



NATIONAL RESEARCH UNIVERSITY  
HIGHER SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

*Nikita A. Vul*

**THE CRADLE OF CHAOS:  
METAMORPHOSIS OF CHINESE  
ELITE, 1850s–1900s**

BASIC RESEARCH PROGRAM

WORKING PAPERS

SERIES: HUMANITIES  
WP BRP 95/HUM/2015

*Nikita A. Vul*<sup>1</sup>

## **THE CRADLE OF CHAOS: METAMORPHOSIS OF CHINESE ELITE, 1850s–1900s<sup>2</sup>**

When the Qing Empire collapsed in 1911, military groups moved to the forefront. The power of regional warlords bloomed during 1916–28, splitting China into disparate fiefdoms. The fragmentation of China largely defined the course of events in this country through all 20 century, so explaining the origins of the warlord era is important. This paper documents the prerequisites of Republican warlordism during 1850s–1900s.

Through their analysis the paper argues for the direct linkage between Qing-era literati governors and Republican-era military warlords. Since the imperial government failed to crush the Taiping Rebellion, local elites gained military experience and influence, thus becoming a cradle for China's future break-up.

JEL Classification: Z19

Key words: Qing Empire, power, warlords, elites, disintegration

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<sup>1</sup> National Research University Higher School of Economics: «Department of Asian and African Studies», lecturer; «Centre for Asian and African Studies», research fellow. E - mail: nephilem\_2001@rambler.ru

<sup>2</sup> This working paper is an output of the research project "“Minority” vs “Majority” in the Historical and Cultural Continuum of Asia and Africa" implemented as part of the Basic Research Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE). Any opinions or claims contained in this Working Paper do not necessarily reflect the views of HSE. All translations by author, unless stated otherwise or from previously translated works. I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Michael E. Chapman, Associate Professor of history at Peking University, in the preparation of this paper

## **The Cradle of Chaos: Metamorphosis of Chinese Elite, 1850s–1900s**

After an extended period of political weakening, China's Qing Empire collapsed in 1911, putting an end to a monarchical system that had existed for several thousand years. Chinese society faced a new problem of building up a modern state, but in the resulting disruption of central authority, contradictions between different political groups sharpened, and they failed to reach a consensus. With the traditional political order non-existent and a new one not yet in being, military groups moved to the forefront. For all that, although they were relatively organized and effective forces, they nevertheless failed to achieve unity and provide a leader who could become a feasible head of a state. Indeed, the power of regional warlords bloomed in full, reaching its peak during 1916–28, when centrifugal forces split China into disparate fiefdoms. The fragmentation of China largely defined the course of events in this country through all 20 century, so explaining the origins of the warlord era should be central to any understanding of modern Chinese history.

There is a growing number of works in Chinese, English, and Russian, dedicated to the warlord period. The overwhelming majority of explanations for the rise of warlordism fall into two groups, both of which acknowledge that the disintegration of central administration created a power vacuum and made the phenomenon possible. In what I will call the military-governor school, Franz Michael (Michael 1964: xx–xliii), Fu Zongmao (Xu 2009: 110), Li Zongyi (Li 1980: 99), and Wen Gongzhi (Wen 1971: 2) link the rise of warlordism to the influence of provincial governors and governors-general with military experience; Republican warlords were the direct heirs of nineteenth-century regional leaders. In the non-military-governor school, Jerome Ch'en, Cui Yunwu (Cui 1998: 196–97), Edward McCord (McCord 1993: 24–30), and Mary Wright (Wright 1967: 199) deny the existence of this linkage, explaining the chaos — as Ch'en (Ch'en 1969: 23) puts it— by the 'removal of imperial rule and hence of the Confucian legal and political restraint'; Republican warlords were the brood of the specific crisis of the early twentieth century. Yet odd it is that neighboring Russia which was much more ethnically diverse than China and had almost identical history of military cliques—survived the overthrow of its monarchy in the 1917 February revolution and preserved its unity for almost eight months until the October revolution, while in China, within six weeks of the 1911 Xinhai Revolution, all of

