**BACKGROUND OF THE WARLORD PERIOD**

**A. The influence of China's geography and history**

Because different local regions had different geographical conditions and historical developments, China had in fact many local cultures.

**B.** **The decline and fall of the Ch'ing dynasty**

Traditional rulers held China together by two methods:  
i. the government-organized Civil Service Examination, which centrally produced officials and scholar-gentry to administer the different areas of China,

ii. the government-sponsored ideology of Confucianism, which emphasized obedience to the dynasty in rule. Yet, by the early 20th century, these ways of political control were no longer workable. This was because:

- the Civil Service Examination was cancelled in 1905;   
- Confucianism as a political belief was on the decline;   
- the 1911 Revolution did away with the Ch'ing dynasty, thereby removing the traditional central structure that commanded the loyalty of government officials.

**C. Political decentralization and the rise of regional military forces in late Ch'ing times**

Political decentralization had been growing serious ever since the Taiping Rebellion (1851-64). Because of this factor, the control of the new armies created after 1895 fell into the hands of men like Yuan Shih-k'ai and other provincial military officers. After the successful 1911 revolution, these military men divided China into regions and became rulers, even though formally a republic ruled over the country.

**D. The effects of late Ch'ing provincial and local self-rule**

Such provincial and local self-rule enabled the scholar-gentry leaders to selfishly keep their provincial and local self-interests. These leaders indirectly resisted the Central government, whether the Ch'ing before 1911 or the Republic afterwards. All this favoured the rise of regional warlords.

**E. The gradual disappearance of the traditional prejudice against the military profession**

Traditionally, the military profession was despised in China. Around 1900, however, the situation changed gradually. A military career was gaining in popularity, for the following reasons:

i Foreign imperialism made it necessary for the development of militant patriotism and a martial spirit in China.

ii.  The late Ch'ing government had tried deliberately to raise the reputation and social position of military service.

iii. The abolition of the Civil Service Examination in 1905 made it impossible for youngsters to compete for the traditional civil professions. More young people entered the military service.

iv. In contrast to the corruption of Chinese armies in the past, the disciplined behaviour of the late Ch'ing new armies brought it a good reputation.

**F. The failure of the 1911 Revolution to achieve real unification**

The Revolution of 1911 was quick but incomplete. The ruling classes of the late Ch'ing - military officers and local-provincial scholar-gentry -  remained in power. They became very powerful in local Chinese politics and divided China into parts. Lacking in reputation and real power, the new Republic failed to command the loyalty of all these ruling classes.

**G. The death of Yuan Shih-k'ai, "father of the Chinese warlords" in 1916**

From 1911 to 1916, the Peiyang Army, which Yuan created, was still unified and could therefore dominate other non-Peiyang provincial armies and local-provincial scholar-gentry. The commanders and officers of the Peiyang Army still obeyed Yuan's orders in general. But when Yuan died in 1916, these military men began to struggle for power and cut up territories themselves. This gave other non-Peiyang armies and scholar-gentry of the provinces a chance to gain more independence of action. When Yuan Shih-k'ai lived, some kind of unity still existed in China, for Yuan was still a national figure to stimulate a bit of nationalist feelings. After Yuan had gone, the country fell to pieces. The powerful warlords governed territories beyond the control of the powerless republican Central government in Peking. This was the period of the warlords.

[[Go Top]](http://www.funfront.net/hist/china/warlords.htm#top)

**THE WARLORDS**

A warlord was a commander of a personal army, ruling a territory, and acting more or less independently. Some warlords controlled only a small district or two, but the most powerful warlords ruled over two or three provinces. Generally men of narrow vision and weak abilities, the warlords exploited the people to get rich. Once wealthy, they would give up their warlord positions, retire to the safety of the foreign concessions in the treaty-ports, and enjoy life with their ill-gotten money.

**A. Within the warlord territories**

i. Within his region, the warlord ruled like a dictator. It is true that some warlords carried out limited social reforms and even paid attention to national problems. But for the most part they governed with terror and exploited the people by all kinds of taxation and corruption.

ii. The warlord government lacked any ideology like Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People. Administration was carried out with violence and force. Thus armies were important and were continuously expanded. These warlord armies were trained to be personally loyal to the warlords alone. Yet in reality many of the warlord soldiers were unreliable, since most of them were jobless and hungry people who fought only for money. As a result, many of these soldiers changed sides or ran away in battle. this was the reason why soldiers had to be continually recruited.

iii. The warlords often allowed their follower-commanders to rule some territories. This was because: a these officers expected rewards for their service, b the warlords could not personally control all their territorial belongings. With territorial control and the power of local taxation in hand, however, the officers became more and more independent and powerful. In the end, they became warlords themselves.

iv. Because of limited resources, the effective power of some warlords could only reach urban areas like towns and cities. Consequently, although in theory it was the warlord who occupied a province, in practice the scholar-gentry still ruled independently over the villages of the extensive countryside.

