

Stalemate within Stalemate: The Changsha Incident (1923)

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ABSTRACT

On 1 June 1923, Japanese soldiers in Changsha, Hunan, opened fire on and killed two anti-Japanese protesters seeking to prevent the landing of Japanese goods. Through a comprehensive review of the Incident, this article explores the interplay between local and central diplomatic power during the high time of provincialism. The incident demonstrates how the autonomous Hunan government, faced with the rise of anti-imperialism in local societies and the central government's inability to fend off foreign coercion, mediated between the local parliament, the central diplomatic office, and Japanese authorities for a solution of the case. By unpacking the multi-layered power dimensions of the time, this article demonstrates that the interactions between local and central diplomatic offices were characterized by both cooperation and distrust. Meanwhile, attempts to reach a negotiated settlement over the incident hinged more on competing domestic agendas than on diplomacy. Conflicts between Hunan provincial authorities, a lack of coordination between diplomatic officials in Hunan and Beijing, civilian elites' distrust of military officials, and rivalry between regional warlords all combined to hinder progress in negotiations.

KEY WORDS

Hunan, diplomacy, warlord, provincialism, Sino-Japanese conflict

BIOGRAPHICAL PARAGRAPH

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On June 1, 1923, around 1 p.m., the Japanese steamer Chinling arrived in Changsha. When Chinese passengers were disembarking, civil groups advocating for the boycott of Japanese goods and services accused them of betraying their country. Japanese soldiers interfered, which fueled the anger among the large crowd of spectators. As scuffles between the crowd and the Japanese soldiers grew tense, some twenty bluejackets from the nearby Japanese gunboat, the Fushimi, came out to maintain order. They took their rifles and fired in the air as a warning, only to find this exacerbated the mayhem. The bluejackets were later given the order to shoot into the crowd and attack them with bayonets. Two Chinese were killed, including one 11-year-old student, and thirteen severely wounded.¹ The event became known as the June 1 or Changsha Incident of 1923.

The Changsha Incident ended in a diplomatic deadlock. China was unable to secure compensation for the victims while Japan did not acknowledge that the bluejackets had over-reacted. Eclipsed by many Sino-Japanese collisions during the late 1920s and beyond, the incident remains under-researched. While Angus McDonald (1978) makes a passing reference to the case in his seminal study on the rural revolution in Hunan,² Chun-Hao Ying (2008), in a more elaborate account of the event, associates it with China's lack of bargaining power in its negotiations with Japan over the latter's navigational rights along the Yangtze River. The Incident was not, however, a mere diplomatic confrontation between China and Japan, but a reflection of entangled tensions at various levels. A state-level perspective alone is insufficient to reveal the layered conflicts involved.

The Changsha Incident provides a window onto the interplay of local and central diplomatic power during the high time of provincialism. The Incident took place shortly after Hunan became the first province to promulgate a provincial constitution during the decades-long autonomy movement. One of the outcomes of the constitutional movement was the establishment of a local diplomatic institution, independent of the central government's

supervision. While Hunan's defiance of the authority of the Beijing government was under the gaze of other provinces who were tempted to follow suit, the outbreak of the Changsha Incident served as an acid test for the boundary of local diplomatic power. Recent studies have charted a general trend toward the centralization of diplomacy during the late Qing and early Republican years (Zhao, 2008: 176–179). Yet the development did not follow a linear path. The power vacuum in Beijing after Yuan Shikai's demise gave rise to militarism. The authority of the central government waned significantly when local powers failed to pledge allegiance and became embroiled in the civil war between North and South military factions. Hunan was affected by this political fragmentation. The Changsha Incident demonstrated how the newly elected Hunan government, faced with the rise of anti-imperialism in local societies and the central government's lack of capacity to fend off foreign coercion, mediated between the local parliament, the central diplomatic office, and Japanese authorities for a solution of the case.

The Incident also reveals how an international dispute became entangled in local political rivalries.³ Provincialism was not driven by loyalty to local interests only, but also by local responses to political contingencies. Schoppa (1997: 662) has pointed out the pragmatic nature of the autonomy movement, arguing that provincialism and nationalism were intertwined in continually varying patterns depending on changing degrees of political integration at every level. Provincialism, in contrast to its obvious connotation with division and separation, was sought as a means of enhancing security and integration, either at the local level to prevent internal exploitation and external intervention, or to form the basis of federalism at the national level.⁴ Yet the pragmatic nature of the means betrayed their goal. Provincialism could not solve the problem of the lack of political consensus but was exploited by various interest groups as a pretext to claim resources and power. Instead of

tightening the connection between the civilian and military elites, Hunan's constitution widened the gap.

Indeed, beneath the autonomous movement in Hunan lay the Hunan civilian elites' resistance to the militarization of politics and the efforts of local groups to shield the region from exploitation by external warlords. Jerome Chen (1979) has famously characterized the early Republican period as dominated by a gentry-military coalition. Yet the coalition was a loose one, brimming with tensions in the inevitable transition from civilian to military power during a time of national instability.⁵ Meanwhile, lurking behind the Changsha Incident was the competition among local militarists, particularly the rivalry between Tan Yankai (譚延闓 1880–1930), a member of the degree-holding gentry who nonetheless assumed Hunan's military governorship three times in the early Republic, and Zhao Hengti (趙恆惕 1880–1971), who originally rose to power as Tan's main military subordinate. The Tan-Zhao conflict progressed in parallel with the Changsha Incident in the background and affected the development of provincialism and negotiations during the incident at various points. At the same time, communist-led social groups also rode the wave of popular anti-imperialism to expand their influence. The diplomatic dispute tied all these threads together. Voices and engagements of various interest groups in the Changsha Incident revealed a fragmented yet entangled political environment.

This article seeks to provide a comprehensive review of this Incident. Instead of analyzing the case from the conventional perspective of a Sino-Japanese conflict, it seeks to bridge the domestic and international divide and unpack the multi-layered power dimensions of the time. The detailed negotiation process helps to reveal the nuances in diplomacy during a high time of provincialism and the delicate relations between the central and local governments. While claiming diplomatic independence from the central government, Hunan's limited diplomatic power was exposed by its lack of authority to deal with the

Japanese beyond the local level. Meanwhile, interactions with the central government over such diplomatic issues were characterized by both cooperation and distrust.

The stalemate over the Changsha Incident occurred not only in China's negotiations with Japan but also among various groups who sought to advance their interests throughout the negotiation process. The rivalry between the local parliament and the cabinet handicapped Hunan's negotiations with Japan. Local activists continued to stimulate anti-imperialism among the public, which placed local authorities in a quagmire between foreign pressure and domestic political demands. Meanwhile, conflicts between Tan Yankai and Zhao Hengti, which reflected the tension among warlord factions, provided Japan with an excuse to suspend the negotiations. The Changsha Incident would culminate in a complex power play of groups at various levels. The diplomatic stalemate was a delicate political balance made up of layers of connected confrontations and compromises.

THE HUNAN AUTONOMY MOVEMENT AND THE LOCAL FOREIGN AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT

The outbreak of the Changsha Incident put the Hunan Foreign Affairs Department (*Jiaoshe si* 交涉司) at the forefront of negotiations with Japan. The Department had only been founded in December 1922 as an outcome of Hunan's provincial autonomy movement. The delicate power balance between the civilian and military elites and the division of local and central diplomatic institutions foreboded diplomatic difficulties. To place these issues in a proper perspective, it is necessary to review Hunan's pro-autonomy movement and the tension between local factions of Tan Yankai and Zhao Hengti.

