The general question underlying this conference is whether the evident regional diversification of Chinese society that accelerated in the 1980s has potential for military divisiveness and chaos. Warlordism, which reached its apogee (or nadir, depending on point of view) from 1916 to 1928, provides an historical precedent for such chaos. In this paper I concentrate on the phenomenon of warlordism, rather than on militarism in general, because of China’s historical experience with warlordism. The defining characteristic of warlordism, as distinct from other forms of militarism, is that the center loses its dominance of military power, and geographically-based, political-military forces contend among themselves.

Clearly such images, memories and fears have a power in themselves, quite apart from the accuracy of the historical referent or the imposibility of repeating history. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to analyze the characteristics of the warlord context and the path of development of regionalism as a feature of Chinese military thought from warlord times to the present. It should then be possible to discuss whether warlordism has a future in China, and what history might contribute to expectations concerning potential fractal patterns.

This paper attempts to be useful to such discussions by providing a general historical background on warlordism and on the evolution of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) attitude toward center-local relations, and then by considering the salience of warlordism for China’s contemporary politics. The first section analyses behavioral, geographical and historical patterns of the warlord period. The point here is not to present a specific argument concerning warlordism, but to recollect
its major features in order to provide some historical grounding for later discussion.

The second section discusses the emergence and logic of center-local relations in the CCP and the People's Liberation Army (PLA), beginning with Mao Zedong's analysis of warlordism in 1928, and how to survive in a warlord context. The organizational imperatives of rural revolution are also discussed in order to point out that the nature of the revolution required relatively flexible relations between the center and local leaders and relatively close ties between political, military, and economic leadership at each level. The Maoist/guerrilla model of organization is contrasted with the Weberian/Prussian army model. The second section concludes with a discussion of PLA regionalism after 1949. Of course, the other papers at this conference will provide far more detail on this subject in their discussions of specific regions, but here the Gao Gang affair of 1953 is used to illustrate the shift from rural revolution to a centralized party-state, in which past and present regional differences might set the pattern of factional associations, but all significant military politics revolves around Beijing.

The final section returns to the question of the contemporary salience of warlordism. Since the most direct political effect lies in the rhetorical utilization of the "myth" of warlordism (the public historical memory as opposed to what actually happened), this is the first topic to be considered. I argue that warlordism, like McCarthyism in the United States, is most likely to be used as a negative label, and probably by conservative centralizers against provincial diversifiers. The provincial diversifiers are not likely to defend warlordism; instead, they are more likely to promote Western-style federalism as the model for guarantees of local autonomy. The second topic is whether specific aspects of warlordism could influence future periods of national strife, and it seems to me that factional structures, the tendency of conflicts to degenerate into winner-take-all contests, and the illegitimacy of separatism are likely partial continuities if we assume a future period of chaotic politics. Lastly, the "big question" of the possible return of warlordism is addressed. I argue that warlordism, as it existed in the 1920s, is impossible in the 1990s, because so many essential characteristics of its ecology have been transformed. I also think that "neo-warlordism" is quite unlikely, because it is unlikely that geographically-based conflicts would assume a military dimension.

Patterns of Warlordism

By its nature, the study of diversity defies easy generalization, and Chinese warlordism is hardly an exception. Indeed, the reference to the return of warlordism in the current context is usually nothing more than a vague gesture toward the possibility of chaotic times in which central control of politics and the military is lost and is replaced by the struggle of locally-based military powers. The fact that this actually happened in China not so long ago gives a kind of "lesson of history" credibility to such concerns.

Clearly, however, the history lesson must go beyond evoking such general memories and consider the behavioral and geographical patterns of warlordism and the ecology of its emergence, flourishing, and taming. This is a formidable task of historical analysis, but fortunately Professor Hsi-sheng Ch'i has provided a sustained and rigorous treatment in his classic work, Warlord Politics in China, 1916-1928. This is a remarkable work both in its command of detail of a complex period and in the rigor of its logical and historical analysis, and the following discussion is a pale reflection of its richness.

Patterns of Warlord Behavior

The most obvious behavioral characteristic of the warlord period is that of constant struggle. Although there was a national government of sorts, and the situation was not a war of all, against all, at every minute, nevertheless there were no fixed hierarchies, alliances, or rules. With a few temporary exceptions, all warlords professed a commitment to national unity, and most of the larger alliances were dedicated to this mission. They also generally professed personal moral and cultural standards that included loyalty, reciprocity, and cooperation. It was painfully obvious, however, that personal and resource security and their aggrandizement was the major motivating force of warlord behavior. This core concern was not to be trusted to the rules of the game or to loyalties. As Mao Zedong put it somewhat later, "power grows from the barrel of a gun."

The uncertainties of warlord politics led to an oscillation of power rather than the emergence of a single hegemon. In part this was due to the internal logic of factions. As described by Andrew Nathan, the weak structure of complex factions and the anxieties of less powerful participants leads to a cycle in which crisis leads to expanded power of the victor; the victor's power and the inadequate distribution of rewards leads to collusion among remaining factions and defections within the victorious faction, until a new grouping challenges the old victor, creating a new crisis. But the factional pattern by itself fits the Beijing politics analyzed by Nathan better than it does warlord politics as a whole. The political economy of the warlord era restricted the area able to be controlled by a single warlord, and so, as Ch'i argues, the overall pattern of the aggregation and dispersion of power also resembles an
international balance of power. One advantage of the international model is that it stresses the importance of territorial control as well as personal allegiance.

