

## EPILOGUE

# The “Third Front” after Sixty Years

Barry Naughton

UC San Diego, La Jolla, CA, USA

Email: [bnaughton@ucsd.edu](mailto:bnaughton@ucsd.edu)

The “Big Third Front” (*da sanxian* 大三线) was initiated in 1964 and was for decades considered top secret. Today, talk about the Third Front is ubiquitous in China. These three articles, in very different ways, show how the Third Front’s public emergence reveals important facets and fault lines of modern China. The Third Front was, after all, an extraordinary display of enormous and arbitrary state power: it is not surprising that it has ripples and repercussions through the present, and in many different dimensions.

I vividly recall the first time I saw the term – in 1982 in the library at Wuhan University. The absolute prohibition against mentioning the Third Front had recently ended, and the rather mysterious term would occasionally appear. I had not come to Wuhan University to read in the library, but in the conservative phase of the Chinese political cycle then prevailing, I had not been allowed to carry out the state enterprise survey project I had envisioned, and so I was instead holed up reading economics articles, freezing in the unheated university library. In one rambling discussion of China’s past errors, a Chinese economist lamented that “we wasted 100 billion yuan on the Third Front.” Back then, even a billion yuan was a lot of money, so wasting 100 billion was a very big deal. What could this Third Front be that so few had even heard of it?

As Paul Kendall points out in this issue, contemporary media “avoided explicit reference to the Third Front, given its secret status, and instead focused on individual construction projects that were only later officially recognized as elements of the Third Front.”<sup>1</sup> Since absolute secrecy was breaking down by 1982, I could follow a simple methodology: any time I came across a concrete reference to the Third Front, or an acknowledgement that a given firm was part of the Third Front, I would copy it down on a three-by-five index card. By the time I left China, I had more than a hundred such index cards, enough to support an analytic article in this journal. At that time, the Third Front could be mentioned in China but not openly discussed, so this article was the first serious piece published on the overall Third Front.<sup>2</sup>

My paper slumbered in well-deserved obscurity for decades, as virtually all scholars turned their attention to the more immediate question of whether China would move forward with reform and opening up. But after the turn of the century, interest in the Third Front resumed, first in China and then in the West.<sup>3</sup> It might appear, then, that when the Third Front was really important, it was top secret; now that it no longer matters, everybody can talk about it. The current contributions, however, show that this way of looking at the Third Front’s extraordinary afterlife is incorrect. Instead, the papers demonstrate that the Third Front’s aftermath illuminates some of the most important social dynamics in China in the past 60 years. All three papers included in this *China Quarterly* special section provide a rich understanding of the specific legacy and impact of the Third Front. That includes nostalgia, which is a big theme of the papers by Kendall and Jin Yi,

<sup>1</sup> Kendall 2024, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Naughton 1988. Later translated and published in Chinese (Naughton 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Two scholars played an especially important role: in China, Chen Donglin, and in the US, Covell Meyskens. The title of Chen’s (2003) work, as discussed below, is quite misleading. Chen also contributed a later (2015) work. For Meyskens, see Meyskens 2020b.

and the obvious explanation for the final scene in the Taomo Zhou and Cuifen Weng paper, in which a statue honouring Third Front construction workers is dedicated in the presence of a group of aging veterans squeezed into their old uniforms. To be sure, there is quite a lot of nostalgia in China today. Moreover, as Kendall reminds us, Xi Jinping 习近平 at the very beginning of his rule insisted that the reform era could not be used to “negate” the pre-reform era, more or less condemning commemorations of the Third Front to the nostalgia mode. But there is far more to the Third Front today than nostalgia. Indeed, some of the substantive aspects of the Third Front legacy help us to understand the emotive force of the Third Front in the context of China’s nostalgic emotional life. In the following, drawing on these three papers, I will make five observations about the Third Front that contribute to its continuing resonance today.

### The Third Front Was Not Just a Geographically Limited Policy

The territory of the “Big Third Front” is, of course, geographically circumscribed and corresponds to remote areas of south-west and north-west China. The focus of construction started in the south-west (when the Americans in Vietnam were considered to be the biggest threat) and later moved to the north-west (when the Soviet threat loomed larger). Most Big Third Front projects were sited in remote mountain locations, and some were even buried underground or dug into caves. Yet, as Jin Yi’s paper on two Third Front firms in Luzhou, Sichuan, demonstrates, not every Third Front factory was remote, and these two factories were part of the normal, exposed urban periphery where one might expect to build factories in any case.

