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WARLORD CHINA, 1912-27

The Presidency of Yuan Shikai, 1912-16

The 'constitutional republic' set up in 1912 was meant to be a democracy, with an elected parliament sharing the tasks of government with President Yuan Shikai. Accordingly, elections for a parliament known as the **National Assembly** were held in 1913.

In the elections of 1913 a new party set up by Sun Yatsen won a majority of seats in the National Assembly. This was the People's National Party, or **Guomindang**. However, Yuan Shikai was not interested in sharing power with a parliament dominated by Sun Yatsen's party. He quickly began to ignore the Assembly's decisions, especially when it proved to be inefficient, corrupt and slow to make decisions. Yuan clearly intended to govern China as a dictator, not as a democrat.

In January 1914 Yuan Shikai dissolved the National Assembly after making himself President for the next ten years and giving himself wide powers. At the same time he gained the support of the major European powers which wanted a strong government in China to protect their trading interests there. By the end of 1914 Yuan was ruling as a dictator and twelve of the eighteen provinces were under his control. Military governors in these provinces made sure that they stayed loyal to Yuan.



A Chinese postcard of 1912 showing Yuan Shikai in military uniform. Behind him is the new flag of Republican China – five stripes of red, yellow, blue, white and black, representing the five main peoples of China: Chinese, Manchus, Mongols, Muslims, and Tibetans.

By 1915 Yuan felt confident enough to make himself Emperor. It was an ancient Chinese tradition that a strong general who overthrew a weak emperor, as Yuan had done, should unite China under his own rule and found a new dynasty. In December 1915 Yuan accepted what the ancient Chinese called 'the mandate of heaven' – that is, the right of the Emperor to rule 'all the land that lies under heaven'. He planned to call his dynasty 'The Grand Constitutional Era' – the twenty-seventh in China's 2000-year history.

Three groups of people opposed Yuan's plan to become Emperor. One was Sun Yatsen's new party, the Guomindang, which wanted a democratic government. Another consisted of the generals in Yuan's army and the military governors of the provinces; they feared that they would lose authority if Yuan had more power. And the third was the Japanese government which had plans to bring large areas of China under its control (see Chapter 7).

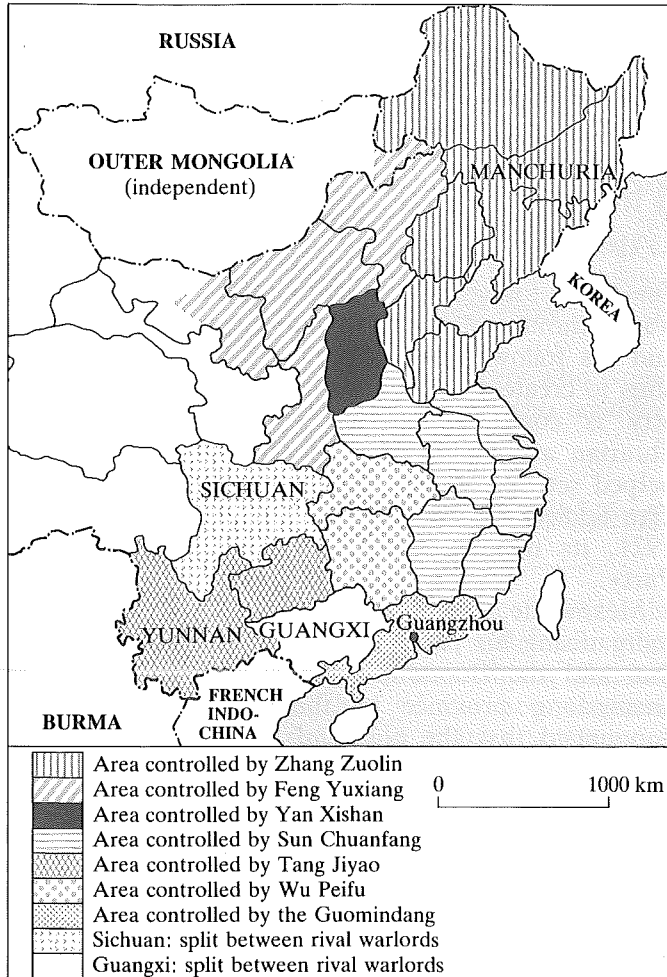
Early in 1915 the Japanese government presented Yuan with **Twenty-One Demands**, demanding control of many of China's factories, railways and ports, and threatening war if the demands were refused. The Chinese people were naturally outraged by the Twenty-One Demands, and when Yuan accepted many of them rather than go to war with Japan, he quickly lost popularity. On Christmas Day 1915 the army in remote Yunnan province rebelled against him. Other army garrisons in neighbouring provinces joined the revolt. Faced with the opposition of the army which had brought him to power in the first place, Yuan dropped his plans to become Emperor. Shortly after, in June 1916, he died of a stroke – though most people said it was really of a broken heart.

