THREADING ON THIN ICE: RESISTANCE AND CONCILIATION IN THE JADE MARSHAL’S NATIONALISM, 1919-1939

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Mengchuan Lin: Threading On Thin Ice: Resistance and Conciliation in the Jade Marshal’s Nationalism, 1919-1939
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The 1920s marked a decade in the history of modern China which is typically referred to as the period of warlords. This period was characterised by political chaos, internal division and internecine warfare between various cliques of military strongmen who controlled China’s numerous provinces. These de facto military dictators of China, known as warlords in historical literature, were customarily construed to be avaricious and self-serving despots who ruled their large territories with little regard for the welfare of their subjects or that of the Chinese nation.

My thesis aims to revise these previously held assumptions concerning the historical agency of Chinese warlords by investigating the unusual conduct of a particularly influential warlord: Wu Peifu. Wu’s display of deeply seated nationalistic tendencies throughout his political career, I argue, complicates our understanding of the impact that Chinese warlords exerted on the rise of Chinese national consciousness during the early 20th century.
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Introduction

Paul Cohen argues in *History in Three Keys* that the historian’s retelling of the past is a highly artificial process. By subjecting a discrete chunk of the past to reconstruction, whether in the form of a narrative or argument, a historian will invariably alter it to some extent. Depending on the degree of the alteration, the reconstructed past will exist primarily as either an *event* or a *myth*.\(^1\) Both of these forms need to be distinguished from the *experienced* past, which represents reality. Cohen then proceeds to illustrate the Boxer uprising as *event, experience and myth*, in demonstration of the multifaceted nature of the past. In similar fashion, the warlords of early republican China also existed in these three forms. While the warlords reconstructed as *event* denote a particular ordering of the past, they as *myth* denote a particular ordering of the past to justify conditions in the present.

Many of the stories of warlords in historical literature are mythologised. They are altered to a degree that they no longer represent even remotely factual reality, namely, the past as *lived experience*. The chief object of this essay is to retrieve, to the greatest extent possible, the *experienced* past of the warlords. To that end, we will examine warlordism as a phenomenon through the prism of the nationalism (*minzu zhuyì*) of Wu Peifu. Wu, nicknamed the Jade Marshal, was a prominent warlord of the period who at the apex of his power had the capability to restore unity to a China fragmented by incessant conflicts. Nationalism, as Benedict Anderson rightly argues, is the most potent force of the 20th century.\(^2\) Typically, warlords were not construed as champions of nationalism. Before we delve into an extensive discussion of Wu’s

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individuality and his peculiar brand of nationalism, it is imperative that we fully illustrate how warlords are portrayed in the historiography on early Republican China, of both Chinese and Western authorship. For if we fail to appreciate the extent to which depictions of warlords are imbalanced, being hugely skewed towards the negative, it will be difficult to justify the need for scholarly revision of this subject. To this end, the contents of a few seminal works on warlords shall be presented so as to elucidate the historical legacy they currently possess among learned circles.

Warlords do not exactly have a glowing reputation in modern Chinese history. The terminology which was coined to describe them in the Chinese language,  _acl#1_junfa, is not a neutral one. Its pejorative nature is readily manifest in how the very word itself already conjures up images of masculinised and gun-toting thugs in the mind. Curiously enough, the word also has a way of being retroactively applied to any person who exhibited authoritarian or pro-imperialist tendencies in the contemporaneous Chinese political discourse. Extant Chinese-language studies present the history of warlords in a highly linear fashion, typically tracing their origin to a common progenitor: Yuan Shikai. The death of this ill-fated leader of China’s modern army in 1916, who counted a three-month emperorship among his manifold legacies, gave rise to the major warlord cliques of the era. Many of the warlords who subsequently rose to power were Yuan’s former protégés; and their collective imprint on modern Chinese history is one of infamy. As the scholar Zhang Jian puts it, “June 6, 1916 marked the much celebrated death of Yuan, a great schemer and traitor, who led a life of utter ignominy.”3 He added in the same paragraph that Yuan was also the common stooge of imperialist powers. Yuan’s demise split the warlords into three major cliques, named after the abbreviation of the provinces to which the hometowns

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3 Zhang Jian, Lishi fengbei qian de sikao (Shenyang: Liaoning renmin chubanshe, 1983), 46.
of their respective leaders, Feng Guozhang, Duan Qirui and Zhang Zuolin, belonged. All three warlord cliques were patently cruel reactionary regimes in Zhang Jian’s eyes. Feng Guozhang’s Zhili clique, under the leadership of Wu Peifu, was responsible for its suppression of the February 7th strike of the workers of the Beijing-Hankou railway. Zhang Zuolin’s Fengtian clique, a puppet of imperial Japan, was said to have murdered the Communist revolutionary Li Dazhao. In another book, the scholar He Xiongfei describes Wu as an archetypal opportunist, who capitalised on the people’s trust of his patriotic pretensions to wreak havoc in China.

A strictly negative perception of warlords is so deeply ingrained in the minds of Chinese intelligentsia that any alternative depiction of them, even in fiction, invites criticism. In his scalding critique of the novel Yanyu Mengmeng by bestselling Taiwanese writer Qiong Yao, Chen Donglin accuses Qiong of palliating the crimes of the warlords by portraying the life of the fictive warlord Lu Zhenhua in a sympathetic light. Chen’s comments bespeak his intense dissatisfaction with Qiong’s writing:

The chief purpose of Qiong Yao’s creation of the character Lu Zhenhua, as a representative of the feudal warlords of old, is to arouse her readers’ sympathy for them. She achieves this through steady beautification of Lu’s image, which is initially presented as an ugly one. In embellishing at length episodes such as Lu’s reconciliation with his daughter Yiping, she hopes to accentuate Lu’s apparent humanity.

It thus appears that even fictitious warlords would not be exempt from the condemnation of these Chinese historians.

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4 Ibid., 46-47.