Despite the title of the 2003 work by Chen Donglin, the Third Front was *not* a regional development strategy.<sup>4</sup> There was a string of so-called “small Third Front” (*xiao sanxian* 小三线) regions running down through the coastal and near-coastal provinces. One of the largest and most significant of these was in Shandong, with the substantial development of electronics, steel and chemical factories. Within the province, 16 general purpose machinery factories were moved from the coastal cities to the mountainous interior, while six larger machinery factories were moved out of the province itself to the Big Third Front.<sup>5</sup> Shanghai factories were relocated to or replicated in southern Anhui, and at least 100,000 factory workers worked for Shanghai factories there.<sup>6</sup> Small Third Front zones are also documented in Liaoning, Jiangxi, Zhejiang, Fujian and Guangdong.

Even large cities were part of a “Third Front-like” effort. In January 1965, just as the Big Third Front was ramping up, Mao Zedong 毛泽东 called for Beijing and other big cities to build gigantic underground air raid shelters capable of sheltering the population as well as production and transport facilities. This effort was continued and expanded in 1968–1969, when tensions with the Soviet Union were at their peak.<sup>7</sup> For a time in the 1990s, these underground cities were re-opened as commercial areas and easily visited; today, most have been closed down or replaced by urban redevelopment.

Thus, in a sense, almost everybody alive in China at that time participated, in one way or another, in the militarization of society that is associated with the Cultural Revolution and the Third Front. These people dedicated important parts of their lives to the “smaller” campaigns, and of course they are eager that their experiences and sacrifices not be overshadowed by the Big Third Front and forgotten. As a result, nostalgia for the Third Front has a large market.

4 Chen 2003.

5 Shandong Provincial Party Committee Research Room 1985, 316, 400, 429–30, 433.

6 See the three-part series edited by Xu Youwei (2012), comprising 12 articles, covering everything from the selection of workers to resettlement in Shanghai after the conclusion of the Small Third Front. See also Meyskens 2020a.

7 Liu 2019.

### Third Front Initiatives Were Staffed by Volunteers and Elite Workers

Many of the workers and managers who went to the Third Front were volunteers, responding to Mao Zedong's call under heated political conditions to build the "great rear area." For example, at the Changchun No. 1 Autoworks – a Soviet-constructed project that was China's only real auto factory – the very best workers competed for the opportunity to go to the new No. 2 Auto Factory in the Third Front, which was situated in the mountains near Shiyan 十堰 in Hubei. These workers were idealistic and eager to make a contribution to the national struggle; they also perceived "No. 2" as the focus of future development, the place to make a glorious and successful career. Because of this effect, the Third Front attracted many top quality and highly dedicated workers. The same thinking meant that some of China's most sophisticated machinery was moved to the Third Front, including to the No. 2 Auto Works.<sup>8</sup> This quality differential meant that the Third Front was even more costly than it appears if measured simply in numbers of people and costs of machinery.

### During the Reform Era, the Handling and Use of these Elite Resources was a Key Issue

After 1979, the political "line" changed, and China's economic strategy shifted in fundamental ways, yet the individuals and materials in the Third Front were still scarce, high-quality resources. A fundamental part of China's economic reform strategy was the effort to keep these high-quality resources at work in the national interest. This general principle is beautifully exemplified in Zhou and Weng's account of the movement of 20,000 workers from the People's Liberation Army Engineering Corps to the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone between 1979 and 1982. These were – and are – China's most skilled and technically equipped construction workers, repurposed from the remote defence industry to the cutting-edge reform zone of Shenzhen.

There are other, related examples. Again, the No. 2 Auto Works in Hubei can serve as an extreme example. The plant itself, spread among different mountain valleys around Shiyan, actually produced very few trucks there, and eventually the entire enterprise was moved out of the Third Front and into the major city of Wuhan.<sup>9</sup> After the move, No. 2 Auto Works went on to become a pioneer in the formation of "group companies" (*jituan* 集团) from state enterprises, and formed multiple joint ventures with foreign automobile companies, the first being with France's Peugeot. Thus, the factory itself was moved out of the mountains, or out of the Third Front, and given a productive economic life.