**B. Between the warlords**

i. For more territory and power, the warlords always fought with one another. Most of these wars were short-lived and small in scale. Alliances with other warlords were often made and changed. The most powerful warlords would become protectors of smaller warlords. But the internal governments of these smaller warlords were seldom interfered with, since military victories of one warlord over another were often short and limited.

ii. Because warlord armies were kept together by individual officers rather than a military system, the elimination of a single military commander by murder could greatly weaken a rival warlord's military strength. As a result, there were many political assassinations . Also, money and bribes (known as "silver bullets") were often offered to buy over the officers of a rival warlord. [[Go Top]](http://www.funfront.net/hist/china/warlords.htm#top)

**C. In Peking the capital**

i. While some warlords were content to struggle for territories among one another, other warlords were fond of fighting for the control of Peking, the capital. There were two reasons:

a. On becoming the master of Peking, any warlord could represent the nation in foreign and internal matters, since the foreign powers only recognized the Peking government as China's formal government. The warlord in Peking could therefore acquire foreign loans in the name of the national government.

b. After 1911, the foreign powers had taken over the complete control of the collection of China's customs and salt taxes in the treaty-ports. The collected money was then sent by foreigners from the treaty-ports to Peking to pay the interest on foreign loans that China had previously contracted. The remaining sum of money, even after deduction, was still large. It would be turned over to the Chinese government in Peking by the foreigners. In this way, whoever controlled Peking could obtain this large sum of money.

ii. Generally speaking, the northern warlords usually fought for the control of Peking in the name of national unification. The southern warlords, who had no hope of gaining control of the national capital, spoke strongly for a federal system of government (in which the provinces would retain important independent powers).

iii. Because of the struggle for Peking, China's national government changed hands quickly. From 1916 to 1928, China had more than 7 heads of state, another 7 brief periods of caretaker governments, and 25 cabinets in quick succession.

**D. Relations with the foreign powers**

i. To the foreign powers, the absence of a strong and centralized Chinese government during the warlord period offered opportunities for the expansion of economic concessions. On the other hand, however, warlord disorder made it unsafe for the foreign powers in enjoying their existing treaty-rights. There were, in short, both advantages and disadvantages.

ii. Japan was most eager to make use of China's political disunity. In 1917-18, large loans were sent to the Peking warlord government, in return for the extension of Japanese economic privileges in China. Other foreign powers also sent loans to the Peking warlords.

iii. Although there was an Arms Embargo Agreement in 1919 that prohibited the sale of arms and munitions to China, foreigners continued to sell weapons to. Chinese warlords for profits.

iv. Some foreign powers had the habit of choosing and supporting one or the other warlord in China. They hoped that if their warlord could one day unify China, they would make large gains. Russia, for example, backed Feng Yu-hsiang. Japan, on the other hand, supported Chang Tso-lin in Manchuria.

v. In short, the policies and activities of the foreigners during the warlord period encouraged China's political disunity.

[[Go Top]](http://www.funfront.net/hist/china/warlords.htm#top)

**GENERAL POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS OF THE WARLORD PERIOD**

A. 1916-1923

From 1916 to 1918, there were, generally speaking, two groups of warlords in China. One consisted of Yuan Shih-k'ai's generals in North China; the other of militarists who had been uncooperative with Yuan in the south. Upon the death of Yuan Shih-k'ai in 1916, the two groups fought with each other for territorial expansion, which continued till 1918. In that year, the northern group was itself divided into two: an "Anfu clique" and a "Chihli clique". The Anfu clique was led by Tuan Ch'i-jui, while the Chihli clique by Wu P'ei-fu. The two cliques often fought with each other for the control of Peking. Members of the two groups often changed sides. In 1920, Chang Tso-lin, who was a warlord backed by the Japanese in Manchuria, entered the struggle. Chang belonged to neither clique. He had his own ambitions.

B. 1924-1928

In 1924, the second round of warlord warfare began. Feng Yu-hsiang, who had previously been one of Wu P'ei-fu's generals, betrayed Wu and went over to the enemy's camp, the Anfu clique. Then, a struggle between Feng and Chang Tso-lin took place. In the end, Feng was defeated and had to retreat to Northwest China, where he got Russian backing. Meanwhile, in the south, warlords also fought for territories. Even Sun Yat-sen entered the struggle with warlords politically and militarily.

