

1964

In September 1959, workers struck oil in China's northeast, near a stop along the Harbin–Qiqihar railway. As these new deposits were discovered at a time when China was facing international crises on multiple fronts that had severed its access to petroleum, this was cause for celebration, and, in 1960, the area was rechristened 'Daqing' (大庆, or 'Great Celebration'). As Daqing began pouring out millions of tonnes a year, allowing China to become self-sufficient in oil, in 1964, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) began promoting the experience of the workers who had toiled in arduous circumstances to develop the deposits as an example for the whole nation to emulate.

Learning from the Daqing Oilfields

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‘Into the ground drill bits tread / Reaching desired footage / Crude gurgles to the surface bed / Supporting the Vietnamese people and drowning the Yankees dead,’ wrote model worker Wang Jinxi in a poem dated June 1966.² By luck or design, Wang went to Albania with an official petroleum delegation that month, just as the Cultural Revolution reached the Daqing oilfields and insurgent workers accused him, along with the state’s increasingly powerful Petroleum Group (石油派 or 石油帮), of a litany of transgressions including denying them adequate time for rest.³ Wang, a poor peasant turned lifelong oil worker, had been elevated to the status of ‘National Model Worker’ (全国劳动模范) in 1959 for his tireless devotion to oilfield development.⁴ His poetry exalted the superhuman work ethic he and his fellow workers modelled and forged links between their own backbreaking manual labour and the nation’s capacity to secure petroleum self-sufficiency to counter imperialist threats.

In April 1964, when the first national campaign to ‘Learn from Daqing’ (学习大庆) was announced in the *People’s Daily*, Daqing appeared ready-made to mythologise.⁵ Following a prospecting campaign scattered across Manchuria’s central plains, in September 1959, workers struck oil near a stop along the Harbin–Qiqihar railway.⁶ The first shipments of crude left the area—rechristened ‘Daqing’ (大庆, or ‘Great Celebration’)—in June 1960.⁷ Daqing’s deposits, located in proximity to China’s heavy-industry heartland, promised enough oil to ensure the country’s self-sufficiency according to its Mao-era demand.⁸ These deposits were discovered amid China’s split with the Soviet Union, which had severed its main foreign source of petroleum, and as the United States was increasing aid to South Vietnam. That Manchuria’s Japanese occupiers through 1945 had not uncovered this oil—even as they forcefully developed the region’s mining infrastructure and provoked a war with the United States in part to secure oil from the Dutch East Indies—rendered the discovery all the more poignant.⁹ This context invigorated Daqing’s workers and suffused the spotlight that ‘Learn from Daqing’ initiatives shone on them after 1964.

In certain respects, the particularities of Daqing’s history, along with the specific technological and labour requirements of oil production, inhibited its utility as a model. Behind celebrated ‘ironmen’ (铁人) oil workers like

Wang Jinxi and female ‘family dependants’ (家属) like agricultural worker Xue Guifang (薛桂芳) stood some 30,000 People’s Liberation Army (PLA) veterans redeployed to bring the Daqing fields into production.¹⁰ Nevertheless, at conferences by late 1963 and on a national and mass scale by April 1964, Daqing was promoted as holding key lessons for the rest of the country.¹¹ These included its successful integration of industry and agriculture, of mental and manual labour, and the practical application of Mao Zedong’s wartime treatises ‘On Practice’ and ‘On Contradiction’.¹² Above all, Daqing was celebrated for the self-sacrificial spirit of its workers, who demonstrated how collective effort could tangibly contribute to national energy self-sufficiency and thereby advance the revolution at home and abroad.

Locating Daqing

In 1973, Radio Peking highlighted how Daqing departed from the ‘predatory imperialistic ways of oil extraction’.¹³ The broadcaster indicated that Daqing’s development differed from the capitalist practice of wildcatting, in which lone entrepreneurs drilled recklessly for the sake of private profit and without regard for a site’s long-term sustainability. While all evidence suggests that efforts to locate oil in Manchuria—spearheaded in 1956 during China’s First Five-Year Plan by the Ministry of the Petroleum Industry (MPI)—took the form of state-organised wildcatting, it is certainly the case that once oil had been struck in 1959 plans were made to ensure Daqing’s longevity and socialist tenor.¹⁴ It is important to bear in mind that ecological sustainability ‘was not a political value at the time’, and thus the focus of Daqing’s planners and workers during the Mao era remained on petroleum’s role in socialist modernisation.¹⁵

