

THE CHINESE SHANXI TYPE 17: A LOCAL WARLORD'S .45 CALIBER VERSION OF THE MAUSER C96

By Marc Gorelick



Chinese Type 17 pistol-carbine with detachable wood stock/holster. Made by Yan Xishan's Taiyuan Arsenal in Shanxi Province. Photo courtesy of Joh Springers Erben, Vienna, Austria



Photo left - Chinese warlord soldier with Mauser C96 pistol and Dadao sword. Public Domain.

The Mauser C96 (*Konstruktion 96*) is a semi-automatic pistol that was originally produced by German arms manufacturer Mauser from 1896 to 1937. It was the first self-loading pistol to be industrially produced in large numbers before 1900. The distinctive characteristics of the C96 are the integral box magazine in front of the trigger, the long barrel, the wooden shoulder stock, which gives it the stability of a short-barreled rifle and doubles as a holster or carrying case, and a grip shaped like the handle of a broom. The gun was nicknamed "broomhandle" in English because of its grip looked like the handle of a broom, and in China the C96 was nicknamed the "box cannon" because of its rectangular internal magazine and because it could be holstered in its wooden box-like detachable stock.

Mauser produced about one million C96 pistols for the domestic market and for export, while a large but unknown number were made in Spain and China. The number of Chinese made C96's is especially problematic because of poor and destroyed production records. Besides the standard 7.63×25mm chambering, C96 pistols were also chambered for 9×19mm Parabellum, with a small number also being produced in 9mm Mauser Export. And then there was the Chinese Shanxi C96 (Type 17) in .45ACP.

The 7.63×25mm Mauser cartridge was reportedly the highest-velocity commercially manufactured pistol cartridge until the advent of the .357 Magnum cartridge in 1935. This cartridge, matched with the C96's long barrel, gave the pistol superior range and better penetration than most other pistols of its era and helped make it a favorite with Chinese Warlords.

The “Box Cannon” C96 was one of the most common and popular pistols in China during the Warlord period which, depending on the source, started in 1911 or 1912 (end of the Qing Dynasty) or 1916 (the death of Yuan Shikai) and ended with Chiang Kai-Shek's exile to Taiwan in 1949 when the Communists took over. It was a time of over 30 years of near continuous civil war with numerous provincial warlords (called *junfa* in Chinese) fighting each other, the nationalist Kuomintang government and the communists (and then the invading Japanese) in an ever shifting kaleidoscope of temporary alliances and battles. Many of the warlords built up vast armies in their continuous efforts to control one of the world's largest countries. Everyone – warlords, government, rebels, secret societies and communists – needed lots of guns and needed them quickly.



Mauser C96 Export Model, 7.63mm. Photo National Firearms Museum

Naturally, the participants looked to the west for modern arms, as a modern Chinese armaments industry was practically non-existent. When World War I ended, there were plenty of surplus modern arms available, as well as large, efficient armaments manufactories that were built up during the war, and with the coming of peace, were facing a bleak financial future. China, with its voracious appetite for large numbers of modern weapons, was a ray of hope for the western arms makers. Unfortunately, there were a few speed bumps such as the Arms Embargo Agreement of May 5, 1919, specifically designed to limit the warlords' access to war materiel, facially in an effort to reduce the death and destruction. Signatories included Britain, Russia, France, Japan, Spain and the United States, with tacit support from Belgium and Italy. The agreement specifically embargoed the sale of rifles and crew served weapons as implements of war. However, as FN, Mauser, Astra and Star quickly determined, handguns were not considered to be implements of war, and were not prohibited by the agreement. The arms manufacturers were delighted; handgun production was resumed, new deals were made, implemented and business resumed at full force.



Shanxi Type 17 pistol s/n 3223, .45 caliber in superb condition. Gun retains approximately 60-70% of a thinning blue with a plum-brown coming through and some silvering to high edges. The inscriptions are crisp. There is some roughness from the manufacturing process. However, one rarely finds a genuine Type 17 in as good condition. Photo courtesy of Morphy Auctions.



Genuine stock/holster with carrying straps for Shanxi Type 17, s/n 3223. It is oversize to accept the oversize .45 caliber Type 17. The stock is in excellent condition with some handling marks. The leather of the holster is still pliable. It is rare to find a complete stock/holster in such good condition. Photo courtesy of Morphy Auctions.