The proposal for provincial autonomy was popular among all stripes of political thinkers in Hunan during the late Qing and early Republican years. After the failure of the Hundred Days' Reform, reformists Tan Sitong (譚嗣同 1865–1898), Xiong Xiling (熊希齡

1870–1930) and Liang Qichao (梁啟超 1873–1929) took the lead in setting up the Southern Study Society (*Nanxuehui* 南學會) in Hunan, which advocated local self-government and imperial reform. Closely connected with the revolutionaries during his study in Japan, Yang Yulin (楊毓麟 1872–1911), a native Hunanese, published “A New Hunan” (*Xin Hunan*) in 1902. He argued for the establishment of a local autonomous government and an independent provincial parliament bound by a local constitution (Yang, 2008: 32). His idea that “Hunan belongs to the Hunanese” [湖南者，吾湖南人之湖南也] garnered support from many who were disappointed with the Qing’s inability to defend China’s sovereignty and local order. The native-place connection provided political cohesion and empowered local elites, many of whom were otherwise excluded from a centrally led bureaucracy. Self-government became a strategy of the local elites to establish their authority, to overcome the foreign coercion that the weak central government tacitly albeit reluctantly allowed, and to deter the militarists from draining local resources with the power of the gun (McDonald, 1978: 27).

The call for provincial autonomy grew urgent after the death of Yuan Shi-kai who had tried in vain to re-weave the torn fabric of centralized rule. Through provincialism, local elites sought to keep Hunan detached from external military predators. Hunan lies athwart the north-south lines of communication. It connects Guangdong and Guangxi in the south and constitutes a vital trading port in the middle of the Yangtze basin. The centrality of Hunan made it a natural prey for the north-south rivalry. Indeed, from the fall of the Qing until the end of the Northern Expedition, Hunan was governed by a total of thirteen governors, with each succession accompanied by battles and a renewal of banditry.⁶ Provincial autonomy drew the province close to the southerners who were in defiance of authorities from the north. Yet the local civilian elites were also keen on keeping southern militarists at bay, seeking an institutional restraint to military power. The provincial constitution and its moral trappings

became what they relied on to bridle the militarists, although they were too often prone to failure.

Tan Yan-kai was an important figure in the Hunan autonomy movement. Native to the town of Chaling (茶陵) in Hunan, Tan was a classically trained scholar. He passed the highest level imperial exam to receive the *Jinshi* (進士) degree and became recruited to the Hanlin Imperial Academy. This academic glory earned him enormous respect among local elites. He was elected leader of the Hunan Provincial Assembly (*Ziyiju* 諮議局) in 1909 and steered Hunan through the 1911 revolution as the province's military governor.⁷ Tan was nevertheless a scholarly politician who lacked a military base. His gentry background provided him dignity, moral authority, and reputation—all resources of value in peace but not in times of instability. His inability to mount a decent defense of the province had to be tempered by his use of political ambiguity toeing a fine line between the northern and southern warlords.

The autonomy of Hunan was part of the strategy. Following the assassination of Hunanese nationalist Song Jiaoren (宋教仁 1882–1913) he tactically declared Hunan's independence in support of Sun Yat-sen's revolt against the Beijing government. Upon the retreat of the nationalists, however, Tan retracted and submitted to Yuan's power (Zhang, 1983: 37). The province mainly fell in the hands of Beijing appointed military governors, Fu Liangzuo (傅良佐 1887–1926) and Zhang Jingyao (張敬堯 1880–1933), between 1917 and 1920.⁸ Both of them governed with brutality to ensure this gateway for the expansion of Guangxi and Guangdong militarists was firmly in the hands of northern warlords.

Tan's most important military ally was Zhao Hengti. The two formed a delicate coalition in the latter half of the 1910s to wade through the turbulent years when Hunan was caught between north-south rivalries. A native of Hunan, Zhao first studied at Tokyo Shinbu Gakkō, a military preparatory school, and then at the Imperial Japanese Army Academy. In

Tokyo, he joined the revolutionary alliance led by Huang Xing (黃興 1874–1916). Upon returning to China in 1909, he served under Cai E (蔡鐸 1882–1916) in Guangxi Province before being sent to Hunan by Huang to assist Tan Yankai (Shen, He and Sun, 2017: 20). His affiliation with the Guangxi military clique created the impression of a Hunan-Guangxi military alliance. Although it served to deter northern warlords, the alliance proved to be a mirage. When challenged by Fu Liangzuo in 1917, Zhao failed to obtain Guangxi's military assistance for Tan, which led to Tan's resignation (McDonald, 1978: 31). Taking advantage of the split between Anfu and Zhili factions in the north, Tan Yankai and Zhao Hengti allied with Zhili warlord Wu Peifu (吳佩孚 1874–1939) and expelled Zhang Jingyao from Hunan in 1920. With Zhao's help, Tan regained his control over Hunan's government once more.

However, Tan and Zhao's alliance soon fell apart. Upon his return to Hunan, Tan took over both the civilian and military leadership, which infuriated local military groups. A rebellion subsequently broke out in western and northern Hunan, aimed at toppling Tan's power. Tan tried to secure Zhao Hengti's support once more, but this time without success. Zhao complied with Tan in public, yet quietly nudged an anti-Tan coalition with a group of militarists led by Cheng Qian (程潛 1882–1968) (Qiu, 1962: 140; Yao, 1962: 148). As fighting erupted in Changsha, Tan had to urgently flee the city and seek refuge in Shanghai. His river steamer poignantly passed the barge carrying his wife's coffin from Shanghai to his hometown Chaling for a funeral that he could not attend (Tan Yankai diary, 28 November 1920; Qiu, 1962: 141). After Tan left Changsha, Lin Zhiyu (林芝宇), commander of the provincial police, was appointed provincial governor (*shengzhang* 省長) while Zhao served as provincial military affairs commander (*dujun* 督軍), so as to keep the supervision of civilian and military apart. Yet Lin was close to Cheng Qian, who had been seeking opportunities to replace Zhao after successfully ousting Tan. Zhao decisively purged military

officials of Cheng Qian's clique, and then blamed the bloodshed on forces that remained allied to Tan (Qiu, 1962: 141). Zhao's radical shake-up nevertheless left a bad taste among the local elites. This foreshadowed his troublesome relations with local parliament members during the negotiations with Japan over the Changsha Incident.

To secure support from the local civilian elites, and to repair his rumpled reputation, Zhao reactivated the drafting of the provincial constitution initially advocated by Tan Yankai. This echoed the federalist movement (*liansheng zizhi* 聯省自治) mostly favored by southern provinces. Yet the Beijing government then led by the Zhili clique would not let Hunan slide into the hands of the south. Wu Peifu intervened in Zhao Hengti's expedition against the Hubei warlord Wang Zhanyuan (王占元) and inflicted a serious defeat on Zhao's troops.⁹ With British mediation, Zhao agreed that Wu could station troops in the city of Yuezhou, a gateway to Changsha, in return for Wu's support for Hunan's self-governance and Zhao's provincial leadership. Concerned about Wu's further penetration into Hunan, local elites expedited the drafting and revising of the provincial constitution, hoping to buttress Hunan's autonomy with laws. On January 1, 1922, Hunan's constitution was formally promulgated, marking the province as the first to claim "independence". Zhao was elected as provincial governor the same year. Other provinces, including Sichuan, Guangdong, Guangxi, Guizhou, started to follow Hunan's example. This further weakened the rule of the Zhili clique in Beijing. In return, the Zhili clique instigated infighting in Hunan: with Wu Feifu's support, for example, Shen Hongying (沈鴻英), a Guangxi militarist in exile in Hunan, challenged Zhao Hengti's troops (Shenbao, 13 December 1921: 11). The constitutional movement, instead of shielding Hunan from the north-south struggle, locked the province more deeply in military factionalism.