the southern-central and some of the northwestern provinces declared their independence (Fairbank 1986: 162). Support for the military-governor school has recently significantly decreased, supposedly because it has not always presented the strongest or best-documented case. This paper draws on a range of published memoirs, newspaper accounts, and contemporary histories in Russian as well as Chinese, in order to reinforce the argument for direct link from Qing-era governors to Republican-era warlords. It also explains the reasons to believe that the prevailing non-military-governor school inadequately explains warlordism, which created one of the most dramatic and crucially important epochs in modern Chinese history.<sup>3</sup>

I believe that three prerequisites gave rise to the bloom of warlordism. Firstly, Chinese emperors, starting from the Song dynasty enforced an elaborate system of checks and balances which was meant to sustain combat effectiveness and limit the power of certain military commanders. Secondly, while the provincial governors were literati without military backgrounds, the system could function effectively, but in the wake of rebellions like the Taiping, such governors obtained military experience, and they, along with army officers who increasingly rose to governorship, could now finance and thus control troops which, in substance, they owned privately. Thirdly, when the throne failed to put down the Taiping Rebellion of the 1860s, local army elites rose to this challenge. By doing this they gained political power and hastened the very process which militarized Chinese society and eventually resulted in the bloom of warlordism after the fall of Qing. By then local armies consisted of the soldiers who, with the centralized funding non-existent, had to rely for the sake of their own survival on the generosity of their direct commanders who could raise funds locally, thus becoming local feudal lords.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the Qing Empire found itself in a grip of systematic crisis. This crisis affected all spheres of life, making no exception for the armed forces. By the mid-nineteenth century, China were facing a number of serious internal and external challenges, raising doubts about its survival and forcing a search for measures that could buttress the country's security and its

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<sup>3</sup> It was the time, when China's army gave up its role of a 'purely supporting tool' and became a 'ruling power', see (Menshikov & Nepomnin 1999: 208); McCord also claims that the research of the emergence of warlordism is crucial for understanding of military-civil relations in contemporary China, see (McCord 1993: 2).

defense potential. Traditional China could boast two crucial peculiarities: firstly the undersized role of the military and its all-around reliance on civil officials. A historical heritage of four thousand years dictated relations between military and civil officials (Xu 2009: 88). Confucius himself in the *Analects* pointed out the headship of the civil above the military.<sup>4</sup> Confucian virtues did not include military exploits; so there is no wonder why Confucians held warriors in neglect. Soldierly lacked popularity, as expressed in the proverb, “Good iron is not made into nails, good men are not made into soldiers.”<sup>5</sup> As a result, the authorities manned by civil officials constantly did their best to impose strict control over the army. Among the evidence of the first such attempts one can mention so-called “tiger tallies” (*hufu*), used from the Warring States period through the Eastern Han and beyond. Rulers at the capital provided local military commander with a half of a pair of matching tallies and kept the other half; when the time came for action, rulers sent their half to the locality, thus authorizing the commander’s action.<sup>6</sup> All Chinese emperors especially during the Song, did their best in imposing strict control over the armed forces.<sup>7</sup> The constitutive essence of the court’s military policy lied in the maintenance of the army’s combat effectiveness, with in-parallel reduction of certain military commanders’ influence. Quite expectedly and naturally, civil officials in all state affairs within the framework of this policy had the priority, which in turn led to the growing popularity of the civil service.

After the foundation of the Qing dynasty in 1644, the Manchu, in terms of the armed forces, their organization, and place in the state structure, steered a steady course shaped by their predecessors. A survey of the early Qing edicts clearly demonstrates that they duplicate Ming military regulations. In other words, the Manchu once again conferred powers to civil officials (Xu 2009: 102). The organizational framework of the army during Qing is a vivid example illustrating Chinese traditional policy of creating a system of checks and balances.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, *Lunyu*, Chapter 12, verse 7.

