

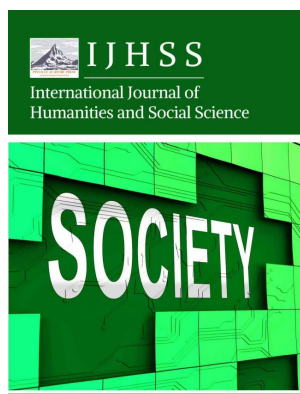
Article

A Comparative Study of the Old and New Guangxi Cliques during the Republic of China

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Abstract: This article offers a comparative overview of the Old and New Guangxi Cliques, two successive but fundamentally different forms of regional militarism in Republican China. While both cliques shared the basic characteristics of warlordism-territorial autonomy and the preservation of military strength-their organizational structures, leadership composition, and political orientations diverged significantly. By following the chronological development of each clique, the study highlights how the Old Guangxi Clique's fragmented, parochial power base contributed to its rapid collapse, whereas the New Guangxi Clique, shaped by modern military training and strategic engagement with national politics, rose to prominence and played a sustained role in major historical events. This comparison illustrates the internal diversity of warlordism and clarifies why the New Guangxi Clique became a more coherent and nationally influential force.

Keywords: Guangxi Clique; warlordism; Republican China; regional militarism

Received: 15 November 2025

Revised: 24 November 2025

Accepted: 23 December 2025

Published: 31 December 2025



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1. Introduction

Throughout the more than three decades of the Republican period, regional militarization remained a persistent feature of China's political landscape, despite repeated efforts at institutional consolidation. Although the central government in Nanjing formally reorganized various regional armed forces under the framework of a unified national army, localized military power continued to operate with considerable autonomy. In many provinces, military leaders maintained effective control over territory, personnel, and resources, thereby sustaining a decentralized pattern of governance. Well-known examples include the long-term administration of Shanxi by Yan Xishan and the prolonged regional leadership exercised in Yunnan by Long Yun.

Within this broader historical context, the military tradition associated with Guangxi presents a particularly noteworthy case. In existing scholarship on Republican-era regional militarism, the Old Guangxi Clique (Jiu Guixi) and the New Guangxi Clique (Xin Guixi) are often discussed in a continuous narrative and treated as successive phases of a single regional military lineage [1,2]. Such an approach emphasizes geographic continuity and the persistence of regional armed power, but it tends to obscure important internal distinctions. Studies of regional military regimes during this period have pointed out that different forces varied significantly in terms of organizational structure, leadership composition, and strategic orientation [3]. The Guangxi case illustrates this internal diversity with particular clarity, as the two cliques differed substantially in their origins, modes of organization, leadership networks, and approaches to political engagement.

This article therefore adopts a comparative perspective to examine both the similarities and divergences between the Old and New Guangxi Cliques. On the one hand, the two forces shared several basic characteristics commonly associated with regional militarism, including strong territorial control and an emphasis on preserving independent military strength. On the other hand, they diverged sharply in leadership structure, strategic vision, and patterns of interaction with broader political developments. By situating the historical evolution of each clique within this comparative framework, the study argues that the Old Guangxi Clique largely represented a more localized and traditional form of regional militarism, whereas the New Guangxi Clique gradually developed a more organized, adaptive, and outward-oriented profile.

Accordingly, while the main narrative of the article follows a chronological structure, its overarching objective is analytical rather than purely descriptive. The comparison seeks to explain why the Old Guangxi Clique declined relatively quickly, whereas the New Guangxi Clique rose to prominence and exerted a more sustained influence beyond its original regional base. Despite the extensive body of research on regional military forces during the Republican period, systematic comparisons that focus on internal structure and political trajectory within a single province remain relatively limited. By addressing this gap, the present study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of diversity within regional militarism during this historical period.

2. Similarity: The Consistency of Warlordism

A comparative examination of the organizational practices and governing principles of the Old and New Guangxi Cliques reveals several consistent features that can be understood as characteristic of regional militarism. Despite differences in historical context and political trajectory, both factions displayed similar patterns in territorial control and administrative arrangements. One retrospective account from a leading figure of the New Guangxi Clique emphasizes the symbolic and practical importance attached to the provincial capital, noting that long-term control over a specific locality was regarded as the foundation of authority and legitimacy, and that Guilin functioned as an indispensable political center rather than a merely administrative seat [4].