The Hunan constitution was a result of the provincial leaders' resistance to Beijing's authority. One audacious move was to establish an independent Department of Foreign

Affairs, thus claiming more direct power over diplomacy. During the early and mid-Qing period, local governors and generals, with guidance from the emperor, had already enjoyed a high level of discretion in handling foreign affairs. This aligned with their responsibility to defend the territory (*shoutu* 守土) (Jiaqing emperor's edict, 11 June 1809). As foreign-related business and missionary disputes increased during the late Qing period, specialized offices were also established under the supervision of local governors as part of their informal *muliao* (幕僚) system. Together with the existing circuit intendants (*daotai* 道臺), independent from governors' control, they formed a local diplomatic system to deal with daily foreign affairs, and consulted with the central government in case of major diplomatic disputes (Zhao, 2008: 176–177). Yet the local-central coordination weakened considerably during the Boxer Rebellion when southern governors disagreed with the central decision to wage war against the Powers. In 1901, the Qing government sought to reverse this trend by centralizing diplomacy with the establishment of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Centralization continued despite the fall of Qing. In 1913, the Beijing government began to establish regional diplomatic offices, including foreign affairs bureaus in capital cities and key treaty ports. Heading these offices were special commissioners (特派交涉員) recommended by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Apart from being responsible for the Ministry, special commissioners were also supervised by local governors. This dual supervision system was intended to achieve a balance between central leadership and local discretion (Jiang, 2000: 55–56).

The Hunan constitution broke this balance. The newly established Hunan Department of Foreign Affairs was independent of central supervision. The head of the Department was elected by the provincial parliament and appointed by the governor. The central government was excluded from the process. Although during the early Republican years, the Beijing government was considerably weakened and most foreign-related affairs in the local region

usually fell under *de facto* management of the local government, diplomacy nevertheless was still widely considered the domain of the central government. Hunan's institutional departure from this norm amounted to major political arrogation of central authority. Even some ardent supporters of the provincialism movement felt that Hunan's actions had gone too far. Li Jiannong (李劍農), one of the drafters of the Hunan constitution, criticized the constitution for being a product of local pork-barreling and was particularly disappointed with Hunan's claim to diplomatic power, believing this simply revealed local elites' utter ignorance of the basic principles of federalism (Li Jiannong, 1922: 13).

In November 1922, Yang Xuancheng (楊宣誠 1890–1962) was appointed councilor of foreign affairs for Hunan. Yang's background as a Changsha native facilitated his connections with the local elites, particularly under the popular slogan of "Hunan for the Hunanese" (湘人治湘). He studied naval science in Japan and graduated from the Naval Gunnery School and Navy Torpedo School in Tokyo. Like Tan Yankai and Zhao Hengti, he was drawn towards Huang Xing's revolutionary group. Under Tan Yankai's sponsorship, he went to the United States to study political economy. Shortly after returning to China in 1916, Yang became Tan's secretary of foreign affairs. Between 1917 and 1919, Yang was sent to Siberia as a Lieutenant in China's Expeditionary Army, away from the turbulent local military struggles (Who's Who in China, 1925: 895–896). His international training and experience thus made him a strong candidate to take charge of the Department of Hunan Foreign Affairs. According to the Hunan constitution, the parliament would select two candidates, from whom the governor would appoint one. Yang Xuancheng and Qiu Ao (仇鰲), who used to lead Hunan's foreign affairs in Tan's government, received equal votes in the parliament. Zhao was in favor of appointing Yang because he was much less entangled with local factional struggles. But Zhao also had to rely on veterans of Tan's clique for the daily operations of the new government. As a compromise, Zhao split the role of *guanjiandu*

(關監督), in charge of foreign-related trade and taxation, much like the traditional *daotai*, from the Department of Foreign Affairs and appointed Qiu as its head. He then installed Yang as Councilor of Foreign Affairs in charge of political negotiations (Shenbao, 27 December 1922: 7). The pragmatic separation of trade and diplomacy for the sake of a political balance of power nevertheless also fragmented local diplomatic authority.

LOCAL NEGOTIATIONS WITH JAPAN

Shortly after the inauguration of Yang Xuancheng, Hunan saw a sharp rise in public anger against Japan across the province. In March 1923, the initial leasehold on Lüshun and Dalian (also known as Port Arthur and Dairen) was due to expire. Japan refused to return the ports but sought to extend the lease by 99 years, citing the 1915 Sino-Japanese treaty, commonly known as the “Twenty-One Demands”.¹⁰ A movement for the recovery of Lüshun and Dalian as well as appeals for repudiation of the “Twenty-one Demands” swept through the country. As a key city along the Yangtze River route, Changsha was at the forefront of the agitation. Demonstrations organized by local students, laborers, and merchants soon developed into boycotts of Japanese goods and services. The newly established Department of Foreign Affairs was frequently called to solve disputes and to compensate for damages to Japanese properties by radical Chinese groups (Shenbao, 21 May 1923: 7).

Members of a social organization—the Hunan Society to Support Diplomacy (HSSD, *Hunan waijiao houyuanhui* 外交後援會)—were particularly active in discouraging Chinese from using Japanese steamers for travel and cargo transport (Shenbao, 7 June 1923: 10; North China Herald, 16 June 1923: 729). Riding the tide of popular outcry against the “Twenty-One Demands”, the HSSD was established in April 1923 as a platform to organize social movements across the province. Its leaders included Guo Liang (郭亮), Xia Xi (夏曦) and Xia Minhan (夏明翰), prominent members of the Hunan communist branch (Hunan

shengzhi, 1999: 266). Affiliated with over three hundred social groups in Hunan, the association radically pushed for the cut of all economic ties with Japan (Shenbao, 12 May 1923: 4; 20 May 1923: 7). With institutional support of Hunan Chamber of Commerce, Education Association, Student Union and the Hunan Federation of Labor, the HSSD organized large scale anti-Japanese demonstrations and became the foremost group calling for the boycott of Japanese products and services (McDonald, 1978: 200). The agitated public sentiments eventually led to the Changsha Incident.

Chinese and Japanese officials disagreed with the basic facts of the incident, particularly the context of the shooting. The Japanese consul in Changsha and captain of the Fushimi gunboat insisted that the soldiers had acted in self-defense. Their reports provided lengthy details on HSSD's "outrageous" (露骨) anti-Japanese activities. The Japanese account noted that upon learning of Wuling's possible arrival on May 31, HSSD members were already waiting at the wharf to disturb the unloading of Japanese products. A clash was avoided because Wuling did not arrive that rainy night. The second morning anti-Japanese "rogues" gathered again at the wharf and sabotaged Wuling's unloading. To stop the students from harassing disembarking passengers, Japan sent one officer and sixteen soldiers to the wharf to maintain order. Small-scale scuffles occurred but luckily no serious clashes ensued. The situation deteriorated after Chinling's arrival in the afternoon. As described by the Japanese reports, students and laborers beat passengers "with sticks" and threw stones at Japanese soldiers. The Chinese policemen were unable to control the agitated crowd. Fearing a more severe attack from the crowd, the soldiers were ordered to shoot (Nihon Gaikō Bunsho, 1923: 38, 46).

The Hunan Foreign Affairs Department nevertheless accused Japan of provoking the attack: tension initially built up between Chinese activists and Chinese passengers. Conflicts could well have been avoided had the Japanese stayed away from the "Chinese" trouble. In

his correspondence with the Japanese consul, Yang Xuancheng blamed Japanese citizens for overreacting by calling naval soldiers from the nearby Fushimi gunboat for protection. Yang emphasized Hunan officials' repeated efforts to ease the tension after the landing of Wuling in the morning, including calming the Chinese crowd, and demanding that the Japanese soldiers stay away from the wharf. Yet peace could not be sustained with all the built-up anger. After the arrival of Chinling in the afternoon, soldiers came ashore again, and eventually shot unarmed Chinese citizens. Yang questioned "if Japanese soldiers did not intend to provoke, why have they gone this far?" (Dagongbao, 4 June 1923: 6) He believed the existence of Japanese gunboats and the abuse of force by Japanese naval soldiers were the cause of the tragedy.

