

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 200

“1919 – China”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

China, like Japan, was a member of the Allies and, like Japan, had a seat at the Paris Peace Conference. The two countries were at odds over Japan's claim to the Shandong Peninsula, but China fully supported Japan's effort to add a clause to the League of Nations covenant opposing racial discrimination.

British and American opposition to the ban on discrimination angered both nations. Ratification of Japanese control over the peninsula placated the Japanese a little, at the cost of twice insulting China.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 200. 1919 – China.

Today we turn our attention to China. We last talked about China in episode 152. That episode ended with the death of Yuan Shikai, the beginning of the Warlord Era, and the entry of China into the Great War. Today I want to talk about China's role at the Paris Peace Conference and how the Treaty of Versailles will affect the next chapter of Chinese history.

We'll begin with the warlords. Historians call the next twelve years that followed the death of Yuan Shikai the Warlord Era. I think we probably all know roughly what a warlord is. Before we go on, though, I'll ask you to indulge me while I tell you a little story. This happened about twenty years ago. I was driving to the post office and listening to a news program on the radio in my car. For the benefit of you young people, back then print and broadcasting were the principal media through which we got our news.

Anyway, they were doing a story about a warlord. I think it was in Afghanistan, but I don't remember for certain. Afterward, the host segued into a background piece on the origin of the term *warlord*. This made me sit up and take notice, because I'm always interested in both word origins and Chinese history, so I expected to learn a little bit of both.

So you can imagine my surprise when the host of the program began to explain that the word was coined by a British journalist covering the conflict in Somalia in the 1990s, which at that time would have been just a few years earlier. My surprise gave way to utter astonishment when she actually introduced the British journalist in question and then proceeded to interview him about the circumstances that led him to this historic etymological breakthrough. He explained to her that he had created the term by analogy to *time lord*, a term which originates with the long-running BBC television program, *Doctor Who*.

By this time, I was sitting in the parking lot at the post office, with the engine of my car still running as I shouted at the radio because I couldn't believe what I was hearing. To this day, I have trouble believing that I actually heard that. I did some searching on the internet for an archived recording or summary of this program, to document my memory, but I couldn't find anything. Of course, if I were responsible for creating something his embarrassing, I wouldn't want to archive it either. It's one thing when a news announcer makes a slip of the tongue, or gives out a minor inaccuracy in the course of discussing a related topic. It's quite another thing when a news program devotes a whole segment to a claim that is utterly ridiculous on its face and could have easily been refuted had anyone bothered to consult a dictionary.

I consulted a dictionary; the *Oxford English Dictionary* to be precise, the same copy I've owned since I was in college, which was...let's just say it was more than twenty years ago. It tells me that the first known use of the term *war-lord*, albeit hyphenated, was by Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1856. It also draws an analogy between the English word *warlord* and the German term *Kreigsherr*, literally *warlord*, which happened to have been one of Kaiser Wilhelm's titles, though when they said *warlord* in Imperial Germany, they meant something closer to "commander-in-chief of the armed forces" rather than *warlord* as we understand the term today.

The Chinese term that we translate into English as *warlord* was coined in the early twentieth century to describe the military rulers of the Warlord Era. The Chinese term is much more pejorative than its English analog. In Chinese, neither you nor anyone you support would ever be called a "warlord." Only your enemies are "warlords."

So what is a warlord, in this Chinese context? Back in episode 58, I described how Imperial China had multiple regional armies, the largest and most important of which was the Beiyang Army, literally the Northern Army. The Beiyang Army's area of responsibility included the Imperial capital, Beijing, which automatically made it important. And as the Imperial government strove to modernize the Chinese military in the late 19th and early twentieth centuries, the Beiyang Army got the latest and best of everything.

You'll recall too how the Revolution of 1911 led to an agreement brokered by the military leader Yuan Shikai, under which the Emperor would abdicate and the Republic of China would be established, with, erm, Yuan Shikai as President. Yuan quickly reneged on promises of parliamentary democracy and became an autocrat and almost even had himself declared Emperor before his death in 1916.

