*Malaysian Journal of Chinese Studies*, 2023, *12*(1): 121–123

# Book Review

China as a federated nation: A review of Negotiating A Chinese Federation: The Exchange of Ideas and Political Collaborations between China's Men of Guns and Men of Letters, 1919–1923 by Vivienne Xiangwei Guo, Leiden: Brill, 2022, pp. ix, 266 pp.

**Diana Lary***

**To cite this book review:** Diana Lary (2023). China as a federated nation: A review of *Negotiating A Chinese Federation: The Exchange of Ideas and Political Collaborations between China's Men of Guns and Men of Letters, 1919–1923* by Vivienne Xiangwei Guo. *Malaysian Journal of Chinese Studies 12(1): 121–123. http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202306_12*(1).0009
**To link to this book review:** http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202306_12(1).0009

Communist China's hatred of federalism is profound and visceral. Beijing's response to the perennial and constant tension between the centre and the regions of China is a tough emphasis on centralism, and bitter attacks on anyone or any system that suggests devolution of power. The antipathy to federalism is fed by the equally perennial attachment to the province/region, the attachment that led the youthful Mao Zedong to give his enthusiastic support to federalism, and self-rule for his own province, Hunan.

Vivienne Guo's lucid study of federalism is based in the key period 1919–1923 when centralised power based in Beijing was waning, when foreign threats were lessened after the disaster of World War One, and when a multitude of ideas, Chinese and foreign, was floating around in China. One popular idea on government was federalism, the devolving of power to the provinces, in the manner of other .[1] The logic of devolution is real. The differences in spoken languages, cuisine, pride in provincial history have created strong provincial identities that fuel the desire for greater autonomy. But federalism is in conflict with the ideal of a strong, centralised China. Since the beginning of the Chinese state political, military, ideological divisions along regional lines have been seen as threats to the central state. Devolution was a slippery slope leading to the collapse of the state, a disaster not unknown, given the long periods of division in China's history. In the early Republic provincial identities flourished, nowhere more so than in the rich southern provinces of Guangdong and Hunan.

1919–1923 was also a time when the deep division between men of the gun and men of letters, was blurred. Guo looks at the federalist efforts of two military men. Chen Jiongming (陈炯明), in Guangdong, was a graduate of the traditional examination system, a lawyer and a soldier. His ideal was "a modern Guangdong in a modern China." He encouraged and financed political thinkers, notably anarchists. Under him Guangdong was a "May 4th crucible." His problem was with the unwavering centralist Sun Yat-sen, who saw Chen only as a means to foster his centralising ideal of launching a northern expedition to reunite China. Chen ousted Sun from Guangzhou once, but was soon ousted himself. Zhao Hengti (赵恒惕), a soldier trained in Japan, actually proclaimed Hunan's provincial constitution, with the collaboration of leading Hunanese men of letters, Tan Yankai (谭延闿) and Xiong Xiling (熊希龄). He held power until 1926.

The blurring of the division between civil and military did not last; the military became dominant, notably in the twelve years of war from 1937 to 1949. But the division remains strong in Western scholarship on China. The disdain for the military ignores the parallel military world, and the importance of the military in political change; China's modern military was born out of the need to resist foreign incursion; the same military brought down the last dynasty. Guo's perceptive study goes far to breaking down the facile stereotypes of men of letters and men of the gun.

Federalism has not had a long history in modern China. The system has been damned by both the Guomindang and the Communist Party, condemned as a precursor to separatism and the dread "splitism" (分裂主义). The Guomindang, after Sun Yat-sen's death, did launch the Northern Expedition in 1926, in the name of anti-warlordism and anti-imperialism. Military commanders, except those in the revolutionary armies were labeled warlords, all equally venal, ignoring the differences between them, some educated, some not, some progressive, some backward. The only way to escape the term was to be "relabeled" as a revolutionary general, to be "turned" by the Guomindang. The result was that in the 1928 national "reunification," the Guomindang controlled with certainty only five provinces. Guangdong was back under another regional military figure, as popular as Chen Jiongming had been, Chen Jitang (陈济棠) (no relation).

Guo's scholarship is outstanding. She uses the widest possible range of sources, including a unique form of communication, the circular telegram (通电). These were combinations of statements of principle, attacks on opponents and publicity announcements. They were widely reproduced by newspapers and magazines eager for column inches. In this way competing ideas were circulated simultaneously.

This book, with its high scholarship and its persuasive argument, gives hope for the rebirth of two key aspects of modern China where there is alarming absence in Western scholarship. One is the strength and persistence of regional and provincial attachments, not just in the border regions populated by non-Han peoples, but in major provinces, notably Guangdong, the fountainhead of economic modernisation. The suspicion of southern devolution is alive and well. There are no

Cantonese on the 20th Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party. The other is the importance of China's military and military culture, a dominant part of China's economic and political world, but virtually unknown outside China.

A footnote on filial devotion in keeping the contributions of leading figures alive. Chen Jiongming has been rescued from obscurity by the devoted efforts of his son, Chen Dingyan (陈定炎), just as Pai Chung-hsi or Bai Chongxi (白崇禧) has been given his rightful place in Republican history through the books of his son, the celebrated writer Pai Hsien-yung or Bai Xianyong (白先勇). And a second footnote: a lovely autocorrect on p.24: "Confusion notions of family relationships" must be a correction for "Confucian."

## Notes

1 The common translation of federalism is 联省自治,"self-government amongst linked provinces."

* Dr. Diana Lary is Professor Emerita, Department of History, University of British Columbia, Canada. Email: lary@mail.ubc.ca