5 He Xiongfei, Jianxiong molu: zuie de zhili youxi (Beijing: Beiyue wenyi chubanshe, 1991), 182.

6 Chen Donglin, Dupin, yishu: Qiong Yao zuopin pipan (Changchun: Shidai wenyi chubanshe, 2000), 171-172.
Extant western scholarship, though usually more reserved in their judgement, also displays a somewhat essentialist understanding of warlords. To date, James Sheridan, Donald Gillin and Odoric Wou penned three biographical studies on Feng Yuxiang, Yan Xishan and Wu Peifu respectively in the 1960s and 1970s. Admittedly, the works of these scholars seek to portray the exploits of these warlords in a more balanced fashion. Gillin, for instance, argues that Yan attempted to implement various kinds of reforms during his tenure as the governor of Shanxi province. These reforms gave rise to campaigns whose aims ranged from the eradication of mass illiteracy to that of the practice of footbinding among peasant women. Wou similarly tries to present Wu as a well-intentioned and pragmatic warlord through the analysis of his domestic and foreign policies. By highlighting the progressive nature of the policies of these warlord regimes, these older works are largely successful in complicating the notion of warlords as belonging to a monolithic category of traitors and reprobates. However, none of them specifically tries to situate their warlord subjects in the discourse of anti-imperialist nationalism, which powerfully shaped the intellectual landscape of China in the early Republican period. Sheridan’s work on Feng serves as an excellent case in point. While his chronicle of Feng is replete with fascinating details covering various aspects of the warlord’s career, it is an exceedingly linear account which seems to lack a central theme. Presumably, the study was


8 Gillin, Yen His-shan, 34-35, 66-76.
written at a time when English language studies on Feng did not yet exist. More recent studies also fail to address the issue of the warlords’ relationship to nationalism vis-à-vis their interactions with imperialist powers. Arthur Waldron attempts to trace the etymology of the term warlord (junfa) in the political discourse of the early Republican period.9 Although his study succeeds in illustrating the impact of junfa on the evolution of anti-warlord rhetoric among the Chinese intelligentsia, Waldron does not purport to explain the validity of the claims against the warlords’ pro-imperialist tendencies. Another scholar, Edward McCord, applies the term praetorianism to the prevailing political circumstances of the warlord era.10 His association of the deeds of Chinese warlords with the notorious Praetorian Guard of ancient Rome, which had a penchant for palace intrigue, holds profound implications. The emphasis on the militaristic and opportunistic nature of the warlords disregards the multidimensionality of their character and motivations for rule. As the record concerning Wu Peifu’s domestic and foreign policy will show, McCord’s simple characterisation is flawed.

**Wu Peifu, Running Dog of Imperialism?**

The secondary literature appears to concur that Chinese warlords were characterised by their collusion with imperialists and hostility towards progressive elements. These two reactionary traits form the basis for the revulsion that scholars hold towards warlords and their regimes. It is of particular importance to note that the negative interpretation of the contemporary Chinese intellectuals seems to strangely echo the tone of their counterparts who wrote about the warlords during the 1920s. Gao Zhenxiao, a prominent intellectual of the period and a hero of the

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1911 Xinghai Revolution, penned an open telegram to that effect.\textsuperscript{11} In it, he minced no words in listing systematically the many heinous crimes which Wu Peifu perpetrated against the Chinese people and nation. Wu’s iniquity was so great, Gao asserted, that it far surpassed all of his predecessors, namely Li Yuanhong, Yuan Shikai and Xu Shichang, the three former presidents of the Republic of China. The telegram was also laden with invectives such as villain (\textit{zei}) and rebel (\textit{ni}); for to Gao, Wu’s misdeeds equalled those of notorious rebels such as Li Zicheng and Zhang Xianzhong. Li and Zhang were the principal leaders of the peasant rebellions of the early 17th century, which toppled the Ming dynasty in 1644. In closing, Gao called for the people of China to unite and join in the expedition to overthrow Wu so as to rescue the nation from certain doom.\textsuperscript{12}

If the contents of Gao’s telegram seem to be somewhat vague, the following announcement, written by a certain Li Chengxuan, provided a clear reason for denouncing Wu:

Wu Peifu, the stooge (\textit{zougou}) of the British imperialists, is currently being surrounded by forces of the National Revolutionary Army in Wuhan; his downfall is imminent. Wu’s fall is tantamount to the defeat of British imperialism in China. The British are already powerless to influence the current government in Beijing, under the control of the pro-Japanese Zhang Zuolin. Britain’s extensive commercial interests along the Yangtze will soon also be undermined. Thus, they are doing everything in their power to aid Wu.\textsuperscript{13}


\textsuperscript{12} “Xuanbu Wu Peifu zuizhuang zhi tongdian” [Open Telegram Announcing the Crimes of Wu Peifu] in \textit{XHGC}, 209.

\textsuperscript{13} “Zhongyang tonggao dishiwuhao: faqi fandui Yingdiguo zhuyi yuanzhu Wu Peifu gongji beifajun de yundong (September 6, 1926),” in \textit{Jiandang yilai zhongyao wenxian xuanbian (1921-1949) disance} (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2011), 389.
Li Chengxuan was one of the code names which the Chinese Communist Party employed to release official documents during the period of the First United Front, which was a temporary alliance between the Chinese Communists and Nationalists against the warlords. The above notice, which denounced Wu for his imperialist leanings, was addressed to the students of the class of 1926 of the Whampoa Military Academy. Many of their graduated classmates were then serving as commanders in the army that embarked on the Northern Expedition, which was a military campaign launched by the Chinese Communists and Nationalists in 1926. The chief aim of the campaign was to eradicate the various warlord regimes of the time. The defeat of Wu’s forces, in particular was central to the success of the Northern Expedition. In the above notice, the Chinese Communists accused the British of assisting Wu in three ways: 1) fabricating war reports, which the London news agency Reuters then disseminated to mislead the public; 2) sending aid from their colony in Hong Kong to Chen Jiongming and other right-wing reactionaries who planned to create disturbances in Guangdong, the base of the Communists and the Nationalists; 3) dispatching fleets of warships to Hankou, Wu’s base, to assist him in halting the advance of the Nationalist forces.\(^\text{14}\) Furthermore, the notice claimed from a September 3 article of *Dalu Bao* that some British warships in the port of Hankou had opened fire on the Nationalist troops. At the end, the Whampoa students were ordered to “create anti-British slogans and rally the people’s support in thwarting the machinations of the British imperialists.”\(^\text{15}\)