The reason why Yuan was able to get as far as he did, frustrating both the desires of those in Beijing who wanted to retain the Imperial model of government and of the Republicans in the south like Sun Yat-Sen, who wanted liberal democracy, was that he was a respected leader within the Beiyang Army. But his ill-advised attempt to crown himself Emperor cost him much of that respect and support. He died soon after, and after his death, there was no consensus among his former supporters in the army over who should succeed him, so a power struggle broke out within that army. The other armies across China found themselves leaderless, or, more accurately, now had no leaders beyond the highest ranking military commanders in their own region. And so you see here the beginning of the Warlord Era, when power has devolved to groups of local military commanders here and there across the country, who recognize no authority beyond their own.

China still had a national government in Beijing, and this was the government that foreign powers recognized and did business with, but the Beijing government was usually under the control of whichever faction of the Beiyang Army controlled the capital at that moment, and its authority extended no farther than that. The rest of the nation, with one exception, was at the mercy of the warlords. This one exception was the southeast of China, in and around Guangdong province, where the Kuomintang, the Nationalist Party of Sun Yat-Sen, still ruled.

There were more than a hundred warlords across China, who controlled regions that ranged from a town and its surrounding farms up to the most powerful warlords, who governed an entire province, sometimes even two or three provinces. What they could control depended on how many soldiers were loyal to them. The various warlords sometimes formed alliances, or cliques as they're usually called, and at other times fought wars among themselves. Most of these wars were not between individual warlords, but between these cliques. Many, many wars, which inflicted years of suffering and sacrifice upon the Chinese people.

There were reactionary warlords who dreamed of reinstating the Empire. There were conservative warlords who believed China needed autocracy, not democracy, and generally believed themselves to be the most suitable autocrat. There were reformist warlords sympathetic to Sun Yat-Sen and his calls for a democratic republic, and some of them were willing to support him and the Nationalist Party. There were also Christian warlords who varied in their political views but embraced Christianity and opposed vices such as drinking, gambling, and opium among their soldiers and in the regions they controlled.

The strength of a warlord depended on the strength of this army, which depended on numbers of soldiers and the loyalty of their officers. Officers expected to be rewarded for their loyalty, and the only reward that mattered in the Warlord Era was more soldiers, more equipment and supplies, and a greater area of responsibility. But this was a double-edged sword. Make your subordinates too strong and now they were warlords in their own rights, and some or all of them might turn on you, or join a different clique. This assumes they could persuade their own soldiers to follow them over you. Needless to say, personal relationships mattered a great deal.

How did warlords get their soldiers? Most of them were recruited from the rural peasantry. These were very poor people, for whom a soldier's salary of a few dollars a week might be enough to free their families from debt bondage, even buy them a scrap of land. Warlords had no trouble recruiting soldiers so long as they had money to pay their salaries. In fact, it was harder getting rid of them when you could no longer afford them. Once recruited, soldiers objected strenuously to being discharged, though by the same token, since their interest in military service was largely pecuniary, a warlord's soldiers also had the disturbing tendency to desert whenever ordered to engage in actual combat.

Where was the money coming from to pay these soldiers? Some of it was in the form of foreign loans. Most of it came from the pockets of ordinary Chinese. Warlords first claimed the tax revenues of the regions they controlled. Then they imposed additional taxes on their own authority. If necessary, they sent their soldiers to pillage towns and villages for cash, or for food and supplies. And in addition to civilian money and property, warlord armies often claimed the labor of those who lived in their domains. If the soldiers needed a trench or earthworks, civilians were forced to do the work for them. Civilian laborers were also conscripted at a moment's notice to carry baggage and equipment for an army on the move, and might not return home for weeks. Civilians were rarely paid for this labor. Sometimes they were given papers that purported to exempt them from any further labor conscription for a period of time, but even then, the papers were often disregarded. If you remember our episodes on the Congo and on Africa during the Great War, a lot of this will sound familiar to you.

