

1964

In the early 1960s, the geopolitical environment was worsening. On one side, the United States had established a string of military bases around China, from South Korea to the Philippines, and was increasing its aid to the South Vietnamese regime; on the other side, the Soviet Union had transformed into an existential threat for China, amassing hundreds of thousands of troops along its northern border. To make matters worse, China still had not managed to develop an atomic arsenal of its own. As Chinese leaders were discussing the terms of the Third Five-Year Plan, Mao Zedong argued that, in preparation for war, the country should be divided into three fronts. The First Front would be along the coast, the Second behind coastal provinces, and the Third in central and western China. This entailed the secret construction of a large military-industrial complex in China's interior—often in hidden mountain locations. This essay looks at the circumstances of the workers involved in the construction of the Third Front.

The Third Front Campaign

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On 27 May 1964, Mao Zedong summoned Deng Xiaoping and a few other Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders to discuss China's Third Five-Year Plan.¹ Over the previous few months, Deng and other leading officials had drafted initial plans that concentrated on developing coastal areas and lifting the output of agricultural and consumer goods.² Mao disapproved of this economic strategy because it did not address China's worsening geopolitical environment. The United States had a string of military bases around China, from South Korea to the Philippines, and Washington was expanding its forward-deployed forces in Southeast Asia. The Soviet Union, meanwhile, had transformed in the wake of the Sino-Soviet Split from a close ally into an existential threat, with 200,000 troops on China's northern border. What made matters worse was that both the United States and the Soviet Union had thousands of nuclear weapons while China did not have a single atomic bomb, as Moscow had withdrawn its promised support to build one.³

Given China's imperilled security position, Mao argued that, 'in the age of the atom bomb, not having a military rear was no good'.⁴ In preparation for war, the Party had to divide the country into three military fronts: the First Front along the coast, the Second Front behind coastal provinces, and the Third Front (or, hereinafter, the Front) in central and western China. In this final region, the Party had to secretly build a large military-industrial complex to serve as a backup economic motor for national defence in case the United States or Soviet Union invaded, and had to abandon established industrial areas and retreat into the interior like Chiang Kai-shek had done during World War II.⁵ Provinces in the First and Second fronts also had to build small military-industrial bases. Like the CCP's revolutionary base areas, all Third Front projects had to be dispersed in hidden mountain locations. With this new industrial war machine, Beijing would be in a better position to fight off an assault by its Cold War enemies.⁶



Figure 1. Map of the First, Second, and Third fronts. The author owns the rights to this map.

Deng and other top Party leaders did not immediately back Mao's call to undertake such a big developmental drive to bolster national security. They instead recommended conducting preparatory surveys and drawing up plans for a few select projects. This policy stance was based on their concern about launching an industrialisation campaign like the Great Leap Forward (1958–62), during which the central government had decentralised authority to localities and commanded them to mobilise local resources to quickly expand China's industrial base. In the end, the Great Leap led to economic and administrative disorder and a famine that killed tens of millions of people.⁷

Party elites only endorsed building the Third Front in August 1964, when the United States bombarded North Vietnam in the wake of the Tonkin Gulf Incident. With the prospect of a great-power war on the immediate horizon, Party leaders greenlit the construction of a military-industrial complex in China's inland regions.⁸ To ensure the Front did not experience the Great Leap's managerial problems, Party leaders granted central planners sole authority over its administration and did not allow local leaders to independently initiate projects.⁹ Between 1964 and 1980, China dedicated to the Front about 40 percent of the national construction budget. Most investment occurred in two big waves. The first wave was concentrated in the southwest. Major projects included three railroads to connect the provincial capitals of Sichuan, Guizhou,

and Yunnan, the large steel town of Panzhihua in Sichuan, the coke town of Liupanshui in Guizhou, and a conventional weapons complex in the mountains around Chongqing. In late 1966, the Cultural Revolution derailed these early efforts to build the Third Front.¹⁰

The Party leadership ordered a second wave of construction in 1969 in response to Sino-Soviet border clashes. While construction continued on projects in the southwest, hundreds of new initiatives were begun in central and northwestern China. The CCP's big push to industrialise the interior subsided in 1972 when Sino-American rapprochement significantly lessened Beijing's concerns about the threat of a great-power war on Chinese territory. About one-third of the national construction budget, however, was still allocated to completing existing projects until the late 1970s, when Party leaders decisively reoriented national development back towards the coast.¹¹

Integral to the Third Front's construction was a huge labour force. In total, roughly fifteen million people took part in the campaign, with about one million labourers coming from urban areas and the rest mobilised from the countryside.¹² The remainder of this essay examines the experiences of Third Fronters and the products of their labour. The first section charts how people were recruited. The next section looks at what life was like at construction sites, while the last section discusses the Front's economic legacies.