In order to accord Wu a fair appraisal of his overall impact on modern Chinese history, we must first ascertain the validity of the above claims of his allegedly treasonous dealings with

\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) Ibid, 389-340.
imperial powers. To that end, a number of sources pertaining to Wu’s relations with imperialists and pro-imperialist factions will be investigated. We will be able to see that his stance in diplomacy had always been markedly anti-imperialist. In fact, he consistently sought to buttress his anti-imperialist rhetoric with concrete action whenever the circumstances permitted. For instance, on matters of principle, such as the preservation of China’s territorial integrity, he stood absolutely firm. It must be noted however that Wu’s brand of anti-imperialist nationalism was also deeply pragmatic; he would only choose to go head to head with the imperialists on the condition that net gains would be made for the Chinese nation. If he perceived that any confrontation with imperial powers would actually put vital national interests in jeopardy, he would often opt for a conciliatory approach in the resolution of disputes with imperialist powers.

**The Nascent Form of Wu’s Nationalism**

Wu first unveiled his anti-imperialist sentiments on the national stage in 1919, in the aftermath of a series of events that later came to be called the May Fourth Movement. The movement, precipitated by mass student demonstrations against ineffectual governmental effort to resolve the issue of the retrocession of Germany’s colonial holdings under the Treaty of Versailles, marked the high tide of anti-imperialism in the early Republican era. China had participated in World War I on the side of the Allied Triple Entente in the hopes that Germany’s defeat would result in the return of its concessions in Shandong to Chinese control. Over the course of the war, the Chinese government, then under the control of Anfu clique leader Duan Qirui, contributed 140000 labourers to the Allies’ war effort in Europe. At the postwar Paris Peace Conference however, the victorious Allies decided to award the German concessions to Japan. This was because the Japanese had entered the war on the side of the Allies and attacked German colonies in the Far East. The Chinese delegation remonstrated to no avail. News of the
fresh diplomatic humiliation enraged the public, particularly the students of Beijing’s elite universities, who staged massive protests against the government and called for the boycott of Japanese goods. An anti-Japanese conflagration quickly swept across the entire country.

During the time of the May Fourth protests, Wu was only a commander of a division of the Zhili army stationed in Hunan. Despite his modest rank, he and his subordinates sent an open telegram to Xu Shichang, the president of the republic, voicing their support for the students. In that telegram, Wu stated that he was pleased to hear news from Wuhan and Shanghai that the Chinese delegation had decided to not, until they received further orders from Beijing, sign the Treaty of Versailles. “Such an act demonstrates that President Xu is receptive to public opinion and China still has diplomats who are willing to defend the nation’s interests,” Wu declared triumphantly. After urging the president to stand resolute in the face of divisive counsel at home and potential threat from abroad, he requested that Xu do four things: 1) immediately send a telegram to encourage the Chinese delegation to continue to stand their ground; 2) petition the Western powers, particularly the American president Woodrow Wilson for assistance in breaking the diplomatic impasse, and in the event of failure, prepare to present the case to the League of Nations; 3) appease the public by informing them of the Chinese delegation’s rejection of the Treaty of Versailles and charge anyone who proposes agreeing to the terms of the treaty with treason; 4) appoint the Chinese delegate Wang Zhengting as China’s representative to the League of Nations and place him in full charge of the Shandong Problem, so as to alleviate the burden of Lu Zhengxiang, who was head of the delegation.16 Wang had been the most insistent

16 “Wu Peifu deng guanyu bali heyue jujue qianzi hou zhuzhang lianluo Yingguo jiejue Qingdao wenti yiji wuli duifu Riben zhi tongdian (July 13, 1919),” in Wu Peifu wencun (Changchun: Jilin wenshi chubanshe, 2004), 249-250. Hereafter WWC.
about China’s refusal to sign the treaty. Wu’s final remarks in the telegram evinced his strong nationalistic sentiments:

The Japanese are using intimidating tactics against China. Our government should deal with them calmly and refuse to submit. Since a peace conference is already under way in Western Europe, the Great Powers shall not permit militarism after the manner of Germany to arise in East Asia. If Japan threatens us with war, we should appeal to the Western powers to designate theatres of combat and prepare to counter with commensurate force. China has millions of soldiers and hundreds of generals. Are all of them only capable of fighting among themselves? Will they all back down in the face of external enemies? I think not! My troops, united by the potentiality that they might finally fight enemies from outside, are all eagerly readying themselves for battle. In the event that the nation requires our service, we request to be placed in the vanguard.17

The wording of this telegram, replete with nationalistic fervour, soon made Wu the new hero of the nation. The public showered him with accolade for his avowals of resistance against Japan. The Shanghai newspaper Minguo Ribao published a commentary stating that Wu’s recent deeds proved his “candour, patriotism and profound sense of righteousness.”18 Public disapproval of the weak and pro-Japanese government of the Anfu clique had been steadily growing in the aftermath of the May Fourth Movement. Wu, seeing the opportunity, formed an alliance with the Fengtian leader Zhang Zuolin and decided to challenge the Anfu-led government. In July, 1920, he issued a manifesto on behalf of the Zhili army and announced his desire to eradicate the Anfu clique. In it, he first observed that since the founding of the republic

17 Ibid., 250.

18 Minguo Ribao [The Republican Daily News] (Shanghai), September 15, 1919.
in 1911, China had experienced nine years of almost incessant strife, and the responsibility for the country’s chaos lay with the politicians and the military. In his words, “The military possesses the sacred duty to defend the Chinese nation and people. But at the same time it is also a double-edged sword. If employed properly, it can fulfil its duty of defending the nation; if not, it can become an instrument of evil that puts the lives of the people in jeopardy.” Wu then went on to accuse the Anfu leaders of gross misgovernance in a number of ways: 1) filling parliament with bribed pro-Anfu politicians, turning the legislative body into a rubber stamp for the Anfu clique; 2) condoning widespread corruption in the bureaucracy and encouraging nepotism, resulting in the allocation of many important posts to Anfu affiliates; 3) selling monopolies, railway and mineral rights and borrowing vast foreign loans, putting the country in heavy debt.