A considerable gap of information appeared in the two versions. While the Japanese emphasized aggression on China's part, fighting with stones and bamboo sticks did not appear in Yang's version. However, a report by an investigator from the Beijing government and testimonies of witnesses collected by newspapers provided details that differed slightly from both versions: the Japanese were initially agitated by Chinese students stamping "traitor" onto Chinese passengers. Sabotage of this sort had caused their businesses huge losses in the prior month. It was the Japanese soldiers who had first beaten the Chinese with bamboo sticks and badly injured several in the morning. In return, the Chinese crowd had attacked Japanese soldiers with stones. When the mayhem spiraled out of control in the afternoon, the Japanese soldiers closed the gate of the wharf to prevent the Chinese crowd from flooding in. Yet a few climbed up the gate in rage, creating the impression that the Chinese would launch another attack. Shots were fired under this miscalculation (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, 030600801027; Dagongbao, 2 June 1923: 6).

Such disputes over basic facts suggested negotiations with Japan would not be easy. Yet Yang soon realized that more challenges would come from domestic pressure. The

Hunan constitution and the lack of an institutional connection with the central government severely handicapped his negotiations. Since Yang's Department was responsible for the provincial parliament, the parliament called for an urgent meeting on June 2. More than seventy members were present, most of whom had no experience handling international negotiations. The meeting hall was filled with anger and sorrow. Some members burst into tears on stage, and some sobbed too bitterly to speak (Dagongbao, 3 June 1923: 6). Such intense emotions led to radical demands, including the abolition of all treaties with Japan; the disarmament of Japanese gunboats and naval troops in China; the abolition of Japanese shipping rights in Chinese rivers, and the removal of the Japanese consulate in Changsha. Some even proposed to deny the use of diplomatic measures to deal with Japanese "bandits" (*fei* 匪) and encouraged the government to confiscate the Fushimi gunboat and trial the guilty soldiers for murder (Dagongbao, 3 June 1923: 6). Apart from serving as a rhetorical release of frustration, none of these proposals were feasible.

Yang Xuancheng was urgently called in to give briefings at the meeting. He provided a balanced explanation, including details of Chinese students' intimidation of the passengers of Japanese steamers. Fully aware of the futility of emotion in diplomacy, he tried to calm the members while making his suggestions. Yet the emotions were hard to contain, and the civilian elites' distrust of the government led by Zhao was deeper than he had anticipated. At the end of the meeting, two sets of demands were announced by the parliament. First, the provincial government should send troops to disarm the Japanese gunboat and arrest the guilty soldiers. Second, it should appeal to all legations in China for support and mediation.¹¹ Yang fully understood that these demands, largely catering to public opinion, would be of no avail for a real solution, particularly when Hunan's military power was in chaos.

Meanwhile, the Hunan Department of Foreign Affairs had its own plans. In an urgent meeting called by Zhao's cabinet the same day, the Department proposed a much more

moderate set of demands: (1) The punishment of the Japanese commander of the marines and trial of guilty soldiers by Japanese law; (2) Full compensation; (3) Apology by the captain of the Japanese fleet to the Hunan government; (4) Apology from the Japanese government to the Chinese government about the event; and (5) A guarantee from the Japanese government that a similar occurrence would not happen again (Dagongbao, 4 June 1923: 6). The demands exhibited diplomatic professionalism by respecting Japan's extraterritorial rights and distinguishing responsibilities at different levels of authority. Yet by demanding an apology from the Japanese national government without the official endorsement of Beijing, Hunan exceeded its diplomatic power as a provincial authority.

Yang knew all too well that the parliament's demands were "impossible to achieve" (Dagongbao, 3 June 1923: 6), but bound by the Hunan constitution, he could not dismiss them either. They had to be referred to the governor for decision. Zhao was in favor of a moderate solution due to his acute awareness of the province's military weakness. To placate the parliament, he met representatives of social groups who played a key role in swaying the opinion of the parliament and the public. During the meeting, he repeatedly emphasized the importance of unity, which indicated the lack of it, and promised to punish Japan by international law, a rhetoric that appealed to the ears of local civilian leaders. Regarding the demand for the disarmament of Japanese gunboats, Zhao affirmed that the government would ensure their withdrawal from Changsha waters. Most parliament members agreed to this compromise. Keeping the Japanese steamer away from Changsha was therefore key to constraining public anger.

It soon turned out that the withdrawal of Japanese gunboats was going to be difficult to achieve. The Fushimi came to Changsha from Yichang, Hubei. While docking in Yichang, its soldiers had already shot at local anti-Japanese students and caused casualties (Dagongbao, 3 June 1923: 3). On June 3, Yang Xuancheng presented the Hunan

government's five demands to the Japanese consul Tanaka Sōtorō (田中莊太郎), with the additional requirement to keep this trouble-making gunboat away from Changsha waters. Tanaka's initial reaction was soft. He expressed regret for the incident and extended a personal apology to the victims but refused to respond to any of the demands Yang presented, maintaining that more investigations were required to appraise responsibilities. He then kicked the ball to the Japanese navy, indicating that punishment of the implicated marine commanders and soldiers would have to be decided by naval officers, as was the issue of the withdrawal of the Fushimi (Dagongbao, 4 June 1923: 6). Tanaka was honest about the limits of his role, but not his sympathy. In a dispatch to Japan's Minister of Foreign Affairs Uchida (内田), he expressed no regrets about the event and commended Japanese "ultimate forbearance" (極力隱忍) for Chinese insults. He defended the navy's position that the shooting took place when the Chinese mob tried to grab the Japanese soldiers' guns—a testimony not confirmed by Chinese witnesses (Nihon Gaikō Bunsho, 1923: 39).

Meanwhile, naval officers showed little sign of a willingness to make concessions. In a classified report on June 1, the captain of the Fushimi blamed the incident on the violent Chinese protesters as well as on the lack of sincerity and capacity of Chinese policemen to contain the aggression of their own citizens. He explained that the order to fire was issued in the face of imminent danger. Chinese mobs had wrestled with Japanese soldiers, beating them with sticks and stones (Nihon Gaikō Bunsho, 1923: 46–47). In a dispatch to naval headquarters on June 2, he added another explanation, arguing that the Japanese violent response was triggered by three Chinese policemen aiming guns at the Japanese soldiers (Nihon Gaikō Bunsho, 1923: 40). Ultimately, both the local consulate and naval officers strongly upheld the self-defense argument, dismissing Hunan's diplomatic pressure. They even secretly sought reinforcement of Japanese gunboats to enhance Japanese presence in Changsha (Nihon Gaikō Bunsho, 1923: 44, 61).

Yang Xuancheng came to realize that Tanaka's promise to ease tensions was empty when another Japanese gunboat, the Ataka, arrived on June 4. Public tensions soared again. At Yang's accusation of Japan's further provocation, Tanaka continued to sugar-coat the reinforcement, saying the arrival of the Ataka was unexpected and the Fushimi's stay was due to its lack of coal. Trained in naval gunnery, Yang refuted Tanaka with technical details and exposed his fabrication by citing the Fushimi's recent movements in Changsha's waters (Shenbao, 11 June 1923: 10). Seeing no possibility of compromise, Tanaka revealed his support for the gunboats by creating legitimate grounds for their stay. Strongly denouncing the Hunan government's inability to contain the public's anti-Japanese sentiments, the consulate moved the few hundred Japanese citizens in Changsha to the consulate compound for protection. Male Japanese were sheltered in the consulate buildings, women and children on Japanese steamers anchored nearby (Shenbao, 12 June 1923: 6). He thus created an emergency that made it imperative for the gunboats to stay in proximity. Even the British consul in Changsha observed that "the Japanese are deliberately exaggerating the danger to their lives and wish to emphasize their distrust of the sincerity of the [Chinese] provincial authorities." (British National Archives, FO 371/9200/61, 28 June 1923)

With gunboats present, the Japanese consulate did not hesitate to show contempt for Hunan officials. On June 9, Zhao Hengti and Yang Xuancheng visited the Japanese consulate to ease tensions. The visit was pre-approved by the Japanese consul. But when they arrived at the gate, they were denied entrance. After a lengthy communication with a member of the consulate, Zhao was allowed in only if he went on foot without assistants and guards. This lack of diplomatic etiquette, as Yang observed, was a deliberate "insult" to Hunan authorities (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, 030600801026).