MPI leaders, including Long March veteran Yu Qiuli and geologist turned Eighth Route Army fighter Kang Shi’en, were able to tap their PLA connections to secure the labour and resources necessary to turn Daqing into a functioning site of oil production, transport, and, soon, refining.¹⁶ In February 1960, the MPI secured 30,000 PLA veterans, plus 3,000 officers recently demobilised from the Korean War, to build up the requisite infrastructure around the newly discovered wells.¹⁷ This was conducted and described like a wartime mobilisation: a ‘Great Battle for Oil’ (石油大会战).¹⁸ Seasoned PLA troops were joined by thousands of civilian engineers, geologists, planners, and workers from across the country.¹⁹ Even when morale was high conditions were punishing. As

historian Tai Wei Lim has written: ‘Personnel had to work in a harsh natural environment during bitter[ly] cold months ... [with] scant material comfort. Modern equipment was inadequate with few motorized vehicles and accessible roads. The workers overcame technological deficiencies with sheer self-reliant brute labor.’²⁰ They had to build nearly everything from scratch, including their own shelter and food supply. Resolving food scarcities also took the form of organised campaigns. Responsibility for waging the battle for food soon fell to female family dependants, who, often fleeing Great Leap Famine conditions elsewhere, came to Daqing to join male relatives who had taken up oilfield posts.²¹

In the first half of the 1960s, Daqing’s development was guided by specialised knowledge, technological leadership, and shared hardship. Amid a hierarchical management structure that respected worker contributions while deferring to scientifically trained experts, oilfield leaders like Yu Qiuli and Kang Shi’en encouraged universal asceticism.²² Daqing’s early days involved a ‘leadership style in which leaders and led lived together with minimum status differences.’²³ With Mao’s encouragement, Daqing’s organisational structure drew on the 1960 Charter of the Anshan Iron and Steel Company (see Hirata’s essay in the present volume).²⁴ The charter called on people to ‘keep politics firmly in command and strengthen Party leadership; launch vigorous mass movements, have cadre participation in productive labor and worker participation in management ... close cooperation among cadres, workers, and technicians; and go all out with technological innovation and technological revolution.’²⁵ As the oilfields became a major generator of state revenue and as the power of MPI officials within central government ranks grew—giving rise to the ‘Petroleum Group’ moniker based on its affiliates’ energy industry ties—Daqing’s leaders still expected spartan living conditions. A perhaps apocryphal oilfield story has Yu Qiuli chastising ‘ironman’ Wang Jinxi for indulging in the luxury of purchasing an East German-made motorcycle. Only after Wang persuaded Yu that the motorcycle was not a luxury but rather a necessity for speeding between well sites and thereby enhancing work productivity did Yu agree to let him keep it.²⁶ Some accounts suggest that Daqing’s leaders lived considerably better than its general workforce during this period, mostly in terms of food quality and quantity.²⁷ However, even with such stratifications, conditions were harsh for all. No-one lived or accumulated private profits in the manner of oil barons in the capitalist West.

Despite or because of the oilfields' technocratic leadership, Daqing's manual labourers received the bulk of media attention once the fields began to be publicised in 1964.²⁸ As scholars Li Hou and Yiyu Tian have explained, spotlighted workers included three broad categories that revealed the oilfields' starkly gendered divisions of labour: 'Ironmen', 'Iron Girls' (铁姑娘), and family dependants.²⁹ Ironmen included figures like Wang Jinxi and other male workers with long-time oilfield experience.³⁰ Iron Girls—themselves modelled after female agricultural workers of the Dazhai Production Brigade in Shaanxi Province—were officially registered as workers and, like their male counterparts, 'challenged the limits of human bodies in their intense physical labor.'³¹ Family Dependents were 'housewives in industrial and urban areas who were mobilized into productive labor by the state as "workers," but did not have officially-budgeted positions.'³² In Daqing, dependants like Xue Guifang set to work cultivating fields surrounding the well sites. They thereby not only sustained the entire endeavour but also facilitated Daqing's emergence as a model of industrial and agricultural integration and self-sufficiency.³³ As Daqing developed, dependants took on other crucial tasks including caring for children, making clothes, and staffing public offices. To be sure, all of Daqing's residents performed many different roles and contributed in one way or another to its becoming a new kind of urban-rural oil town. But how a person was officially classified meant significant differences in job security and remuneration.³⁴ Chairman Liu Shaoqi—soon singled out for attack during the Cultural Revolution alongside Deng Xiaoping—reportedly discouraged oilfield workers from engaging in agricultural tasks because it was 'not worth the 50 yuan per month that we pay' for their labour.³⁵ Family dependants, as Tian has explained, felt their precarious employment status acutely even as they took great pride in contributing their varied skills to Daqing's success.³⁶

