

INTRODUCTION

Afterlives of the Third Front

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This special section of *The China Quarterly* examines the ongoing importance of the Third Front to contemporary China. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in academic interest towards this Maoist military-industrial complex, particularly within China itself. Some of this research has been concerned with understanding the central policy decisions that led to the official launch of the Third Front in 1964, as well as the subsequent construction of Third Front work units in the 1960s and 1970s.¹ A great deal of this research, implicitly or otherwise, has also sought to make connections between the Third Front and the present day. Such research ranges from policy-oriented examinations of what lessons can be drawn from the Third Front for furthering the contemporary development of China's hinterland regions, including comparisons with the "Open up the west" campaign and the Belt and Road Initiative, to more personal explorations of how everyday life in the Third Front has been remembered, often conducted by grassroots historians with their own memories of Third Front work units.²

Building on this burgeoning research on the Third Front within China, the papers of this section are centred around a contemporary set of questions: what has become of the Third Front and its workers in the post-Mao era? What material and discursive functions does the Third Front currently serve? And for whose benefit are these functions performed? Our special section examines several of the Third Front's afterlives, as the shockwaves created by this massive project extend into state media discourse, heritage construction, economic development and geopolitics, and continue to shape the lives of former workers. Sixty years on from the launch of the Third Front, the year 2024 is a particularly opportune moment for discussion of these shockwaves.

The Third Front stemmed from Mao Zedong's 毛泽东 concerns during the early 1960s about the nation's vulnerability to aerial attack, especially nuclear attack, as tensions escalated with both the United States and the Soviet Union. With industry concentrated on the eastern seaboard, a few well-placed strikes could potentially severely undermine China's capacity to mount a military response. In 1964, Mao rejected a draft of the Third Five-Year Plan (1965–1970) and called for specific revisions, including division of the country into First, Second and Third Fronts (see [Map 1](#)). The Third Front, in marked contrast to the post-Great Leap austerity policies, was to be a massive self-sufficient military-industrial complex created almost from scratch amid some of China's most inhospitable terrain. The central government additionally demanded that key Third Front factories, rather than being located within existing cities, should be adjacent to mountains, dispersed and hidden (*kaoshan, fensan, yinbi* 靠山, 分散, 隐蔽) and, in certain cases, located in caves. This new secret industrial defence apparatus was known as the Big Third Front. The centre also ordered the construction of backup military-industrial facilities – known as the Small Third Front – in the mountains of First and Second Front provinces (see [Map 2](#)). Subsequently, between 1964 and 1980, nearly 40 per cent of the national capital construction budget was allocated to the Third Front.³ With many

1 Chen, Donglin 2013; Chen, Xi 2015.

2 Guojia jiwei sanxian jianshe tiaozheng bangongshi 1998; Wang 1997; He 2003; Jia 2009; Ni 2013; Zunyi shi difang zhi bianzuan weiyuanhui bangongshi 2016; Zhang, Hongchun 2017; Xu and Chen 2015–2019.

3 Naughton 1988.



Map 1. The First, Second and Third Fronts

inland provinces lacking not only factories but also personnel, an estimated four million urban workers were relocated to the Third Front, along with their family members, from cities across China. Another 11 million rural residents served as temporary construction workers.⁴

With the easing of international tensions in the late 1970s and early 1980s, particularly between the US and China, the Party's central leadership began to shift its developmental policy away from the interior and towards the coastal regions. This is where the story of the Third Front might appear to end. However, whereas the "campaign time" of constructing the Third Front mainly occurred in the mid-1960s and early 1970s, these two periods of intensive activity produced also "campaign spaces" – in the form of factories, research institutes and welfare facilities – which did not simply disappear when the central leadership shifted its attentions elsewhere.⁵ These Third Front spaces were scattered across remote and inaccessible terrains, having been planned according to the needs of military defence rather than economic efficiency. Consequently, the Third Front went from being an important military project under Mao Zedong to being critiqued as an economic anachronism under Deng Xiaoping 邓小平.⁶

In further contrast, the last two decades have seen the Third Front reinvented as Maoist industrial heritage, with the emergence of Third Front museums, parks and even hotels. In this latest iteration, the Third Front has taken on two new functions: as a driver of local economic development

4 Kendall 2022, 41. For the calculation of these figures, see Meyskens 2020, 237–244.

5 See Hershatter 2014, 4, 24–27 on the "campaign time" of the state.

6 For examples of this criticism, see "Duanzheng jingji gongzuo de zhidao sixiang – lun jingji jianshe zhong de zuopai cuowu" (Rectifying the guiding ideology of economic work – on leftist errors in economic construction). *People's Daily*, 9 April 1981; Zhao and Liu 1983; Zhang, Huaiyu 1985.