Millions of ordinary Chinese, mostly in small towns and rural regions, endured this abuse for twelve years. These warlord armies have been called "stationary bandits," only half jokingly. They were like bandits in that they took what they wanted without regard for law or right, but differed from bandits in that they didn't leave afterward. They just hung around, robbing the same people over and over again. Or as the Chinese put it, more colorfully, "bandits and soldiers are breath from the same nostrils." The distrust and resentment bred by the warlords and their armies would have a profound impact on twentieth-century China.

The warlords and their endless fighting also brought economic growth in China to a standstill for a decade, a tragic lost opportunity, given how critically China needed to modernize. They also gave democracy a bad name. Formally, China was a democratic republic; educated elites in the big cities may have understood that designation as a republic was only a formality, but for

hundreds of millions of aggrieved rural people, democracy was synonymous with the rapine of the warlords.

The warlords armed their soldiers with weapons purchased from abroad. There was technically an arms embargo on China during this period, but it was frequently flouted. Foreigners also held many special concessions and direct investments in China, in such things as railroad lines and factories. These foreign investors frequently paid bribes to the warlords to leave their holdings alone, or even helped them acquire arms in return for their protection. These arrangements helped the warlords maintain and expand their control.

No foreign nation was more aggressive in manipulating the unstable political situation in China than the Japanese, who extended loans and economic aid to the Beijing government in exchange for Beijing ratifying the transfer of control over the Shandong Peninsula from Germany to Japan. That would be the Japanese version of what happened. You could just as honestly say that Japan paid massive bribes to the warlord clique that happened to control Beijing—much of that money in the form of loans that someone else was going to have to repay—in exchange for the warlord clique ceding to Japan territory it did not control and had no authority to surrender. That was certainly the Chinese view.

[music: “Jasmine Flower”]

I want to turn now to China at the Paris Peace Conference. But first I’ll remind you that the peace conference convened in January of 1919, meaning that China was at this time only about two years into the twelve-year Warlord Era I’ve been describing to you. The worst crimes of the Warlord Era haven’t happened yet, and at this point negotiations are taking place in China between the various factions in the hope of working out some kind of peaceful resolution. You and I know that’s not going to happen, but at this moment, there was reason to hope that some kind of negotiated settlement was within reach.

The Chinese delegation that went to Paris included representatives from several of the factions contending for power in China. They didn’t agree on internal questions, but they saw eye to eye on what China wanted out of the peace treaty. The Chinese wanted an end to the oppressive foreign concessions that had been forced upon their nation in the last days of the Empire and during the chaos of the Republican years so far. They wanted Chinese customs houses restored to Chinese control. They wanted an end to special legal privileges and territorial concessions for foreigners in China. And the biggest and most obnoxious of those concessions was the Shandong Peninsula.

When the Japanese made their presentation at the peace conference, arguing their claim to the peninsula, they had what sounded like a legally proper argument. First of all, they argued, this was not a dispute over the rights of Japan versus the rights of China; this was a dispute over the rights of Japan versus Germany. It was Germany that had already secured a 99-year lease to the Shandong Peninsula, fair and square, in compensation for the murder of two German Catholic

missionaries, episode 14. Now Germany had forfeited the lease by making war on the Allies, and Japan was claiming German rights under that lease in compensation for its contribution to the war effort, as Britain and France had already agreed. No legitimate Chinese interest was infringed by this arrangement, and even if that were the case, the Japanese and Chinese governments had already signed a treaty confirming the transfer of control over the peninsula to Japan, which should be enough to resolve any lingering doubt over the legitimacy of the Japanese claim.

The Chinese delegation anticipated most of the Japanese arguments, but had good reason to hope for the support of Woodrow Wilson and the Americans. The Americans had a longstanding “Open Door” policy toward China, which opposed special trade arrangements and concessions for European powers. The Americans also had their brand-new policy of self-determination, and it was indisputable that the people of Shandong Peninsula identified as Chinese and wished to be part of China. The Americans were also known to be suspicious of Japan and its ambitions. Once the US had declared war on Germany, Washington had encouraged China to do the same, in part to counterbalance Japan’s influence in the alliance.

