

# **Wu Zhihui's Letter and Chen Jiongming's Reply**

Wu Zhihui and Chen Jiongming

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## Wu Zhihui's Letter

On April 29, 1924, Wu Zhihui wrote Chen Jiongming a long letter from Shanghai, in which he argued the necessity of a Chen-Sun reconciliation to save the country from disintegration. It reveals the views held by prominent members of the Nationalist Party on national affairs, politics, and political personages in China at that crucial point in modern Chinese history.

In his letter, Wu Zhihui presents an ambivalent, if not hypocritical attitude. For example, he states unequivocally that China must, sooner or later, adopt a federal system of government. Yet he would follow the Leninist example and “groom” Sun Yat-sen to be the “twentieth-century” leader of the party, and “clean up the central plain” to achieve the military unification of China. As for Marxism, Wu himself says that he had studied it and “debated about it many times in Paris more than a decade ago, finally rejecting it” on the grounds that it was not suitable for China. Yet he would follow Sun Yat-sen and ally China with Soviet Russia and the Chinese Communist Party. Could these polar shifts really be what Wu called the “progressiveness of the twentieth century,” namely, the machiavellian code that the end justifies any means employed for its realization? Wu Zhihui's letter provides insight into these ambiguities. He presents his arguments in ten sections. The following excerpts illustrate his main points:

1. Nothing has been accomplished in the Republic since the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty in 1911. Our country is on the brink of being divided up by the Foreign Powers. To whom can we entrust the task of saving the country from disaster—the self-seeking bureaucrats, the dreaming politicians, the idiotic scholars, or the indolent citizenry?

We know we have no choice but to entrust the task to the [Nationalist] party members, although like the others, party members are not incorruptible. We may evaluate them in terms of their determination, capability, and progressiveness, with the last being the most important.

2. There are good men among the warlords and the bureaucrats; Wu Peifu is one of them. Wu is an honest, conscientious, and capable man, but he does not possess the capacity to lead the masses. Above all, he is a “sixteenth-century” man and even lags behind, for example, the “eighteenth-century” Yuan Shikai and Duan Qirui.

Most of the politicians, such as Liang Qichao and Sun Hongyi, are basically good men. They belong to the nineteenth-century; some of them even approach the twentieth century. They may have the determination to do good, but lack the ability to be a true leader.

Among the scholars, there are, of course, many who belong to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century categories. They possess no lack of enthusiasm to save the country; they only lack the ability to do it. In recent years, most of them have become idiotic fools; they think they can fight militarism with mere words or by non-cooperation with the warlords.

As to the citizens, their ability has always been equal to zero; their determination is questionable and they belong to the sixteenth- or eighteenth-century categories or earlier. Therefore, we cannot entrust the task of saving the country directly to the

bureaucrats, the scholars, or the citizenry. We cannot expect them to produce a great leader.

3. I do not say that the party members have all the determination and ability to do the job; nor do I say that they are less corruptible than the others. In terms of progressiveness, however, party members do belong to at least the nineteenth century, with the majority of them in the twentieth-century category. Above all, they produce leaders.

Without party members, we can expect no progress in the affairs of a nation. Today, Spain, with conditions similar to those of China, exists as an independent nation in the West. China in the East does not have such good fortune, as she will no doubt end up another India or Indo-China.

4. Let us compare the leaders among the party members with the chieftains among the warlords and the bureaucrats. Do Cao Kun and Wu Peifu measure up to Sun Yat-sen and Chen Jiongming? Do any of the other warlords measure up to half of Wang Jingwei?

Among the leaders of the party, I mention only Sun, Chen, and Wang, in that order. I may displease Mr. Sun by putting your name right after his. I do not care if people criticize me for my limited choices. I came to them solely by intuition, [and believe they] reflect the general feeling of the people at the present time.

Furthermore, I dare say that if Sun Yat-sen does not cooperate with Chen Jiongming and Wang Jingwei, he will certainly become [known as] a “grass-headed” [bandit-like] revolutionary party chieftain; that if Chen Jiongming does not cooperate with Sun and Wang, he will no doubt end up a “blockhead” warlord. If Wang Jingwei does not cooperate with Sun and Chen, he will be nothing but a “white-faced” [handsome] literatus. But what I say here is strictly based on present circumstances. It is not impossible that in the future all three of them will prove worthless. On the other hand, each may successively reach the top as a result of their close cooperation. To conclude, the country will benefit from their working together; it will suffer if they pursue their own separate ways.