In any case, it should be recalled that a warlord army was more like a bag filled with sand than a well-oiled machine: the annual desertion rate was between 15 and 25 percent and only Yan Xishan in Shanxi Province could maintain a conscription cycle. In one contemporary study of a northern warlord garrison, two-thirds of its recruits had joined within the past two years and almost ninety percent were illiterate. Training was vestigial, rarely with live ammunition, and units of every size deserted during battles. It was said of the armies in Sichuan that they had more officers than soldiers, more soldiers than weapons, and more weapons than ammunition. The Yunnan army was sometimes issued opium in lieu of provisions. With such armies, large and stable structures of power are hard to imagine.

Interactions between warlords were based on cultural expectations, lightly and alertly held, concerning basic rules of the game and standards of personal loyalty. The least violated rules of the game included the inviolability of envoys and of conference participants. As Chi' argues, this was the result not only of a spirit of sportsmanship but also because the personal nature of warlord power required high-level personal communications. Wars were usually declared before they were fought, defeated warlords were not imprisoned, and, especially in the north, assassination of rivals was considered improper. Less egregious violations of righteous military conduct and improper treatment of subordinates were also remembered and decried by rivals, while particularly virtuous behavior, such as Wu Peifu's loyalty to Cao Kun, or the discipline of Feng Yuixiang's troops, was also well-known.

Given the uncertainties of the period, the structure of a particular warlord's circle was based on both competence and nepotism. A high percentage of warlords and their lieutenants were of humble background and rose through the ranks, but the loyalty of the merely competent was suspect. Nepotism was considered honorable, fair, and prudent, and the favoring of those with personal guanxi ranged from relatives (including heavy use of political marriages) to clansmen, to schools, to same province of origin. In Chi's rather dramatic charts of the relational patterns of various major factions, the most stable (Fengqian) clearly centers on Zhang Zuolin. Almost every lieutenant had a number of personal ties to Zhang, while having no ties to fellow lieutenants. The thinness of the Anhui faction's personal relations to Duan Qirui and the complexity of relationships within the Zhili faction reflect, or preage, the troubled history of these groupings.

Within a faction, the behavior expected of both leader and subordinates was defined by the Confucian family system. Not only was confrontation avoided, but communication was minimized even between superiors and subordinates and discouraged among subordinates. The familial model assumed that the leader would be effective in dealing with others, and both strict and generous with subordinates. The largest "family" to which this model pertained was the Beiyang clique, which existed until July 1920, then fell apart because members organized against Duan Qirui on the basis of his failings and sins as a paternal leader.

Although most warlords engaged in ostentatious and extravagant behavior and expected their troops to pursue their looting opportunities, some of the most successful adopted strict standards of behavior for themselves and their troops. Feng Yuixiang was careful in his recruitment and training, and his army, the Guominjun, as well as the Third Division of Wu Peifu were known for their self-discipline in dealing with civilians. In general, however, the rudimentary fiscal capacities of the warlords and their uncertain control over territory encouraged smash-and-grab opportunism at all levels. Only Yan Xishan in Shanxi was able to build a local government as well as an army in a locality. Thus, even though warlordism was local, it hardly served local interests. As Chi' puts it, "War-making was a luxury item of direct and compulsory consumption for a reluctant people, who were so squeezed of their last resources that they had no more to spare for economically constructive purposes."

In general, warlords decried warlordism and demanded the reunification of China. The warlord period commenced in 1916 with a declaration by a conference of military governors that they were ready to use collective force against "anyone attempting to disrupt national unity or making unreasonable political demands." And despite the impotence of the government in Beijing, no one can question that it was an active housekeeper. During the warlord period there were ten heads of state, forty-five cabinets, five legislatures and seven constitutions, and warlords were quite conscientious about renewing their (largely meaningless) official credentials. The illegitimacy of separatism was not denied even by the advocates of provincial self-government, who claimed that, while they also supported a unified China, under the present circumstances more provincial autonomy was necessary. The universal commitment to reunification prevented an official acknowledgment of China's segmentation. From the north-south wars in 1916 to the Northern Expedition of 1927, attempts at national reunification were the major yeast in the fermenting of new warlord alliances.

The external relations of warlords were diverse in every dimension. The Guomindang and the CCP claimed that imperialism and warlordism were closely linked. Just as the various imperialists had zones of
influence and concessions, the imperialists patronized various warlords in their struggles, and had supported local armies since the time of the Taiping threat to Shanghai and emergence of "Chinese" Gordon and the Ever Victorious Army. While it was clearly the case that Japan supported the Beiyang militarists until 1919 and the Soviet Union supported the CCP, the Guomindang, and Feng Yuxiang, according to Chi's other patterns of imperialist linkage to specific warlords are less clear. Indeed, the major imperialist powers signed the Arms Embargo Agreement of May 5, 1919, which banned all arms supplies to militarists. Not surprisingly, the Agreement had many loopholes and had become a dead letter by 1924, but there was no open intervention by specific foreign powers in the 1920s except for the Soviet involvements. Nevertheless, foreign weapons played a key and increasing role in warlord conflicts, and warlords were careful to minimize damage to foreign property and to avoid confrontation with imperialism.