The one argument the Chinese did not anticipate was this prior treaty agreement between Tokyo and Beijing, because that treaty had been kept secret. Beijing knew about it, but even some members of the Chinese delegation in Paris did not. Still, everyone knew what Woodrow Wilson thought of secret treaties, and what he thought of governments handing people back and forth between themselves as if they were so many tins of beef.

When it was China’s turn to state its case before the peace conference, that responsibility fell to the 31-year old Chinese ambassador to the United States, who used the English name Wellington Koo. Koo held a Ph.D. from Columbia University in international law and was noted for his debating skills and his eloquence. Koo gave a powerful speech in which he made the case for the return of the peninsula to China along the lines I just laid out. China, he said, was grateful to Japan for liberating Shandong from the Germans and acknowledged her debt. But the Chinese government could not and should not be expected to pay that debt by selling the birthrights of millions of their fellow Chinese.

Koo also made a point of the fact that Shandong was the birthplace of Confucius, the Chinese political philosopher whose teachings are the bedrock of Chinese morality, ethics, and culture. Koo dramatically proclaimed that asking the Chinese to surrender Shandong was like asking Christians to give up their recently acquired control over Jerusalem. The Chinese also had a national security argument, noting that Shandong was like “a dagger pointed at the heart of China.” In the hands of a foreign power, that power would control access to the northern half of the country.

He made a powerful argument, and most observers felt it was far stronger than the Japanese one, but the disposition of the Shandong Peninsula was a difficult problem for the conference and for Wilson in particular, as we saw last week, and so the matter was tabled for some time.

A couple of weeks later, the Japanese proposed their anti-racism amendment to the covenant of the League of Nations. Although Japan and China disagreed bitterly over the Shandong question, the Chinese delegation fully supported this Japanese proposal. Of course, this only made things more difficult for the conference after the Japanese threatened to refuse to sign the treaty. In the end, Wilson and the Allies agreed to give Japan Shandong as a consolation prize after rejecting the anti-racism amendment. That made one loss and one win for Japan, which the Japanese were able to swallow, barely. But it made two losses and no wins for China, which for the Chinese was intolerable.

Most people in the United States were sympathetic to the Chinese position, as were most Americans in the delegation in Paris. They urged Wilson to support China, whatever the consequences regarding Japan. Tasker Bliss almost resigned over the issue. He wrote Wilson a harsh letter comparing Japan to a police officer who arrests a purse-snatcher and then keeps the purse. "Peace is desirable," Bliss wrote, "but there are things dearer than peace." Edward White and Robert Lansing also signed the Bliss letter, and remember that these are three of the five seats of the American delegation, Wilson and Colonel House being the other two.

The Chinese delegation got the full details on April 30. The Allies tried to soften the blow. David Lloyd George asked the Chinese delegation to remember the U-boat offensive and how desperate Britain's position was at the time it made its deal with Japan. Woodrow Wilson assured them that the League of Nations would guarantee China's security against any future aggression from Japan or any other power. Wellington Koo responded, in words that sound prescient today, that most Chinese admired and respected the West and yearned for their own country to join the international community as an equal partner. But if the West persisted in disregarding the aspirations of the Chinese people, they might turn away and choose a different path. "There is a party in China that favors Asia for the Asians," he told them, warning that a just solution to the Shandong question would insure fifty years of peace in East Asia, but an unjust one would guarantee war within ten.

That evening, Wellington Koo briefed the rest of the Chinese delegation on the meeting. He also told them that he would not sign the coming peace treaty unless ordered to by Beijing, in which case, he predicted, he would eventually die for it.