In light of these Anfu misdeeds, Wu astutely pointed out that the majority of issues plaguing China were related to the people’s livelihood (fanwan wenti): “The impoverished masses, faced with abysmal living standards, had no choice but to destabilise society in numerous ways. The workers’ frequent strikes are one such example.” If this was allowed to continue, he warned the survival of the nation would be at stake. The Anfu leaders defended against Wu’s charges by claiming that any attempt to break up their government would severely disturb the political status quo, and also nullify the parliament and by extension the office of the presidency. In rebuttal, Wu declared, “The parliament and the office of the presidency should reflect the will of the people (minyi), and as such should not become the pawns of a single party or clique. As for fears that the Anfu clique might resist its disbandment with military force, which would spark civil war, we must remember that only the top Anfu leaders have vested interests in the clique’s

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19 “Zhijun quanti jiangshi quchu Anfu xi xuanyanshu (July, 1920),” in WWC, 255.
20 Ibid., 255-256.
21 Ibid.
survival, not the majority of its rank and file soldiers. Since it is clear that the Anfu clique has earned the disfavour of many Chinese nationals (guoren), it must be disbanded, regardless of the violation of any legal technicalities.”

The concluding remarks of the manifesto trumpeted Wu’s steadfast devotion to the people’s welfare and his absolute commitment to depose the Anfu leaders.

During the short nine-day Anfu-Zhili War that followed, the Zhili army, under Wu’s overall command, emerged victorious. The defeat of the Anfu clique saw the formation of a joint government between the Zhili and Fengtian cliques. Public opinion was overwhelmingly on the side of Wu’s Zhili clique during the short war. On July 16, the prominent newspaper Shen Bao published a petition by over one hundred Shanghai commercial organisations that celebrated Wu’s fulfilment of his promise to exterminate the Anfu clique made early in the month. They declared that China’s “400 million compatriots” (tongbao) swore to stand behind Wu on account of his righteous campaign against the corrupt Anfu government.

The Poetic Origins of Wu Peifu’s Anti-Imperialist Nationalism

Wu’s staunchly militant response to Japan’s seizure of the Shandong concessions, his support of the May Fourth student demonstrations and his opposition to the pro-Japanese Anfu government were all testaments to his anti-imperialist nationalism. The many praises he received in the newspapers affirmed the public’s approval of his nationalistic stance. In fact, Wu’s antagonism towards Japanese imperialism can be traced to some of his own early writings. A native of Penglai, located in Shandong province, Wu received considerable training as a classical scholar in his youth and had in fact obtained the licentiate (xiucai) degree, which was awarded to

22 Ibid., 256.

23 “Qing chu Anfu wu huo tiaoting zhi liao yaodian” in Shen Bao [Shanghai News] (Shanghai), July 16, 1920.
candidates who passed the imperial examination at the county level. His classical education imparted him the literary skills to compose poems in the classical style. The ability to do so was not only rare among warlords, but scholars as well, for the Chinese language was then undergoing a process of vernacularisation. In the poem Deng Penglaige Ge written after a tour of the famous Penglai Pagoda, he lamented:

Dwarf bandits are running rampant across the land. The Jiawu war diminished our territory and the Jiachen war undermined our sovereignty. The motherland is filled with barbarians! I wish I could be placed at the head of a strong army and reclaim our lost territories in one battle. Will that day ever come?

Dwarf bandit (wokou) was a derogatory term which the Chinese first used to describe pirates from Japan who raided China’s coastal areas during the 15th and 16th centuries. The word wo probably owed its origin to the name which the Emperor Guangwu of the Han dynasty bestowed on the small state of Nakoku (nuguo) on the Japanese island of Kyūshū. The two wars which Wu alluded to in the poem were the First Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War. In the former conflict, the defeated China had to cede Taiwan to the Japanese. In the latter conflict, the belligerents Russia and Japan fought over their respective spheres of influence in Manchuria and the Chinese were powerless to stop them. Wu’s reference to these humiliating episodes, both of which occurred during his lifetime, spoke to his heartfelt desire to revitalise the feeble Chinese

24 Laijiang Zhuwu, Wu Peifu zhengzhuan (1920) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), 137-140.
25 “Deng penglaige ge (1920)” in Wu Peifu xiansheng ji, ed. Shen Yunlong (Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1971), 305. Hereafter WXSJ.
26 “Wei zhi” in Houhan shu.
nation. In fact, he turned his poem into a marching song for drilling his troops in Luoyang, urging them to treat Japan as the imaginary enemy and avenge China’s loss in the Jiawu war.\textsuperscript{27}

Several other poems of Wu also contained very strong nationalistic overtones. In \textit{Huaigu Ershou} for instance, he extolled the exploits of Yue Fei and Lin Zexu, vowing to “emulate the latter’s example and devote great effort to building up the military capabilities of the country.”\textsuperscript{28} Yue was a renowned general of the Southern Song dynasty who won many battles against the Jurchen invaders of northern China. Lin was a scholar-official of the late Qing dynasty who devised the opium suppression campaign against the Western merchants in Canton. Also, in the poem \textit{Ru Shu}, Wu quoted a well-known phrase, usually attributed to Huo Qubing, to demonstrate his resolve to defend the country against foreign invaders.\textsuperscript{29} Huo was a general of the Han dynasty who fought against the Xiongnu, a loose confederation of nomadic peoples who lived in the Mongolian steppes and parts of central Asia. He allegedly uttered the phrase quoted in Wu’s poem to express his desire to never establish a stable family until his Xiongnu enemies were exterminated. Clearly, the recurrence of motifs such as war, ancient heroes and external foes in these poems reflected Wu’s deep desire to protect and strengthen China militarily, particularly in response to the growing threat of Japanese imperialism.