Perhaps even more striking is the large number of talented individuals who worked at No. 2 Auto Works in the Third Front and who then went on to assume even more important positions as the firm moved out of the mountains. Among these was Wang Zhaoguo 王兆国, who left No. 2 in the 1980s. He became the head of the Communist Youth League and was even considered as a candidate for the top Party job, before his career flamed out for mysterious reasons. Li Lanqing 李岚清 worked at No. 2 Auto Works for several years. He ultimately rose to become executive vice-premier under Zhu Rongji 朱镕基, from 1998–2003, and was arguably China's most important trade and industry politician at that time. Less exalted but also extremely important was Chen Qingtai 陈清泰 who emerged from the Third Front in the 1990s to make No. 2 Auto Works one of China's first conglomerate firms. From that decade through to the 2010s, Chen made important contributions to SOE reforms. Leaving the Third Front was an important part of China's reform experience.

This approach to human resources was one of the features that differentiated China's gradual reforms from the "big bang" reforms of the Soviet Union. China tried to protect and repurpose "clusters of expertise," rather than cast them on to an uncertain fate on the market. This approach

<sup>8</sup> Interview with former No. 2 Auto Works Manager, Beijing, May 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Meyskens 2022.

was economically productive, so long as the people concerned were flexible enough to change their orientation. However, this process also opened the way for endless disputes over the fairness of the treatment of individuals. Zhou and Weng describe the gulf that opened up between winners and losers in the transplantation of the PLA Engineering Corps to Shenzhen. While all the workers retained some beneficial status, only a minority were able to parlay this into a middle-class or above status in rapidly developing Shenzhen. In a related fashion, Jin Yi shows how bureaucratic regulations, especially regarding housing allocation, had a huge and varying impact on the social status of former Third Front workers in Luzhou. All these differences in status and income were the inevitable result of a policy stance that tried to keep insiders within the system while repositioning them.

It is inevitable that with such complexity should come disagreement over the fairness of treatment. Jia Zhangke's 贾樟柯 magnificent 2008 quasi-documentary *24 City* (*Ershisi cheng ji* 二十四城记), about a factory outside Chengdu in rather the same situation as Jin Yi's factories outside Luzhou, captures the complex mixture of nostalgia and bitterness over unfair treatment as well as the sheer loss that was a feature of the conversion of many Third Front enterprises.

### Militarization – the Driving Force of the Third Front – Has Been a Continuing Theme of Chinese Policy through the Reform Era

Zhou and Weng's paper on the PLA Engineering Corps also shows how militarization has been a continuing theme that links the Third Front with the reform era. The motivation for the Third Front was, of course, military, and top military resources and efforts were directed to the Third Front. It is not an accident that the elite construction teams Zhou and Weng describe are part of the military construction complex. We generally consider the transformation of the Third Front after 1979 as part of the "conversion" process that has turned military into civilian firms. Given the relaxation of international conditions at the time and the explosive growth of new consumer markets, that emphasis is surely correct in most cases. Yet, in some cases, the "transformation" of Third Front enterprises was designed to make them more economically efficient military enterprises, by importing global technologies and creating new technological capabilities. Obviously, this was much easier in Shenzhen than in Guizhou. This was clearly one of the motivations for the process that Zhou and Weng describe. They point out that Ren Zhengfei 任正非 – presumably on his own, but who knows? – made the identical calculation when, after leaving the Third Front, he set up the Huawei Corporation in Shenzhen. Thus, a hidden military agenda lurks behind Shenzhen and other parts of the reform process.