5. The leader of a group may be established in three different ways: He may impose himself upon the group by force ; he may be elected by popular acclaim; or he may be “groomed” by the group for the role. It will not satisfy the “twentieth-century” party members to establish their leader by one, or some combination, of the first two methods. They will only feel comfortable by grooming him for the role.

6. In the recent reorganization of the Nationalist Party, Mr. Sun Yat-sen was set forth [like Lenin in Russia] as the first leader of the party without going through the sham process of election by the membership. This is necessary to meet the demands of the time.

In 1913 [1914], you and I did not agree to [Sun’s] demand that we [put our] fingerprint [on an oath of loyalty to him]. In 1921, you and I did not quite agree with the election [of Sun] as president [by the extraordinary parliament in Canton] . Why not? Because at that time we were not able to see clearly the necessity of grooming

a leader. We do see [the need] clearly today now that Lenin has played his role in Russia. (Please do not be mistaken. I am still a “talking” anarchist, but in reality, one who “holds a pair of grass-shoes” [is a humble follower] under the banner of the patriotic [Nationalist] party. I do not believe true communism can be made to work in China today.)

7. Petty conflicts among the Taiping leaders caused their total destruction. It would be a pity if Sun and Chen attempt to eliminate each other; neither will be the winner.

8. At the present time, three persons attract the attention of the nation, namely, Sun Yat-sen, Chen Jiongming, and Wu Peifu. Their common virtue is twofold. The first is perseverance; the second is that they have accumulated relatively little personal wealth. But only Sun and Chen understand the “twentieth-century” way to found a modern nation. Wu Peifu knows nothing of this.

Sun Yat-sen possesses that rare capacity for forgiving, essential to being a leader. He can deliver “ocean-wide, sky-high” big talk; he has discussed the merits and demerits of [political] theories advanced by others but he is not serious about adopting them. He has three basic virtues: perseverance, forgiveness, and appreciation for goodness. Based on these three virtues, he can be dressed up as a leader. This is, of course, better than carving a leader out of a piece of balsam wood. (My personal, biased opinion is that a leader should not be too capable. Carving him out of a piece of wood is acceptable too.)

Although Sun Yat-sen advances the theory that “practice is easy, knowledge is difficult,” the ability to make plans and put them into practice is not his specialty. Therefore, it is better to ask for Mr. Sun’s help when we are getting into a difficult and complex situation, and to ask you to assume the burden of bringing peace and order out of the present chaos across the nation.

9. After the complete pacification of the two provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi, you have advocated a period of rest and rehabilitation and of implementing new programs to gain the confidence of the citizenry before embarking upon the campaign of “cleaning up the central plain.” How dare I not praise such a proposal? In 1917, I attempted to make the same proposal to Tang Jiyao [of Yunnan]. I also had high hopes in 1919, since you had made Zhangzhou a small “model China.”

I know it is painful for you that Guangdong and Guangxi have not yet been able to establish self-rule. Before last October [1923], I also felt deep in my heart that Mr. Sun had erred [in his decision for an immediate military campaign against the North]. However, in the past several months, I have given much thought to this matter. It has dawned on me that in the greater scheme of things [with China in a state of turmoil] it would be quite difficult for a small group [in isolation] to implement self-government, especially given the ease of communication today. Take the case of Russia with the Arctic Ocean at her back. It would be easy for her to close all doors and isolate herself; still she must abandon [true] communism and adopt new economic policies. Although Guangdong is located in the southern-most part of China, its doors, unlike those of Yunnan, open in all directions. While Yan Xishan of Shanxi has severed his ties with all party members around the country, you have

[maintained] ties with half of them. What has Shanxi accomplished with its reform program once its doors closed to party members? I did some detailed investigating last autumn and found that the whole thing [the reform] was a fraud. I don't think it was Yan's intention to deceive, rather it was the inevitable outcome of being isolated.