When the Cultural Revolution erupted in May 1966, who performed what kind of work and how this work was socially valued and materially compensated became intensified sites of political struggle. While at the outset of the Cultural Revolution the oilfields continued to be nationally praised, Daqing and the Petroleum Group were soon recast as bastions of technocracy closely allied with Liu and Deng.³⁷ Red Guards and the Gang of Four accused Daqing and Petroleum Group leaders, including Yu and Kang, of capitalist tendencies. They also attacked Wang Jinxi for supplying Daqing with the veneer of worker leadership.³⁸ Significantly, and with Mao and Premier Zhou Enlai's apparent blessing, these uphe-

avals were only briefly tolerated at Daqing. The PLA, long involved in Daqing's development, restored production at the oilfields as early as the autumn of 1967, 'making Daqing one of the earliest places during the Cultural Revolution to be placed under military control'.³⁹ Deposed senior cadres were soon restored to their posts and, by May 1968, Wang was appointed vice-director of the new Daqing Revolutionary Committee. 'The conservative workers, the so-called "royalists," Hou explained, 'joined together under the leadership of the PLA to maintain order and to increase production ... The oil field remained one of the leading growth engines in the Chinese economy during the Cultural Revolution.'⁴⁰

While Daqing's rank-and-file workers struggled against entrenched leadership, regional anti-Communist developments appeared to justify the PLA's effort to keep the oil flowing. The war between North Vietnam and the United States invoked in Wang's June 1966 poem was then in full swing; the 1965–66 coup against Sukarno in Indonesia had turned the region's foremost oil producer staunchly anti-communist.⁴¹ Daqing, meanwhile, had proved so bountiful that China was exporting nominal amounts of oil to North Vietnam and North Korea and, by 1972, it also sent symbolic amounts to the Philippines and Thailand.⁴² Since 1964, China had been importing refining equipment from Western Europe (Italy in particular) and Japan to process the volume of crude the oilfields were generating.⁴³ More consequentially, once the US–China normalisation in 1972 paved the way for the normalisation of relations between China and Japan, the latter two countries inked an 'oil for steel' deal that supplied Japan with Chinese oil just as Japan was hit by the 1973 Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) oil embargo.⁴⁴ Although principles set forth by Zhou Enlai, who brokered the deal, stipulated that Chinese oil should not benefit US subsidiaries, Taiwan, or South Korea, this was difficult to enforce in practice.⁴⁵ Gang of Four members criticised these trade deals throughout the 1970s while scoring intermittent victories—particularly in the realm of cultural production, for instance, by delaying the release of a film about Daqing's early pioneers—against Daqing's restored technocratic and production-first ethos.⁴⁶ Jiang Qing, for her part, pointedly charged that, by 'exporting petroleum, China is shifting the international energy crisis on to the Chinese people and has saved the first and second worlds, i.e., the U.S., Japan, and Western Europe'.⁴⁷ After Mao's death and the arrest of the Gang of Four in 1976, suppressing oilfield struggles for the sake of increasing production and integrating China into global petroleum markets continued unabated.

Daqing's Mao-Era Lessons

On 20 April 1964, 'Daqing Spirit, Daqing People' (大庆精神, 大庆人) was the headline of the front-page story in the *People's Daily*.⁴⁸ In keeping with the secrecy that had shrouded the entire project since its inception, the article did not identify Daqing's actual location. The oilfields' headquarters had hitherto been publicly identified only as the 'Saertu General Land Reclamation Farm' (萨尔图农垦总场), rendering it indistinguishable from other worksites and prison camps elsewhere in China's far northeast.⁴⁹ Even after Daqing's achievements were publicised, further details about the oilfields were kept as quiet as possible until 1973, when Party leaders decided that the benefits of broadcasting China's reserves outweighed the potential security risks (prices in US dollars for Chinese crude tripled between late 1973 and early 1974 amid the OPEC embargo).⁵⁰ In this vein, when the campaign to 'Learn from Daqing' officially launched in 1964, Daqing's experiences were, on the one hand, generalised and distilled into exhortations about self-sacrifice and extreme endurance. On the other hand, Daqing's story supplied lessons about ways to integrate industry and agriculture and deploy Maoist philosophy to resolve practical problems.⁵¹