<sup>5</sup> 'Hao nan bu dang bing, hao tie bu da ding' (Zhukov 1988: 14).

<sup>6</sup> The contents of the Xinqi tally clearly demonstrate that even the commanders of relatively small detachments required special permission for action: 'Whenever one is to levy troops and equip them with armor if more than fifty soldiers are used one must match the king’s tally, only then shall one undertake it.' (Falkenhausen 2005: 86).

<sup>7</sup> The first emperor of Song dynasty, Zhao Kuangyin, took special precautions to ensure that the army could not threaten the throne. The Northern Song’s Military Council operated under a chancellor, who had no control over the imperial army. The imperial army was divided among three marshals, each independently responsible to the Emperor (Xu 2009: 96–97)

In order to eliminate all possible threats to the throne, Qing emperors intentionally avoided the creation of a unified national army. Instead they chose to split it into two halves. (Zarrow 2005: 90). One half was the Eight Banners Army (*Baqibing*), which in its turn consisted of eight Manchu, eight Mongol, and eight Chinese corps. These corps—the court's main support—were posted in Manchuria, along the empire's northern border, and at strategic points throughout the provinces. The other half, the Green Standard Army (*Lüyingbing*), was manned mostly by ethnic Han soldiers. They were scattered over thousands of outposts all over the empire. Thus its key feature was extreme fragmentation. In general, the Green Standard Army was rather a great constabulary or gendarmerie force than a combat army (Powell 1955: 13). The regulations prohibited Green Standard commanders to serve in their home provinces, military officers at all levels were frequently rotated, appointments were made directly by the court, and the central Board of Finance funded all military units (McCord 1993: 20). Qing emperors on one hand, took very good care about gaining full control over the levers of influence on the army, and on the other hand – curtailed personal and local bases of power.

The nineteenth century witnessed gradual degradation of the Chinese army. In the Eight Banners, significant numbers of bannermen turned into beggars. The throne provided bannermen with special grants of land, meanwhile denying them the right to seek employment outside the service. Since in due course the number of bannermen dependents grew, these grants of land could not any longer secure them adequate support. The Green Standard Army was in equally poor shape. Officers squander funds, and the soldiers were so slack in terms of discipline that they did not differ much from bandits (Gittings 1969: 191–92). The corruption reached such extent that it staggered the imagination of contemporary observers. When Russian traveler and military geographer Michael Venyukov visited Aihun in 1854, (Venyukov 1871: 110-12) he saw that the soldiers of Manchu garrison armed themselves only with wooden pikes, which blades 'were colored in gray paint to imitate steel'. He also mentions that same year during the emperor's review of the troops stationed in Beijing the majority of soldiers showed up with sabers made of sheet-iron. That happened because the corrupt officials a while back had sold the real weapons which were stored in the armory for fear of mutiny. In dread of the emperor's wrath, they bought sheet-iron, made from it

sword-blades and fasten them to the belts of the soldiers marching to the review. 'Apparently, the hasty ruse worked: debauched emperor Xianfeng, who by this time was probably in opium intoxication, did not notice the fraud.'

The Taiping Rebellion made it perfectly clear that the Banners had degenerated 'into a hoard of parasites no longer capable of performing elementary military functions', as Mary Wright puts it (Wright 1967: 197).<sup>8</sup> After a number of setbacks, the Qing government came to understanding that local militia – the *tuanlian*, *mintuan*, and *xiangyong* troops, demonstrated the best performance on the battlefields. Once the court saw in these units the chance to save the dynasty, it immediately sent 1853 forty-three officials to take charge of these local troops in the suppression of the rebellion and secure their loyalty.<sup>9</sup> Among these officials was Zeng Guofan, a person who later became one of the masterminds of military reform. Zeng Guofan received an appointment to Hunan province. There, on bases of local militia he managed to build an impressive force, subsequently called Xiang Army (*Xiangjun*), which grew from 17,000 soldiers at the outset to 130,000 men before its disbandment (McCord 1993: 22).