To save the country, party members need territories; the province of Guangdong alone is simply not enough room for their activities. At the minimum, their territory should be extended to the south of the Yangtze to match that of their adversaries. It would then be opportune to advocate a temporary period of rest and peace. [At that point] you will have plenty of time to experiment with making Guangdong a model province.

In recent years, it has been quite fashionable for someone controlling a division or a brigade of troops to seek a territorial base, leave his friends, and declare independence. On the surface, your plan fits exactly into this pattern. How can you explain your true intentions to the nation? Furthermore, you have advocated a federation of self-governing provinces. (I believe also that China sooner or later must adopt such a federal system of government.) But what you want now is, in effect, to bring the truly self-governing Guangdong into a federation with its "warlord-occupied" neighbors and to give these "occupied" provinces the same self-governing name. This would be a strange federation indeed. You have also excluded from your plan those comrades who have a desire to "clean up the central plain." How can you explain this to the nation?

10. You are concerned with public opinion and the people's desire for peace. But public opinion is like an indulgent mother and the people are not necessarily tired of war. What they are tired of is purposeless war. When you brought your military campaign from Guangdong to Fujian, back to Guangdong and on to Guangxi, public opinion was on your side and the people rejoiced at your successes.

As to whether Mr. Sun Yat-sen is sincere in his intention to "clean up the central plain," so far he has shown me no evidence to the contrary. If you do agree [to assist him with this], you can first make the commitment and thus gain an opportunity to test his sincerity. If his words turn out to be empty, then it is not too late to sever your ties with him. On the other hand, if you consider this effort as merely laughable, or if you believe that now is not the time for it, then any reconciliation [with Sun] would amount to a joke. [You would be] reconciled only in name and not in spirit. (By "cleaning up the central plain" we do not mean to bring all parties together to drink to a final, total victory.) At the 'minimum, we should satisfy the "indolent" citizenry's desire, which probably means a conference between the North and the South. However, we should bring the situation to a point where there is ample room for further development. (Also, this does not mean that all of us will share in the spoils.)

Wu Zhihui concluded with the following remarks:

What I have written are random and disorganized thoughts. There are also places where I [must] have offended you. I trust that you will forgive me, for I know I

always enjoy your friendship. As long as there is agreement on the basic ideas, all other small sacrifices can be disregarded by both sides. It is quite unnecessary to settle any personal grudges now. After the national goal is achieved, you may sever your ties forever or even fight it out in a duel with swords.

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## Chen's Reply to Wu Zhihui

Chen Jiongming's reply to Wu Zhihui's letter of April 29, 1924, was written in Swatow on May 13, 1924, and delivered by Huang Jusu to Wu in Shanghai. Its full text was not disclosed to the public until five months later by the Hong Kong newspaper *Huazi ribao* (October 25, 1924). It marked the first time since his retirement from Canton almost two years earlier that Chen had spoken out on national affairs. It reveals a frustrated patriot who was "powerless to change the situation" and so had to await a future opportunity to serve his country again. It also provides insight into his relationship with Sun Yat-sen and the divergence of their political ideologies. A translation of the full text is given below:

It has been a long time since I [Chen] last heard from you [Wu]; you always have my deepest esteem. Mr. Huang Jusu came to visit me and brought along your letter. I read it many times and was deeply moved. Previously, Mr. Huang Jiang wrote to me about some of your thoughts and I have asked him to express to you my general feelings. As long as there is a practical and feasible way for both sides to proceed, I am willing and ready to do my part. It pains me to see the present disintegration of the situation in Guangdong. I blame myself. I have asked myself where I went wrong. I do not care to talk about the faults of others.

When I brought my armies back from Guangxi, some critics said that Mr. Sun Yat-sen blamed me for not carrying the campaign to the North because I coveted the comforts of Canton. This criticism can be dismissed as a joke. Some critics said that I was in no hurry to unify China because I intended to set up Guangdong as a model province "to gain the confidence of our countrymen." At the time, this was not exactly true either. The fact of the matter is that I am quite conservative in my military strategies and did not agree with Mr. Sun, who directs troops like an acrobat twirling his gun in the air.

