

## 5. NORTH CHINA AUTONOMY MOVEMENT; HEBEI AND CHAHAR AUTONOMOUS GOVERNMENTS

### Emergence of North China autonomy movements

After the Tanggu Truce was concluded, the inhabitants of North China were not altogether satisfied with life under the rule of the Nanjing Nationalist government. Farmers in the Demilitarized Zone harbored a fervent desire for North China autonomy, and hoped an opportunity would arise.

What motivated them was frustration with the Nanjing government's predatory tax policy vis à vis North China over the preceding decade. Here is one example: In 1935 the government collected 14,000 yuan *per annum* in central government tax and non-tax revenue. Since the central government expended only 8,350 yuan on North China, it was pocketing 5,650 yuan!

Exploitative policies like this had been commonly used by Chinese warlords in the past. But as Chiang Kai-shek's regime gradually retrenched in the face of Manzhouguo's remarkable progress, it was only natural that a deep-seated longing for autonomy would spring up among the people of North China.

Accordingly, the basis for the formation of an autonomy movement was deep-rooted. It is not surprising that a strong desire on the part of the people of North China to rebel against persistent misgovernment and escape from their predicament inspired them to turn to Japan and Manzhouguo.

But this groundswell should certainly not be attributed to local machinations of the Japanese military. Support from the Japanese military alone would not have been sufficient to give rise to an autonomy movement among the Chinese people. What was needed was a change of heart among them, impoverished as they were by so many years of warlord "governance." The evolution of the autonomy movement and the background for Manchurian independence were interrelated.

With the conclusion of the Umezu-He Agreement, the North China autonomy movement erupted in a violent manner, with the Fengtai revolt and the Xianghe peasant uprising. The Fengtai revolt was an attempt by Bai Jianwu to take advantage of the signing of the Umezu-He pact to occupy Beiping with his own troops, goad anti-Chiang factions to rise to action, and establish a pro-Japanese, pro-Manzhouguo government. The plan ended when Bai's troops were defeated in a confrontation in Beiping on June 28. When it came to light that several Japanese nationals, including the chairman of the North China Youth League, were involved in the incident, the consul-general at Tianjin ordered them to leave China; he also ordered the North China Youth League to disband. This was a public gesture demonstrating that Japan did not support the North China autonomy movement.

The Xianghe Incident was an autonomy movement started by farmers in October 1935 in Xianghe county, Hebei province, along the border of the Demilitarized Zone (designated by the Tanggu Truce). A group of approximately 1,000 peasants banded together to present a petition for autonomy. They repudiated both Chiang Kai-shek's government and the GMD, pressed for the elimination of extortionist taxes, and demanded local autonomy and the resignation of the county magistrate. County officials attempted to use force to suppress the petitioners. However, the

realization that they could not succeed convinced the officials to compromise with the petitioners by issuing a tax-reduction order. The uprising eventually subsided. An investigation conducted by the Japanese military police revealed that several Japanese had participated in the uprising. However, no official Japanese entities were involved. The incident was a timely emergence of deep-rooted political discontent in North China, which might be described as a major trend that makes the involvement of a few Japanese seem insignificant.

### **North China's warlords vacillate**

As the notion of political autonomy for North China began to surface, so did unrest among North China's warlords, mainly Yan Xishan of Shanxi, Han Fuju of Shandong, Shang Zhen and Wan Fulin of Hebei, and Song Zheyuan, who had gradually moved into Hebei from Chahar province. All were aware of the need for an alliance with Japan. But they were also apprehensive about pressure from Nanjing, and refrained from acting precipitously. The Nanjing government responded to the turmoil in North China by using a combination of inflexible and accommodating tactics, flaunting its military might at times and seeming conciliatory at others, to prevent defections and undermine efforts toward North China autonomy.

In November of 1935 the Nationalist government initiated a currency reform with British backing. If the reform were successful, Nanjing's control over North China would certainly tighten, and British influence would increase. Japanese Army authorities were not amenable to British domination over North China. The warlords were also unhappy about the possibility of the Chiang government's wrapping its tentacles around North China. The interests of local Japanese forces and the warlords coincided on this point.

Immediately after the currency reform was implemented, both Song and Han attempted to sabotage it by prohibiting the export of silver from their provinces. Song then sent a telegram to the Fifth Guomindang Congress demanding the formation of a constitutional government, the convening of a national assembly, and the return of power to the people. Some historians argue that these actions were the result of "coercion" by the Japanese military. They were not, but even if they had been, we must not forget that the warlords welcomed and used that same "coercion" as an excuse to abandon the Nanjing Nationalist government and achieve autonomy for North China.