Patterns of Warlord Geography

The geography of warlordism was not entirely fluid. Most warlords had geographical bases, and some areas, such as Manchuria under Zhang Zuolin and Shanxi under Yan Xishan, were relatively stable. There were also some regional patterns. The north tended to dominate most of China, and the coastal provinces tended to fight fewer and larger wars in interprovincial alliances, while inland provinces tended to fight more small-scale wars within each province. However, the single most valid generalization about warlord geography is that it was complex, confused, and uncertain. Even places that appeared stable at the provincial level were often a roll of conflict locally, and the bigger the warlord alliance, the harder it fell.

One of the most important geographical patterns was that places that were relatively undeveloped in terms of economics, military equipment, and transportation tended to have more small warlords engaged in constant threats and skirmishing with their neighbors. In Sichuan, for instance, a geographer in the 1930s noted that "Animals are rare, carts unknown, railroads but dreams, canals impossible, and the rivers too swift." As R. H. Tawney noted in 1932, it was easier to get from London to Beijing than it was to get from Beijing to Chengdu. Correspondingly, Sichuan remained a disunited provincial theater outside of the interprovincial alliances in which smaller warlords schemed and struggled. Guangxi Province had only sixty miles of road in 1925, and no railroad. Even in coastal areas, warlordism started with small-scale armies and many local contenders, and then built up to interprovincial alliances and struggles. If power grows from the barrel of a gun, then a sturdier plant can grow from an armored railroad car than from an occasional rifle with inadequate ammunition.

Small-scale warlordism did not spare the population from the horrors of war. Although Sichuan Province was not part of national struggles, the sufferings and exactions of the peasantry there were legendary. On the other hand, the increasing firepower of the coastal warlords led to ever more destructive battles. This raised the stakes of conflict, leading to fewer wars but more expensive preparations. Eventually, in the conflict between the Northern Expedition and the northern warlords, it led to an abandoning of earlier codes of conduct in anticipation of a mortal struggle.

Although the level of fracture among warlords was related to the state of military development and communications, in all cases the province was an important political unit, providing a basic locational identity. It should be remembered, however, that the internal structure of most provinces was a pyramid of smaller powers rather than an integrated military or governmental structure. Outside the context of a grand alliance warlords were reluctant to interfere in neighboring provinces, and they preferred not to ally closely with neighbors in order to avoid having an alliance turn into a regional hegemony. The exceptions proved the rule. Warlords in divided provinces like Sichuan fought for hegemony in Sichuan, and, with one important exception, did not involve outsiders. Occupying armies from neighboring provinces were unpopular and provided a rallying point for local forces. Zhang Zuolin's Fengtian, with steady control over all of Manchuria, was the major exception, while Yan Xishan in Shanxi epitomized the importance of the provincial unit. Guangxi, Guizhou and Yunnan tended to have indigenous regimes.

Guangdong was not impressive as a provincial unit, even though its relative advantages with respect to Western access were roughly similar to its present situation. Its local warlords were divided, and it was occupied occasionally by troops from Guangxi and Yunnan. Moreover, the Guomindang was explicitly national in the focus of its commitment to reunify the country and in its recruitment for the Whampoa Military Academy.

There were also regional patterns of conflict and control. Northern warlords and troops penetrated all but the southernmost tier of provinces, and in general the northern armies and regimes were more fluid, more interprovincial, and more powerful than warlords elsewhere. Provincial differences appeared to matter less in the north than in the south, perhaps influenced by the common origins of most northern warlords in some association with the Beiyang Army. The rules of the game were more sophisticated in the north; there were only a few
murders of rivals among northern warlords, while there were at least nineteen important assassinations in the south. Manchuria stood out as a defensible area, well-armed, with capable and stable leadership. Wealthy areas with good railroad communications were especially likely to become battle zones; the larger warlord struggles tended to take place in the large north and central zone from Hebei to Hunan. Beijing was an especially attrative target because of national symbolism, communications, and customs revenues.

Patterns of History

The warlord period was a long time coming, created for a relatively brief period (twelve years), and proved difficult for the Guomindang to eradicate. Although the balance of power logic of warlord competition led to the oscillation of victors and challengers, there was also a secular logic of increasing risk, cost and destruction that contributed to the emergence of a new national pattern under the Guomindang.