An extra impediment facing Germany was the Treaty of Versailles, which put severe restrictions on the German armaments industry. However, Mauser was able to resume commercial production of the C-96 in 1922 and during the 1920's the major market for Mauser pistols was Asia with the bulk being shipped to China via Japanese trading houses. Between 1916 and 1936, it is estimated that about 300,000 of various models of the C96 were exported to China. Mauser's sales began to drop off in 1929 as Spanish-made near clones of the C-96, such as the Astra 900 series and Star MM31 made inroads into the Asian market. For example, about 30,000 Astra versions of the C96 were exported to China. These pistols were shipped with the detachable shoulder stock, making them pistol-carbines, to satisfy the Chinese Warlord customers, and to get around an international embargo on rifle shipments to China. The C96 with shoulder stock served as a substitute for rifles, and the powerful 7.63mm cartridge made these guns very effective in the carbine role.

Female Chinese soldier with Mauser C96 (1939). Note the stock is attached and how she carries it. Public Domain

The C96 was especially popular in China and owning them was considered a bit of a status symbol. Used by both the government and by the troops of the various warlords, it could be carried in its hollowed shoulder stock or be attached to the stock for use as a short-barreled carbine. Despite its popularity around the world, China was the only nation to use the C96 as the primary service pistol of its military and police. Although large numbers were imported from Germany and Spain, many C96's in China were unauthorized copies that were produced locally in various government and warlord-controlled arsenals. Chinese Warlords were particularly impressed with semi-automatic pistols and they soon realized that it was cheaper to make copies in China than to purchase them from western manufacturers. The larger arsenals were in Hanyang, Shanghai, Taku Naval Dockyard, Gongxian, and Taiyuan in Shanxi Province. They all made numerous copies of other western pistols, including the FN Model 1900 in 7.65mm (some were enlarged copies that fired the 7.63 Mauser), Mauser Model 1914 and Colt Model 1900 Sight Safety. The Hanyang arsenal alone produced around 13,000 copies of the C96. The operating mechanism of the C96 was relatively straightforward, but it was also relatively difficult to manufacture. While this says something about the capabilities of Chinese manufacturers, it should be remembered that most of the major arsenals were set up and operated by western advisors and were built with western equipment.

During the Warlord era of the early 20th century, the northern Chinese Shanxi (or Shansi) province was ruled by the progressive warlord Yan Xishan (or Yen Hsi-shan) (1883-1960), who had established a modern arms factory in his capital city of Taiyuan. Yan was well educated, a career soldier in the Qing military and a former advocate of Self-Strengthening. Unlike other warlords, he focused on improving and modernizing Shanxi, rather than expanding territory or amassing a personal fortune. One of the more progressive warlords, Yan introduced numerous reforms, like the abolition of foot binding and improvements in public education and health care. Yan was trying to modernize and industrialize his small, poor and remote province and army, and, according to one source, his Taiyuan Arsenal was the only one in China that could produce modern artillery as well as modern small arms. The factory, or arsenal, was initially established in 1898 to make Mauser rifles, carbines and ammunition and machinery and tooling were purchased from Germany. It had its ups and downs and for a time during its early years it was also used mostly for arms repair. However, it was reorganized and expanded by Yan Xishan in 1910, who obtained machinery and workers from the Hanyang and Shanghai arsenals and, by 1926, was producing copies of Maxim and Vickers machine guns, as well as ammunition. German technical advisors helped to

manage the arsenals 8,000 workers who, according to a report, were capable of producing up to 1,500 rifles, 500 C96-type pistols, and 2.4 to 3.6 million rifle cartridges per month. This arsenal was one of the reasons for Yan maintaining Shanxi's relative independence during the Warlord period.



Photo left – Yan Xishan (photo taken between 1936 and 1945.) Public Domain.

Photo right – Taiyuan Arsenal workers. Public Domain.



The first C96 pistols manufactured at the Taiyuan arsenal were conventionally sized and chambered copies of the Mauser pistol in 7.63mm. It has been estimated that fewer than 2,000 of these pistols were made. However, things were to change.

Yan was equipping his troops with a locally produced copy of the Thompson Model 1921 submachine gun, chambered for the .45 ACP cartridge, but was experiencing supply difficulties as his troops' side arms and carbines were the Mauser C96 chambered for the 7.63mm cartridge. Having different cartridges was causing mix ups and shortages.

Chinese Warlord troops training with their C96s.

Note that the stocks are attached and the guns are being used as carbines. Public Domain.