Going to the Front

Since the Third Front was top secret, its creation was never officially announced, so people typically only learned about it when their workplace informed them that Mao had ordered the construction of a military-industrial complex in inland regions to protect China from rising American and Soviet military pressures. Before someone was transferred to the Third Front, a political background check was conducted to ensure they were not classified as a landlord, rich peasant, counterrevolutionary, or rightist and that they did not have any foreign contacts or personal reason to oppose the Party. The government instituted these recruitment criteria because it sought to enlist only people who could be trusted to remain dedicated to building the Front amid any hardships and who would not disclose its existence to domestic or foreign enemies.¹³

With this framing, the Party presented Front participation as a political privilege. Some participants were excited to have the opportunity to go

where the Party thought they were most needed. Their enthusiasm was heightened by Mao's declaration that until the Front was built, he would 'not sleep well'.¹⁴ Favourable views of this sort were most common among Party members, whose personal biographies were already deeply enmeshed with the CCP's project of building socialism in China, and youth who had grown up after the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949 and were eager to realise Mao's decrees on how to construct socialist China. Many other recruits were traumatised to learn they had been chosen to answer Mao's order to firm up national security by industrialising remote mountainous areas.¹⁵

Urban residents were particularly distressed because going to the Front amounted to a socioeconomic demotion. Instead of living in a city in China's northeastern or coastal industrial heartland, they would have to reside not just in the underdeveloped interior, but in its mountainous hinterlands. In many cases, when workers were mobilised, plans for their new workplace were still on the drawing board, and construction had yet to begin. Workers were anxious about the sort of life that awaited them in this industrial world that they would have to build themselves. What sort of housing, medical facilities, and cultural activities would there be? Would there be schools for their children, and would they be any good? What would local weather and food be like, and would they be able to adapt? Would they be able to understand the local dialect? And, perhaps most importantly, when could they come back and live again with their family and friends?¹⁶



Figure 2. Third Front mobilisation poster. From the author's personal collection.

The administrators charged with overseeing the relocation of urban workers had their own concerns, too. Some provincial officials shared the worries of those in the Party centre who thought the Front might negatively impact the countryside like the Great Leap had, so they stressed that the campaign must be centrally directed and agriculture must receive adequate attention. Some northeastern and coastal officials also cautioned against ignoring the development of their regions and devoting too much consideration to the interior. While some inland provincial officials voiced similar words of warning, others sought to acquire more resources from developed parts of the country to advance local industrialisation.¹⁷

Officials in rural areas tended to view the Front more positively because it was a way for them to gain more resources by temporarily hiring labour out to projects in their vicinity. Employed in this way, a worker could earn about thirty-two yuan per month. A labourer's wage, however, did not go directly into their pocket. Their rural work unit first took a portion to cover the costs of food and lodging. Workers received the remainder, which was often about six yuan. This sum was a significant material benefit for rural folk who were typically compensated in work-points and earned, on average, eleven to fifteen yuan per year. The amount rural officials skimmed off the top was also more than they usually spent on local labour's livelihood, meaning they, too, obtained extra funding.¹⁸

The small number of rural residents hired as permanent employees accrued the even greater privilege of having access to the broad welfare guarantees of an urban state-owned enterprise. Despite these material advantages, some rural parents were still reluctant to let their children partake in the Front because they preferred to have more familial labour for their household, could not bear to part with their loved ones, or feared they might be maimed or killed in an accident. As this overview of people's responses to Third Front recruitment demonstrates, how people felt about being integrated into China's covert Cold War industrial defence apparatus was shaped by their specific social, economic, and geographical situations.¹⁹

Everyday Life

For urbanites, their departure for the Front was often filled with tears. Leading cadres tried to stimulate enthusiasm by playing revolutionary songs and coming to the train station to wish them farewell. These efforts were usually of little avail, as family members and workers welled up

at not knowing when, if ever, they would see one another again. The hundreds or thousands of kilometres they had to travel before arriving at their destination reinforced the feeling of how far they were going from home. Their sense of heading into the middle of nowhere was further enhanced by the fact that, for most, their future workplace could only be reached by a truck-ride, snaking for hours, if not days, up dusty mountain roads. Although rural folk generally had to travel shorter distances to their new workplace, they rarely had the luxury of motorised transport and had to instead walk for tens or hundreds of kilometres along rugged mountain routes.²⁰



Figure 3. Building a road for a Third Front factory. Source: “‘三线文化’ 三线建设部分老照片选登” [“Third Front Culture”: Select Published Old Photos of Third Front Construction]. 每日头条 [Meiri Toutiao], 20 August 2017, available online at: kknews.cc/zh-cn/news/a8jbqa6.html.