The warlord period was the final stage in a long process of the deterioration of central military control in China. The armies of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom demonstrated the weakness of the imperial military and led to the emergence of local armies that were loyal to the empire but did not owe their strength to it. These local armies, in turn, did not prove adequate for reversing the empire’s fortunes against foreign armies, inducing the Qing first to modernize its existing armies and then to create a “new army” on a German model. In 1895 a young officer named Yuan Shikai was put in charge of the formation and training of the Newly Established Army, which was expanded in 1901 and renamed the Beiyang Standing Army. He also created a new military academy at Baoding. Meanwhile the provinces were all encouraged to create their own modern armies, and there was increasing militarization of landlord power at the local level. On the eve of the 1911 Revolution there were sixteen divisions and sixteen mixed brigades in China, of which seven divisions and four mixed brigades were personally loyal to Yuan. Thus, on the eve of warlordism, there was already a dispersion of military power.

Under Yuan, political power had been reduced to military power, and it became clear during his unsuccessful grasp at the imperial mantle that military power was irrevocably fragmented. As Yuan’s successor Duan Qirui attempted to quell the challengers the unity of the Beiyang family disintegrated, leaving only the empty formalities of national politics. As political authority disintegrated, the “modernity” of the modern armies tended to follow suit, because the fracturing of politics made private armies out of public ones.

Rather than the conquest of an otherwise healthy political system by the military, warlordism was the rump of a disintegrated public order, the embodiment of national disgrace and total crisis. Although its organizational paradigm was the German army, in fact most warlord armies were undisciplined, untrained, undersupplied, poorly financed, and officered by men more experienced in free-for-all sandbag fighting and personal survival rather than in modern warfare. As the armies grew larger and battles grew bloodier, the contenders who departed from the standard mold of warlords—who were more ideological (Feng Yuxiang’s Guominjun and the Guomindang), more disciplined (Wu Peifu, Feng Yuxiang, Guomindang), had a secure territorial base (Zhang Zuolin, Yan Xishan), or had significant foreign financial and training support (Feng Yuxiang, Guomindang) became the survivors and the victors.

As the above list of winning attributes suggests, the Guomindang transformed itself in the mid-1920s into a military power that was qualitatively superior to most warlords in virtually every respect. The cadets of the Whampoa Military Academy were the core of the Guomindang difference because they provided dedicated, well-trained leadership that was national in its perspective. But they functioned as part of a larger vision of a modern government that would replace the chaos of warlordism, and, although the northern warlords fought with uncharacteristic ferocity against the Guomindang’s Northern Expedition, they were neither defending nor did they propose a credible alternative path for China.

As Ch’i suggests, warlordism did not cease with the Guomindang victory in 1927, but the character of the warlord system changed. Thereafter, conflicts tended to be between the Guomindang center and individual warlords or coalitions of warlords. Until 1937 these conflicts remained serious even at the national level—witness the Xi’an Incident—but their orientation demonstrated that there was now a centrally-oriented political-military order in China. But conflicts with the remnants of warlord power and with the communists made the Guomindang quite sensitive about maintaining central control over its own forces, callous to the sacrificing of regional forces and interests, and suspicious of local initiatives.

The continuation of warlord influence after 1928 is also impressive. From the beginning the Guomindang collaborated with friendly warlords and left them in actual control of territory under the general aegis of the national government. Thus, the military reality that Mao Zedong dealt with in his base areas in South China in 1927-34 was one in which the initial opposition was from local warlords and only later, after it was clear that the Jiangxi Soviet was a problem of national proportions,
did the Guomindang army take charge. The incorporation of warlord realms into the national structure meant that the national state and its military were relatively weak agglomerations even if no one could challenge the Guomindang's overall hegemony.  

The Emergence of CCP Regionalism

Regardless of the direct relevance of warlordism to contemporary China, it was one of the factors that set the context of the rural revolutionary struggle of the CCP. Mao Zedong developed a unique approach to relations between the party center and local leadership that was clearly influenced by the context in which the communists had to survive and by the rural revolutionary approach that Mao adopted. Mao's flexible attitude toward center-local relations set the pattern of party and military regionalism after 1949. However, under the new situation of the CCP's monopoly of power, the center tightened its control. Thus, the post-49 situation of the party and the military is fundamentally different from that of the warlords, even though local diversity has greatly accelerated since 1979.

Survival in Context

Mao Zedong's approach to rural revolutionary war took its basic shape from 1927 to 1931, and during this time his principal opponents were local warlords and defense forces organized by landlords. In some respects the survival of a base area was similar to the survival of a local warlord's control over a population. Indeed, in the case of Zhang Guotao in the Euyuan Soviet, there was not a lot of difference except for the communist expropriation of local landlords. Military power was the paramount concern not only because "power grows from the barrel of a gun," but also because even if a base area were lost, an army could move elsewhere, while if the army were lost, the base would soon fall.

But as a revolutionary movement, a communist base area was a threat to all warlords and to the Guomindang. It was not simply a local power; it was an anti-center. Mao quickly had to face two problems that determined his survival chances. The first was how to survive in the face of more powerful hostile forces. The second was how to create a political-military strength that would be superior to that of his opponents. The first problem could be reformulated as how to cope with the existing pattern of regionalism under the warlords. The second problem entailed the development of a new structure of force that had its own unique implications for center-local relations.

