



From “Relational System” to “Cultural Mechanism”: Chinese Warlord Politics (1916-1928)

Yuanhang Chen

College of Humanities, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, China

Email: 740476464@qq.com

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Abstract

Hsi-sheng Chi's 1976 English monograph *Warlord Politics in China, 1916-1928* was the first to systematically construct an analytical paradigm of “relation-culture” in the study of Beiyang warlord politics. This research broke away from the traditional class-based historical view and regarded the warlord group as a dynamically operating power balance system. Its core innovations lie in: 1) employing political science and sociological theories to deconstruct warlord factions, proposing three sustaining bonds of the system (personal relations, interest considerations, and ideological connections), and further specifying twelve models of interpersonal relations to reveal their correlation with military efficiency; 2) initiating a cultural-historical perspective to establish a “cultural sedimentation-cognitive framework-behavioral pattern” mechanism, explaining how Confucian ethics, folk beliefs, and non-mainstream cultural channels shaped the logic of warlord rule, and introducing the concept of “cultural cognitive difference” to explain their behavioral features. This interdisciplinary approach filled a gap in the systematic study of warlord politics. However, in its final chapter, by applying the international relations framework of “balance of power” to analyze internal interactions among warlords, the study neglected the essential differences between China's pre-modern political ecology and the modern international system (e.g., conflicts between the residual “tianxia” worldview and the Westphalian system). This has been questioned by scholars such as Chen Zhirang for theoretical inadaptability, becoming an important starting point for subsequent reflections.

Subject Areas

History

Keywords

Beiyang Warlords, Relational System, Cultural Mechanism, Balance of Power

1. Research Foundation

Professor Hsi-sheng Chi, served as Professor at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. He graduated from Tunghai University, later studied in the United States, majoring in international relations and political science, and earned his PhD at the University of Chicago. From 1967 to 1992, he taught at the University of North Carolina, and from 1992 to 2002, he participated in the founding of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. His research interests include China's domestic and foreign affairs since modern times, international relations theory, and strategic issues.

Warlord Politics in China, 1916-1928, published in 1976, was the first English-language monograph to systematically explore the history of Chinese warlordism in the early twentieth century. It employed the analytical framework of the balance of power system and role-behavior rules to examine warlord politics, attempting to outline a multidimensional picture of political operation across political, economic, military, ideological, and socio-psychological factors.

2. Structure and Core Issues of Chi's Research

The book is systematically structured around a comprehensive examination of the emergence and intricate composition of warlord factions, delving into their multifaceted governing capacities encompassing both military and economic dimensions, analyzing their distinct behavioral characteristics, and situating these elements within the broader context of China's political system during this tumultuous period. The analytical journey begins with Chapter 1, which meticulously lays out the foundational methodological framework and the overarching theoretical system that guides the entire study. This is followed by Chapter 2, which provides a detailed description of the historical origins of Chinese warlord factions, tracing their roots and the conditions that led to their rise. Building on this historical foundation, Chapter 3 offers a rigorous analysis of their internal composition, pinpointing three primary binding factors: the intricate webs of personal relations, the pragmatic calculations of self-interest, and, where applicable, the role of ideological connections. The focus then shifts to a thorough investigation of military capacity, with Chapters 4 through 6 methodically examining critical aspects such as recruitment strategies, training regimens, weaponry procurement, and tactical doctrines on the battlefield. Subsequently, Chapter 7 addresses the crucial economic capacity of the warlords, exploring their financial resources, revenue generation, and economic management. Chapter 8 transitions to an analysis of the behavioral norms that characterized warlord politics, highlighting the profound influence of traditional family ties, prevailing social morality, and the contemporary political values that shaped their conduct. Finally, the volume culminates in Chapter 9, titled "China's Political System," which provides a dynamic and synthesizing analysis of warlord politics as a whole; it explores the system's evolution over time and offers a comprehensive explanation for the pivotal historical outcome of why the Nationalists ultimately triumphed amidst the myriad of compet-

ing political factions [1].

3. Historiographical Context and Chi's Breakthrough

Before embarking on a detailed analysis of the "formation" of warlords, it is essential to first establish a clear and precise definition of the term itself, as its conceptual boundaries are fundamental to the scope of this inquiry. Traditionally, the label "warlord" carried a heavily negative connotation, often used to describe the primary instigator or culprit of warfare and conflict. In this study, however, the term is employed in a more neutral, analytical sense; its object of analysis comprehensively includes all independent political actors who effectively wielded military power and controlled territory during that specific historical era, thereby stripping away the inherent pejorative implication to focus on their functional roles within the political ecosystem. The chronological focus of this examination is the critical period bounded by Yuan Shikai's death in 1916, which created a massive power vacuum, and the nominal end of warlord politics with the Northern Expedition in 1928, a tumultuous twelve-year span during which China experienced prolonged and profound turmoil, incessant military struggle, and complex political entanglement among these competing power centers. Yet, despite the profound significance of this era in shaping modern China, rigorous scholarly research dedicated to systematically understanding this pervasive political condition had, for a considerable time, remained a largely underdeveloped and significant blank space in the historiography, a gap which this work seeks to address.