\textbf{Wu Peifu’s Continued Resistance against Soviet Imperialism}

Wu’s anti-imperialist nationalism not only manifested in the form of resistance against Japanese encroachment on Chinese territories, but that of other imperial powers as well. After his

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[27] \textit{WXSJ}, 209.
\item[29] “Ru Shu (1927)” in \textit{WXSJ}, 213. The phrase which Wu quoted is “xiongnu wei mie he yi wei jia,” literally meaning “how can a family be built if the Xiong have still not been exterminated?”
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
victory over Zhang Zuolin in the First Zhili-Fengtian War in June, 1922, he became the de facto ruler of much of northern and central China. It was under such circumstances that the Soviet Union dispatched Adolph Joffe to China in the autumn of the same year. The ostensible goal of the Soviet envoy’s visit was to negotiate with the Chinese government about the normalisation of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Technically, such matters should be handled through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing. But being a seasoned diplomat, Joffe recognised that obtaining the goodwill of Wu, the real power behind the Beijing government, would be more vital to the success of his mission. Hence, he wrote a series of three long letters to Wu, attempting to convince him of the benefits of friendship with the Soviet Union. The contents of these letters, though couched in a seemingly respectful and innocuous language, laid bare the Soviet Union’s imperialist ambitions in China.

In his first letter addressed to Wu on August 19, Joffe began with flattery, praising Wu for possessing “the perspicacity of a philosopher, the resoluteness of a seasoned politician and the sagacity of a military strategist.”30 After stating that it would be his utmost honour to meet personally with China’s most illustrious politician and general, Joffe proceeded to reassure Wu of the Soviets’ good intentions towards China: “the Soviet people are deeply concerned with the Chinese people’s struggles to free their nation from the yoke of imperialism. The Soviet Union too is currently engaged in a heroic struggle against the combined forces of the imperialists of the world. Perceiving that our goal is mutual, the Soviet Union is fully committed to assisting China.”31 In the same vein, Joffe continued, “I perceive upon arriving in Beijing that the Chinese government seemed to doubt the sincerity of the Soviet government’s appeals for negotiations,

30 “Yuefei gei Wu Peifu jiangjun de xin (August 19, 1922)” in Liangong (bu), gongchan guoji yu Zhongguo geming yundong (Beijing: Beijing tushuguan chubanshe, 1997), 99. Hereafter GCGJ.
31 Ibid.
fearing that we might have some conspiracy in mind. In actual fact, the Soviet Union has absolutely no intention to do anything of the sort, but is prepared to accommodate China’s interests on the basis of our general foreign policy.”32 Joffe explained further that the Soviet government had also tasked him with negotiating with Japan about the issue of Japanese occupation of Russia’s far eastern territories. But because he considered Sino-Soviet relations to be of greater importance, he had deliberately delayed negotiations with the Japanese. After much prevarication, he finally unveiled his true mission in China, which was twofold: 1) persuading the Chinese to send an observer to a future negotiation to be held between the Soviet Union and Japan in Changchun; 2) obtaining Chinese acquiescence in the stationing of Soviet troops in Outer Mongolia.33 Seeking a solution to the Mongolian Problem was Joffe’s most important task. The Soviets had dispatched troops to occupy parts of Outer Mongolia, which belonged to the late Qing empire, during the Russian Civil War. The Mongolians, for their part, had acquiesced in the Soviet occupation. Some had even actively colluded with the Soviets. Being aware of Mongolian compliance, Joffe insisted that the continued stationing of Soviet troops in Outer Mongolia was only to prevent White Russian forces from re-establishing themselves in the region. Soviet presence, he argued, would also forestall any attempt on the part of Zhang Zuolin to occupy Outer Mongolia. Zhang’s Fengtian clique was hostile to both the Soviets and Wu. In closing, Joffe accused the Japanese of proliferating rumours that the Soviets harboured imperialist designs on China and appealed to Wu to quickly establish a formal treaty with his country.

In two subsequent letters addressed to Wu on September 18 and November 18, Joffe continued to press him to accept the status quo in Outer Mongolia: “The imperialists, in order to

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32 Ibid., 100.

33 Ibid., 101-102.
defend their own policy of aggression in China, are using the Mongolian issue to discredit us. Unfortunately, certain individuals in Chinese society had fallen right into the trap. Instead of opposing the stationing of foreign troops in Beijing or other similar measures to carve a sovereign nation into spheres of influence, they have decided to protest against the presence of Soviet troops in Outer Mongolia.”34 He warned further that the Mongolian Problem would become a severe impediment to the restoration of friendly relations between China and the Soviet Union.35 In addition to urging Wu to relinquish Chinese control of Outer Mongolia, Joffe also tried to persuade him to establish a joint government with Sun Yat-sen. Sun was leader of the Nationalist government in Guangzhou, which opposed Wu’s Zhili-controlled Beijing government. Joffe insisted that only such an alliance would bring about China’s unification and ensure Soviet support,36 and it was the only “correct policy” for Wu to implement.37

Wu, for his part, was adamantly opposed to Soviet meddling in Outer Mongolia. The contents of the following telegram, which he sent in early November to Wang Huaiqing, the Chinese inspector-general of Rehe (a special administrative district bordering Mongolia), made his anti-Soviet position abundantly clear:

Soviet Russia, harbouring ambitions to invade Mongolia, is coaxing the Outer Mongolians to form companies which are then placed under the control of Russian managers. They operate in accordance with Russian laws and enjoy monopolies over all railroad, mining, power and gas interests. The Russians’ irregular behaviour (yijju) is

34 “Yuefei gei Wu Peifu jiangjun de xin (September 18, 1922)” in GCGJ, 133.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 132.
37 “Yuefei gei Wu Peifu jiangjun de xin (November 18, 1922)” in GCGJ, 156.
highly suspect. Should they annex Mongolia, other Chinese territories will too be endangered (*chunwang chihan*). As the inspector-general of the borderlands, your proximity enables you to acquire the most accurate information on this matter. Please petition the president to undertake urgent measures to ascertain Soviet intentions in Mongolia by interrogating Joffe. If he attempts to equivocate, the posts and communications agency should intercept his correspondences and search for clues which might illuminate the Mongolian situation.³⁸

In the same telegram, Wu stated that he believed Outer Mongolia’s position vis-à-vis China and Russia was akin to that of Alsace-Lorraine for Germany and France. Consequently, it should serve as a peaceful buffer zone between the two countries. Moreover, since Outer Mongolia had traditionally belonged to China, Wu asserted that the Chinese government had the right to abolish any type of local government that the Russians sought to establish in that area.³⁹

The above exchanges between Wu and Joffe, in which the former sought to defend China’s territorial integrity from Soviet imperialism, serve as further proof for his anti-imperialist nationalism.