In Mao's analysis written in October 1928, aptly entitled "Why is it that Red Power Can Continue to Exist?" in the Selected Works, there is an underlying sense of wonder that, despite the dashing of the CCP's national ambitions and the loss of ninety percent of its strength, pockets of communist controlled territory managed to persist in remote rural areas. Mao's explanation is that the continued strife among warlords at every level prevented coordinated action against the communists, even though they were perceived by both the warlords and the Guomindang to be common enemies rather than simply rivals. Mao predicted that warlord strife would continue because it was founded on the autarkic, primitive political economies of the rural areas at the local level, and at the national level it was further encouraged by differences among the imperialists. The strategic implication of warlord divisiveness for the CCP was that border areas were the best locations for bases, because if attacked by one warlord the communists could retreat into the neighboring warlord's territory. Coordination between warlords against the communists would be difficult because no warlord participating in such an effort would want to bear the costs of communist suppression. If one warlord in a coalition exhausted his troops defeating the communists his own territory would be at risk to his rivals at the end of the campaign. Such geographical considerations required a long-term reliance on the peasants rather than on the proletariat because they were inevitably the population at the interstices of warlord control. Of course, all of the above logic would apply to any outlaw group at the time, and so it is not surprising that Mao's first friends at Jinggangshan were the local bandits who had already discovered the locational advantages of mountainous borders.

The second problem, that of creating a superior political-military force, led in a completely different direction from normal warlord rule, and, as we shall see, had unique implications for center-local relations. Survival after the collapse of the First United Front in 1927 required the CCP remnants to shift focus from the proletariat to the peasantry, but there was continuity in the approach of revolutionary mobilization. Mao viewed the poor peasants as the natural resource for rural revolution, and land reform as the fundamental method. The problem was that of transforming peasant support into military power. Mao's historic solution to this problem was his rural revolutionary strategy, involving the combination of political, military and economic mobilization of the base areas, flexible military tactics premised on popular support ("people's war"), and a long-term national strategy of building from rural areas to surround the cities rather than seizing cities or allying with other political forces.

Mao's rural revolutionary strategy transcended its initial warlord environment. The Anti-Japanese War required a somewhat different spatial logic than that of border areas, and the military context of the
civil war was far removed from the local warlord competition of the early 1930s, but the strategy of rural revolution remained fairly constant and provided continuity from one phase to the next.

Regionalism Within the CCP

Mao Zedong upheld a rather remarkable commitment to the discretionary autonomy of local leadership within the organization of the CCP and the PLA. Geographical flexibility of leadership permitted the growth of base areas with distinctive characters and military units with considerable local cohesiveness. The discretion was granted on the assumption that central discipline and authority would be accepted absolutely; it was not based on a right to autonomy, nor was it a negotiated relationship based on the personal following of the local leader. Nevertheless, Mao’s leadership involved a commitment to local flexibility that was in part a result of his own frustration as an over-controlled local leader in the 1927-34 period, but more importantly it resulted from the nature of rural revolutionary power.

The major resource of the CCP in its base areas was mobilized popular support. The main task of local level leadership, therefore, was that of encouraging maximum sustained involvement of the population in programs that strengthened the base. This required close attention to what the population needed, and to what it was willing to do. To attempt too little would be to waste potential; to attempt too much would exhaust and disillusion the masses and would lead to failure. Hence the cardinal rule for local leaders was *bie toli quanzhong*, do not separate yourself from the masses. Leadership had to be situationally appropriate and mass-regarding in order to be effective. The leadership hierarchy had to be as flat as possible because of difficulties of communication and in order to avoid the expense of bureaucracy; even the form of the organizational structure had to stay close to the masses. Moreover, military, political and economic tasks were all interrelated; the “purely military viewpoint” was a form of separating from the masses, and it was discouraged institutionally within the PLA by the presence of political commissars.

An important personnel implication of people’s war was that military units and leaders were encouraged to build local identifications through a multi-dimensional integration. The PLA worked closely with the militia, and with the local party leadership. It tried to reduce its budgetary strain by raising its own crops and helping with economic tasks. Given the integration of party, government, and military functions, general leadership at each level tended to be more important than vertical, professionally-oriented leadership. As a result, the PLA developed close geographic identities and solid group identities based on common experience. The Long March, other deployments and the civil war disrupted specific local attachments, but the five field armies and many of their units formed strong communities that were also locality-oriented.

The implication of mass-regarding local leadership for organizational authority was that local leaders needed the discretion to “creatively apply” central directives. Mao repeatedly emphasized that the responsibility of local leaders was to act according to the local situation rather than to execute central commands. In 1930 he called the blind execution of orders “the most ariful form of sabotage.” In the Rectification Campaign of 1942 he called for cadres to act like general commanders, and said that in cases of conflict between upper and lower levels of leadership, the presumption of correctness should lie with the local level. Mao demanded that cadres investigate the concrete conditions of the areas under their charge, using the slogan, “No investigation, no right to speak,” and he set a model of this by his own rural investigations.