Readers of the *People's Daily* on 20 April 1964 learned that Daqing manifested the self-sacrificial and self-sufficient ethos of the Communist wartime base at Yan'an. They learned about Daqing's punishing weather, what the oilfields looked like, and how staff and workers offered mutual support and studied 'On Practice' and 'On Contradiction' together. Readers also learned anecdotes about Wang Jinxi and other male workers who risked life and limb for oil, and about the geologists and engineers who supplied the necessary expertise. 'Without a high degree of revolutionary consciousness, without dauntless revolutionary stamina, without esteem for a real scientific spirit, would any of this be possible?' the reporters asked. A piece in the newspaper's late edition profiled Daqing's 'lofty models' (崇高的榜样) and further clarified that the 'Daqing spirit' (大庆精神) was the 'revolutionary spirit of the working class' (无产阶级的革命精神).⁵² Daqing's people were 'made of something special' (特种材料制成的人). Its workers were 'both red and expert' (又红又专). They had achieved such astounding results because they 'persisted in holding aloft the red flag of Mao Zedong thought' and had 'conjoined heightened revolutionary fortitude with a rigorous scientific stance'. In April 1964, 'Learning from Daqing' meant replicating this ethic and attitude.⁵³

Daqing offered other lessons as well. Many of these focused on how Daqing's workers incorporated Maoist philosophy to resolve problems confronted at the oilfields. A striking example appears in a documentary by Belgian filmmakers Joris Ivens and Marceline Loridan, who visited Daqing in the mid 1970s. For their film *The Oilfields*, Ivens and Loridan interviewed many Daqing workers, including Xue Guifang, who in the film is identified by her honorific, 'Mama Xue' (Wang Jinxi had passed away from stomach cancer in 1970). In one scene, the filmmakers interview seamstresses in a workshop tasked with making and mending clothing for workers to help them endure Manchuria's bitter cold. As the camera pans over seamstresses pressing fluffs of cotton between sheets of fabric to make warm padded clothing, they discuss how they resolved the dire cotton shortage. One explained:

According to metaphysics, material objects are unchangeable. But Chairman Mao's philosophy has taught us that things can be transformed into their opposites. That's how rags are turned into cotton. You discover truth by putting ideas into practice. We started out with the idea that cloth is made of cotton. Then we asked, if cotton can be transformed into cloth, why can't cloth be turned into cotton again? Practical experience proved that it was possible. When we tried to find a way to do this, we sometimes got discouraged. But finally, we succeeded in making cotton from cloth. We were really excited.

Another seamstress continued:

At first our experiments didn't work. But we thought that since these rags were made of cotton fibre, there must be a way to make cotton again from the rags. It's a dialectical process. We tried seven times before we finally got it. Since 1970, we've made 300,000 pairs of gloves, with only 90,000 pounds of recycled cotton. Our interest in philosophy keeps growing. Because we can apply it to concrete situations, it's fascinating, and it encourages us to study philosophy.⁵⁴

The proud work performed by these women—making clothes to keep oilfield workers warm enough to survive in the Manchurian cold—was integral to Daqing's emergence as a model. As the seamstresses in Ivens and Loridan's film attest, much of this grassroots work was fuelled by Maoist philosophy integrated into everyday practice.⁵⁵

While the precise reasons Daqing was so successful as an oilfield remain a subject of debate, there is no question that its development facilitated China's capacity to continue its industrialisation and weather the split with the Soviet Union. Daqing supplied China with sufficient oil until consumption needs were recalibrated amid the market reforms of the 1980s and substantially contributed to China's emergence as one of the world's major oil producers.⁵⁶ Oil exploration hardly stopped at Daqing in the 1960s. However, as new fields were opened, officials demonstrated greater interest in extracting oil itself than in building up diversified, egalitarian communities around extraction sites. The geological formations that contained Manchuria's oilfields were understood to lead towards the Bohai Gulf and to the Yellow and East China seas. Chinese geologists noted the potential of these offshore regions as early as 1960.⁵⁷ Preliminary explorations of the shallow waters of the Bohai Gulf began by 1965; results from a United Nations–sponsored 1966 survey and another conducted by the US Navy in 1968 indicated that 'the continental shelf between Taiwan and Japan may be one of the most prolific oil reservoirs in the world', and China began offshore drilling in 1973.⁵⁸ While Wang Jinxi in 1966 sang the praises of drilling for Vietnam, petroleum industry officials were already thinking much more expansively about the meanings of national demand and how new demands could be met.