However, there is one thing I cannot comprehend to this day. On the very day of the victory celebration in Nanning [Guangxi], a plot for the mass assassination [of me and my staff] was launched. I learned of this conspiracy at a later date, and I still shudder at the very thought of it. I am not faultless, but to this day, I cannot think of anything I did to deserve that.

Once relieved of all official duties [in April 1922], I had stayed in Huizhou to keep out of [Sun's] way. My expeditionary forces [the Guangdong Army under the command of General Ye Ju] were isolated [in Guangxi] but gradually managed to find their way

back to Canton [May-June 1922]. The sentiment for rebellion was rampant. It took much persuasion and admonition to calm the situation.

Sun and his followers demonstrated neither the ability nor the wisdom to deal with the tension. They sought only to annihilate, not to rehabilitate. Suddenly, Sun returned to Canton from Shaoguan and ordered the immediate withdrawal [of the Guangdong Army] from the city. And then a secret meeting was held in Haizhu to arrange for a combined attack [on the Guangdong Army] by certain army and naval units. Admiral Wen [Shude] and General Wei [Bangping] secretly reported that a certain person had spent a great sum of money bribing army units to assassinate their senior officers. The final plan called for a simultaneous and sudden attack.

Under such provocation, what do you expect from a soldier with a gun in his hand? Can you expect him to lie down like a sheep on the altar?

After the provoked revolt [of June 16, 1922], Sun and his followers brought up the party “bible,” called me names [traitor to the party and to the country], and stopped at nothing until all blame was put on me. I started my career as a rebel [against the Manchus]. It matters little if I rebel once more. This whole unfortunate affair has been a painful burden; it seems to be part of my fate and therefore unavoidable.

For all the struggles to the present, pity neither Sun nor Chen, for neither is really that important. What is most painful to see is the devastation of Guangdong and the hindrance of the party’s efforts to serve the country.

Now, sir, you have shown [me] the kindest heart and uttered deeply moving words. I cannot but feel ashamed of myself. I appreciate the high hopes you have for me, but I am afraid I cannot measure up to your expectations.

I will keep your advice and criticism close to my heart and try to correct my mistakes. In the following, I shall give brief answers to some of the important points you brought up in your letter. Mr. Huang [Jusu] will explain [them] in further detail to you when he returns to Shanghai.

*1. On the question of Sun Yat-sen being the party leader*

The question of Mr. Sun being the leader has not been the cause of [our] split in the past; nor will it be the obstacle to any reconciliation in the future. Never mind the “less senior” Chen Jiongming; even if we were to bring back Mr. Huang Xing [from the grave] and ask him, I doubt that he would challenge Mr. Sun’s qualifications as leader.

For one to be a public leader, he must possess the ability to deliver “ocean-wide sky-high” big speeches. (It seems that the Frenchman, Lyman, said something to this effect.) As for me, I am still poisoned by the old teachings of Confucius and entrenched in my belief in “practice before you preach.” This is certainly not compatible with what we expect of a public leader. Therefore, there is absolutely no problem on the question of Mr. Sun being the leader.

What is truly regrettable is that the split with Huang Xing in the past and the disfavor with Chen Jiongming at the present are both the result of a bond that demands blind obedience. Sun’s followers have aggravated the situation by worshipping him in



a master-disciple fashion. This I truly do not understand. (Most of the old comrades, speaking among friends, also refer to Mr. Sun as “Mister” [xiansheng], just like the word “Master” [fuzi] was specially reserved for Confucius by his disciples. No wonder in all the writings against me [after the June 16 Incident] there has been no lack of words such as “Master,” “Father,” and the like!)

Now I understand some slight changes have been made in regard to [requiring] blind obedience. This shows that Mr. Sun has indeed improved his capacity for leadership in his later years—I rejoice, and I congratulate him for it.

However, the troublesome problem remains that I am not the type of person who can close his eyes and follow a leader blindly down a path. I can follow a leader, but if I discover the path is wrong, I will not hesitate to tell him so. If he does not listen, I am willing to step aside and let him continue his experiment. I am not willing, however, to accept compromise and be pulled, against my judgment, down the wrong path. This is in direct contradiction with Mr. Sun’s way. He believes he knows the right path. He pulls others [along and expects them to] follow him blindly. He accepts neither criticism nor advice. Therefore, unless I can somehow change my way, following Mr. Sun will only create more problems.