The warlords

Yuan Shikai had managed to hold China together under his rule, but after his death there was no one leader popular enough to command the loyalty of all the Chinese. The result was the collapse of the central government in Beijing. For the next eleven years, from 1916 to 1927, it only controlled a small area around Beijing. In the south the Guomindang, under their leader Sun Yatsen, set up a rival government in Guangzhou. In other areas the generals and the military governors who had opposed Yuan set up their own governments and used their armies to enforce their authority. These men were the **warlords**.

From 1916 onwards the warlords fought each other for control of China. The greatest warlords governed

whole provinces (see map). Within the provinces under their control, groups of generals and officers controlled smaller areas – cities and counties, for example – and were warlords in their own right. There were hundreds of warlords, and most were interested only in their own power and wealth, not in helping the people under their rule. They imposed high taxes, enlisted peasants into their armies, and governed with great severity.



China under the warlords, 1916–27

The strictness of warlord rule can be glimpsed in this extract from an article written in 1927 by a French journalist about an interview she had with Marshal Zhang Zuolin, the warlord of Manchuria:

A. ‘. . . A small fat man with a jovial and crafty countenance . . . shook hands with me and bade me welcome in impeccable French. “The Marshal will receive you shortly. We are preparing an offensive, and he is still in conference with his generals. But I am going to let him know you are here. I am M. Wuching (Foreign Minister).”

To kill time, we struck up a conversation.

“What do you think of our capital, and of our streets? The Marshal, you know, insists on cleanliness and order.”

“The city, I must say, was well policed. I remember seeing two heads, still dripping with blood, swaying in a fisherman’s net by the door of a theatre: two soldiers had been executed there for having disregarded the law that forbade them to enter without paying.

M. Wuching probably read my thoughts: “What else could we do? Stern punishments are salutary warnings to any mutineers. Pity is unforgivable when it comes to setting an example . . . Do drink your tea please, and have a cigarette.”’

Conditions in China were worst when the warlords fought each other to get control of each other’s provinces. The largest of these civil wars took place in 1920 and 1922, and involved up to 300,000 soldiers. In these wars, both sides fought with great ferocity and cruelty. This extract from the memoirs of the British Consul in the city of Chengdu gives us an idea of the horrors of the war. It is about an attack by Yunnanese soldiers on Chengdu in 1920.

B. ‘Seven hundred Yunnan men stripped; some were entirely naked, some naked to the waist. Armed with knives and revolvers they rushed the Sichuan camp of 16,000 men at the foot of the hills. The attack was a complete success. Panic seized regiment after regiment and the whole force fled . . .

About ten of these heroes . . . were captured and, naked as they were, kept in the streets on show in cold drenching rain before being murdered. Two were killed and cut up in the streets, and I saw the hearts and livers in a cookshop.’

Work section

- A. Test your understanding of this chapter by explaining what the following words and terms mean: National Assembly; Guomintang; the Twenty-One Demands; warlords.
- B. Study source A above. Then, using the information in this chapter, answer these questions:
1. For what reasons do you think the marshal was ‘preparing an offensive’?
 2. For what offence had two soldiers been beheaded?
 3. Why, according to Monsieur Wuching, were they executed for this offence?
- C. Study the map above, then answer these questions:
1. Which warlord appears from the map to have been the most powerful?
 2. How powerful does the Guomintang appear to have been? Explain your answer.