Tension between the Hunan government and the Japanese consulate escalated further over the case of Zhong Zhenhe (钟振翻). On June 22, the Japanese consulate arrested a

primary school boy named Zhong Zhenhe, accusing him of cutting ropes that tied the Japanese boats to the shore and throwing stones at the boats. Zhong initially denied the charges but was forced to confess. When the deputy of foreign affairs Deng Chengwei (邓承畴) arrived at the Japanese consulate to collect Zhong, he found Zhong had been unlawfully interrogated and beaten by a group of angry Japanese expatriates. Deng criticized Tanaka for the abuse and demanded Zhong's immediate release. Yet Tanaka refused to release Zhong unless Deng signed Zhong's "confession". After an over-night protest in vain, Deng eventually put his name to the document, saying "the statement was written by Zhong, but the facts were uncertain, and more investigation is required." (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, 030600801026; Shenbao, 27 June 1923: 7; Shenbao 28 June 1923: 7; Dagongbao 24 June 1923: 6) After being detained for eight hours, Zhong was finally able to leave the consulate with Deng at 5:30 a.m. the next day.

While the reputation of the Hunan Department of Foreign Affairs was severely tarnished by the Japanese consulate, the worst was yet to come when the office became the target of domestic anger. Frustrated with the lack of capacity to punish Japan, the local parliament turned their anger inward. Parliament members blamed Deng Chengwei for "insulting the nation," arguing that Deng should not have signed the forced testimony and should have left Zhong in the Japanese consulate under the circumstances. They also suggested that Yang Xuancheng should have promptly filed the case with the international court of justice in The Hague (Shenbao, 28 June 1923: 7). Based on the parliament's power of impeachment granted by the constitution, they not only sought to remove Deng and Yang from office but also to publicly prosecute them (Shenbao, 1 July 1923: 10). Such an appeal was favorably supported by representatives of the commerce, labor, education, and agriculture communities, which revealed a widespread urge to find a scapegoat. The local

foreign affairs office was at its wits' end to deal with both Japan and the local parliament at the same time.

The Zhong Zhenhe's case led local diplomacy to a dead end. The animosity created by Zhong's case rendered local negotiations almost impossible. Disturbed by Tanaka's lack of diplomatic courtesy and trustworthiness, Yang made repeated requests to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, hoping the ministry could communicate with the Japanese authorities to replace Tanaka (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, 030600801026; 030600801028). Yang's frustration with Tanaka could be traced well beyond the Changsha Incident. He was particularly disturbed by Tanaka's long-term indulgence toward misbehavior by the Japanese community in Hunan. In a report to the central government, Yang made a lengthy list of cases of misbehaving Japanese who were left unpunished and even protected by Tanaka (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, 030600801026). Ōishi Yutarō (大石勇太郎), for example, ran amuck after being drunk. When being reprimanded by local Chinese policeman, he gathered a group of Japanese and severely injured the policeman. Instead of punishing him, the Japanese consulate allowed him to participate in consulate issues, including coercing Zhong Zhenhe to sign the forced confession. Similarly, a man surnamed Kawasaki sold opium equipment through a Japanese pharmacy; Nishiyama defrauded Chinese by issuing fake debt notes to the Chinese and refused to redeem them; Suzuki led a mob to smash and rob a barber shop. All these Japanese were left unpunished. By citing the cases in detail, Yang traced the deeper cause of the local animosity between the Japanese and Chinese communities, and exposed Tanaka's connections with the troublesome Japanese. Replacing Tanaka, therefore, became one of Hunan's main demands.

DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS BY THE BEIJING GOVERNMENT

Hunan leaders were keenly aware of the limits of their diplomatic capacity. As a provincial authority, Hunan's Department of Foreign Affairs lacked the reciprocal channels to contact Japanese officials at the national level. Obtaining the central government's support was thus imperative to breaking the deadlock of local negotiations. Yet the constitutional movement and the independent position Hunan acquired greatly hindered the local government in seeking help from Beijing. As mentioned above, the Hunan Foreign Affairs Department was established without the endorsement of the central authorities. The head of the office was elected by the local parliament and appointed by Hunan's governor. The conventional system of dual supervision (by both the central and the local government) was replaced by supervision of local authorities only. Compounding the disconnect was the distrust of the local civilian elites toward northern warlords in charge of the Beijing government. Having deeply suffered from the abuse of power by Beijing-appointed governors, including Fu Liangzuo and Zhang Jingyao, they were concerned that Wu Peifu of the Zhili faction might take advantage of the situation to interfere in Hunan affairs. Many parliament members therefore urged for an alliance with the competing southern government to empower local negotiations (Dagongbao, 3 June 1923: 6).

While the local and central diplomatic arrangements were in limbo, Hunan leaders sought to get Beijing involved by the roundabout means of issuing open telegrams in the press. By doing so, they hoped that the public opinion would compel the central government to act. On June 3, Zhao Hengti sent an open telegram to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, requesting the Beijing government to present Hunan's five demands to the Japanese legation and the government (Dagongbao, 3 June 1923: 6). Yang Xuancheng followed up with another open dispatch, urging Beijing to push for Japan's withdrawal of the gunboats (Dagongbao, 3 June 1923: 6). Although open telegrams (*tongdian* 通電) were often used for propaganda purposes, they also provided an unofficial means of communications between

provinces and the central government when officially they were at odds with each other (McCord, 1996: 796–797).

Meanwhile, the central government itself was in the middle of a political crisis. On June 13, Cao Kun (曹錕), a warlord of the Zhili clique, forced the resignation of President Li Yuanhong (黎元洪) and lobbied hard in parliament to have himself elected as the next president. At the same time, the Anhui clique led by Duan Qirui was forming an alliance with Sun Yat-sen and Zhang Zuolin (the warlord of Manchuria) to undermine Cao's plan (North China Herald, 16 June 1923: 719; North China Herald, 23 June 1923: 795; Shenbao, 17 June 1923: 19). The collapse of Li's government led to a drastic change of leadership in all key departments, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Wellington Koo (顧維鈞) replaced Huang Fu (黃郛) as Minister, while many subordinate officials only continued to serve the Ministry in an interim manner during the transition (Gu, 1982: 61).

Beijing did respond to Hunan's appeal for support, but in a perfunctory manner. Apart from Deputy Minister Shen Ruilin's (沈瑞麟) two meetings with the Japanese acting minister on June 5 and 6, in which Shen presented Hunan's five demands and urged the withdrawal of the Fushimi and the Ataka, little more was initiated at the central level in June (Nihon Gaikō Bunsho, 1923: 64, 66). This was partly caused by the central government's own political crisis, as mentioned above, and partly by the central diplomatic office's awkward relationship with Hunan. From the center's perspective, Hunan was an "autonomous" province, with its own self-claimed diplomatic power. Yang Xuanchang, as Hunan's Councilor of Foreign Affairs, was elected and appointed by the local government. Based on the dual supervision rule, Yang's diplomatic power could only become legitimate if he also received a central appointment as a local commissioner. Beijing was in fact contemplating the appointment of Yang to maintain the principle of central control (Shenbao, 6 June 1923: 3), but it did not happen, possibly because of Hunan's resistance to Beijing's challenge to its autonomy.

Meanwhile, Yang felt the pain of fighting alone. He acknowledged that rounds of “hard battles” with the Japanese had gone nowhere. Hunan could not solve the dispute with Japan alone. It would be more effective if Beijing strengthened its negotiations with Japan at the national level. Yet action from the central government was limited and its support to local diplomacy lukewarm:

“Beijing’s dispatches were full of empty words. Apart from confirming their meetings with the Japanese minister and the minister’s promise to pass on their messages, there is not much concrete help. Now the president [Li Yuanhong] has left Beijing, the cabinet falling apart. Who would pay attention to diplomacy? Our nation and the central government are facing difficulties. What else could we expect?”

