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## Review of Arthur Waldron, *From War to Nationalism: China's Turning Point, 1924-1925*

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**Disciplines**

Arts and Humanities | East Asian Languages and Societies

**Comments**

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the north during the civil war, and marked the beginning of anti-government activity that characterized the next three years.

The other major themes that are briefly addressed in Yick's study are the labour, government, business and telecommunications sectors of post-war Beijing-Tianjin. One might assume that organizing labour movements would have been the most important activity of the communists, but this was not the case. Despite official Party rhetoric, the CCP's success in the urban sphere during the civil war was limited to the student movements. The Party's limited inroads into organized labour were the result of economic and not political issues. Local grievances, related to wages and the treatment of workers, were the catalysts for strikes, not the communists' anti-GMD ideology. Yick goes so far as to conclude that labour unrest "played a minimal role in furthering the Nationalist loss of authority." (p. 149) The strikes that did take place in the northern cities, and there were many of them, were the natural result of food shortages and monetary crises that characterized the post-war period. Workers struck over 'bread and butter' issues and not for lofty ideals.

This is a well-organized and researched book. Yick's extensive bibliography, which contains dozens of recently published Chinese studies and document collections, will serve as a solid foundation for any future research on the civil war period. The book should be read by all those examining the history of twentieth century China, and particularly the CCP. It not only challenges many of our past conceptions of the Chinese Revolution but also provides a possible framework and context into which the other student movements of this century can be placed.

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Robert John Perrins

Waldron, Arthur: *From War to Nationalism: China's Turning Point, 1924–1925*. (Cambridge University Press, 1995), xix + 366 pp., \$ 39.95. ISBN 0-521-47238-5.

As in his *The Great Wall of China*, Arthur Waldron has again turned to Chinese military-political history to subvert some long-standing verities of Chinese history. In *The Great Wall* he discredited the complementary myths of the Great Wall and a "monolithic" pre-modern China. In *From War to Nationalism*, he takes on the guiding argument in mainstream modern Chinese history: the structural incapacity of the China's status quo regime and the consequent inevitability of a nationalist revolution.

Waldron argues on the contrary that by 1924 what he calls the "Northern System" had stabilized after the difficult decade of the 1920s, and that the Beijing government under Wu Peifu bid fair to resolve China's pressing problems. Waldron thus finds the roots of the Nationalist revolution of 1926–1928 not in any systemic deficiency of the Northern regime, but rather in the widespread disruption produced by the Second Zhili-Fengtian War of 1924. It was the war's defeat of the dominant Zhili clique that both gave credibility to the previously marginal "anti-imperialist, anti-feudal" critique, and weakened the forces of order enough to give the Northern Expedition a chance of victory.

With hitherto unutilized archival data from Nanjing, Washington, London, and elsewhere, and exhaustive mining of contemporary and secondary literature, *From War to Revolutions* marks a qualitative advance in warlord historiography. In the vividness of detail, depth of inside information, and clarity of presentation, Waldron's work is a bravura performance in history writing. The author has clearly fulfilled his aim to pen the first comprehensive and readable description of one of China's many civil wars.

Few, however, will be fully convinced by Waldron's main argument. The nationalist anti-government sentiment that became public in 1925 with the May Thirtieth Movement may well have been *occasioned* by the war and its dispiriting aftermath, but it is harder to argue that it was *caused* by the war. In the end, Waldron fails to offer strong arguments countering the principal claims of mainstream historians about the structural incapacity of the Beijing regime. Waldron himself concedes that a protracted state of near bankruptcy paralyzed the Zhili government throughout its tenure (pp. 120–126) and acknowledges that the Washington Conference's promise of escape from the financial and diplomatic entanglements of the treaty system was proving illusory even before the war broke out (pp. 30–34). Nor does he even attempt to confront the significance of the May Fourth Movement, anti-Christian agitation, the upsurge in labor unrest, and the post-war depression in discrediting both the Beijing government and the Versailles powers. In short, even after reading *From War to Nationalism* one still has the impression that the period of stability from 1921–1924 was only a temporary reprieve due to a series of fortunate accidents. The Northern System may have been still afloat in 1924 but it was by no means seaworthy.

Waldron has thus given us a compelling narrative of one of the dramatic episodes that together finally broke the back of the Northern System. He has also gone a considerable way in elucidating the nature and the strengths, even in its last days, of that system. In so doing, he has issued a much-needed call to abandon the teleological master narrative of inevitable revolution. Compared to these achievements, his failure to adequately establish the centrality of the years 1924–1925 is an important but not vitiating flaw in an otherwise masterful and provocative study.

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Atkins, Martyn: *Informal Empire in Crisis: British Diplomacy and the Chinese Customs Succession, 1927–1929*, Cornell East Asia Series 74. (Ithaca: Cornell University East Asia Program, 1995), x + 127 pp., pbk. \$ 12.00. ISBN 0-939657-74-0.

When the Guomindang established itself at Nanjing in 1928, two governments claimed to be the legitimate rulers of China. In their relations with external powers, each of them attempted to alter the treaties that had been imposed on the Qing empire through force by European nation-states in the previous century. Of crucial concern for both were provisions like extraterritoriality and tariff regulation, treaty provisions which the Powers had agreed to rescind or modify at the Washington Conference (1921–1922).