**Wu Peifu’s Final Stand against Japanese Imperialism**

Wu maintained his anti-imperialist position throughout his career, which reached its zenith between 1922 and 1926. The periodical *Time*, since its founding in March, 1923, had regularly presented articles concerning his exploits. In fact, he became the first Chinese to be


³⁹Ibid.
featured on the cover page of the magazine in September, 1924. More importantly, Wu remained a staunch opponent of Japanese imperialism even to his death. After the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, Japan gained the upper hand and captured large parts of northern and eastern China during the initial phase of the war. In order to effectively rule these newly acquired territories, the Japanese searched desperately for preeminent Chinese politicians who were willing to collaborate with them. Wu, then residing in Beijing, became a prime target for Japanese co-option, due in no small part to his well-established reputation among ordinary Chinese. The Japanese repeatedly sent Kenji Doihara to inveigle Wu into complying with their demands to head a puppet government in Beijing. Doihara was a general in the Imperial Japanese Army, notorious for orchestrating the Mukden Incident of 1931 in which the Japanese invaded Manchuria on the pretext of a staged railway explosion. Wu, for his part, adamantly refused to become a traitor to the nation by assuming the mantle of a puppet leader. As an article from the February 6, 1939 issue of Time informs us, he would only agree to Japan’s peace terms on two “novel” conditions: 1) immediate withdrawal of all Japanese troops from China; 2) permission to swear fealty to Chiang Kai-shek’s government, which had established itself in the hinterland to continue the war against Japan. Evidently for a period of time Wu also deviously led his Japanese cajolers into believing that he might be amenable to a compromise, to the extent that Japan’s Dōmei news agency reported on several occasions that he had agreed to head the puppet government. However, when the time finally arrived for his formal acceptance, at a party to

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40 *Time*, September 8, 1924.

41 “China: Wooed Wu” in *Time*, February 6, 1939.

42 Ibid.
which foreign correspondents were invited, Wu’s declaration shocked the Japanese: “I shall become a puppet on the day when you little men go back to your little islands.”

The contents of a short memoir written by Liu Siying, who was a former aide of Wu, should make his determination to resist collaboration with the Japanese even clearer. In the memoir, Liu recounted that he travelled to visit Wu in Beijing on behalf of Chiang’s government in December, 1938. His main task was to deliver a letter, written by Kong Xiangxi, the vice-premier of the Executive Yuan, to Wu. In order to safely convey the letter, Liu had to sew it into the lining of his clothes so as to prevent it from being discovered by the Japanese occupation authorities. In that letter, Kong, after first praising Wu for his “intense patriotism, keen sense of justice and resilient spirit,” asked him for advice on “saving the nation.” Liu then explained to Wu the details of Chiang’s plan of making the Japanese fight a war of attrition by trading China’s huge space for time. Wu agreed with Chiang’s overall strategic vision, stating, “If we can persevere and refuse to compromise halfway, the Japanese are bound to lose! But alas, the people of Sichuan (where Chiang’s provisional capital was located) shall surely suffer! Please exhort our compatriots in the Southeast to support Mr. Chiang’s war of resistance against Japan! Although Mr. Chiang and I were erstwhile foes, we have the same duty to defend the nation. If I had been the one who unified China, the responsibility for organising the war effort against Japan would no doubt have fallen on me now. Regardless, I shall do everything in my power to help Mr. Chiang succeed in his war against Japan and hope our compatriots in the Southeast will


44 Liu Siying, “Ju Ri you he” in WXSJ, 473-474.

45 “Kong Xiangxi’s Letter to Wu” (December 8, 1938) in WXSJ, 474-475.
support me.”

Wu then wrote a reply to Kong, thanking him for his concern and assuring him that even though he was living in occupied territory, he had managed to remain “unwavering and unperturbed (anru taishan).” Before Liu left, Wu specifically asked him to convey three suggestions to Chiang: 1) stamp out corruption in the his government so as to win over the people’s hearts (renxin); 2) pay particular attention to diplomacy and try to use the British and the Americans against Japan; 3) start planning measures to deal with the future threat of the Communists, whose strength were growing day by day in northern China.

In addition to Liu’s memoir, another memoir, written by Zhang Bolun, informs us of many rich details of Wu’s last days in Beijing, during which he continued to evince the kind of anti-imperialist nationalism that came to define his early career. Zhang was Wu’s loyal secretary and edited many of Wu’s speeches. Being an eyewitness, his memoir also sheds light on the somewhat suspicious circumstances surrounding Wu’s death. After Doihara’s failures to obtain Wu’s consent to play puppet, the Japanese entrusted Major General Kawamoto with the same daunting task. Kawamoto knew that Wu had by then become a devout Buddhist. Therefore, he first sought to develop a personal relationship with Wu by becoming his disciple, before attempting to co-opt him. To the great dismay of Kawamoto however, his “master” saw through the ruse and instead used the teacher-student relationship to admonish his fake pupil. In the meantime, Wang Jingwei, the leader of the Japanese puppet government in Nanjing, had also come to Beijing to convince Wu of the worthiness of his collaborationist cause. Wang offered to

46 Liu, WXSJ, 475.

47 “Wu’s Reply to Kong Xiangxi” (January 10, 1939) in WXSJ, 476.