An important strand of the Third Front was the attempted creation of a military electronics complex in Guizhou, which at the time was called the 083 Base Area. The project was run by the Fourth Ministry of Machine Building, which in those days controlled essentially all of China's extremely scarce electronics expertise. The Guizhou complex ran into immense obstacles. As soon as Shenzhen was established, some of the Guizhou electronics firms set up "windows" in Shenzhen. Subsequently, the Guizhou base restructured, moved many of its firms to the suburbs of Guiyang and renamed itself the Zhenhua Corporation 振华. Substantial operations were moved to Shenzhen, thus beginning Shenzhen's career as a centre of electronics production and, later, a hub of Chinese (and global) innovation. A further round of restructuring occurred in 1989, when the electronics firms under the Fourth Ministry of Machine Building were reorganized as the China Electronics Corporation (CEC). Then, in 2010, CEC took over and once again reorganized Zhenhua. In December 2021, 32 years later, CEC moved its national operational headquarters to Shenzhen. Today, Zhenhua is still headquartered in Guiyang, but it is a formal subsidiary of CEC, which maintains a controlling interest in the firm while also listing it on the Shenzhen Stock Exchange. Zhenhua is large, and CEC is huge, with a total of 19 listed subsidiaries. Both CEC and Zhenhua have a substantial civilian production base, but there is no question that their core

mission continues to be providing military electronics to support China's defence forces and space programme.<sup>10</sup>

This reminds us that the Shenzhen technology story is not just one of innovation, flexibility and openness (thanks to its proximity to Hong Kong) but is also one of channelling state resources to this advantageous location. This is obvious from the examples of CEC and the PLA Engineering Corps, but it is also neatly symbolized in the person of Wang Zhen 王震. Wang Zhen was a revolutionary elder who was one of the earliest, most enthusiastic and relatively unsung supporters of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, where his children and grandchildren have been commercially active since the beginning of the reform era (as they have been in Hong Kong, too). Wang Zhen was in a position to wield influence in Beijing since he had an extensive network of powerful, long-standing friends, not least of whom was Deng Xiaoping 邓小平, who was a frequent bridge partner. But it is also worth remembering that Wang Zhen's day job in the late 1970s was as head of the military industrial system. With an influential actor like Wang Zhen helping to call the shots, it can hardly be an accident that Shenzhen quickly became attractive for the relocation of military assets from the Third Front.

### Chinese Discussions of the Third Front Work around a Taboo: Much of the Effort Invested in the Third Front Was Wasted.

For all the ubiquity of the Third Front in the Chinese media and literature today, there is never discussion or analysis of the cost or effectiveness of the Third Front programme. For sure, there is a standard justification for it: the international situation was perilous, the US (first) and the Soviet Union (later) were unpredictable threats, and so extreme measures were justified to signal China's resolve to maintain its independence and fight in a protracted war, if necessary. This is a complex argument, well outside the scope of a short overview. Suffice it to say, it is not at all clear that it would make sense to expend precious investment resources on small, half-finished machinery plants in remote locations, which might or might not have survived a nuclear attack targeted at China's own infant nuclear capabilities (to say nothing of its large cities). Certainly, Third Front facilities played a purely symbolic role in strategic competition and never provided any concrete military benefits.

As for economic output, many Third Front plants actually produced nothing; many produced tiny, uneconomic "batches" of essentially hand-assembled product. The fact that so many factories and skilled workers were ultimately moved out of the Third Front to large cities is vivid testimony to the economic costs incurred by the programme.

Of course, China has grown enormously in the more than 40 years since the end of the Third Front, and many regions that were economically marginal back then are now vital parts of the Chinese economy. China's massive transport infrastructure, which now knits the entire country together, in a few cases traces its roots back to Third Front projects. Today, a railroad runs from Chengdu to Kunming, through extraordinarily rugged terrain, and, arguably, this project to "open up" the south-west dates back to the Third Front. This achievement, however, came at a staggering cost: 2,100 workers were killed during the campaign-style construction; many parts of the line had to be rebuilt to correct design errors; and, as many frustrated travellers discovered, the route rarely carried passengers during the 1980s and 1990s. Today, there is a fine modern line linking Chengdu and Kunming, but the builders ended up abandoning about a quarter of the original Third Front line, creating an entirely new route in many sections. It is unclear how large a contribution the Third Front made to this piece of China's regional integration.<sup>11</sup>

10 See "Zhongguo dianzi xinxi chanye jituan" (China Electronics Information Corporation). Chinese Wikipedia, consulted 24 June 2024, at <https://zh.wikipedia.org/zh-hans/中国电子信息产业集团>.