The key factor in the Xiang army success lied in Zeng's unique organizational approach. He was the man who personally and directly appointed command staff, who in turn picked up division commanders, and they chose the platoon commanders who handled enlistments. Therefore, certain units had a tendency to obey only the orders of the officers who directly recruited them. For this reason division commanders often had to disband such units when the immediate commanding officer died or retired. The Xiang Army maxim, 'Soldiers follow the general, soldiers belong to the general', clearly demonstrated those close ties which bound together commanding officer and his immediate subordinates. Indeed it represented a glaring contrast to the old military dictum, 'Soldiers had no fixed commander, commanders had no fixed soldiers', and to the traditional motto of the Qing Army: 'The soldier belongs to the state' (Powell 1955: 24, 32), (Guo 2000: 21).<sup>10</sup> As a result Xiang army largely represented a

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<sup>8</sup> Zeng Guofan acknowledges that moral decay, low level of operational teamwork in combat, murder of the civilians, retreat from the battlefield before the arrival of the enemy, and disobedience of orders were typical to the Green Standard Army (Gao 1992: 38).

<sup>9</sup> These militia troops were not equal in terms of combat effectiveness. For example, Zeng Guofan spoke scornfully of *tuanliang*: 'When I hear people saying that *tuanliang* has won a great victory against the rebels, I can never contain my laughter, and I put my hands over my ears and walk away' (Liu 1978: 442–43). For the distribution of these officials across the provinces, see (Luo 1939: 22–24); (Lai 2000: 86).

<sup>10</sup> Respectively, 'bing sui jiang zhuan, bing wei jiang you', 'bing wu chang shuai, shuai wu chang bing', and 'bing wei guo you'

complicated net of kin and fellow-landsmen ties which formed a pyramidal structure. Later on such structure became the organizational model for armies in other regions, like the 5,000-man Chu Army (*Chujun*), which came into being in 1860 as a result of Zuo Zongtang's efforts. Zuo Zontan, - once the Xiang army general became a commander of the newly formed Chu Army, which operated mainly in Jiangxi and Zhejiang (Zheng 2000: 651).

The enduring Huai Army (*Huaijun*) could boast to be the most powerful military unit of such type. The beginning of its history dates back to late 1861, when Zeng Guofan ordered his subordinate Li Hongzhang to bring eight battalions of the Xiang Army back to Anhui—Li's home province—and organize an independent force under Li's command.<sup>11</sup> In accordance with commanders' plans the Huai Army was to be more powerful than the Xiang. Its strong points lied not only in the combat qualities of its soldiers but also in the Western munitions available to them (Liu 1978: 425). There were several other crucial distinctions from other armies: firstly, Li Hongzhang placed little emphasis on recruits' social background and education. Instead he placed importance on their skills and efficiency. Secondly, local ties of soldiers were also important to him: 64 percent of Huai officers and men were Anhui natives (Guo 2000: 27).

The system of financial support comprised another important feature of these armies. On one hand, the central financial system was static and couldn't respond to either long-term change or sudden emergencies. On the other hand the throne chose to preserve Green Standard and Banner troops. Thus new armies manned by militia forces became an additional financial load o state budget. They did not fit into the established military system and thus "had no prearranged funding" (Powell 1955: 25). In this shortage or even total absence of financial support from the central government, Zeng Guofan had little option but to rely on the Yangtze provinces—Hunan, Hubei, Jiangxi, and Anhui—creating his own independent financial organization. Indeed, it is widely acknowledged that the throne permitted him to use local sources to fund the army, as well as sanctioned sales of degrees, titles, and even offices. Still it is essential to point out that these funds were all local (Liu 1978: 410).<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, there is little doubt that

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<sup>11</sup> Li Hongzhang benefited from the fact that his father Li Wen'an had been a classmate of Zeng Guofan. Li Wen'an and Zeng Guofan together took part in the top examination of 1838. In 1859, Li Hongzhang joined Zeng Guofan staff, became his principal secretary and drafted his correspondence (Fairbank 1986: 107).