On reaching their new workplace, many recruits were shocked to find not an established factory but a construction site in various stages of completion. Due to a shortage of motor vehicles, recruits regularly had to install heavy machinery by hand and lug in tonnes of supplies on shoulder poles and pushcarts. Whatever sort of work people were engaged in, it was militarised: people were organised into military units; administrators described project goals as battles in China’s Cold War struggle against the United States and Soviet Union; and militaristic language and routines pervaded everyday life, from calling colleagues ‘comrades-in-arms’ (战友) to a regimented schedule of morning calisthenics, long work hours, and regular readings of Mao’s works about the need to have a military mindset.²¹

At the end of a workday, the earliest recruits were lucky if they slept in tents on thin mats; many closed their eyes under the stars with no bedding at all. Even once labourers erected housing, it typically was a rammed-earth hut with a thatched roof. Provisions were similarly spartan, with water sourced from local streams and rice porridge and pickled vegetables the main sustenance, with fresh vegetables occasionally added as an accompaniment, and small morsels of meat served only once a month or so.²² This regime of austerity was by design, resulting from the Party's policy of restraining consumption so that more resources were available for expanding China's economic infrastructure and increasing heavy-industry output.²³

The Party's drive to quickly build up its military-industrial base in inland China came crashing to a halt in late 1966 when it collided with Mao's campaign to root out 'hidden enemies and traitors within Chinese intellectual circles and within the Party', who, in Andrew Walder's words, were putatively trying to 'overthrow Communist political power and restore capitalism'.²⁴ Third Fronters made the Cultural Revolution's political logic their own, claiming that barebones living conditions and their assignment to the Front were due to the actions of capitalist roaders in their midst. Party leaders, on the other hand, asserted that criticisms of this sort were the work of domestic elements collaborating with China's enemies in the United States and Soviet Union. The Party's efforts to clamp down on worker dissent intensified in 1969 when Sino-Soviet border skirmishes made it seem that Moscow might soon launch an invasion or carry out multiple nuclear strikes.²⁵

In response to Sino-Soviet military tensions, the Party centre endorsed another big push to accelerate the expansion of China's military-industrial base. As in the first phase of Third Front construction, workers frequently replaced machine power with their muscles as they rushed to boost China's industrial defences before the outbreak of war. While many urban recruits were supportive of the Front's objective of bolstering national security through rapid industrialisation, many were also dissatisfied with their austere housing, diet, and cultural life. Even when projects were completed and standards of living began to improve in the late 1970s, many workers still longed for the day they could decamp from China's hinterlands and rejoin family and friends in more developed urban centres. While rural recruits also missed their families, they tended

to better recognise the material benefits they had as urban state-owned enterprise employees compared with rural residents living just outside Third Front factory walls.²⁶

Life After the Front

To assess the lives of the Third Fronters after the campaign, it is necessary to examine this issue from several different angles. If this topic is approached from the perspective of the workers themselves, the picture is decidedly ambivalent. While many Third Fronters recognise in their memoirs and oral interviews that their years of hard work endowed inland China with a larger industrial base than it would otherwise have had, they also often complain about the material privation of their everyday lives and the psychological adversity of being separated from family and friends. Those recruits who brought their children with them worried that their work unit's subpar schools would adversely impact their children's life chances and perhaps even lead them to suffer the same fate—having to reside forever in China's mountainous backwoods.²⁷

If a different perspective is adopted and the Front is evaluated through the lens of its economic results, they, too, are unmistakably mixed. From one perspective, the Front made significant contributions to the development of inland China. By building up regional industrial infrastructure, the Front integrated inland regions more into the Chinese economy, sped up the circulation of regional resources, and augmented manufacturing, mining, and hydropower facilities that made a society powered by hydrocarbons and electricity into more of an economic norm in inland China. Taken altogether, these economic changes helped to decrease the economic gap between the coast and the interior. On the other hand, they also established an industrial base whose continued growth would require ever more resources and whose development would place ever more stress on China's ecology.²⁸

From another standpoint, the Third Front was massively wasteful.²⁹ According to a 1984 State Council report, only 48 percent of all projects were worthy of further development; the other 52 percent were abandoned.³⁰ This statistic is a stunning testament of how much of the Third Front passed into the dustbin of China's economic history. However, when considering the inefficiency of the Front, it is important to take

into account the security logic embedded in its construction. According to Party policy, Front projects had to be in secluded mountain areas to keep them out of sight of enemy bombers. About one-quarter of Front funding was invested in factories that manufactured war materiel, and projects were rushed because of concerns that the Soviet Union or United States might soon attack. The policy of speeding up the building process ironically slowed project completion, as it resulted in shoddy construction and the need for years of repairs, which in turn raised construction costs.³¹

Given the many economic problems with the Third Front, it might seem most appropriate to conclude that, despite what it left in terms of industrial infrastructure, it must overall be viewed as an economic failure. This viewpoint, however, overlooks the fact that the Front was a development initiative that had ensuring national defence as its top priority. Critics might still object that, although certain inefficiencies are to be expected for an industrial defence project, the CCP leadership nonetheless still overreacted to Soviet and American military pressures by investing so much in the Third Front, and that the Communist Party could have guaranteed China's security with a more moderate industrial campaign.³²

Perhaps the Third Front was too much, but stopping our analysis there neglects one particularly important point. The Front was not an isolated phenomenon. It was part of a slew of defence initiatives undertaken by Washington and Moscow during the Cold War, from the thousands of atomic bombs produced that if used would have annihilated the Earth many times over to the very long, bloody, and costly wars fought in Vietnam and Afghanistan. From this standpoint, the excesses of the Third Front appear not as a Chinese anomaly but rather as part and parcel of the irrationality of great-power competition during the Cold War, when massive reactions to perceived security threats became a defining feature of international statecraft.