That was because developments at the peace conference in Paris were being followed with great interest and passion in China. The Chinese delegation was receiving hundreds of telegrams from people and organizations across the country, urging them to stand fast on the Shandong question. The following Saturday, May 3, newspapers in China broke the news of the Allies' decision, leading to an outburst of public rage, both at the Allies and at the perceived weakness of the

Chinese government. That night, delegations of students from the various schools around the capital met at Peking University, traditionally a hotbed of political activism. The crowd heard multiple passionate denunciations of the Allied betrayal. Western leaders, and particularly Woodrow Wilson, were labeled frauds and liars and con artists. Trusting in Western goodwill was denounced as a terrible mistake.

The next morning, Sunday, May 4, thousands of student protestors gathered at Tiananmen Square in the capital. They waved signs that read “Give Us Qingdao,” “China Belongs to the Chinese,” and “Down with the Traitors.” In the afternoon, the demonstrators erupted out of the square and surged through the city streets toward the homes of some of those “traitors,” that is, Foreign Ministry officials who had negotiated that earlier treaty with Japan confirming Japanese possession of Shandong. They set fire to their homes and beat members of their households. The police moved in and cracked down, beating and arresting 32 of the protestors.

That evening, the sun set on May 4, but it was merely dawn for what Chinese history calls the “May Fourth Movement.” In the days that followed, student protests escalated. The government tried to crack down, but the protests only spread. Strikes were called in Beijing and Shanghai. Shops closed in protest. The head of Peking University resigned in protest over the arrests of the students. Activists across China organized boycotts of Japanese imports.

The demonstrators were eventually released. They had made their point. Wellington Koo never was called upon to risk his life by signing the peace treaty, because the Chinese government rejected it, thus becoming the only nation represented at the Paris Peace Conference to refuse to sign the Treaty of Versailles. China and Germany would negotiate a bilateral peace treaty later in the year.

[music: “Wa Ha Ha”]

The May Fourth movement did not end when China refused to sign the treaty. It collided with the New Culture movement and sent it, like a billiard ball, caroming off in a new direction. We examined the New Culture movement in episode 152. Remember that China had experienced a string of humiliations at the hands of the Western powers and Japan over the past 25 years, from the Sino-Japanese War to the foreign concessions imposed on China (like that German one at Qingdao) to the Boxer Uprising to the Russo-Japanese War, in which two foreign powers fought a war over Chinese Manchuria. The sense grew that tradition was no longer enough; China needed to modernize. The prevailing opinion that emerged among intellectuals was that Chinese traditions were holding the nation back. China needed to embrace Western values in order to become strong. By 1910, even conservative Chinese were coming around to the view that in order to survive, China had to change. More progressive Chinese embraced Western science and technology along with Western principles of liberty, equality, and democracy, as the formula needed to bring China into the modern world.

But in the aftermath of the May Fourth movement, advocates for Western principles went silent. The betrayal in Paris was widely seen as proof that the West's so-called "values" were self-serving, a veil of pretty words that served merely to conceal the ugly countenance of racism and imperialism that lay underneath.

Meanwhile, a thousand miles to the north, the last stages of the Russian Civil War were playing out, and the communists were securing their victory. If you can find nothing else good to say about the new Communist government in Russia, you can say this: they know an opportunity when they see one. In March 1920, Moscow unilaterally renounced Russia's special interests and concessions in China. They were denounced as vestiges of czarist imperialism; the new socialist Russia wanted nothing to do with them.

The contrast between how the West treated China and how Communist Russia treated China was impossible to overlook or dismiss. Now there was tangible evidence that while the liberal West refused to accept China as an equal partner, the Communist East was reaching out in friendship. China already had a small socialist party and a tiny anarchist movement, but Marxism *per se* was not well-known or well-studied in China. The October Revolution in the country next door began to change that. In the spring of 1919, *New Youth* magazine devoted a full issue to an analysis of Marxism. Soon Marxist study groups were organizing at Peking University and in cities around the country. And it was indisputable that the May Fourth movement had mobilized workers in China as nothing before had.