48 Liu, WXSJ. 476.

49 WXSJ, 199.

50 Zhang Bolun, “Xunguo shimo” in WXSJ, 477.
let Wu take full charge of the military affairs of his regime.\textsuperscript{51} In a series of correspondences exchanged between the two men from May through October, 1939, Wang attempted to impress upon Wu the folly of resisting Japan, and averred that “peaceful cooperation would allow the government to focus on the internal threat of the Communists.”\textsuperscript{52} In reply, Wu sternly rebuked Wang’s defeatist logic, and enunciated that “his fate shall be tied to the nation’s survival.”\textsuperscript{53} An article from the Nationalist newspaper \textit{Zhongyang Ribao} described a dramatic incident which demonstrated Wu’s aversion to collaboration with Wang. Apparently, during a meeting held earlier in the year with Chen Zhongfu, a functionary of Wang’s puppet government, Wu had slammed his fist on the table and shouted, “Whoever agrees to cooperate with Wang, that person must be truly depraved!”\textsuperscript{54} The article proceeds to tell us that Wu passed a personal copy of Wen Tianxiang’s \textit{Zhengqi Ge} to Chen and told him to give it to Wang. Wen was a scholar-official of the Southern Song dynasty who refused to surrender to the Mongols.\textsuperscript{55} After hopes of Wang and Wu forming a joint government were crushed, the Japanese made a last ditch effort at forcing the latter’s compliance. They proposed to let Wu become the ruler of a huge piece of territory in northern and central China, by setting aside for him six provinces: Hunan, Hubei, Jiangxi, Henan, Hebei and Shandong. Curiously enough, his old domain had once consisted of the majority of these same provinces. Again, he refused to take the bait, announcing that he would only submit if

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{52} “Wang Zhaoming zhi Wu Ziyu xiansheng han” (May 22, 1939) in \textit{WXSJ}, 478.

\textsuperscript{53} “Wu Ziyu xiansheng fu Wang Zhaoming han” (June 7, 1939) in \textit{WXSJ}, 480.

\textsuperscript{54} “Wu Peifu jianyi zhongzhen paian dama wang ni xiajian” in \textit{Zhongyang Ribao} [Central Daily News] (Chongqing), October 20, 1939.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
the Japanese agreed to his terms first.\textsuperscript{56} As Zhang noted in his memoir, even the people of Beijing seemed to trust Wu’s integrity. When faced with rumours of Wu’s possible surrender to the Japanese, some of them responded, “Is the great marshal (dashuai) really going to re-enter politics (chushan)? We doubt it. Even if he does, he will have good reasons.”\textsuperscript{57}

The Japanese, rebuffed by Wu’s repeated refusals to collaborate, were becoming desperate. As his secretary Zhang reported, Wu had chronic dental problems.\textsuperscript{58} One night, during a dinner at which Zhang was also present, Wu’s gum was lacerated by a tiny stone in the food. Wu’s wife then called in a Japanese dentist named Ito to treat her husband’s ailing tooth. Ito promptly extracted the supposedly bad tooth. On the following day, Wu’s left cheek turned completely swollen. After medicine prescribed by a Chinese doctor failed to cure the swollenness, the family called in the German doctor Stephens. Upon diagnosis, Stephens believed the infection could be cured, but Wu would need to undergo surgery at the hospital in the Legation Quarter. Wu knew that the Legation Quarter was part of the foreign concessions and refused to go. He told his wife, “Should I faint from the pain, don’t send me to the Legation Quarter to be treated. If you violate my Three No Principles, I shall no longer consider you my wife,” for he vowed to never do three things in life: 1) enter foreign concessions; 2) amass personal wealth; 3) borrow foreign loans.\textsuperscript{59} In the afternoon of December 4, 1939, four men, Qi Xiyuan, Fu Dingyi, Kawamoto and Ishida came to Wu’s residence. The two Chinese were collaborators and Ishida was the director of the army hospital for the Japanese garrison forces in Beijing. According to Zhang’s description, the four men, “after conspiring in the meeting room,

\textsuperscript{56} Zhang, WXSJ, 484.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 485.
went upstairs to Wu’s bedroom.” Ishida then performed surgery on Wu, during which Wu sustained a fatal injury to his windpipe, leading to his death.\textsuperscript{60} An article from the December 18 issue of \textit{Time} reported sceptically that the Japanese attributed the cause of Wu’s death to “a bad dental abscess.”\textsuperscript{61} Circumstantial evidence concerning Wu’s sudden death from dental abscess all indicated the possibility of foul play involving the Japanese. In fact, \textit{Zhongyang Ribao} published an article two days after his death in which the reporter directly accused the Japanese and the Chinese collaborators of complicity in Wu’s death.\textsuperscript{62}

\textbf{The Pragmatic Side of Wu’s Nationalism}

As the evidence show, Wu had adopted a predominantly combative attitude towards imperialist powers in his long career. His militancy notwithstanding, Wu’s interactions with the imperialists were not only characterised by opposition, but also conciliation. He recognised that a purely confrontational approach towards resolving diplomatic incidents did not always yield the optimal result of soliciting cooperation or compensation from the imperialists. In the event that he found himself unable to respond to the imperialists’ challenges with sufficient force, he was often flexible enough to resort to the use of conciliatory measures.

Sun Danlin, a close aide of Wu, recounts an incident in his memoir which illuminates the delicate relationship between the warlord and Britain. In the months of July and August of 1921, Wu’s Zhili army capitalised on a regional conflict between the minor warlords of Sichuan and Hubei to seize control of the latter province. After his forces captured Yichang, Bi Weiyuan, an aide of Wu, advised him to establish a bureau in the city to collect the salt surplus which might

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{61} “Foreign News: Buddha’s Verdict” in \textit{Time}, December 18, 1939.

\textsuperscript{62} “Wu Peifu si yu di wei zhi shou” in \textit{Zhongyang Ribao}, December 6, 1939.
then be used to finance military expenditures.\textsuperscript{63} The salt surplus was a tax collected that constituted the remainder to the amount which was typically used by the central government to repay foreign loans. Major cities in China, such as Yichang in Hubei, all had inspectorates for the collection of the salt revenue. Governors in the provinces were supposed to forward the surplus to Beijing on a regular basis. Wu, who had just been promoted to the post of inspector-general of Hubei and Hunan, had no prerogative to collect the salt surplus for his own use. Nevertheless, he acceded to the proposal owing to his deep trust of Bi, who enjoyed a close personal relationship to the warlord, being both his old friend as well as matchmaker.\textsuperscript{64} Predictably, Wu’s actions invited the wrath of the British, who considered his collection of the salt surplus illegal and deleterious to their commercial interests in the region. Shortly after the establishment of the salt surplus bureau, the British ambassador to China Beilby Alston enacted three measures to counter Wu: 1) picketing marines around the salt inspectorate in Yichang to prevent the collection of the salt surplus; 2) lodging a formal protest with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing; 3) requesting British warships in Shanghai and Hong Kong to converge on Wuhan, the capital of Hubei, in a demonstration of force against Wu. The ministry, in response to the British complaint, ordered Wu to immediately stop his collection of the salt surplus. Wu was initially intransigent. He refused to bow to the British demands and threatened to close the British-owned HSBC bank and other British businesses in retaliation. Alston, perceiving the warlord’s antagonism, ordered the British warships to train their guns on Wu’s inspector-general offices in Wuchang and Hankou, in addition to stationing marines onshore in another show of force. He also sent envoy Barton to Luoyang to negotiate with Wu. Sun tells us in his memoir