Archival records documenting successive chairmen of the Guangxi provincial government during the Republican period further illustrate this pattern [5]. Individuals holding key provincial posts were consistently drawn from within the same military-political network, indicating a clear preference for internal appointment over external oversight. This practice was not limited to Guangxi itself. When administrative responsibility for another province was later assigned to the same military group, senior governing positions there were likewise filled by figures affiliated with that network. Such arrangements reflect a fundamental characteristic of regional militarism: even within a formally centralized political framework, military factions tended to place trusted associates in charge of territories under their influence in order to safeguard organizational cohesion and political autonomy.

A similar logic can be observed in military operations. In order to preserve the effectiveness of their core forces—particularly elite or long-established units—commanders and subordinate officers of the New Guangxi Clique often adopted a cautious operational stance. Direct engagement was avoided whenever possible, while large-scale confrontations were more frequently borne by centrally organized forces. This strategy points to a second defining feature of regional militarism, namely the prioritization of preserving military strength over short-term tactical gains. From a theoretical perspective, these practices suggest that there was no fundamental difference between the Old and New Guangxi Cliques in terms of their basic adherence to regional militarist principles.

However, when these shared characteristics are placed within their respective historical settings, the contrast between the two becomes increasingly evident. The very similarities outlined above serve to sharpen the central question of this study: if both

cliques exhibited comparable core features of regional militarism, why did their historical trajectories and ultimate outcomes diverge so markedly?

3. The Fall of the Old Guangxi Clique

To explain how the New Guangxi Clique later developed into a more cohesive and comparatively modern regional force, it is first necessary to examine the internal weaknesses and structural fragmentation that characterized its predecessor. The Old Guangxi Clique (Jiu Guixi) was relatively short-lived, lasting for approximately a decade from 1911 to 1921. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911, Lu Rongting, who had previously served as the Qing-appointed military governor of Guangxi, consolidated control over the province by eliminating rival forces dispatched from outside the region and subsequently declared Guangxi's separation from the former imperial order [6]. Soon thereafter, he aligned himself with emerging political movements of the period, seeking to enhance his legitimacy through broader affiliations.

In August 1920, under the banner of the Constitution Protection Army, the Old Guangxi Clique initiated the First Guangdong-Guangxi War. Lu Rongting appointed Shen Hongying as commander of the expeditionary forces, which advanced toward Guangdong in three separate divisions. Initial momentum, however, proved difficult to sustain. By November of the same year, the campaign had stalled, and Lu withdrew his forces from Guangdong. Political developments soon followed, further weakening the Old Guangxi position. In June 1921, Lu again attempted to extend his authority by launching another offensive toward Guangdong with the aim of bringing the two provinces under unified control. This effort was met with organized resistance, and by late September the Old Guangxi forces suffered a decisive defeat, retaining control only over limited areas within Guangxi. Lu Rongting subsequently announced his withdrawal from political affairs.

The decline of the Old Guangxi Clique did not end with this initial setback. In May 1922, following a temporary withdrawal of opposing forces, Lu returned to Guangxi in an attempt to regroup his former subordinates. This effort quickly encountered resistance from Shen Hongying, leading to another defeat. Lu was forced to retreat once more and again declared his withdrawal from politics. Later that same year, remaining forces loyal to Lu were eliminated through a coalition formed by rival commanders, effectively dissolving the military base of the Old Guangxi Clique. By August 1924, after further military pressure and external mediation, Lu Rongting permanently withdrew from political life.

In early 1925, the balance of power within Guangxi shifted decisively. With assistance from allied forces from neighboring regions, the emerging New Guangxi Clique, led by Li Zongren, defeated the remaining rival armies and regained control of key cities. The recapture of Guilin marked a turning point, leading to the collapse of residual opposition and the consolidation of authority by the New Guangxi leadership. During this period of internal conflict, an external attempt to extend influence into Guangxi was also repelled, further reinforcing the position of the new ruling group. Li Zongren subsequently declared Guangxi to be under the unified authority of the New Guangxi Clique, formally bringing the old political order to an end.