## *2. On the question of “cleaning up the Central Plain”*

What have we been fighting for? [In your letter you imply that] I may continue to laugh at the words [“cleaning up the Central Plain”] or that I may continue to insist that “now is not the time for it.”

You are indeed misinformed, for while I may not be a brave man, I am certainly no coward. But there is no standard blueprint for the founding of a state ... [followed by the four paragraphs quoted previously] ...

Therefore, it will take, at a minimum, ten years to achieve a true republic. Even if Mr. Sun were to become president today, I am absolutely sure that he would not be able to achieve a true republic within five years.

Based on the above analysis, I have formulated a practical plan of action that consists of two phases. The first phase is “military revolution,” that is, to use poison against poison. The second phase is “civil revolution,” that is, to lay down our swords and propagate civil rule. Without the participation of the people, how can we speak of “government by the people”? The more we rely on military force to achieve the goals of the revolution, the bigger the mess we will be creating. The past is full of examples. Therefore, the use of military force should be avoided at all cost.

Thus, the first phase is directed at putting down disorder and the second, at creating order. We should start the second phase immediately once peace is restored. For the first phase, we should carefully examine the present military and political situation. [In 1921–1922] we attempted to develop a positive political situation and a military capability to match that of our adversaries (that is, the anti-Zhili clique alliance, which included at least Fengtian, Zhejiang and the Southwest as major partners). It is a pity that Mr. Sun did not agree to this plan and instead chose Guangdong as the sole base of support for his military campaign against the North. Not only was

that campaign a fruitless effort, but Guangdong was destroyed in the course of it. If Mr. Sun and his advisers have awakened to these facts, it is still not too late [to work out an alliance] . However, if we wait until the situation in southern Fujian is stabilized and Yuan [Zuming]'s troops enter Guizhou province, things will become more difficult to handle.

In the past year, I have grieved at the slaughter across Guangdong and the gloomy prospects for national affairs. I am powerless to change the situation; I can do nothing but pray to heaven and shed tears. Now I have to be patient and watch for possible changes and prepare, even if barehanded, for combat with the dragons and the snakes. Thus, I may avenge this insult forced upon me. It is difficult to express all I feel in a letter. I have asked Mr. Huang Jusu to explain [my thoughts] to you in greater detail.

...There is no standard blueprint for the founding of a state. It requires careful study of the actual circumstances to determine, for example, how to put down the disorder of the present and how to create a lasting order for the future... For example, rampages of the military in private hands are what really ravage the Republic and the people today. In other words, big warlords destroy law and order for the central government; small warlords destroy law and order in the various provinces; and the bureaucrats, politicians, and party members live among them like parasites. They all talk about working for the people, but actually they steal from the people; every day they trample on the heads of the common folks. Together, they are the four ills of the Republic.

To clean up the present mess, we cannot solely depend on the use of words and bare fists. We have no choice but to use poison against poison. If we can unite the small warlords to overthrow the tyranny of the big warlords and establish civil rule once and for all, we will achieve a quick solution. If we cannot, we will have to first break up the big warlords [that is, their power bases], then establish a federal government to prevent their resurgence and confine the mischief of the small warlords to local areas. In this way, we can effect a temporary unification of the country, which may be called a "pseudo-federation." This is not the best way, but I consider it the only practical alternative. During this pseudo-federal period, we will have the opportunity to realize peace, to reduce military forces, and to payoff the national debt. Meanwhile, through political parties, we can lead the people to organize local governments in order to promote their capacity for self-rule and self-defense. Then the people will rise again to deal with the small warlords, to restore all the people's right to govern, and to force the big warlords to assume the role of a military force for national defense. In this way, a true federal government may be realized and a true republic may finally be established.

This is a slow and roundabout way. But in the founding of a republic, the sovereignty belongs to the people. If the people do not, directly or indirectly have the capability to be part of the organizing effort, then their sovereignty cannot be exercised. If national power is left in the hands of a treacherous few, then a true republic will not arise, even after a hundred years.

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