The Communist International created a Far Eastern Bureau, and in 1920, its deputy manager, a 27-year old Jewish Russian Bolshevik named Grigori Voitinsky journeyed to Beijing, where he met with Li Dazhao, Chen Duxiu, and other key figures from the New Culture movement. With Voitinsky's help, Chen turned the Shanghai Marxist study group into a Communist Party cell. In July of the following year, thirteen people representing seven such cells across the country met in Shanghai at what was grandly called the First National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. Chen Duxiu was named Secretary General, though he did not personally attend the conference. One of the thirteen who did was Mao Zedong.

At this point I'd like to direct your attention to Sun Yat-Sen, whom I mentioned earlier in today's podcast, and whom we also last heard from in episode 152. Back in that episode, I told you that after Yuan Shikai became President of China, he outlawed the Nationalist Party and Sun Yat-Sen fled back into exile in Japan. Sun returned to Guangdong, in China in 1917, after Yuan's death and re-established the Nationalist Party.

Sun stood by the Three Principles he'd first articulated 15 years ago: nationalism, democracy, and the people's welfare. Back then, nationalism meant a China ruled by Han Chinese, not by Manchu Emperors; now it meant something more like nationalism as we usually understand the term, that is, asserting the rights and privileges of China against the foreign nations that disrespected them. Exactly what "people's welfare" meant for Sun changed over time. At the

very least it meant economic and land reforms; sometimes Sun flirted with socialism. As for democracy, given that the previous attempt to implement democracy in China had led to fragmentation, Sun now believed that the path forward was a military takeover of the nation. Sweep away the warlords first and re-impose unity; later there will be opportunity for democratization. To this end, Sun was willing to work with the warlords in southern China to build a Nationalist Party coalition that could take control of the whole nation.

But that would take some doing. He built relationships with some sympathetic warlords, but many people in China and internationally saw Sun as a has-been, the man who had already tried once to reform China and had failed. The support and especially the money he needed to carry out his plans were not forthcoming, either from the wealthy elites in Guangdong province or from his former supporters abroad.

But remember what I said about Communists and opportunity. Sun's political program was not all that different from the Communist Party's. Sun was hopelessly bourgeois, of course. After all, his base was the business and merchant class in southern China whose wealth had expanded rapidly after the Revolution of 1911. Still, February Revolution first, October Revolution later, am I right? Lenin embraced Sun as a reformer and an enemy of imperialism, and in 1923, Soviet officials brokered an alliance between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party of China, under which the Communists would back Sun's efforts to seize control of the country from the warlords, while the Kuomintang would agree to accept Communists as members without asking them to renounce their allegiance to the Communist Party.

This arrangement became known as the United Front, and in less than six years' time, the United Front would indeed secure control over all China and end the reign of the warlords. Alas, Sun himself would not live to see this accomplished.

But that is a story for another episode. We'll have to stop there for today. Thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Joseph for his donation, and thank you, André, for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Joseph and André help keep the podcast on track and free for everyone, so thanks again for your support. You're invited to join them, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue our 1919 World Tour. I'm pretty sure that by now we are closer to the end than the beginning, but next we're going to look at some of the

nations in the Western Hemisphere to see how they're coping with the post-war world, beginning with South America, in two weeks' time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Since he never signed the Treaty of Versailles, Wellington Koo's prediction that he would be killed for it was never tested, fortunately for him. China did join the League of Nations and Koo was its first representative in that body. He held the positions of prime minister, finance minister and foreign minister in the Beijing government for brief periods in the 1920s, until that government was overthrown by the United Front. This made Wellington Koo into a wanted man for a time, but the new Nationalist government was persuaded to accept him back into the Chinese Foreign Service. He returned to diplomatic duties at the League of Nations, then was China's ambassador to France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, until his retirement in 1956. From there he went to serve as a judge on the International Court of Justice in The Hague for a ten-year term. In 1967, he left the Court and settled in New York City, where he passed away in 1985, at the age of 97.

[music: Closing Theme]