Yan's ingenious solution was to standardize ammunition by producing a .45 ACP caliber version of the C96. This made logistics and production easier. It was designated *Type 17 Handgun*, after its year of introduction—the 17th year after the 1911 revolution) in 1928. Production of the .45 caliber handgun began at the Taiyuan Arsenal in 1928 and ended in 1931 or 1932. They are stamped (in Chinese) "*Type 17*" or on mid-late production guns, "*Semi-automatic Type*" on the left-hand side of the gun, and the Taiyuan Arsenal reference and year of manufacture appeared on the right side. A translated example of a right side inscription is "*Republic Year Eighteen, Made in Shansi.*" The markings changed depending on production runs - first, second and third production runs each have different Chinese markings. The earliest guns were marked with traditional characters but by 1929 the pistol name and arsenal reference were rewritten using

larger Zhuan Xu font characters. Frames were marked in that manner until the 8000 serial range, which was reached in 1931. Subsequently assembled guns had only the Type 17 designation on the left side panel.



Photos above and below. Right and left sides of .45 caliber Shanxi Type 17 pistol. Note how the magazine extends well below the triggerguard in order to accommodate the larger .45 cartridges. Photos courtesy of Joh. Springers Erben, Vienna, Austria.



A little less than 9,000 Type 17 .45 caliber pistols are believed to have been produced by the Taiyuan Arsenal. (The highest known recorded serial number is 8,555 but the arsenal stopped dating the pistols in

1931.) In 1936 and 1937, several years after production of the Type 17 ended, the Taiyuan Arsenal assembled a limited number of C96 pistols in 7.63 mm. Most were of standard dimensions and configuration although a few were selective-fire.



Shanxi Type 17 pistol inside its detachable wooden shoulder stock and holster. New holster/shoulder stocks were made to fit the Type 17's larger dimensions. Photo courtesy of Joh. Springers Erben, Vienna, Austria.



Shanxi Type 17 pistol. The markings on the right-side panel give appear to read that it was manufactured in the year 19, which indicates that it was made in 1931 or 1932 (19 years after the revolution in 1911). Note the smooth wooden grips. Photo courtesy of Morphy Auctions, Denver, PA.



Top and bottom views of a Type 17 .45 caliber pistol. It is wider than the C96 in 7.63mm in order to accommodate the larger .45 caliber ammunition.. Photos courtesy of Morphy Auctions, Denver, PA.

Besides being chambered for a larger .45 caliber cartridge, the frame of the Type 17 pistol was larger than the 7.63mm C96 models, with the 10-round box magazine extending below the trigger guard. Although some of the overall length and grip frame dimensions are similar, the .45 caliber Type 17 is substantially wider than the 7.63mm C96. Two five-round stripper clips were used to load the Type 17 rather than the single 10-round stripper clip of the standard 7.63mm C96 Mauser. Because of the overall increase in size, Type 17 pistols share no interchangeable parts with any other C96 variant. They are 11.73 inches (29.8cm) long with a 5.5 inch (14cm) long barrel. They weigh 3.66 pounds (1.66kg) without the shoulder stock and 5.3 pounds (2.4kg) with the shoulder stock. The v-notch, adjustable rear sight is graduated to 1,000 meters. The hard wooden grips are usually grooved (although plain grips are not unknown) and often have 14 horizontal grooves. Almost all grips are oil stained.



Type 17 serial number on the left chamber flat. Photo courtesy of Morphy Auctions, Denver, PA

The Type 17s have stamped serial numbers marked on numerous places and parts. The numbers are either the whole number or can be the last three digits. Serial numbers can be found on the left chamber flat, the top rear of the bolt, the back of the hammer, the back of the sub-frame, and the top of the backstrap. Smaller components have the last three digits of the serial number and include the lower surface of the rear sight bar, the side of the trigger, the follower, the interior of the magazine floor plate, the sear, and the inner surface of the safety. The serial numbers are also penciled on the inner surfaces of the grips but time may have faded those to illegibility.



Photo Above Left - Type 17 serial numbers on the back of the hammer, back of the sub-frame and top of the backstrap. Photo courtesy of Morphy Auctions.

Photo Above Right - Type 17 serial number on the top of the bolt and last three digits on the back of the hammer. The 12-pointed star on the right side of the top of the bolt is associated with the Chinese Republic of the 1920's. Photo courtesy of Morphy Auctions.