Map 2. The Small Third Front

through heritage construction and as a prominent element within state discourse on PRC history. The Third Front enables a historical narrative of the Mao period that sidesteps the Cultural Revolution to focus on struggles against foreign enemies and nature, while also stressing developmental progress from the 1960s to the present. Events to mark the 60th anniversary of the Third Front in south-western cities also promote the “Third Front spirit” (*sanxian jingshen* 三线精神) of hard work and selfless dedication to the nation as a valuable resource for achieving material and moral progress in the present day.⁷ Paul Kendall’s article in this special section explores what happens when such narratives appear on national television as he focuses on two major CCTV documentaries about the Third Front. Kendall argues that these documentaries trace the Third Front into the present in ways that have supported but also sometimes complicated the CCP’s standard division of PRC history into pre- and post-1978 eras. The first documentary, *Vicissitudes of the Third Front*, implies not two but three eras for Third Front work units: a glorious struggle against external enemies and nature (1960s–1970s); an inglorious decline in the face of economic reforms incompatible with the Third Front (1980s–1990s); and a glorious revival after conquering the market (2000–present). The second documentary, *The Big Third Front*, further muddies CCP periodization by using footage from the Mao era to represent the 1980s, and vice versa. The result is an awkwardly ambivalent presentation of the early reform era as a period of decline as

7 For examples, see the article by Li Guo, “Jinnian sanxian juece 60 zhounian dahui juxing” (Major event organized to commemorate 60th anniversary of Third Front strategy). *Gongren ribao*, 27 May 2024, <https://www.worker.cn/c/2024-05-27/8267843.shtml>; and “Zhangyang sanxian jinsheng, chuancheng hongse jiyin” (Promote the Third Front spirit, pass on red genes). *Sohu.com*, 27 May 2024, https://www.sohu.com/a/www.sohu.com/a/781854858_667409.

much as of revival. Kendall concludes by suggesting that academic focus on the Third Front can serve as a methodological tool for cutting across and complicating dominant periodizations of PRC history.

The economic decline of many Third Front work units since the 1980s, and particularly since the 1990s, exerted a considerable influence on the socioeconomic circumstances and identities of factory workers.⁸ Tasked with achieving financial self-sufficiency during the reform era, many Third Front work units tried to escape decline by relocating from mountain valleys to more market-friendly urban locations. Other work units were absorbed into expanding cities and then were subsequently relocated as municipal authorities appropriated factory land for urban redevelopment projects. The displacement created by the Third Front is thus by no means restricted to the relocation of workers that occurred during its initial establishment in the 1960s. Yi Jin's article explores some of these social-spatial complexities through an analysis of Third Front families' responses to their recent relocation as part of an urban development project in the neighbourhood of Qiancao 茜草 in Luzhou 泸州, Sichuan. With a theoretical focus on place attachment, Jin contextualizes responses to this latest relocation by examining workers' memories of their initial relocation to Qiancao as part of the Third Front, as well as their movements within Qiancao itself during frequent rounds of housing reallocation. He finds quite divergent responses to these relocations and subsequently argues for "contingent attachment," highlighting how workers' sense of attachment to place varies according to long-term residential experiences since the launching of the Third Front. By drawing attention to these instances of "contingent attachment," Jin's paper seeks to make an intervention in debates about people's relationship with place amid China's rapid urban development.

While Jin mainly focuses on workers who remained geographically close to their Third Front work units, many other Third Front workers left the factories entirely. Between 1979 and 1982, 20,000 troops from the People's Liberation Army Engineering Corps arrived in Shenzhen 深圳, China's first Special Economic Zone. The PLA Engineering Corps had initially been established to fulfil the labour needs of the dispersed, inland Third Front project, and yet many of its military workers found themselves transferred – often at extremely short notice – to a very different kind of project in Shenzhen. Through quantitative and qualitative analysis, Taomo Zhou and Cuifeng Wang shed light on the dynamics of the upward and downward social mobility that this group of military migrants experienced. Zhou and Wang find a high degree of path dependency between the institutional barriers to upward social mobility in the Mao and Deng eras, with political credentials accumulated during the pre-reform years being most strongly associated with divergent economic conditions for former Third Front participants. In the case of Shenzhen, state-led, gradual economic liberalization under Deng largely reinforced, rather than subverted, the Mao-era military hierarchy.

This special section concludes with an epilogue by Barry Naughton. Over three decades after its publication in *The China Quarterly*, Naughton's article on the Third Front is a foundational text that has influenced all the contributors to this special section.⁹ In turn, we invite Naughton to reflect upon his ground-breaking research in light of the contemporary afterlives of the Third Front discussed in this section, from its influence on Chinese development and the lives of industrial workers to the changing ways that governmental and societal actors interpret the Mao era and its aftermath.

Competing interests. None.

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⁸ See Li 2015; Wu and Liu 2021.

⁹ Naughton 1988.

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