manchuria. Yan Xishan introduced industrial training schemes and endeavoured to improve the quality and range of local services in Shanxi province.

Political

The warlord period was important for the reaction it produced. The disunity and distress that characterised the time intensified nationalist feelings in China. This produced a solidarity among Chinese **radicals** and gave direction and purpose to a revolutionary movement that otherwise might have continued to dissipate itself in factionalism and local rivalries.

Cultural

It was no accident that China's **literary and intellectual renaissance** reached its high point in the 1920s – the worst years of warlord rule. As evident in the 4 May Movement (see page 37), the humiliation of the nation at the hands of warlords and foreigners gave the Chinese a common sense of grievance. It was this that eventually checked the fragmentation of Republican China by providing a cause around which the Chinese could unite. Ultimately, the two major revolutionary parties, the GMD and the CCP, would engage in a long and violent struggle for supremacy, but what united them initially was their shared resentment against warlord rule.

Radicals

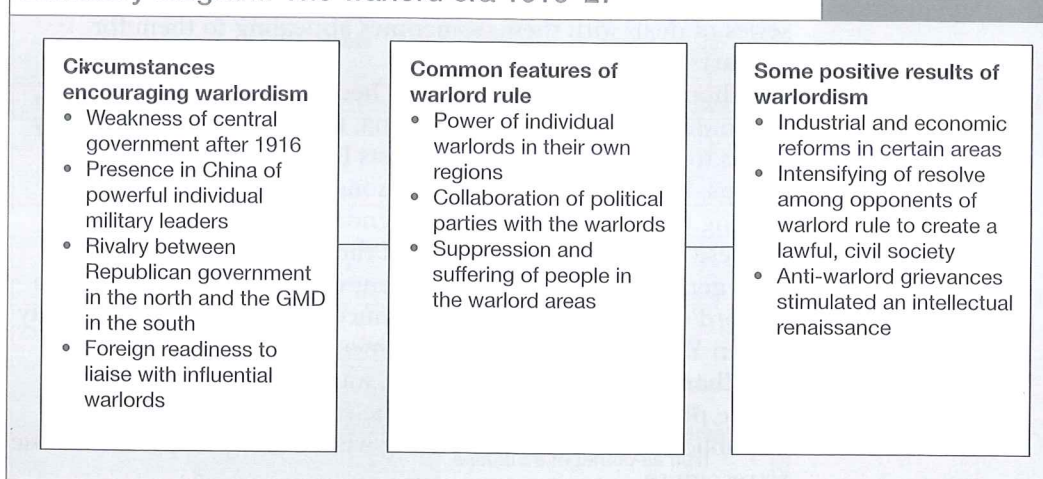
Those Chinese who believed that sweeping political and social changes were necessary if China was to be truly modernised.

Literary and intellectual renaissance

In the 1920s, there was a huge increase among Chinese writers and artists of works dealing with China's national identity and character.

Key terms

Summary diagram: The warlord era 1916–27



3 | The 4 May Movement 1919–25

Key question
In what sense was the 4 May Movement an expression of Chinese nationalism?

Key date
4 May Movement began: 1919

The term, the 4 May Movement, refers to the sustained feeling of resentment in China against Japan in particular and the imperialist occupiers in general. This reaction was most notable among China's intellectuals, who, disillusioned by the failure of the 1911 Revolution and the Republic to achieve real advances for the country, were further dismayed by the refusal of the West in 1919 to extend the principle of **self-determination** to China. The 4 May Movement was of central importance in Chinese politics between 1919 and 1927 and played its part in preparing the ground for the reorganisation of the GMD in 1919 and the creation of the CCP in 1921. It took its name from the first day of the violent demonstration in Beijing, which followed the news of China's humiliation at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 (see page 38).

Key question
How was China regarded by the West?

Key terms
Self-determination
The principle that nations were entitled to shape and plan their own development free from outside interference and direction.

Tokyo
Japan's capital city and centre of government.

Vassal state
A nation effectively under the control of another state.

Western attitudes towards China 1914–19

To understand how China came to be humiliated it is necessary to examine the attitude of the Allied powers – France, Russia and Britain – towards China between 1914 and 1919. At the start of the European struggle in 1914, the Allies had urged both China and Japan to declare war on Germany. Japan did so, but then put pressure on the Beijing government to delay its entry into the war. The Japanese motive was to prevent China's improving its international standing. In addition, Japan obtained from the British a secret promise that they would not press for China's entry without first consulting **Tokyo**. Armed with this guarantee, Japan then, in the first month of the war, seized the German territories in China, including Shandong province with its key port of Qingdao. At the time, the Japanese declared that these possessions would eventually be returned to China, but the emptiness of that promise became evident in 1915 when Japan's notorious 21 Demands threatened to reduce China to a Japanese **vassal state** (see page 29).

Britain's reluctance to take China's side at this point arose from its concern to avoid offending Japan as a major war ally. By 1915 it was becoming clear that the European war would be a protracted one. Britain and the Allies simply could not afford to risk losing Japan's support. However, it was this same reason, the mounting demands of the war effort, that led the Allies in 1917 to renew their appeal to China to join the hostilities against Germany. Up to that year the Chinese had maintained their neutrality. If the Chinese were to be persuaded to join the war they would have to be convinced that an Allied victory would guarantee their recovery of the disputed territories that Japan had seized.

US involvement

The Americans played a key role at this juncture. Having themselves joined the war against Germany in April 1917, they urged China to do the same. The USA suggested to the Chinese