Photo Left - Type 17 serial number on the top of the bolt. Note that the 12-pointed star associated with the Chinese Republic of the 1920's is to the left of the serial number. Photo courtesy of Morphy Auctions.

The communists destroyed most of the Type 17 Shanxi .45 pistols after their victory over the Nationalist Government in the Chinese Civil War. It has been surmised that the destruction was largely due to their odd caliber which did not conform to Chinese communist standards. However, a few examples were put in storage and later exported overseas for sale on the commercial market.

During the Carter administration in the early 1980s trade was re-opened between China and the United States. This

included the sale of firearms (remember all the inexpensive Chinese SKS's at gun shows?) Thousands of the remaining warlord pistols, particularly C96s, were imported into the United States by Navy Arms and other importers. Collector demand in the United States for Taiyuan Arsenal .45 ACP Type 17 pistols had driven prices to unprecedented levels. Perceiving the potential for easy profits from gullible Americans, Chinese businessmen reproduced the Type 17 with markings patterned after the late production Type 17s. The new-built guns were introduced as “refinished originals” for \$2,000-\$2,500, allegedly selected to have excellent bores and with replaced parts. After the fraud was discovered, the prices of the “modern” Type-17's dropped in half. However, the fraudsters were not done. In order to increase interest and mislead the still-naïve, some of the guns were distressed to make them appear worn and aged. The antiquing was performed very skillfully. However, there are still ways to determine if a Type 17 is original or a skillful modern reproduction. One of the best clues to determining if a Type 17 is a genuine original is to carefully examine the panel markings.



*Left – Genuine original roll die inscriptions. Photo courtesy of Joh. Springers Erben, Vienna, Austria.
Right – Reproduction pantograph inscription. . Photo private collection.*

The panel markings of genuine original Type 17s were roll die stamped. The roll die characters' lines are of unequal width and frequently taper to a point at their end. The new-made reproduction guns had pantographed characters. While details differed from one pistol to another, the pantograph character lines are of uniform width and invariably end with a blunt tip.

Another way to determine if a Type 17 is original or a reproduction is to remove the grips and look at the grip frame. Original grips are nicely domed. Original Shanxi Type 17's as well as original Chinese C96's will often have oxidation on the grip frame under the grips. A modern reproduction will have little to no oxidation under the grips. And a third way to determine if a Type 17 is original or not is to look at the bore.

These guns were used hard and cleaning by Chinese Warlord soldiers was not always up to snuff. If the bore looks worn, dull and there are signs of oxidation, then the gun is probably original. If the bore is bright, shiny and sharp, then be suspicious.



*Left – Chinese soldier at the battle of Wuhan in 1938 with stocked C96. Public Domain
Right – Warlord soldier with a C96 holstered in its wooden stock. Public Domain.*



Warlord Sun Chuanfang's Anguojun soldiers drilling with Mauser pistols, 1926-1928. Public Domain.

Given the Warlord handguns' heavy use and their high rate of attrition (when a Warlord soldier's gun malfunctioned, there was no such thing as a field repair - the gun was often thrown away and a new one issued), the lack of documentation, and the destruction of many surviving examples by the victorious communists, the task of quantifying the relatively small numbers of original guns that still exist is difficult.

Today, an advanced well-heeled collector wants an original Type 17 made at Taiyuan Arsenal in Shanxi Province should expect to shell out up to \$10,000, depending on condition. One in truly superlative condition will cost substantially more. For example, the Type 17, s/n 3223, pictured in this article sold at a Morphy auction for \$19,680. For those unwilling to shell out these amounts of money, Chinese reproductions (made on original machinery) are still available at auctions for substantially less – around \$2,000 to \$3,000.

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PHOTO CREDITS

- Joh. Springers Erben, Vienna, Austria
- Morphy Auctions, Denver, PA
- Private collection – Owner prefers not to be identified.
- Chinese Warlord Photos are Public Domain because their terms of copyright have expired according to Chinese (Mainland and Taiwan) law.

Photo right - Chinese Warlord cavalry. Public Domain.



ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

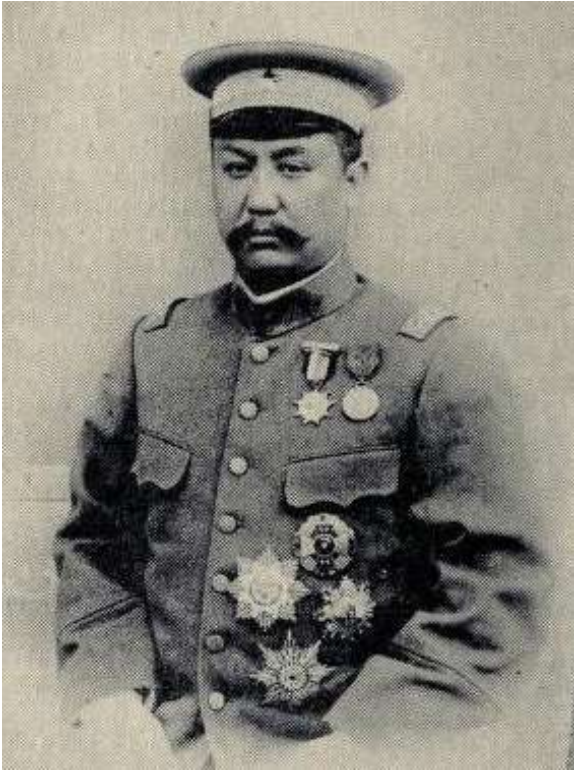


Photo left - Yan Xishan, Chinese Warlord. Photograph taken in the early 1920's. Public Domain.

Yan Xishan (1883-1960) controlled Shanxi Province from 1911 to 1949. He produced the Type 17 pistol variant of the Mauser C96 at his Taiyuan Arsenal. Some historians have described him as a benevolent dictator whose rule was based on political pragmatism and unlike most other warlords, some concern for the people he ruled. He was the leader of the small Shanxi/Jin clique and was affiliated with the Anhui clique of warlords. He maintained Shanxi's neutrality and tried to free it from serious military confrontations with rival warlords by using a strategy of shifting alliances between various warring cliques and joining only winning sides. Although he was weaker than many of the warlords who surrounded him, he often held the balance of power between neighboring rivals, and even those who he betrayed hesitated to retaliate against him in case they needed his support in the future. He joined the Kuomintang, but later rebelled against Chiang Kai-Shek in the Central Plains War (1929-1930) in which he was defeated. He rejoined the Nationalist Government, and

resumed control of Shanxi, cooperated with the Communists against the Japanese when they invaded China, and after the Japan's defeat enlisted stranded Japanese troops to help him fight against the Communists during the Chinese Civil War. Shanxi was lost to the Communists and after the war he fled to Taiwan and served as Premier until 1950 when Chiang Kai-Shek re-assumed the Presidency.



Yan Xishan's soldiers in Liaozhou in 1925 during the war with the Henan warlord Fan Zhongxiu. Public Domain.



Map of the various Warlord faction areas in the late 1920's. Shanxi province is west of Henan in the approximate middle of the map. Map from US Military Academy, West Point, Public Domain.

The Chinese Warlord Era began started (depending on source) in 1911 or 1912 (end of the Qing Dynasty) or 1916 (the death of Yuan Shikai). The country was divided and ruled by various military Warlord factions and cliques. Communist revolution broke out in the later part of the warlord period, beginning the Chinese Civil War. Although the era nominally ended in 1928 at the conclusion of the Northern Expedition, warlords such as Yan Xishan continued to exist and prosper into the 1930s and 1940s under tenuous Kuomintang rule, and were often a potent force until the final Communist victory in 1949.

The Warlord Era was characterized by an ever shifting kaleidoscope of alliances and betrayals as the various Warlords fought alongside or against each other, the central government, revolutionaries and foreign interventionists, such as the Japanese, White Russian Army remnants and Russian Soviets. The warlords of the Warlord Era are generally divided into the Northern faction and the Southern faction with numerous cliques within each faction. There were about eight cliques in the Northern faction and about nine cliques in the Southern faction (not always at the same time as Warlords rose and fell). Each clique contained several warlords. There were about 78 dominant warlords in the Northern Faction and about 51 in the Southern Faction, however some were in power for only a short time. They ranged from professional soldiers who were graduates of military academies down to those who were one step above banditry. They sometimes held high positions in central governments.

Warlord armies ranged from well-disciplined and organized troops with fairly modern weapons to undisciplined hordes that were little more than bandits. Warfare was constant and there were an estimated 500 battles during the Warlord Era, some involving a few hundred men and others involving hundreds of thousands of troops equipped with modern machine guns, artillery, tanks, airplanes and armored trains. Except for officers, Warlord armies were typically made up of illiterate conscripted peasants and/or bandits who regularly augmented their meager or non-existent pay with looting and pillaging.