<sup>12</sup> In the beginning of 1854 in attempt to exploit this source of income, Zeng asked to provide him with 4,000 blank certificates (*kongbai zhizhao*). He was planning to use them for fundraising in Hunan, Jiangxi, and

soldiers clearly understood what were the sources of their pay and rations. Troops realized that the throne had little to do with their funding. They knew that their well-being was entirely a result of their leaders' efforts. It is quite reasonable that this resulted in strengthening personal loyalties between the commander and his army.

The creation of new military units on the bases of regional militias, and their subsequent suppression of the Taiping rebels, resulted in two consequences that played a crucial role in the events to follow. First, the deterioration of order in combination with the emergence of new militia forces created social lifts, raising those of moderate origins. Guo Songlin (1833–80) was a carpenter; Liu Mingchuan (1836–96), who proved to be one of the best generals of the Qing period, was a former bandit and salt smuggler (Liu 1978: 425–26); Bao Chao (1828–86) began his career as a stoker. The warlord period witnessed the same process.<sup>13</sup> Jiang Fangzhen (aka Jiang Baili), who on the peak of his career occupied the office of Wu Peifu's chief of staff, pointed out a second important outcome of the Taiping Rebellion: 'Because they [of necessity] raised citizen militia, literati achieved military merit [as field commanders]—that never happened since the ancient times' (Jiang 1971: 184). Indeed, even before the Taiping rebellion governors and governors-general were nominally in charge of the troops deployed in their provinces, but lacking military expertise, they were complete strangers in the eyes of the soldiers and officers.<sup>14</sup> Being constantly rotated, civil heads of the provinces had little chance either to establish ties with the troops and command personnel, or to take part in the process of soldiers' and officers' selection and training (Kuhn 1970: 122-23). Still, the epoch which followed the suppression of the Taiping Rebellion, witnessed the significant change: twenty out of forty-four governors-general appointed during 1861–90, made their career as militia commanders, and out of 117 governors selected, over

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Sichuan, with one half of blank certificates for official ranks (*zhixian*) and another half for imperial academy students (*jiansheng*), see (Porter 1972: 103).

<sup>13</sup> Out of 1,300 officers with the rank of brigadier and higher who made their way to prominence in 1912–28, only 370–400 had a professional military education or were holders of traditional degrees and thus could be called 'educated warlords'. The rest – about 70 percent of a total were mainly illiterate or semi-literate people from extremely humble origins (Ch'en, 1968: 568).

<sup>14</sup> The heads of provincial administration bore the full load of responsibility for both civil and military affairs within their jurisdictions, but they could hardly fulfill their duty as military commanders. As a result of constant rotations officials always found themselves in charge of unfamiliar bodies of troops, 'whose officers were strangers to them, and with those training and selection they had nothing to do'... The whole system was intentionally designed 'to keep provincial official well apart from the management of the troops he was charged with commanding in time of military emergency.' (Kuhn 1970: 122-23).

half based their careers on militia leadership (Powell 1955: 33). Now a fair quantity of governors-general and governors could boast of many vivid distinctions from their pre-rebellion colleagues. Firstly – now they had a record as effective commanders of militia battalions to add to their literati careers; secondly - had obtained military experience, thirdly - knew how to handle soldiers, and the lastly - they had troops personally loyal to them through personal control of recruitment, appointments, promotions, and funding.