In the first three decades after 1949, early representative works on the Beiyang warlords included Tao Juyin's *Historical Accounts of the Period of Beiyang Warlord Rule* [2] and Lai Xinxia's *A Brief History of the Beiyang Warlords* [3]. Both traced the origins of the warlords from Yuan Shikai's small military academy. In the 1960s, Zhang Guogan, an eyewitness of Beiyang rule, wrote the memoir *The Origins of the Beiyang Warlords*, preserving valuable firsthand material. These works had limitations: Tao's was anecdotal and lacked source citations, while Lai's, based on teaching notes at Nankai University, adhered to the Marxist class-analysis framework, arguing that Beiyang warlords represented the interests of landlords and comprador capitalists. Such works set the tone for decades of subsequent scholarship, portraying the Beiyang warlords as a reactionary force producing chaos, warfare, and suffering in semi-colonial, semi-feudal China.

Against the backdrop of this significant scholarly neglect and the complex, fragmented political reality of the early Republican period, historian Chi Hsi-sheng attempted to fill this profound academic gap by undertaking a systematic and rigorous analysis of "warlordism," which he identified as one of the weakest and most underdeveloped links in the modern Chinese historical narrative [4]. His seminal 1976 book represented a major departure from the mainland's then-dominant revolutionary paradigm and directly challenged the conventional, often simplistic, view that Beiyang China maintained a genuine political unification with a central government functioning as the effective locus of national power. Instead, he per-

suasively argued for recognizing the distinctive and autonomous features of provincial and regional warlord rule, shifting the analytical focus squarely onto the internal dynamics, organization, and interactions of the warlord groups themselves. Methodologically innovative for its time, his work skillfully integrated meticulous historical data with theoretical frameworks drawn from political science, sociology, behavioral science, and systems theory, thereby constructing a multifaceted and sophisticated explanatory model. This pioneering approach marked a definitive breakthrough in the field, establishing what can arguably be considered the first comprehensive socio-political study of modern Chinese warlords, moving beyond mere narrative history to provide a deep structural and functional analysis of the warlord phenomenon as a complex political system [5].

4. Constructing the Warlord Political System: An Analytical Model Centered on “Interrelations”

Building upon this innovative framework, Chi’s core analytical approach fundamentally sought to move beyond the simplistic and atomized view of warlords as isolated individuals, instead reconceptualizing them as interconnected components of a complex, overarching “system.” Central to this systemic perspective was the meticulous study of warlord interrelations, as he compellingly argued that the relational paradigm governing their interactions—the patterns of alliance, conflict, and negotiation—was ultimately more significant for understanding the period’s political dynamics than the internal specifics of any single warlord’s rule. To convincingly demonstrate this, he delved into their shared psychological culture, developing a powerful and cohesive analytical triad of relations-mindset-behavior, which posited that the specific nature of their relationships directly shaped a distinctive warlord mindset, which in turn dictated their collective and individual political behavior. Chi systematically divided these warlord relations into three primary dimensions: the affective bonds of “personal ties,” the pragmatic calculations of “self-interest,” and the more abstract, though sometimes influential, “ideological bonds.” He then further classified these into twelve specific, observable forms of relationships, ranging from kinship and fictive kinship like sworn brotherhood to school ties, professional associations, and regional connections. Among the twelve relational types, kinship ties often produced strong loyalty but could be parochial and prone to factionalism, whereas school or professional ties (such as Baoding or Japanese-trained officers) tended to facilitate more standardized command structures and higher battlefield efficiency. Regional connections likewise fostered cohesion at the recruitment stage but sometimes hindered cross-regional cooperation. These contrasts illustrate how relational density shaped operational performance. These detailed classifications revealingly exposed the varying degrees of cohesion and stability within different factions, clearly demonstrating how the density and strength of personal connections directly underpinned a faction’s political and military strength; for example, his analysis showed that the “Zhili” faction possessed the most complex and multi-layered internal structure,

fostering a certain resilience, while the “Fengtian” faction was relatively simple in its relational makeup but was consequently more autocratically controlled and, as a result, often more militarily efficient in its operations.

Chi also linked the organization of warlord factions with Western social psychology models, such as the “star-shaped relationship” discussed by Krech, Crutchfield, and Ballachey [6]. The “star-shaped relationship” model in social psychology refers to a centralized relational structure in which communication and authority are concentrated in a single core actor, while peripheral members maintain strong ties to the center but weak ties among themselves. Applied to warlord factions, this explains why autocratic leadership could generate rapid military responsiveness yet remain vulnerable to collapse once the central node weakened. He emphasized two key characteristics of warlord politics: strict control of emotions in public affairs and absolute obedience to superiors, combined with the maintenance of personal relations [7].

