# Why Did Chen Jiongming's United-Province Autonomy Proposal Fail?

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In the early 1920s, China was split between north and south, and the central government existed in name only. Chen Jiongming, the military and political leader of Guangdong, proposed a unification plan unlike the others: do not unify by force, but by "united-province autonomy" — each province would first draw up its own provincial constitution and practise self-government, and then the self-governing provinces would join together to form a federal-style unified China. In 1921, Guangdong took the lead in drafting a provincial constitution, and for a time united-province autonomy stood as a rival to unification by force.

But the proposal lived for only a few short years. On 16 June 1922, Chen Jiongming's subordinates shelled the Presidential Palace in Guangzhou, Sun Yat-sen fled to a warship, and the two men broke completely. The Kuomintang then launched its Eastern Expeditions, Chen Jiongming was defeated militarily, and united-province autonomy came to an end together with his political life. Why did a proposal that looked so mild and rational fail so thoroughly?

## I. What Is United-Province Autonomy?

Chen Jiongming's idea borrowed from the federal system of the United States: each province would be a self-governing unit, with its own constitution, parliament, and government; the centre would handle only national matters such as national defence and foreign affairs, and would be made up of representatives from the provinces. The path to unification would run from the bottom up — first self-governing provinces, then a united country — replacing military conquest with peaceful negotiation. Chen Jiongming argued that China was so large and its provinces so different that forcing unity by arms would only bring a new dictatorship, whereas united-province autonomy could both preserve local self-government and achieve unity in form.

This proposal found a ready market in the early 1920s. The warlords' endless fighting had left intellectuals thoroughly disappointed with unification by force, and many had sympathised with federalist ideas; the gentry of the provinces also welcomed provincial constitutions, because they meant that the affairs of a province would be decided by the people of that province. In 1921 Guangdong began drafting a provincial constitution, and Hunan, Zhejiang, Sichuan, and other provinces followed in turn, so that the provincial-constitution movement flourished for a time.

## II. The Guangdong Experiment: Pioneer of the Provincial Constitution

After Chen Jiongming took charge of Guangdong, he put united-province autonomy into practice. He invited scholars to draft the "Guangdong Provincial Constitution Draft," advocated an elected provincial governor and a provincial parliament to legislate, and sought to make Guangdong first a "model self-governing province," and then to link the provinces together into a federation. In 1920 he led the Guangdong army to drive out the Guangxi warlords occupying Guangzhou, achieving "Guangdong people governing Guangdong," and for a time he was regarded as an enlightened local leader.

But Guangdong's "self-government" carried an original flaw from the very beginning: Chen Jiongming himself was a soldier who governed Guangdong by means of his army. However well written the provincial-constitution draft was, both its drafting and its enforcement were inseparable from the backing of Chen Jiongming's army. The Guangdong gentry welcomed self-government, but feared even more losing Chen Jiongming's protection; outsiders suspected that the so-called united-province autonomy was

merely a fine-sounding phrase for Chen Jiongming carving up Guangdong.

## III. Three Reasons for Failure

First, in the warlord era, united-province autonomy had no mechanism for "uniting." The strongmen of the provinces all welcomed "self-government" (no one controlling me), but no one sincerely wanted "united provinces" (being controlled by others). The result of the provincial-constitution movement was that each province went its own way: Zhao Hengti in Hunan and Chen Jiongming in Guangdong alike turned their provincial constitutions into tools for legitimising warlord rule. With no national authority to organise the "union," united-province autonomy was left with only a scattered collection of "provincial self-government."

Second, there was a fundamental conflict with Sun Yat-sen's Northern Expedition line. Sun Yat-sen wanted to unify the whole country by force first, and only then practise constitutional government; Chen Jiongming wanted self-government first, and then peaceful union. In 1922, Sun Yat-sen insisted on the Northern Expedition, Chen Jiongming opposed it, and the contradiction between them intensified. On 16 June, Chen Jiongming's subordinate Ye Ju shelled the Presidential Palace (the 16 June Incident), Sun Yat-sen fled to the warship Yongfeng, and the two men broke completely. From then on, united-province autonomy was characterised by the Kuomintang as a "pretext for splitting the country," and it was publicly criticised in the declaration of the Kuomintang's First National Congress in 1924.

Third, there was thorough military failure. After Sun Yat-sen allied with Soviet Russia, tolerated the Communists, and established the Whampoa Military Academy, the Kuomintang Revolutionary Army twice launched Eastern Expeditions in 1925 and defeated Chen Jiongming's troops. Having lost his army, Chen Jiongming's political life also came to an end, and united-province autonomy had no practitioner left.

## IV. The Legacy of United-Province Autonomy

Chen Jiongming failed, but the question he raised did not disappear: in a large country, how exactly should the relationship between the centre and the localities be arranged? After him, China tried Kuomintang party rule and the equalisation system of the 1947 Constitution (see Question 9 in this series), and neither thoroughly solved this problem. The lesson of united-province autonomy is that local self-government cannot have only the "dividing" side; it must also have a mechanism for "uniting" — without a national constitutional framework, the self-government of a single province is defenceless before a strong power.

Another lesson is that self-government needs a genuine basis in public opinion. Chen Jiongming's provincial constitution was drafted by scholars and pushed forward by soldiers; the people of Guangdong never decided their own provincial constitution through a genuine democratic procedure. When self-government is only the design of a small number of elites, it cannot withstand storms. When local self-government is raised again today (see Introduction I05), the questions Chen Jiongming did not answer must be answered: who formulates the rules of self-government, and by what procedure can it be guaranteed that they will not be hijacked by the powerful?

## Continue Reading

- Index to "Forty Questions on the History of the Republic of China"
- Introduction, Chapter 5: Local Self-Government and Daily Life
- Why Did China Miss the Historical Opportunity of Provincial Constitutions and Federalism?

## References


- Index to "Forty Questions on the History of the Republic of China"

- Question 4, “Why Was Yuan Shikai Able to Destroy the Early Republican System?” — background on the early republican framework, cited by this question
- Public historical materials: Chen Jiongming (1878–1933); “Guangdong Provincial Constitution Draft,” drafted in 1921; the 16 June Incident, 16 June 1922; the Kuomintang First National Congress Declaration (January 1924) criticising united-province autonomy; the Kuomintang Revolutionary Army’s Eastern Expeditions in 1925 defeating Chen Jiongming

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