The non-military-governor school of prevailing historiography rests on four main arguments. Firstly, they claim that provincial authorities lacked financial independence, and the court gathered a large portion of local revenues from a new provincial tax on imports and articles in transit (*lijin*), by demanding special remittances for central expenses (McCord 1993: 27). Provincial governors, aside from emergencies, were allowed to spend tax revenue on items preliminary approved by central authorities, and their budget was under strict central control (Kamachi 2005: 9). And yet, practice fell far short of this ideal. Aside from *lijin*, local authorities had at disposal at least three further sources of income. First, were so-called hidden lands or fields (*yintian* or *heidi*). Their area was growing due to non-disclosure during the registration of tax rolls with the Board of Revenue, and mistakes during conversion of local *mu* (a sixth of an acre) into standard fiscal *mu* (Feuerwerker 1980: 10). In 1887, the total area of such hidden fields reached 418 million *mu*, or a third of all cultivable land (Nepomnin 1980: 26). Secondly, the first decade of twentieth century was a marked by the significant growth of additional taxes (*jiashui*) and compulsory donations (*juanshu*) collected locally. Their extent considerably exceeded the national land and head taxes (*diding*) (Ibid., 110–11). Thirdly, the introduction in 1889 of the new monetary system gave local authorities a brilliant opportunity to overcharge taxes during money conversion; the growing numbers of villagers paid taxes using *fens* and *yuan*s, while officials assessed taxes in old copper cash and taels (Wang 1973: 116–17). Governors thereby easily managed to accumulate huge assets in provincial coffers. J.K. Fairbank believes that the local authorities sent to the capital not more than a third of what they really collected (Fairbank 1998: 248). Such local taxes were available to the state only in nominal terms – very much the same as the regional armies they fed. In reality such state of affairs

created a new power balance between central and provincial governments, where the power gradually shifted in favor of the periphery (Ibid., 238).

Secondly, the non-military-governor school explains that the leaders of the new military units like Xiang army had a personal interest in preservation and all-round support of the existing state, because they were its flash and bone – literati. (Wright 1967: 199). Indeed the numerical superiority of commanders with civil backgrounds over those with military education becomes obvious once we throw a glance at the command personnel's list of the Xiang Army. Nevertheless, the state of affairs in the other armies was significantly different.<sup>15</sup> In Huai Army, headed by Li Hongzhang, twenty-one high-ranking commanders had military background and only five were literati (Lai 2000: 27). The weakness of the second argument lies in the virtual suggestion that Qing officials was the party least interested in corruption because corruption inflicted significant damage on the power of the state, in the preservation of which the officials were very much concerned. Nevertheless, late Qing bureaucracy was notorious for its pervasive corruption. Undoubtedly, provincial heads avoided open conflict with Beijing when the state was powerful, but they were gradually increasing their own power at the expense of the state's, thereby contributing to the process of regionalization. As early as 1895, the natives of distant provinces did not regard themselves as citizens of a united state. During Sino-Japanese war, one of the captains demanded immediate release of his captured warship, on the grounds that the ship was from Guangdong, and the province had no relation to the conflict with Japan (Li 1965: 5). Indeed, Sino-Japanese war clearly demonstrated the ongoing power shift. Provincial heads were so uneager to assist central authorities that Li Hongzhang remarked sadly, 'Only Zhili province fought against the whole Japanese state' (Ibid.). In five years, the Boxer Rebellion delivered another harsh blow to central authorities. It showed that the governors and governor-generals possessed such a degree of autonomy that they did not simply disregard imperial edicts but also challenged their competence.<sup>16</sup> A decade later when the Qing empire fell, fifteen provinces failed to recognize Beijing as the center of the

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<sup>15</sup> Apart from the battalion level (39 commanders with literati background against 52 with military), on all other levels the numbers of commanders with literati backgrounds exceeded those with military backgrounds; altogether, there were 100 commanders with literati background against 75 with military, see (Luo 1939: 64).

<sup>16</sup> Some governors-general like Zhang Zhidong at Wuchang, Liu Kunyi at Nanjing, Li Hongzhang at Canton, etc., immediately agreed to ignore Peking's declaration of war against the foreign powers, issued on 21 June 1900. They claimed that it was a *luanming*, an illegitimate decree issued without the emperor's proper authorization (Fairbank 1998: 231).

country's government, judiciary, financial, and military systems: Hubei, Shaanxi, Hunan, Jiangxi, Shanxi, Yunnan, which declared independence in October 1911, and Anhui, Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi, Guizhou, Jiangsu, Shandong, Sichuan, Zhejiang which declared in November (Ch'en 1979: 26).