\textsuperscript{63} Sun Danlin, “Wu Peifu yu Yin Mei de guanxi (1964)” in Wenshi ziliao cungao xuanbian (Beijing: Zhongguo wenshi chubanshe, 2002), 401.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
that Wu had, by this time, realised that further escalation of tensions would undermine his interests in Hubei. Therefore, he sought Sun’s advice on the resolution of this diplomatic incident. Sun suggested that instead of discussing the salt surplus issue with Barton, Wu should try to earn the envoy’s personal favour so as to propitiate the British ambassador. Wu agreed, prepared a feast for Barton, invited him to inspect his troops and arranged for a staff officer to accompany him on a tour of Luoyang. During the tour Wu’s officer purchased a few antiques for Barton, who gladly accepted the gifts, even though they were all counterfeits. Upon his return to Beijing, Barton persuaded his superiors to settle the dispute peacefully. The ensuing negotiations yielded an outcome in favour of Wu, with the British offering him a one-time payment of two million dollars in salt revenue on the condition that he would stop further collection of the salt surplus in Yichang.\(^{65}\)

Wu’s response to another incident involving the Japanese also revealed the pragmatic dimension of his anti-imperialist nationalism. On June 1, 1923, the residents of Changsha, the capital of Hunan, clashed with a group of passengers from a Japanese merchantman. Later in the day, fully armed Japanese marines from the warship Fushimi came ashore. They first discharged warning shots into the air, which infuriated the crowd of gathering residents, who angrily confronted the marines. The standoff eventually turned into another violent clash, in which the marines killed two Chinese and wounded many others. The incident, known as the June 1 Massacre (liuyi canan), precipitated a wave of anti-Japanese protests in Changsha. The situation had become so volatile that Zhao Hengti, the military governor of Hunan, gravely reported in his urgent telegram to Beijing that “the students, workers and merchants had gone on strike and

\(^{65}\) Ibid.
started to boycott Japanese goods."66 By July, anti-Japanese protests had spread to neighbouring provinces. The political instability of China exacerbated the tense climate, for the central government was undergoing a power transition at the time, in which Cao Kun, the leader of the Zhili clique, had just ousted the president Li Yuanhong from office. The temporarily leaderless government in Beijing was thus in no position to deal with the chaotic aftermath of the June 1 Incident. The Japanese knew the futility of seeking a diplomatic resolution through Beijing directly. So they dispatched Hayashi Kyujiro, the consul of Hankou, to Luoyang instead, whose mission was to persuade Wu to appeal to Beijing to suppress the anti-Japanese sentiments in China. Wu held the post of inspector-general of Zhili, Shandong and Henan, and was the real power behind the ascendant Zhili clique. He initially declined Kyujiro’s request, affirming the validity of the anti-Japanese demonstrations, which he ascribed to the patriotic feelings of the Chinese public. However after much deliberation, he ultimately petitioned Cao to stop the nationwide anti-Japanese protests, citing the avoidance of severe repercussions to Sino-Japanese commercial relations as the chief reason for such a conciliatory measure.67

Conclusion

The life of the Jade Marshal was a colourful one to say the least. In him we find the peculiar combination of a scholar and a soldier. As we have seen, Wu’s scholarly pretensions manifested in his predilection for epic poetry, written in the style of the men of renown of ancient times. They were also made evident by his intensely puritanical values, no doubt a product of his early classical education. In a speech made in an officer training school in Sichuan, he exhorted the candidates to abide by six abstentions. They were supposed to refrain from

66 “Zhao Hengti deng guanyu Changsha liuyi canan yinqi bake bashi bagong tongdian (June 1, 1923)” in Zhonghua Minguo dangan ziliao huibian: Minzhong yundong (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 1991), 652.

67 “Changsha liuyi canan pairi yundong zhi shanhou” in WXSJ, 358.
excessive alcohol consumption, sexual promiscuity, wealth accumulation, personal vendettas, opium smoking and gambling. As a military man, Wu deeply revered his forebears; the names of Chinese generals of old made famous by their resistance against foreign invaders frequently appeared in his writings. He also believed that the moral integrity of a soldier rested in his absolute loyalty to his superiors and the nation.

The duality of Wu’s character was what defined his nationalism. As a soldier whose duty was to defend the nation, he could not abide by attempts on the part of the imperialists to carve China into pieces. While it was beyond his strength to restore territory which had already been ceded, he committed fully to counteract such attempts in a variety of ways which we have seen. Furthermore, as a man of principle, he refused to join the collaborationist cause even though his life was in mortal peril. However, he was also circumspect enough to moderate his tough anti-imperialist stance when the odds appeared to be against him. The disparity in military power between Wu and the imperialists often necessitated the use of conciliatory tactics in diplomatic incidents. On occasions Wu even exhibited self-serving tendencies, which in no way discounted his overall anti-imperialist creed but only emphasised the complexity of his character and the circumstances he faced. After all, he was a leader who exercised, even at the height of his power, limited control over China, in an international environment that did not evolve to the country’s advantage. Accordingly, he made fairly judicious use of his authority to strike a delicate balance between the consolidation of the interests of his own clique and that of China as a whole. If he was indeed a warlord, he had at least been a relatively unique one.

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68 “Sichuan Suiding junguan jiaoyutuan yanjiangci (June, 11, 1930)” in WXSJ, 171-172.

69 Ibid., 170.
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