However, local leadership was not simply allowed a free rein. Discretion was granted on the assumption that the cadres were committed to the party’s ideology and style, and it was granted for the purpose of success in pursuing the party’s ends. Much of the instruction and discipline was carried out in a campaign cycle, so that the relatively permissive vertical structure was supplemented by a temporal ebb and flow of study sessions, evaluations of work, and general mobilizational campaigns. If a local leader marched to his own drum and was successful he might become a model; if he failed he would be criticized, and his deviation might be examined for more serious ideological problems. Discretion was a responsibility rather than a right, and cadres were vulnerable to later judgments that they acted irresponsibly. In general, though, political and military cadres were pursuing the same goal of revolutionary success in widely dispersed but roughly similar rural settings, and even with broad discretion they could be expected to continue marching in the same general direction. In the words of Harlan Jenecks, “The high command closely monitored operations, and did shift forces between field armies on occasion, but really centralized coordination only began in 1949.” The PLA could hug China’s small-scale and dispersed landscape like the landlord and warlord structures it displaced, but it did not lose its overall discipline.

Clearly the structure of authority just described is not Weberian, and the People’s Liberation Army before 1949 was not a Prussian professional army. The Weberian model assumes that resources are controlled and dispensed by the center; Mao assumed that the primary resource, mobilized popular support, would be gathered at the base of the organization, and its availability would be greatly affected by the
discretionary behavior of the lowest levels of leadership. The Weberian model assumes professional and task-specific staffing; rural revolution required the combination of military, economic and political tasks. The Weberian model assumes organizational discipline reinforced by written orders and reports; Mao loosened the vertical bureaucracy and added a temporal cycle of campaigns. From a Weberian point of view, the discretion of subordinates is considered authority leakage; from Mao's point of view it represented creative leadership. Regional differentiation would be anathema to Weber, while for Mao it would indicate proper adaptation to local conditions.

**Regionalism after 1949**

The establishment of state power in 1949 fundamentally changed the context of center-local relations, while at the same time sanctifying the habits of the revolutionary period. As the CCP seized and consolidated state power, it moved from a competitive political-military context based on popular mobilization to a monopoly of resources in the hands of the center—to put it more colorfully, it arrived in a Weberian world on board a Maoist ship. Rationalization of CCP leadership in this new context meant the gradual transition from flexible, mass-line leadership to disciplined, bureaucratic leadership. In the PLA, the transition was from a guerilla force to a professional army. As Harlan Jencs has detailed, professionalism began during the civil war with the move from guerilla to mobile warfare, but the experience of the Korean War confirmed the need for a restructuring that would make the PLA more like other modern armies. But the revolutionary experience was more than a nostalgic reminiscence. The revolution remained the shared and secure pattern of success, and as the party and the army adapted to the authoritarian and bureaucratic rationality of the party-state, the revolution became a standard for radical critique. Liu Shaoqi and Peng Dehuai became the symbols of bureaucratic rationalization, while Mao Zedong and Lin Biao were the leaders of radical intervention.

The establishment of a central party-state ended the rationale for regional differentiation in the PLA, but it did not cancel the regionalistic identities within the military. Indeed, the establishment of six regional governments between the center and the provinces from 1949 to 1953 reflected and reinforced linkages within military units and between units and localities. However, it also demonstrated the confidence of the center in the loyalty of the army, and that confidence proved to be well-founded.

The major case of conspiracy against the center in the 1950s did have as its chief figure a person with deep regionalistic ties. Gao Gang was the model local leader, since he served head of the Political Department for the Fifteenth Army, composed of Yan'an area peasants. In 1949 Gao became concurrently chairman of the Northeast Party Bureau, commander and political commissar of the Northeast Military Region, and chairman of the Northeast People's Government. Not only was this an impressive concentration of power, but we should recall that the Northeast (Manchuria) was one of the most prosperous, defensible and stable of the warlord areas. Thus Gao Gang's conspiracy of 1953 against Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai, for which he was criticized in February 1954 and committed suicide in August, might appear to be the rumblings of regionalism, if not incipient warlordism.

However, Frederick Teiwes's exhaustive study of the case concludes that Gao Gang was involved in political factionalism at the center, in an effort to win Mao's support, rather than in regionally-based confrontation. Certainly regional associations colored the pattern of Gao's supporters and opponents, but the focus of action was Gao's attempt to convince Mao that Liu Shaoqi should be replaced by himself as second in command. The fact that someone who had made their reputation as a regional leader would pursue their political ambitions through "court politics" rather than from a regional base, and then would be easily removed as a threat once Mao denounced his factional activities, demonstrates a solid centrality in PRC politics regardless of remaining regional differentiation. And attempts by Lin Biao to reinvigorate the PLA's revolutionary traditions did not involve encouraging a new regionalism. In turn, Lin Biao's factionalism, though colored by his Fourth Field Army associations, was primarily a case of court conspiracy rather than an assertion of regional power.

I would argue that the pattern in PLA development, more important than continuing regionalism, was the emergence of the PLA as a relatively autonomous societal sphere, with its own economy and politics as well as a near monopoly of the means of violence. The PLA has had its own political gyroscope that has been subordinate to the center but autonomous enough to make the PLA a distinctive presence in national politics. The professionalization of the PLA has not stripped it of its factories and its internal political discipline; it remains a sub-polity; it has only become more efficient as a potential military force. The primary function of autonomy, especially at the local level, is to insulate the PLA from normal politics. But it is certainly conceivable that, in the face of national political disruption, the general political value of the PLA's monopoly of force would rise.