Viewed in retrospect, the Old Guangxi Clique functioned largely as a loose coalition of locally oriented military leaders whose primary objectives centered on territorial expansion and short-term advantage. Coordination among its leadership was limited, and strategic planning remained fragmented. By contrast, the leadership core of the New Guangxi Clique was increasingly composed of individuals with formal military training and exposure to modern organizational concepts. This structural and intellectual divergence played a decisive role in shaping their respective historical trajectories. The collapse of the Old Guangxi Clique was therefore not merely the result of successive

military defeats, but rather the consequence of deeper organizational limitations that constrained its capacity for adaptation and long-term governance.

4. The Early Development of the New Guangxi Clique

In contrast to the decentralized and personality-driven structure of the Old Guangxi Clique, the New Guangxi Clique emerged under markedly different institutional and political conditions. These conditions played a decisive role in shaping its early consolidation and subsequent expansion. Rather than relying solely on personal authority or loose alliances, the New Guangxi leadership sought to embed itself within broader political and military frameworks, thereby enhancing organizational coherence and operational capacity.

In 1925, the New Guangxi Clique formally aligned itself with the Nationalist Government. By March 1926, its forces were reorganized as the 7th Army of the National Revolutionary Army, consisting of nine brigades and forming the core of the new Guangxi military establishment [7]. This reorganization marked an important step in the clique's transformation from a regional armed group into a more standardized military force operating within a national command structure.

In July of the same year, the New Guangxi forces were ordered to participate in the Northern Expedition. By September, they had defeated opposing regional forces in Hunan and neighboring areas, completing the first stage of the campaign. These victories significantly enhanced the military reputation of the New Guangxi Clique and strengthened its bargaining position within the broader political environment. In April 1927, in coordination with central authorities, the New Guangxi leadership took part in a large-scale political suppression campaign, an action that decisively shaped its subsequent political alignments and rivalries [8]. Later that year, internal realignments within the Nationalist leadership led to a temporary redistribution of power, during which the New Guangxi Clique played an active role in reshaping the political landscape [9].

In September 1927, the 7th Army once again defeated remaining opposing forces in Hunan and absorbed their remnants, reorganizing them into the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Divisions under unified command [10]. Four additional brigades were reorganized into the 15th Army under the leadership of Huang Shaohong, further expanding the New Guangxi military system [11]. By the end of 1927, armed conflict broke out between Guangxi and Guangdong. In early 1928, Guangdong forces suffered heavy losses and were forced to retreat, resulting in a decisive victory for the New Guangxi Clique and consolidating its control over the province.

By 1929, tensions between the New Guangxi leadership and the central authorities intensified, culminating in a struggle for political dominance. As a result of military and political pressure, the 7th Army was dismantled, and key leaders temporarily withdrew from Guangxi. During this interlude, provincial administration was briefly assumed by alternative political figures [12]. The situation soon shifted again as senior New Guangxi officers returned to the province, seeking new political alignments. Following a series of negotiations and realignments, control over Guangxi was restored to the New Guangxi leadership.

In 1930, the New Guangxi Clique entered into another phase of cooperation with central authorities, participating in campaigns that removed opposing armed forces from the province and secured regional stability. With this, the formative stage of the New Guangxi Clique's development came to an end.

The repeated alliances and ruptures between the New Guangxi Clique and the central leadership can be traced back to the military conflict that erupted in 1929, which intensified long-standing tensions between regional forces and centralized authority. This confrontation exposed the structural contradictions inherent in post-Northern Expedition governance, particularly the unresolved balance between central control and regional

autonomy. Subsequent conflicts further highlighted these tensions and underscored the fluidity of political alignments during this period. In contrast to the Old Guangxi Clique, the New Guangxi leadership demonstrated a higher degree of strategic adaptability, adjusting its political stance in response to shifting power structures. This capacity for tactical realignment constituted a key distinction between the two groups and helps explain why the New Guangxi Clique was able to survive and reassert itself amid repeated episodes of regional restructuring, whereas the Old Guangxi Clique failed to do so.