(Shenbao, 20 June 1923: 10)

After the student Zhong Zhenhe’s case, local diplomacy came to a standstill. To appease public anger, Yang filed his resignation (Shenbao, 29 June 1923: 10). But his departure would incapacitate the local foreign affairs office. Qiu Ao refused to take over at such a troublesome time, and there were no other competent officials to fill the vacuum. Yang’s resignation was also a quiet protest against the local parliament’s demand to punish his associate Deng. The parliament members did not, however, tone down their criticism (Shenbao, 10 July 1923: 7). The two sides remained locked in an impasse. Meanwhile, the Japanese consul Tanaka took advantage of the local tensions to call for the halt of negotiations at the local level, blaming Hunan diplomats for providing “incorrect facts” and a lack of justice (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, 030600801002).

To break the stalemate, the Beijing government stepped in. On July 6, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent a representative, Shi Lüben (施履本), to Hunan to investigate the case (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, 030600801004). Shi’s appointment also

revealed the difficult relationship between Hunan and Beijing. Shi had graduated from the Hosei Private Law School in Tokyo. Serving as a secretary for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for many years, he was sent to Shandong as a special commissioner (特別交渉員) in 1919. As aforementioned, special commissioners were part of the centralized diplomatic system, supervising local diplomatic offices for the Beijing government. Yet the absence of a central-local arrangement between Hunan and Beijing negated such conventional ties. Shi was therefore appointed as *canshi xingzou* (參事行走), an *ad hoc* investigator of the central government to report on local affairs (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, 030600801003). Beijing also documented the case under the rubric of “navigation”, treating it as a trade route-related dispute rather than a political confrontation.

The tension between Beijing and Hunan lay in the institutional legitimacy, not over diplomatic lines per se. Indeed, Beijing endorsed Hunan’s position and adhered to Hunan’s five demands. In a lengthy report to the central government, Shi also confirmed Hunan’s version of the facts. He refuted Japan’s “self-defense” argument and blamed the Japanese navy for a “deliberate provocation” (*youyi tiaoxin* 有意挑釁) by intervening in disputes among the Chinese and firing into the crowd outside of the Japanese leased area (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, 030600801027). While he substantiated Hunan’s moral ground in the Changsha case, he also found fault with the Hunan authorities for failing to control popular anti-Japanese activities prior to the incident. He suggested shifting the focus from seeking an apology to compensation, thus downplaying the political aspect of the case (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, 030600801027).

Shi’s arrival revived local negotiations. On his way to Changsha, Shi stopped over at Wuhan where he met lieutenant colonel Tashiro (田代) and fleet general Kobayashi (小林) of the Japanese navy. He urged them to withdraw Japanese gunboats, so as to prevent anti-Japanese boycotts from spreading along the Yangtze River (Chinese Ministry of Foreign

Affairs Archives, 030600801009). Meanwhile, upon pressure from Shen Ruilin, China's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tanaka agreed to let displaced Japanese citizens return to Changsha city (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, 030600801010). Immediately after they moved out of the Japanese consulate compound, Shi visited Tanaka and insisted that the Japanese gunboats should leave Changsha, since the city had resumed stability (Nihon Gaikō Bunsho, 1923: 112).

Meanwhile, US and UK consuls in Changsha also urged Tanaka to withdraw the gunboats (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, 030600801017). Japanese shipping in China had expanded during World War I. With the support of the Japanese government, the Japan-China Steamship Co. (Nisshin Kisen Kaisha) took advantage of the withdrawal of the ships of other nations to become the second largest shipping enterprise along the Yangtze River (Reinhardt, 2018: 189). Japan's expansion of shipping services thus challenged British dominance along the Yangtze River. The boycott hit the Japanese business hard, but left room for its competitors to catch up. The American consul, while criticizing the lack of an organized government in China, expressed sympathy for China's anti-Japanese objectives in May, a move considered by the British as "indiscreet" (British National Archives, FO371/9200/49). The British consul was more sympathetic to Japan's cause, blaming the "failure" on Chinese authorities rather than on Japanese militancy (British National Archives, FO371/9200/57); yet he still recognized the urgent need to contain the boycott, so as to keep the anti-imperialist rage off British interests (British National Archives, FO371/9200/63). Faced with all this pressure, the Fushimi finally left Changsha on July 31 (Nihon Gaikō Bunsho 1923: 116).

The Japanese compromise did not extend beyond the departure of the Fushimi. Negotiations still stalled at the central level. Implying that Shi's investigation was partial, Japan's minister to Beijing, Yoshizawa Kenkichi (芳沢謙吉 1874–1965), refused to respond

to Hunan's "unreasonable" demands (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, 030600801034). In Tokyo, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs buttressed Yoshizawa's position and refused to negotiate with Beijing unless there was new evidence (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, 030600802012).

The Japanese diplomats' position was related to the fervent anti-Chinese sentiments among Japanese merchants and oppositional leaders. Chambers of Commerce and other business or political bodies constantly pushed the diplomats to take strong measures against China. On July 14, the Associated Chambers of Commerce, the Sino-Japanese Business Association, the Tokyo Businessmen's Association, and the National League for Chinese Affairs held an assembly to discuss Japan's position in the Changsha Incident. Key politicians also attended the meeting, including Hachisuka Masaaki (蜂須賀正韶), a member of the House of Peers, Shibusawa Eiichi (渋沢栄一), and Speaker of the House of Representatives. A resolution was unanimously passed at the meeting, blaming the Chinese government for anti-Japanese demonstrations. Meanwhile, Japanese opposition parties in the Diet were exploiting the case to denounce the "weak-kneed attitude of the government" and to demand the adoption of more vigorous methods, including seeking indemnities from China and punishing the Chinese officials concerned (FO 371/9200/66–68). Indeed, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs was also caught between domestic radical views and the lack of measures to change the hostile business environment in China.

Beijing's involvement greatly relieved the local diplomatic burden in Hunan, yet social pressure remained high. To placate local frustration, Hunan authorities repeatedly pushed Beijing for a solution (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 030600802002). Victims remained unburied, and the public unsettled (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 030600802016). Hunan's governor Zhao argued that suspension of the case significantly increased the risk of another similar clash (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives,

030600802007). Beijing subsequently explored the possibility of inviting Japanese expatriates in Changsha to mediate, which would have moved the negotiations back to Hunan (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, 030600801033). A distinguished Japanese monk, Mizuno (水野), who was on good terms with Zhao and Yang, offered to mediate; yet his advice to lift martial law was rejected by Zhao (Hunan sheng zhengxie wenshi hui, 1993: 144; Shenbao, 10 July 1923: 7). In March 1924, Zhao sent Yang Xuancheng to Beijing to communicate Hunan's position in person (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 030600802007; Shishi rizhi, 1924). Apart from making an open gesture to push for a speedy solution, Yang's trip also sought to lock Beijing in the leading role to deal with Japan. Ironically, despite the Hunan governor's prior communication and Yang's credentials, Yang was denied entrance again, this time by the guards of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of his own country. It took Yang three visits and some handsome tips to manage to see Wellington Koo (Huang, 1986: 134). Although corruption on the ground was partially to blame for this situation, the corruption also betrayed Beijing officials' resistance to local pressure for a stronger diplomacy than the weak government was able to pursue.