What is to me inconceivable from the present historical vantage point is a situation in which the PLA or its local units would encourage regionalistic challenges to the center. If I project PLA behavior, making the most extreme assumptions about prolonged national chaos and PLA
involvement, what I would imagine would be something like the Bêiyâng army on a national scale, a faction trying to control the center and provinces, and producing internal tensions and factions that would undoubtedly have regional associations but would struggle in a national arena. In this unhappy and unlikely scenario, Chinese politics would be unsettled and the military would play an important and perhaps decisive or dominant role, but, unlike warlordism in the 1920s, there would still be a central political arena.

The Future of Warlordism

The above analysis of warlordism and the historical role of regionalism in the PLA is intended to inform our discussion of the salience of warlordism for Chinese society in the 1990s. We must begin, however, with a consideration of the myth of warlordism rather than its historical reality, because the shared public image of warlordism can have political effects regardless of its historical validity.

The Myth of Warlordism

The fate of the Soviet Union inevitably raises the question of whether China could fall apart, and increasing geographical diversification strengthens the natural tendency to recollect the previous national experience with disunity. Thus, the residual national memory of warlordism, with whatever attractiveness or revulsion it engenders, can be expected to influence Chinese politics to the extent that disunity appears to be a real threat.

Of course, a national myth can function as a “teacher by negative example.” In the case of McCarthyism in the United States, for example, the reference is only made to condemn whatever is being branded as a symptom of similar behavior, and it is rare (and usually rhetorical) that someone considers a return to McCarthyism to be a real possibility. The most likely utilization of warlordism as a political trope in current Chinese politics would also be negative.

Because warlordism was the low point of Chinese modern history, a time when chaos prevailed, sovereignty was shattered and compromised, and national progress was frustrated, it could serve as a historical icon for the dangers of chaos and the political immorality of geographical sectarianism. As yet, centralizing conservatives have not challenged provincial diversification, nor have provincial leaders publicly confronted central power. But if this happens, especially in the context of less unified central politics, it is easy to imagine the centralizers using such a powerful rhetorical weapon as that of preventing warlordism. The rhetoric might be employed even if there is no military dimension to the alleged challenge from the provinces—political rhetoric is not judged by its truth value, but by how it hurts.

If we assume that the PLA would adopt a conservative and centralizing posture, it is even possible to imagine the PLA asserting a greater role for the military in Chinese politics in order to prevent “warlordism.”

It is more difficult to imagine an encouraging role for the myth of warlordism. It was not an especially glorious time for any particular province or region. Moreover, the fact that warlordism did not celebrate local autonomy, but rather portrayed itself as constantly fighting for national unity, means that it could not serve as a historical legitimization of localism. Even as a furtive, unacknowledged model, the memory of warlordism has little to offer a frustrated province or local leader. Far more likely would be the adoption of the rhetoric of federalism, based on Western models, and a large part of the ideological task of federalism would be to argue that federalism would not lead to disunity. Of course, federalism could be used as a rhetorical cover for separatism, just as it occasionally did during the warlord period, but it is more likely to foment claims to military autonomy in order to pursue political and economic guarantees. In sum, the political reality of the myth of warlordism is far more likely to be active as a fear than as a model.

Besides the specific public memory of warlordism, however, there is a general feeling in China that history is defined by cycles of centralization and decentralization, unity and disunity, order and chaos. The most obvious of these processes is the dynastic cycle, and some fear that succession politics in a post-communist world could lead to a period of disintegration. In such thinking “warlordism” does not acquire a positive connotation, but there is a fatalistic acceptance of the possibility of its return.

Partial Continuities

Even if warlordism is a negative memory and, as I will argue below, not likely to recur in any case, there are individual aspects of the patterns of the warlord period that might resonate with a future period of strife or with increasing militarization of politics. These partial continuities could occur, not because warlordism as such would be returning, but because they reflect deeper patterns of Chinese behavior, geography or history. Some of them could be seen in the factional politics of the Cultural Revolution.

Probably the most basic tendency would be for more distinctive and more personality-based factions to form in times of uncertainty, and for bolder sorts to use factions and chaos to drive their personal fortunes forward on the model of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. This
implies destructive competition, and not necessarily bound by any rules of the game. Studies of networks of personal interrelationships, such as Ch'i's relational maps of warlord factions or Whitson's study of the field armies, could provide research models for factional analysis.

Another persisting truth from the warlord period might be the importance of provinces as political units. Some provinces were never unified, others were overrun, but China did not suffer the kind of indefinite political subdivision that appears to be happening in parts of the former Soviet Union. As Ezra Vogel's description of Guangdong makes clear, contemporary provinces are quite diverse in their internal levels of development and prosperity, but the warlord period provides some confidence that no amount of chaos is likely to lead to lasting sub-provincial political disintegration.

At the national level, the importance of national reunification, as a legitimizing function of warlord activities, and the absence of separatist ideologies implies that separatism is less likely to become part of the rhetoric of a new chaotic period. Of course, the fact that warlords condemned warlordism and demanded reunification is also proof that localistic interests can be disguised with national rhetoric, but clearly China as a political unit is deeply fortunate not to have the banners of ethno-nationalist separatism tucked away in every closet.