5. The Mid - Period Development of the New Guangxi Clique

The mid-period evolution of the New Guangxi Clique further accentuated its divergence from the Old Guangxi Clique, particularly in its efforts to institutionalize military training, strengthen provincial governance, and engage more deeply with national political and military affairs.

In 1930, large-scale military conflict erupted in central China. The New Guangxi Clique, together with other regional forces, suffered defeat at the hands of central government troops. Following subsequent political realignments, Huang Shaohong withdrew from the New Guangxi leadership and entered the central administration in Nanjing. With his departure, the original tripartite leadership structure of the New Guangxi Clique effectively dissolved, and Huang Xuchu gradually assumed the responsibilities previously held by Huang Shaohong. This leadership adjustment marked the beginning of a new phase focused less on external confrontation and more on internal consolidation.

Between 1931 and 1936, the New Guangxi Clique concentrated on strengthening local authority and administrative order within Guangxi. During this period, strict measures were adopted to prevent the entry of external armed forces into the province, thereby preserving regional stability. At the same time, the New Guangxi leadership launched an extensive program of educational and institutional development. A systematic provincial education framework was established, and the Guangxi Provincial Military Academy (Lu Jun Jiangwu Tang) was expanded and standardized. This institution became a key training ground for a new generation of officers, many of whom later assumed important military and administrative roles within the New Guangxi system [13]. The formation of this relatively unified and professionally trained cadre significantly enhanced organizational cohesion.

In 1936, the New Guangxi Clique cooperated with neighboring regional forces in a political initiative aimed at influencing central decision-making. Following negotiations and mediation, tensions were resolved without large-scale military confrontation. As a result, regional forces reached a consensus to coordinate their efforts in response to external challenges, emphasizing national unity and collective security.

After the outbreak of the full-scale War of Resistance in 1937, the New Guangxi Clique responded to national mobilization by organizing major field formations, including the 11th and 21st Group Armies. By early 1938, senior command positions within these formations were largely held by members of the New Guangxi leadership, while additional responsibilities were assumed within broader theater-level command structures [14]. In the years that followed, New Guangxi forces participated in a series of major campaigns across multiple regions. Despite heavy casualties and the loss of several senior officers, these forces continued to operate as an integral component of the national war effort.

By the mid-1940s, after years of sustained warfare and with support from international allies, the conflict concluded with victory. The wartime experience marked a profound transformation in the character of the New Guangxi Clique. No longer functioning primarily as a regionally oriented armed group, it had evolved into a disciplined force integrated into a national military framework and oriented toward

collective objectives. This transformation constitutes a second key distinction between the New and Old Guangxi Cliques. Whereas the Old Guangxi Clique remained constrained by fragmented organization and short-term regional considerations, the New Guangxi Clique demonstrated a sustained commitment to institutional development, professional training, and coordinated governance, enabling it to adapt to changing political and military conditions over time.

6. The Decline and Demise of the Guangxi Clique

Although the New Guangxi Clique achieved far greater political influence and military sophistication than its predecessor, its eventual decline illustrates the inherent limits of regional militarism when confronted with a profound structural crisis at the national level.

After the conclusion of the War of Resistance, the New Guangxi forces were reorganized and reduced in scale, with their principal units incorporated into several pacification and regional command structures under the Nationalist government. By 1946, the clique included two first-rank generals and five second-rank generals, reflecting its continued prominence within the military hierarchy of the period [15]. Despite this apparent strength, the fragile postwar political order soon deteriorated. Renewed large-scale military conflict erupted, and senior figures of the New Guangxi Clique assumed key positions within national defense and regional command systems. Their main field armies were deployed in central and eastern China, where they participated in a series of intensive campaigns and suffered substantial losses.

During the final stage of the civil conflict, the New Guangxi Clique further expanded its formal military structure, incorporating additional field armies and assuming responsibility for major operational zones [16]. Senior leaders held important command and administrative posts, and the clique appeared, at least temporarily, to remain an indispensable component of the national military apparatus. However, the rapid deterioration of the overall military situation soon overwhelmed these arrangements. Beginning in late 1949, the principal forces of the New Guangxi Clique were successively defeated and dismantled in a series of engagements across southern Guangxi. By mid-December, its remaining core units had been eliminated, and organized resistance effectively ceased [17].