5. A Cultural-Historical Perspective on Warlord Behavior

One of Chi’s most innovative and groundbreaking contributions to the field was his pioneering effort to interpret the seemingly chaotic behavior of warlords through the sophisticated lens of cultural history, moving beyond purely political or military analysis. He proposed a compelling theoretical model of “cultural sedimentation-cognitive framework-behavioral pattern,” which elegantly illustrated how deep-seated cultural resources and historical legacies actively shaped the political logic and decision-making processes of the era. In this paper, the “cultural sedimentation-cognitive framework-behavioral pattern” mechanism refers to a causal chain in which long-standing cultural residues shape the cognitive schemas through which actors interpret reality, and these schemas in turn generate observable behavioral patterns. In other words, cultural values form the mental lens through which warlords recognized authority, legitimacy, and interest, and this lens ultimately informed their strategic choices and political conduct. To operationalize this model, he meticulously analyzed its manifestations across three distinct yet interconnected levels: firstly, the complex fusion and interaction between orthodox, state-sanctioned Confucianism and the myriad of popular local beliefs and superstitions; secondly, the dynamic and often contentious clash of elite intellectual traditions with deeply ingrained local customs and practices; and thirdly, the paradoxical coexistence of rigid state orthodoxy with vibrant, non-mainstream cultural channels such as folk opera, secret societies, and decentralized local education systems, which served as alternative avenues for value transmission. Furthermore, he introduced the highly insightful concept of “cultural cognitive difference” to precisely explain how military leaders with less formal education, who operated outside the traditional scholarly elite, nonetheless displayed unique and often paradoxical cultural choices in their exercise and justification of power, selectively adopting and adapting cultural symbols to legitimize their authority and navigate the complex socio-political landscape.

Such “cultural cognitive difference” lies primarily in the contrast between the warlords’ “practical-militaristic worldview” and the Confucian scholar-gentry’s “normative moral-political outlook”. Whereas the traditional elite emphasized legitimacy derived from classical learning, moral cultivation, and bureaucratic hierarchy, warlords tended to legitimize themselves through personal loyalty networks, battlefield achievements, and symbolic appropriation of Confucian rituals. This divergence in cognitive foundations helps explain why warlords frequently oscillated between violent coercion and ritualized displays of benevolence.

6. Controversy in Chapter Nine: Rethinking the Applicability of International Political Models

Despite its groundbreaking innovations and the valuable new perspectives it introduced, Chi’s work was not without its identifiable limitations, which have been noted by subsequent scholars. In his final chapter, in an ambitious attempt to provide a grand theoretical explanation for the warlord system’s operations, he applied Morton Kaplan’s international relations-based balance-of-power theory and a role-behavior framework, suggesting that the interactions between warlord factions resembled the dynamics between sovereign states within an international system. While his intention was to use this analogy as a heuristic contrast to illuminate certain structural patterns, this methodological move attracted criticism from peers such as Chen Zhirang, who forcefully argued that it was historically and theoretically inappropriate to directly liken China’s deeply internal and culturally specific fragmentation from 1916 to 1928 to a modern international system of sovereign states [8]. For example, while Kaplan’s balance-of-power system assumes sovereign units with mutual recognition and stable borders, Beiyang warlords operated within a shared symbolic imperial framework in which no faction renounced the nominal authority of “China” as a unified polity. Duan Qirui’s Anhui clique, for instance, sought control of the Beijing government not as a foreign state would seek territorial sovereignty, but as a means to monopolize the legitimacy of the Republic. This fundamental asymmetry renders the Westphalian analogy structurally imperfect. The core of this criticism hinges on the fundamental difference in context: the Beiyang warlord system was intrinsically embedded within a pre-modern Chinese political ecology characterized by personal loyalties, familial networks, and a residual concept of a central celestial empire, which stood in stark contrast to the modern sovereign-state system shaped by the Westphalian principles of formal equality, defined territoriality, and external recognition. This critical oversight, while not diminishing the overall value of his work, highlights the potential pitfalls of transplanting Western theoretical models without sufficient adaptation to the unique historical and cultural fabric of the subject being studied.

7. Contemporary Significance and Future Directions of Warlord Studies

Since the reform era, scholarship on the Beiyang warlords has expanded rapidly,

absorbing and critiquing Chi's work. New debates have emerged over their class character, historical role, and even positive contributions in diplomacy and legal-economic reforms [9] [10]. Lai Xinxia's later *History of the Beiyang Warlords* systematically analyzed the military-political trajectory from rise to collapse. From today's perspective, combining Chi's insights on interrelations with studies of warlord-foreign power interactions may yield new breakthroughs, particularly through economic-historical analysis of foreign financial support. A promising direction would be to integrate Chi's cultural-relational framework with studies of warlord-foreign power interactions by asking: How did foreign loans, arms procurement, and diplomatic recognition reshape the cognitive frameworks and behavioral patterns of warlord leaders? Addressing this question may reveal how external stimuli interacted with internal cultural mechanisms to influence factional consolidation and fragmentation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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