Lastly, the tendency of warlordism to generate increasingly destructive, winner-take-all conflicts may well persist to the present, especially since the tendency has been cultivated in the meantime, first by CCP-Guomindang conflicts, and then by conflicts within the CCP. Perhaps it is related to the persisting unity of China that contractual compromises between antagonists rarely occur, that one lives and the other dies. Tang Tsou has analyzed this pattern of uncompromising conflict in Tiananmen politics of spring 1989, and there is no reason to think that crisis could not provoke the pattern in the future, whether between the party and societal elements, between national factions, or between locally-based factions.

The General Improbability of Future Warlordism

The most general question concerning the salience of warlordism for contemporary China is whether or not a warlord system (or non-system, or anti-system) could reappear in the foreseeable future. This question can be divided into two sub-questions. First, whether something similar to the old warlord context could reappear, and second, whether a new warlordism could occur.

By this point it is probably clear to the reader that I think that the old warlordism is impossible in contemporary China. My argument focuses on the historical context of warlordism and takes note of the numerous fundamental transformations that have occurred in the meantime. Warlordism arose in a process of long-term decay of the military control of the Qing dynasty, in a context of internal and international weakness. It was not a challenge to a functioning center; rather, it was the rocky bottom of societal order that was exposed as national politics were drained of capacity and control. It was not a product of late Qing reforms gone out of control; rather, the political and military reform efforts of the Qing were belated attempts to co-opt regional forces into a national framework under dynastic control. Moreover, the primitive autarkic situation of the economy and communications permitted local powers to assert themselves with few threats other than those posed by their equally-endowed neighbors. I do not wish to imply that warlordism was inevitable in the 1920s; it is conceivable that different persons, different decisions, or different accidents of history could have created a situation where a weak republic could have succeeded a weak empire. But China in the 1990s is a different world in everything but name, place and history, and clearly the old warlordism is impossible.

The question of the possibility of a new style warlordism must be approached carefully. To be worthy of the name, any neo-warlordism should include a sustained period of geographically based confrontational politics in which the subnational units control significant military force. The generals do not have to control the provinces, but military support has to be essential to the confrontation. Let me be clear about what is excluded. Interprovincial or center-provincial conflicts in which only the center controls a significant military option certainly would reflect provincial diversification, but it would not contain the element of military divisiveness essential to a reasonable definition of warlordism. On the other side of the coin, an increase in the political power and active intervention of the military, even including factions with clear provincial associations, would not qualify as warlordism if the arena of military politics was central control in Beijing. Else I would return to my initial distinction between militarism and warlordism. Warlordism requires that the military fight from regionally based strength; otherwise a situation of generic militarism would be confused with a historic situation with more specific prerequisites.

It would require a leap into an unknown future to claim that neo-warlordism is impossible, but I would argue that it is unlikely even if national politics becomes more chaotic. Of course, we can only consider what might be possible as reasonable responses to imaginable situations; the effects of blind ambition, self-destructive tendencies, crucial misunderstandings and accidents could be estimated only by forecasters with greater cosmic information than I could claim.
China is becoming more differentiated in the 1980s and 1990s as a result of economic reforms and international openness, but it is also becoming more wealthy and more interdependent. Wealth raises the level of risk involved in conflict. It increases risk because there is more to lose, and it also increases capacity for destructiveness. Wealth encourages the growth of a middle class, which may be assertive of local interests but is likely also to be fearful of war. Interdependence, in normal situations, would inhibit military conflict because of the loss of markets, supplies, investments and so on involved in an extended market economy. In a period of prolonged and profound crisis, however, interdependence increases the exposure and vulnerability of a locality, and could encourage aggressive and hegemonic behavior. For this reason it is impossible to rule out some form of neo-wartime as one possible end product of prolonged political-economic crisis.

As long as one assumes continuing prosperity, and continuing diversification based on prosperity, it would seem that conflicts based on geography would avoid assuming a military dimension. The center would bear considerable international costs from the use or threat of force in a confrontation with a province, and there would probably be significant domestic costs for the leader who took such a route. It is even more difficult to imagine a province challenging the center in a military dimension. As far as inter-provincial relations are concerned, one province threatening another would be an affront to the center and to all other provinces. It would not be at all surprising if the level of tension in inter-provincial and center-provincial relations rises in the foreseeable future, but the arenas of conflict are much more likely to be political and economic rather than military.

Notes

3. Ch'i, pp. 79-80.
4. Ch'i, p. 188.
7. Ch'i, p. 17. Ch'i claims that “almost all the prominent militarists at one time or another engaged in sweeping attacks on militarism, advocated disarmament, and condemned the very nature of military regimes.” p. 194.
12. Ch'i, pp. 188-189.
13. Ch'i, p. 15.
15. For the last, see Ch'i's analysis of military training, pp. 102-115.
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Chinese Regionalism
The Security Dimension

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Westview Press
BOULDER • SAN FRANCISCO • OXFORD