Thirdly, the non-military-governor school points out that after the suppression of rebellions the central authorities managed to conduct significant reductions of the armies which were initially formed from militia troops (McCord 1993: 27). Unquestionably, the court initiated an extensive disbandment of the so-called private armies, and yet disbandment was far from complete. Zuo Zongtang extensively employed the elements of his army, especially command personnel, against Nian rebels, as well as in the prolonged suppression of Muslim rebellion in Northern China. Li Hongzhang led the Huai Army against Nian rebels, and, in 1870, ordered forty battalions to suppress rebellions in Shaanxi and Gansu. After obtaining the office of governor-general of Zhili, Li took his army to that province, where it remained under his control until death in 1901 (Powell 1955: 27). When Yuan Shikai created his Beiyang Army, it was partially manned by the soldiers troops from Li's army. In Hunan, disbanded troops joined the Patrol and Defense Force (*Xunfangying*) (Zhang 1982: 102). V.V. Zhukov believes that these *Xunfangying* troops were an important connecting link between the local private armies of the mid nineteenth century and the early Republic's warlord armies (Zhukov 1988: 20).

Fourth, the supporters of non-military-governor school argue that the Qing court until the fall of a dynasty demonstrated undeniable capability of transferring or removing top officials at will, rotating most provincial governors on a regular basis (McCord 1993: 26). Sure enough, Qing authorities in the epoch followed the Taiping Rebellion displayed a considerable degree of authority in stripping titles or dismissing from high provincial offices such famous military leaders as Zeng Guofan, Li Hongzhang, Zuo Zongtang, Liu Mingchuan, and Guo Songtao (Powell 1955: 35). Nevertheless, while provincial heads continued to depend on the throne decisions regarding their offices and titles, they, in the meantime, gained greater administrative leeway (Liu 1978: 409). Dismissal or rotation of governors did not prevent the formation of specific zones defined by military and administrative control of different bureaucratic fractions, albeit slowed down this

process. For another thing such shuffle of provincial heads lent these specific zones changeability and mobility (Menshikov & Nepomnin 1999: 177).

Assuredly, during the epoch which followed the Taiping Rebellion, the throne managed to maintain hold of enough power to keep the governors from open challenge of the regime, but this power was insufficient to cope with the centrifugal forces that tug at the unity of the country. The key areas gradually saw the emergence of new power centers. While at a first glance the state framework remained intact, because these areas remained within it and acknowledged the ideological authority of the throne, they assumed several of its important functions, undermining its authority and contributing to the downfall of Qing (Michael 1964: xxi–xxii). These new power centers became the cradle of the future chaos and laid the groundwork for the ultimate disintegration of the country. Thus, the years followed the Taiping rebellion were, borrowing V.B. Menshikov and O. Ye Nepomnin's term, the 'latent period' of the future dissolution (Menshikov & Nepomnin 1999: 177).

The next corner stone in the future disintegration of China was laid in the last decade of Qing empire when in response to this worrying politicization of local military elites, as well as mounting external threats, Qing central authorities in Beijing sought to reform the armed forces. A crushing defeat in the Sino–Japanese War, which turned out to be a shock for the overwhelming majority Chinese, on the other hand provided a decisive impulse to the total reconstruction of the military system. It started in 1895 with the organization of the Self-Strengthening Army (*Ziqiangjun*) in Nanjing, and the Newly Created Army (*Xinjianjun*) in the provincial capital of Zhili. Among other things, these two armies were formed as a counterweight to each other, which agreed with the traditional Chinese policy of checks and balances. Self-Strengthening Army accepted recruits that were to be sixteen–twenty years old and originate from peasant families in areas near Nanking, so that their references could be checked. Before the admission, the recruits had to undergo through a medical examination, conducted by a foreign doctor. Apart for that village heads, neighbors, and clan had to vouch for those who expressed desire to serve in the Self-Strengthening Army. Historian Hatano Yoshihiro expresses reasonable doubts that every recruit underwent through 'all the stages of the selection process', but Viceroy Zhang Zhidong's insistence on the protocols is nonetheless revealing (Hatano 1968:

371). When Yuan Shikai embarked upon the modernization of the Zhili forces following the Boxer Rebellion, he followed the pattern set by Zhang Zhidong; according to Yuan's requirements, recruits had to be taller than 1.6 meters, able to run ten kilometers in an hour, and have no criminal record (Lai 2000: 113).

These armies from the very first day of their existence could boast of a distinctive feature: their organization was tailored according to the German pattern, which was a great step forward even in comparison with the most progressive among their predecessors, the Huai Army, which had a plain pyramidal structure.<sup>17</sup> Unlike Taiping era 'private armies', they adopted a complex branched structure, with functional divisions into infantry, cavalry, and artillery, along with an engineering corps and other technical components, combined with centralized command and coordination of all branches, evidencing by prevailing standards the existence of a modern and multi-branch command system. Since the experiment with the Self-Strengthening and Newly Created Armies turned out to be a success, the Qing government decided to create a model New Army (*Xinjun*), with the divisions stationed in every province.

However, in the resulting confusion, and with the imperial treasury impoverished, soldiers for the sake of their survival had to rely on the initiative of the commanders who could raise funds locally. Consequently, with the end of imperial rule during the first Republican years, provincial armies became ruling powers; the chaos following Yuan Shikai's death proved that Yuan had been the only nationwide accepted symbol with the capability of preserving a semblance of national unity. Income from the provinces plummeted, and the reality of local militarism and regionalization that had been picking up steam for several decades now emerged unobstructed.<sup>18</sup>

After the fall of Qing, local interests finally gained the upper hand over national ones, but Republican China de jure continued to exist as a single state, and the majority of the foreign powers officially acknowledged the central government in Beijing. The unity of the Beiyang military clique ended with the

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<sup>17</sup> Eugene de Butzow, who was holding the office of Russian ambassador to China in 1873-1883, mentioned that the soldiers and officers of the Huai Army were drilled and taught how to use modern weapons, but, nevertheless Li Hongzhang's troops preserved 'the ancient' Chinese army organization and they, as well as the Chinese army as a whole, were 'nothing but an irregular mob with notably lax discipline, total absence of professional educated officers, and quite a prehistoric structure of different units of military administration' (Hohlov 1968: 223)

<sup>18</sup> In 1917, the Peking government received from the provinces more than 18,000,000 yuan but three years later, in 1920, only 4,260,000, see (Jia 1932: 58-59); (Sheridan 1975: 54).

death of Yuan Shikai. What followed was the fight for control over the Beijing government, through which the winner gained access to international loans and custom dues.

Unlike other petty militarist fractions whose leaders cared only about retention of their power and control over the territory they ruled, these Beiyang warlords took turns in Beijing, attempting to claim the role of national leader, but they each failed. In 1928 the Northern Expedition led by Chiang Kai-shek put an end to Beijing's government and laid the foundation of a new state with a capital relocated to Nanjing. For all Chiang Kai-shek's efforts to build up an effective central administration, the unification of the country was symbolic rather than real. Political struggle into the 1930s was still shaped by provincial barons who chose to follow or ignore the orders from Nanjing as it suited them. Northeastern China wasn't an exception, where, in September 1931 the Japanese Kwantung Army staged the Mukden Incident as a precursor for the annexation of Manchuria, an event that opened another tragic page in China's history and led to Pearl Harbor and global war.

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Nikita A. Vul

National Research University Higher School of Economics: «Department of Asian and African Studies», lecturer; «Centre for Asian and African Studies», research fellow.

E-mail: nephilem\_2001@rambler.ru, Tel. +7-921-992-57-03

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