At the time, the Song faction's plan involved (1) forming a pro-Japanese, anti-Soviet autonomous (semi-independent) government in North China, (2) having that government comprise five provinces and three cities, and (3) recognizing the suzerainty of the Nanjing government, but retaining a high degree of freedom over foreign and domestic affairs and economic matters. In the meantime, Song secretly complained to Nanjing about the untenable position he found himself in due to "oppression and coercion" from the Japanese. He found himself struggling to protect his position by sitting on both sides of the fence. On the one hand, Song promised the Japanese that he would establish autonomy and declare independence for North China. On the other, he secretly swore loyalty to the Nanjing government. His hypocritical schemes caused confusion in North China.

For that reason, North China autonomy was assuredly not a high-handed demand from Japan. Rather, it was a movement created by the aspirations of the North China warlords.

## **Establishment of East Hebei Autonomous Government; Hebei-Chahar Political Council**

The North China autonomy movement was in turmoil in November 1935, thanks to the Nanjing government's attempts to undermine it, and vacillation on the part of the warlords. Then, in Tongzhou on November 25 Yin Rugeng, commissioner of the Demilitarized Zone, suddenly issued a declaration of autonomy for the zone and announced the establishment of the East Hebei Anti-Communist Autonomous Council. In addition to castigating the central government, Yin's declaration stated, "In response to the desires of the four million residents of the Demilitarized Zone, we have risen up to save ourselves. We vow that henceforth we shall abandon the central government, proclaim autonomy, serve as the harbingers of autonomy for other provinces, and strive for peace in Asia."<sup>1</sup>

Yin became chairman of the council, which had nine members. The autonomous region comprised 25 counties, seven more than the 18 designated in the Tangu Truce.

The East Hebei Anti-Communist Autonomous Council's declaration infuriated the Nanjing government, which denounced Yin as a traitor and issued an order for his arrest.

In the meantime, demonstrations in Tianjin and Beiping, which involved both anti- and pro-autonomy groups, created chaos. Finally, the Nanjing government decided that, given the circumstances, it would be preferable to anticipate the Japanese by establishing a political organization suited to North China, one that would allow the central government to salvage its reputation. On December 18 the Hebei-Chahar Political Council was born. The council would have jurisdiction over all government affairs for two provinces (Hebei and Chahar) and two cities (Beiping and Tianjin). When Song Zheyuan was installed as chairman, he said that politics should respect the will of the people and be guided by integrity. He promised that, taking the special situation in North China into consideration, he would strive to maintain peace in East Asia, with friendship between China and Japan as the starting point. Song also pledged that he would endeavor to resist the scourge of communism and nurture the people's ability to govern themselves.

That was the process that resulted in the formation of the East Hebei Anti-Communist Autonomy Council and the Hebei-Chahar Political Council toward the end of 1935. However, while the former stressed independence from the Nanjing government and was pro-Japanese, the latter was rooted in compromise between Japan and China. Song Zheyuan was handpicked by the Japanese, but the Hebei-Chahar Political Council<sup>2</sup> was an organ of the Nationalist government. Due to its duplicity, the Hebei-Chahar Political Council was doomed from the start.

Unsurprisingly, relations between the two councils were less than smooth. The East Hebei organization had intended to merge with the Hebei-Chahar group when the time was right. But when it became clear that the Hebei-Chahar group was controlled by the Nanjing government, that

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<sup>1</sup> 冀东防共自治委员会, 冀东防共自治委员会成立宣言, 25 November 1935, transcription at Wikisource, <https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/冀东防共自治委员会成立宣言>; retrieved 09/2025.

<sup>2</sup> According to a contemporaneous Nationalist government organization chart, the Hebei-Chahar Political Council was answerable to the Executive Yuan.

plan was abandoned. On November 25, the East Hebei organization changed its name to the East Hebei Anti-Communist Autonomous Government, with Yin Rugeng as its chief.

In late November, when the UK and US asked the Japanese for an explanation of the situation in North China, Shigemitsu Mamoru, vice-minister for foreign affairs, acknowledged that the Japanese military had had some involvement in recent events, but because of China's hostility toward Manzhouguo, that was unavoidable. His counterargument to the UK was that the currency reform had aggravated problems in North China, and had once again brought on a worsening of relations between Japan and China. In any case, the rivalry between the two North China governments continued, a reflection of the complex political and economic situation in North China.