[[Go Top]](http://www.funfront.net/hist/china/warlords.htm#top)

**EFFECTS OF THE WARLORD PERIOD**

**A. Economic effects**

The warlord period had a harmful effect on the Chinese economy:

i. Agriculture - Frequent warlord warfare and disorder destroyed crops, plants and farms. Farm animals and tools were often seized by warlord soldiers, who behaved little better than bandits. On the other hand, although the production of opium had almost been stopped by 1916, the warlords revived it by giving large areas of land to opium-growth. This was because the business was profitable. Much land that could be used to produce food was therefore wasted.

ii. Trade — Because of the many and different local taxes imposed by the warlords, trade was restricted and was on the decline. Other factors also discouraged trade, such as the frequent dictatorial seizure of goods by warlord troops, the unjust handling of currency by the warlords (who printed as much paper money as they liked) and the military control of transport systems, which badly affected the free flow of goods.

iii. Industry— Industrialists and businessmen were often forced to make "donations" of money to the warlords. As the future was so uncertain, few industrialists and traders were willing to carry out any long-term economic project.

**B. Social effects**

i. The common people were seriously exploited by the warlord and his military men. Heavy taxes were imposed. In particular, the land tax rose 5 to 6 times. Many other taxes were introduced. There was, for example, even a" laziness tax" on those people who did not plant opium. Also, many taxes were collected in advance. In one region, they were collected up to the 56th year of the Republic, that is 1968! Other than taxes, services were also demanded from the people. For example, the peasants were required to provide carts and animals for warlord troops.

ii. Frequent wars between the warlords killed many people and created even more miseries in society. As the warlords paid little attention to constructive social reform, social problems remained as serious as they had been.

iii. In such unsafe social conditions, the peasants were forced to join secret societies for self-protection. This was the reason why when the Communists set up peasant associations in the early 1920s (see page 144), there was strong peasant support, with the result that these peasant associations were quickly growing in numbers. Warlord disorder thus indirectly contributed to the expansion OT Chinese Communism.

iv. Traditionally, members of the scholar-gentry class were social leaders in the villages, taking care of the peasants and commanding popular respect. In the warlord period, however, it seemed that the scholar gentry was either allied with or subservient to the warlords in jointly exploiting the people. Despairing of the scholar-gentry's social leadership, the peasants were as a result more prepared to accept and welcome the new social leadership offered by the Communists.

v. The social disorder that the warlords created led to the further breakdown of China's social tradition. First, human relationships were based less on moral bounds and more on expectations of reward and benefit. Secondly, social and geographic mobility increased: more people moved from lower social positions to higher ones or from one territory to another. Poor and illiterate peasants could become top military officers, even warlords.

[[Go Top]](http://www.funfront.net/hist/china/warlords.htm#top)

**C. Intellectual effects**

i. Despite the lack of a unified government, nationalism continued to grow during the warlord period. There were two reasons:

a To look like national heroes, many warlords were fond of preaching nationalistic ideas. Slogans like "Destroy Imperialism" or "Save China" could often be heard.

b Political disunity that the warlords brought about aroused much dissatisfaction among Chinese intellectuals, who therefore stood out to save China in national movements like the May Fourth Movement.

ii. Because under the warlords there was no single national power with a single national ideology, these intellectuals had more freedom to experiment with different ideas and academic studies. It was under such an atmosphere of intellectual freedom that Communism, a new and strange body of belief, was introduced in China.

iii. Yet because both the Peking and warlord governments were corrupt and unstable, many able and ambitious young men were unwilling to make politics their career. Instead, these young people chose to bury themselves in impractical academic studies. Chinese intellectuals were thus further away from the common people and the peasants, whose suffering continued. In the end, it was Mao Tse-tung and the Communists who went to the countryside and started a revolution there.

**D. Political effects**

i. The warlord period showed that a parliamentary republic on the Western model was a failure. Chinese intellectuals and liberals were therefore more willing to consider other systems of government, such as that of Communism.

ii. Political power, as the warlord period showed, was primarily based on the possession of strong military forces, not empty political ideas. In an atmosphere of power politics, both the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) and the KMT (Kuomintang) became more realistic and practical.

iii. The warlord period also raised the importance of the military profession in China. The leaders of both the CCP and the KMT were military men or men with extensive military experience.

iv. In the warlord period, political decentralization that began in late Ch'ing times was made worse. The problem of China's territorial and political breakup was unsolved. Even after 1928, when the KMT nominally unified the country, much Chinese territory was still governed by the former warlords. This obstructed the KMT's attempts at reform and thus weakened the KMT's power in fighting against the Communists.

v. Meanwhile, political disunity and warlord disorder invited more foreign imperialism. China became weaker, which encouraged Japanese aggression in the 1930s.

[[Go Top]](http://www.funfront.net/hist/china/warlords.htm#top)