In the aftermath of these defeats, the political and military network that had sustained the New Guangxi Clique disintegrated. Some senior figures left the mainland, while others experienced divergent personal trajectories shaped by the shifting political environment of the postwar era. A small number of individuals faced severe punitive outcomes, while most former Guangxi officers either withdrew from public life or lived out their later years under markedly different circumstances. With the collapse of the Nationalist regime on the mainland, the New Guangxi Clique ceased to exist as an organized political or military force [18].

The demise of the New Guangxi Clique thus differed fundamentally from the collapse of the Old Guangxi Clique. Whereas the earlier group disintegrated primarily due to internal fragmentation and organizational weakness, the New Guangxi Clique fell as part of a broader systemic collapse that engulfed the entire national political order. Its defeat did not negate its earlier achievements, but rather marked the end point of a historical trajectory shaped by both regional agency and structural constraints.

7. Conclusion

By tracing the historical trajectories of both the Old and New Guangxi Cliques, this study demonstrates that the apparent continuity of Guangxi regional militarism conceals two fundamentally different models of organization and political practice. The Old Guangxi Clique represented a loosely structured and highly personalized form of regional power, characterized by limited institutional capacity and weak strategic coordination. By

contrast, the New Guangxi Clique benefited from modern military education, collective leadership mechanisms, and sustained engagement with national political processes, enabling it to operate as a more cohesive and adaptive regional force.

These characteristics allowed the New Guangxi Clique to maintain a significant degree of autonomy within a fragmented national political framework for an extended period. Unlike some other regional military groups that were gradually absorbed or dismantled through administrative integration, the New Guangxi Clique preserved the integrity of its core forces and organizational structure well into the later stages of the Republican era. Its ability to navigate shifting political alliances and military pressures distinguished it from many contemporaneous regional forces.

In the broader context of modern Chinese history, the New Guangxi Clique occupies a consequential position. Its development challenges simplified interpretations of regional militarism as uniformly backward or purely self-interested. Instead, it illustrates a transitional form of regional power that combined local autonomy with participation in national governance and military mobilization. The comparison between the Old and New Guangxi Cliques underscores the importance of institutional capacity, leadership cohesion, and strategic adaptability in shaping the outcomes of regional military regimes. Chinese regional militarism, therefore, should be understood not as a monolithic phenomenon, but as a spectrum of organizational forms and political strategies evolving in response to changing historical conditions (see Table 1).

Table 1. Basic Military Organization of the New Guangxi Clique during the Republican Period.

Year	1937	1945	1946	1949
7th Army	170th, 171st, 172nd Divs; Cmdr: Liao Lei	171st, 172nd Divs; Cmdr: Zhong Ji	171st, 172nd Divs; Cmdr: Zhong Ji	171st, 172nd Divs; Cmdr: Li Benyi
31st Army	131st, 135th, 138th Divs; Cmdr: Liu Shiyi	131st, 135th Divs; Cmdr: Wei Yuncong	131st, 135th Divs; Cmdr: He Weizhen	HQ abolished
46th Army (incl. reorganized 46th Div.)	Not yet formed	175th, 188th, New 19th Divs; Cmdr: Zhou Zuhuang	May 1946 reorganized as 46th Reorg. Div.; Cmdr: Han Liancheng	174th, 188th, 236th Divs; Cmdr: Tan Heyi
48th Army (incl. reorganized 48th Div.)	173rd, 174th, 176th Divs; Cmdr: Wei Yuncong	138th, 174th, 176th Divs; Cmdr: Su Zuxin	May 1946 reorganized as 48th Reorg. Div.; Cmdr: Zhang Guangwei	138th, 175th, 176th Divs; Cmdr: Zhang Wenhong
56th Army	Not yet formed	-	-	229th, 329th, 330th Divs; Cmdr: Ma Bacui
84th Army	-	174th, 189th Divs; Cmdr: Zhang Guangwei	HQ abolished	HQ abolished
125th Army	-	-	-	362nd, New 2nd Divs; Cmdr: Chen Kairong
126th Army	-	-	-	304th, 305th, 306th Divs;

Cmdr: Zhang
Xiangze

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