11 The line today bypasses China's metallurgical city of Panzhihua, the connection to which was one of the main original motivations for the original line. Note that many more Chinese workers died on the Chengdu–Kunming line than on the

In any case, these discussions are taboo in the current blooming of Third Front discussion and nostalgia. The sacrifices are real and celebrated, and the idealism and sense of community stand in sharp contrast to the dislocation and materialism of contemporary China. The after-effects and legacies of the Third Front, as these three papers so eloquently show, are still with us and still reveal important facets of China's society, economy and culture. The one thing that cannot be said is that perhaps it was all for nothing. Thus, the insistence of Xi Jinping on the unity of the pre- and post-reform periods leads to an especially sanitized and one-sided view of the Third Front, one that is then widely broadcast in the documentaries so trenchantly analysed by Paul Kendall in his paper in this section.

## Conclusion

The appetite for Third Front stories in China is no doubt genuine: the Third Front was big, it was certainly real, and for decades it was secret. Yet everybody in China at that time was aware of the general story, because nearly everyone had some kind of Third Front-related experience, as China went on a war footing that affected big cities as well as the remote areas of the Big Third Front. Now that the basic story can be told, who would not want to listen and who would not want to share their own experiences?

At the same time, the social effects and divisions, the torturous family histories and the disruptive impacts on communities and businesses continue to have an immediate impact on today's China. Given that the complexity of these effects can hardly be discussed in the public media, the result is a recourse to a kind of nostalgia that pits the past against the real, but mundane, problems of the present. Life was simpler then, it seems, and the past is a foreign country. The three articles in this special section show that the Third Front in fact is less simple, less distant and less different than today's China, on which it continues to exert important impacts and legacies.

**Competing interests.** None.

## References

- Chen, Donglin.** 2003. *Sanxian jianshe: beizhan shiqi de xibu kaifa* (Third Front Construction: Development in the Western Region during the Preparations for War). Beijing: Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe.
- Chen, Donglin.** 2015. *Zhongguo gongchandang yu sanxian jianshe* (The Chinese Communist Party and the Third Front Construction). Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe.
- Kendall, Paul.** 2024. "Third Front as method: Mao, market and the present in CCTV documentaries." *The China Quarterly* [doi.org/10.1017/S0305741024000912](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741024000912).
- Liu, Huoxiong.** 2019. "Shen wa dong, guang ji liang, bu cheng ba" (Dig deep holes; accumulate grain widely; avoid hegemony). *Dang shi bocai* 2019(5), 4–7.
- Meyskens, Covell.** 2020a. "Experiencing the Cold War at Shanghai's secret military industrial complex." *Cold War History* 21(4), 429–447. [doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2020.1842876](https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2020.1842876).
- Meyskens, Covell F.** 2020b. *Mao's Third Front: The Militarization of Cold War China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Meyskens, Covell F.** 2022. "The makings of China's Cold War motor city." In Jennifer Altehenger and Denise Y. Ho (eds.), *Material Contradictions in Mao's China*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 200–218.
- Naughton, Barry.** 1988. "The Third Front: defense industrialization in the Chinese interior." *The China Quarterly* 115, 351–386.
- Naughton, Barry.** 2012. "Sanxian jianshe: Zhongguo nei lu de guofang gongye" (Third Front construction: China's interior defence industry). *Lengzhan guoji shi yanjiu* 11, 268–299.
- Shandong Provincial Party Committee Research Room** (ed.). 1985. *Shandong shengqing* (Conditions in Shandong Province). Jinan: Shandong renmin chubanshe.
- Xu, Youwei.** 2012. "Shanghai xiao sanxian jianshe koushu shi" (An oral history of Shanghai's Third Front construction). *Shanghai jingji pinglun*, 4 December, 12–13; 11 December, 12–13; 18 December, 12–13.

---

US Transcontinental Railroad, which was built in 1863–1869. See Zhongguo tielushi bianji yanjiu zhongxin 1996, 320–322. I am indebted to Ben Kletzer for locating and sharing this source.

**Zhongguo tielushi bianji yanjiu zhongxin** (ed.). 1996. *Zhongguo tielu dashiji, 1876–1995 (Major Events of China's Railways)*. Beijing: Zhongguo tiedao chubanshe.

**Barry NAUGHTON** is the So Kwan Lok Chair of Chinese International Affairs at the School of Global Policy and Strategy, University of San Diego.