Japan noticed the local-central divide and sought to drive a wedge between it even further. Japanese diplomats argued that all trouble originated from Hunan's inability to contain local anti-Japanese violence and frequently complained to Beijing that Hunan's local authorities intentionally muddled facts (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, 030600801034). Taking advantage of the power vacuum of Beijing, Japanese consul Tanaka unilaterally halted local negotiations and pushed for a central intervention (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, 030600801002). When Beijing took over negotiations from Hunan, the Japanese Minister Yoshizawa voiced his concern that "Hunan had claimed independence, acting in defiance against the center." On the grounds of Hunan having taken governance in its own hands he questioned Beijing's capacity to implement any diplomatic

agreements (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, 030600801025). The central-local divide was nevertheless not as prominent as Japan wished to exploit. A much wider divide, in fact, occurred in local politics.

LOCAL CONTENTION: MARTIAL LAW AGAINST WHO?

Hunan's declaration of martial law following the Changsha Incident became a recurrent issue in negotiations at both the local and central level. Yet underlying the diplomatic issue was Japan's attempt to capitalize on Hunan's internal disputes and the Hunan government's intention to contain social activists and rebellious militarists. The Changsha Incident became ingrained in Hunan's troublesome local politics, thus adding another dimension to the Sino-Japanese dispute.

The Changsha Incident placed the Hunan government in a battle on two fronts. While challenging Japan diplomatically, it also had to wrestle with the outrage among its people. Anger of the Chinese public provided Japanese authorities the legitimacy for the presence of Japanese gunboats; the presence of gunboats increased the likelihood of violence; and violence fueled public anger even further. Hunan was locked in a vicious cycle. Zhao Hengti and the cabinet considered it imperative to break this cycle by containing social antagonism against Japan, which the Japanese would use as a pretext for reinforcing their navy. Five days after the outbreak of the incident, the Hunan government implemented martial law.

Ironically, Zhao's measures to achieve social order were neither welcomed by Japan nor by the local parliament. Japanese authorities denied the restoration of local order under martial law and refused to withdraw their gunboats, arguing that martial law merely created a phantom peace that would vanish as soon as it was lifted (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, 030600801010; *Nihon Gaikō Bunsho*, 1923: 88). Meanwhile, the

establishment of martial law reminded the local elite of the tight military control four years earlier under Zhang Jing-yao, when the streets were filled with Zhang's own soldiers.

The newly established Hunan government led by Zhao Hengti was in effect a loose coalition of civilian and military factions. While the local elites desperately sought shelter from powerful militarist in the storm of national warlordism, they were also keen to block local warlords from depleting very limited local resources to expand their military activities. Hunan civil elites therefore included a condition for declaration of martial law in the constitution: it had to be approved by majority vote of the local parliament. When Zhao proposed martial law on June 5, the parliament refused to endorse it. Many members were absent claiming to be "sick," and the proposal was dropped twice due to the lack of a chair and quorum (Dagongbao, 5 June 1923: 6; Dagongbao, 6 June 1923: 6). Frustrated, Zhao ignored the parliament and activated martial law anyway. Persistent members heavily criticized Zhao for breaching the Hunan constitution, but they had to face the sheer reality that the law, the weapon of civilian elites, was too weak to rein in the military pragmatists.

Zhao Hengti's position in Hunan was hinged upon his ability to act as buffer between the forces of Wu Peifu in the north and Guangxi-Guangdong warlords in the south. While Zhao had to seek an alliance with Wu Peifu to secure a trade route between Hunan and the lower Yangtze region (Chen, 1929: 34), the local elites who were under the lingering influence of Tan Yankai, pushed for a tighter connection with Sun Yat-sen in the south. Lacking military power, the local civilian elites allied with social groups to strengthen their voice. One of the key groups was the aforementioned Hunan Society to Support Diplomacy (HSSD), led by Communist Party members in Hunan. At the time, Sun Yat-sen, who was eager to seek Russian aid at the low point of his political life after the betrayal of Guangdong warlord Chen Jiongmeng, accepted the principle of dual membership for Communists in the Nationalist Party. This further tied HSSD to the south.

Founded with the principle to cut all economic ties with Japan, the HSSD attracted enormous public support, but its radical position also created concerns from moderate groups. After the outbreak of the Changsha Incident, the Hunan Chamber of Commerce, for example, disassociated itself from the HSSD, complaining that the society had not only taken credits of business groups' patriotic boycotts but also pushed the movement too far (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, 030600801027). Meanwhile, the Hunan government was uninterested in funding the society, leaving it to survive by itself (Dagongbao, 31 May 1923: 6). This financial insecurity pushed the society towards an even harsher anti-Japanese line, so as to attract more social supporters.

Although HSSD claimed to "support diplomacy," it had in effect undermined the local diplomatic efforts by radicalizing social protests. Leaning towards Sun Yat-sen's regime in the south and his Communist allies, the HSSD had, since its establishment, demonstrated contempt for Hunan government's weak attitude toward Japan. It had tried to secure a position for itself in the landscape of politics in Hunan by riding popular anti-imperialist sentiments across the country. After the outbreak of the incident, the HSSD found its interests best aligned with the parliament. In the provincial assembly on June 2, members of the parliament voiced a strong call to "join the south-western forces to topple the northern government" (Dagongbao, 3 June 1923: 6). The HSSD echoed this line, insisting that Hunan's social groups were firmly opposed to Beijing's involvement, and that diplomatic power should be strictly held in the hands of Hunan, not Beijing (Dagongbao, 4 June 1923: 6). While the government was desperate to contain anti-Japanese activities across the province, the society refused to tone down its antagonism towards the Japanese community. It even sought to ban Chinese traders from selling rice to the Japanese, for example (Dagongbao, 3 June 1923: 6). Leaders of the society carried the bodies of the victims in their demonstration and pushed the government to present their demands to the Japanese

government, including punishing Japanese naval officers, reclaiming control over the wharfs leased to the Japanese, and replacing the Japanese consul (Hunan shengzhi, 1962: 518). After Zhong Zhenhe's case, the HSSD were the most active group blaming Yang Xuancheng and Deng Chengwei for "insulting the national sovereignty" and pushing for their immediate resignations (Dagongbao, 24 June 1923: 7).

In turn, the HSSD became the target of various concerned parties. Japan was eager to identify the society as the leader of anti-Japanese boycotts and pushed the Chinese government to ban its activities (Nihon Gaikō Bunsho, 1923: 38). Japan's request quietly served Zhao Hengti's purpose to break the alliance between the parliament and the social activists. On June 10, the government blamed the society for "breaking the constitution by unlawfully arresting people and disturbing social order," and ordered it to disband its current organization and re-organize in a more accommodating form (Shenbao, 11 June 1923: 4). Meanwhile, Shi Lüben was sympathetic to Hunan's efforts to contain the HSSD. In a confidential report to Beijing, he blamed the HSSD for instigating the incident, believing that "the society sought to overthrow the current government using a diplomatic dispute." He supported Zhao's activation of martial law, believing it was a way to reorganize the HSSD and oust its progressive leaders (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, 030600801014). Indeed, the Changsha Incident provided an opportunity for Hunan's governor, with the pressure from Japan and endorsement from Beijing, to quash local Communist-led groups fraught with the potential to ally with the south.

If martial law was initially exercised to suppress social activists, it later turned into a measure against a military challenge backed by the south. Allying with Sun Yat-sen, Tan Yankai had been seeking opportunities to challenge Zhao and return to Hunan. His chance came in July 1923, when a garrison commander in Western Hunan, Cai Juyou (蔡鉅猷), declared independence from Zhao's leadership because of disputes over opium revenues.¹²

Cai was close to Tan and remained connected to him during Tan's exile in Guangdong. Blaming Zhao for being "loyal to the north and rebellious against the southwest," Cai organized his forces to suppress Zhao and invited Tan Yankai to join him (McDonald, 1978: 55–56). Tan responded to this call and was immediately appointed by Sun Yat-sen as governor and commander-in-chief of Hunan. Claiming to represent Sun's "Three Principles of the People", Tan gathered support from some of his former military clients alienated by Zhao (Dongfang zazhi, 1925). Yet Tan, a gentry politician, could not reverse the transition of power from the hands of civilians to militarists during this time of extreme instability. Many of his old followers turned against him due to his mismanagement of tax and failure to maintain peace during his previous leadership in Hunan (Dongfang zazhi, 1923). Tan's challenge to Zhao failed after northern warlord Wu Peifu stepped in and Tan himself was hurriedly called back to Guangdong to put down another rebellion by Chen Jiongmeng against Sun Yat-sen. The fighting was over in early November 1923. The Tan-Zhao War happened in parallel with Hunan's diplomatic battle against Japan. This time, the parliament quickly sanctioned martial law, fearing the fall of Zhao's government would lead to more chaos (Dagongbao, 15 July 1923: 6).

Meanwhile, Japan sought to capitalize on the instability of Hunan to justify the presence of its navy. The Japanese consul in Wuhan had been following Hunan's status closely. As early as mid-June, the consul had already warned the Japanese government of a possible coup against Zhao by south-leaning militarists, including Cai Juyou, Tan Yankai and Cheng Qian (Nihon Gaikō Bunsho, 1923: 78, 81). Deeply skeptical of Zhao's ability to hold onto power, Japan was reluctant to withdraw its gunboats and saw it as an opportunity to strengthen Japanese interests in case of a major power reshuffle. It therefore used Changsha's declaration of martial law as an excuse, arguing that the Japanese navy should stay until martial law was lifted and social stability was restored. Shi Lüben in turn criticized Japan for

bringing martial law into the negotiations of the Changsha affair. He maintained that Japan had been well informed by China that martial law had little to do with the current Sino-Japanese dispute. Yet citing it as a condition for the withdrawal of gunboats revealed Japan's intension to intervene in Hunan's internal affairs under all circumstances (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, 030600801012; 030600801015). Indeed, the Changsha Incident became deeply entangled in the local politics of Hunan and was used by all interested groups to gain a political advantage.

CONCLUSION

The Changsha Incident remained unsolved. Years after its outbreak, negotiations were pending and no consensus on the responsibility of the event was reached. The lack of a resolution cast a long shadow. The incident became an annual memorial event that inspired public anti-imperial sentiments across the country, foreshadowing the May Thirtieth Movement of 1925 and beyond. Meanwhile, riding public sentiment, the Hunan HSSD and labor organizations successfully blocked Japanese-related groups from renewing the lease of the wharf where the Changsha Incident took place (Hunan tongshu ribao, 1 May 1924), and thus dealt a heavy blow to Japanese shipping enterprises along the upper Yangtze River.

Although the negotiations reached a stalemate at the national level, the Incident nevertheless reshuffled the local political environment. Upon Hunan and Beijing's repeated requests, the Japanese government replaced Changsha consul Tanaka with Shimizu Yaoichi (清水八百一), who turned out to be much more skillful in easing local tensions (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, 030902003002).¹³ Moreover, Hunan readjusted its claims to diplomatic power during a constitutional revision in 1925. It removed the Department of Foreign Affairs from the governor's cabinet and downgraded it to an "Office" of Foreign Affairs (交涉署) led by local foreign affairs commissioners (Hunan shengzhi,

1993: 122). This was a move to offer token respect for the central diplomatic power and meanwhile keep local diplomacy out of the influence of the local parliament.

After the outbreak of the Changsha Incident, Zhao Hengti sensed the complexity of the event and remarked: “for foreign affairs, only twenty to thirty per cent relates to foreign elements, while the rest hinges upon the handling of domestic affairs” (Dagongbao, 4 June 1923: 6). It was a candid assessment of the circumstances. While the Changsha Incident has been commonly considered a Sino-Japanese conflict, deeper reading into the case suggests layers of domestic tensions, including distrust between the local civilian and military elites, the local lack of institutional coordination between local diplomatic authorities and the central diplomatic office, rivalries among local interest groups, and conflicts among the northern and southern warlords. William Kirby stated that “everything important [during the Republican Era] had an international dimension.” (Kirby, 1997: 433) The reverse goes true, too, that every international case of the period had a domestic dimension.

The diplomatic efforts of Hunan’s local Department of Foreign Affairs were constantly undermined by the local parliament, as the local civilian elites were eager to contain military power through a hastily promulgated Hunan constitution. The tension made it difficult to reach a provincial consensus on demands to Japan. Requests for resignation and punishment of local diplomats pushed negotiations at the local level to a standstill after Zhong Zhenhe’s case. Meanwhile, the lack of institutional connections with the central government’s diplomatic office, as a result of the Hunan autonomy movement, and the power vacuum in Beijing diminished local authorities’ opportunity and ability to seek central assistance. In the first month after the incident broke out, Hunan was almost alone in the diplomatic battle, until Beijing, in an *ad hoc* arrangement, sent Shi Lüben to Hunan to investigate. Shi eventually managed to gain the removal of Japanese gunboats from Hunan

waters but was incapable of reaching any agreements on the appraisal of responsibility and compensation for the Incident.

The local warlord-led government of Zhao Hengti, concurrently, took advantage of the incident to weaken the Communist-led social groups that mobilized the public and empowered the local civilian elites. Likewise, Zhao used a declaration of martial law to reduce the influence of southern warlords, particularly his primary rival Tan Yankai. Meanwhile, Japan took advantage of the central-local divide and Hunan's internal struggles to procrastinate on the withdrawal of gunboats and settlement of the Incident. All these entangled factors eventually led to a diplomatic stalemate that foreshadowed more drastic Sino-Japanese conflicts in ensuing decades.

NOTES

1. Facts are based on Shi Lüben's report to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, 20 August 1923, 030600801027, Academia Sinica; Shenbao, 7 June 1923: 10; North China Herald, 23 June 1923: 804; North China Herald, 9 June 1923: 663; North China Herald, 16 June 1923: 729.
2. McDonald traces the laborer's involvement in factional conflicts among local elites. See McDonald, 1978: 206.
3. For excellent accounts on provincialism and federalism, see Chapter 8 in McCord, 1993; Jean Chesneaux, 1969.
4. Huaiyin Li (2021) argues that the success of warlords depended on their ability to centralize regional resources.
5. This does not suggest that there was a sharp distinction between civilian and military power. The two elements commonly coexisted during the late Qing and Republican period. While some military governors had scholarly backgrounds, the seemingly civilian local gentry were sometimes involved in cultivating militia to strengthen the foundations of their power. The distinction between civilian and military power was therefore relative.
6. See a list of military governors of Hunan, 1911–1927, in McDonald, 1978: 21.
7. See Tan's involvement in constitutional reform of Hunan before the 1911 Revolution, in Esherick, 1976: 93–105.
8. For more details about Fu Liangzuo and Zhang Jingyao's rule in Hunan, see McCord, 1993: 254–263.

9. For more details on Wang Zhanyuan's military career and his connections with Cao Kun and Wu Peifu, see McCord, 2014: 70.
10. The 1915 Treaty is commonly referred to as the Twenty-One Demands, although the Beijing government managed to reject several key intruding terms originally presented by Japan.
11. When local or central governments were too weak to maintain local order, local groups often internationalized local disputes in their search for a solution. One of the contemporary examples was an appeal by local communities for an international settlement after mutinying troops of a warlord plundered Yichang in 1921. See McCord, 2013.
12. Western Hunan was the key opium trading pass between Yunnan and Guizhou region and Hubei province. Hoping to take the opium income into his own hands, Zhao Hengti removed Cai Juyou from the garrison head of the Yuanling County and assigned him a token leadership at the Hunan Military Academy. Upon Zhao's suppression, Cai revolted and received Sun Yat-sen's approval to fight Zhao on behalf of the southern government, see Dai, 1981: 68; Fang, 1981: 55.
13. Upon Shimizu's redeployment in 1926, Zhao Hengti sent a notice to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, hoping to keep Shimizu in Hunan. See Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, 030902003002.

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