

BOOK REVIEW  
Covell Meyskens,  
*Mao's Third Front: The Militarization of Cold War China*  
(New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020)

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The Chinese economy was profoundly shaped by geopolitics and war. The first batch of China's modern enterprises could date back to the arrival of the British and French imperial forces on the Chinese shore in the mid-nineteenth century. The grand modernization plans under Empress Cixi and Sun Yat-sen were direct responses to the imminent encroachment of the colonial powers on Chinese soil. The Second Sino-Japanese War and the Civil War were the spawning ground for the critical features of the modern Chinese economy, from the state-driven heavy industrialization, the radical approaches to land reforms, to the Communist monetary system. Even the most recent cycle of market-oriented reform likewise premised on a period of peace and geopolitical stability.

The subject of Meyskens' magisterial work, the Third Front, was symbolic of this critical yet understudied feature of modern Chinese economic history. It occurred at a crucial juncture of modern Chinese history when Beijing faced a major geopolitical crisis after the significant economic setback of the Great Leap famine. In anticipation of war with the United States and the Soviet Union, Mao convinced his Politburo colleagues to gear the national economy, still reeling from the Great Leap Forward, towards full-scale preparation for total war. From 1964 to 1980, China built more than one thousand industrial plants and several major railway lines across southwestern, northwestern, and central provinces. While the anticipated total war never materialized, these projects temporarily shifted the Chinese economy's center of gravity towards inland China under the logic of geopolitical primacy before the Dengist reform radically reversed the trend. Largely hidden in official media until the 1980s, these Third Front projects totaled up to 205 billion yuan or 39% of China's infrastructural outlays. Until Meyskens'

work, only Barry Naughton has analyzed the regional Third Front projects at length in an article and a book chapter.<sup>1</sup> Most works that touch upon the Third Front only treat it as a background or sideline event while reiterating Naughton's negative verdict of the Third Front projects as an economic failure.

Meyskens' book depicts the Third Front Movement as a multi-layered, multi-dimensional, and transformative event that changed the lives of millions while leaving a mixed legacy. Meticulously researched and lucidly articulated, this new narrative on the Third Front was panoramic in scope and rich in detail. Drawing on a wide range of resources from Central Party documents to ordinary people's memory, Meyskens deftly weaved a political genesis of the Third Front informed by top-level geopolitical calculations with an in-depth analysis of its consequences centered on the migrant workers in Panzhihua. The rich details on the everyday politics of the Third Front drew on 120 interviews with participants of the Third Front, including many old Panzhihua workers. Such extensive use of oral history stood out as a signature achievement for a historical work that has already excelled in the wide-ranging archival and published sources it employs.

After the introduction contextualizes the Third Front in China's Cold War strategies, the main body book is structured into five chapters, each capturing the Third Front from a unique perspective. The first chapter focuses on the genesis of the Third Front Movement as the enterprise was shaped by Mao's strategic vision and China's Cold War insecurity. Moving away from geopolitics and elite politics to the mobilization campaigns, the second chapter takes the readers from Mao to the various places where the top-down mobilization reached the recruits through

the mediation of different actors from Beijing to local cadres. The next chapter examines how the logic of "militarization" undergirded the Third Front projects, from its ideological mobilization and planning styles to time's militarized concept. The fourth chapter takes the level of analysis down from macro- and meso-levels to the nitty-gritty of everyday life in the Third Front cities and enterprises, mainly the Panzhihua Steel Plant. The fifth and last chapter returns to the macro-level assessment on the impacts of the Third Front projects on the Chinese political economy and the reach of state power.

While past narratives of Maoist movements often focused on politics and even elite politics, this book gave the pride of place to the human experience of the Third Front Movement without overlooking the political processes. Take the second chapter on the mobilization process as an example. In a top-down order, the narrative moves from the top-level planning, the central command, the formulation of recruit criteria, the propaganda machinery, the local-level responses, and especially the concerns of ordinary urban recruits, featuring hundreds of individual voices from ordinary cadres and workers. The depiction of the work and life of Panzhihua workers likewise vividly captures the everyday experiences as "privileged hardship." The term refers to Third Front workers' experience consciously or unconsciously exchanging harsh working environments and an austerity lifestyle for permanent employment and welfare privileges, which improves one's position in the marriage market. As Meyskens identifies, major Third Fronts projects like the Panzhihua Steel Plant evoked diverse responses from the recruits, whose experiences were shaped as much by their local circumstances and family concerns as by the larger historical forces beyond their control (Meyskens 2020: 196-200).

The book's macro-level assessment of the Third Front is as persuasive and well-balanced as its social history. Beyond a rationale and motivation for the movement, "militarization" also means a military-style mobilization of capital, labor, and technology for building and maintaining Third Front projects. The "big militarized industrialization campaigns" such as the Third Front were closely related to consumer austerity and anti-revisionism ideology.

After China entered into détente with the United States after Nixon's visit, the significance of the Third Front began to wane. Deng's coming to power and China's subsequent turn away from revolutionary diplomacy sealed the fate of the Maoist development strategies, including the Third Front. This classic narrative of the reform is where a conventional history of the Third Front would end. *Mao's Third Front* goes beyond the familiar narratives to examine the projects from the vantage points of state-building and national integration. While most Third Front industrial projects might be economically inefficient, they carry far-reaching consequences for industrial developments in the inland provinces and China's national integration through massive infrastructural projects (Meyskens 2020: 220-226). The theme of national integration warrants further research in related areas of integration and standardization. For example, the Cultural Revolution decade was also the critical period for China's "synchronization," when wristwatches, radio networks, and the Beijing Time became established parts of the national infrastructures and entered the everyday life of millions. Meyskens' research on the Third Front thus opens an avenue for a new history of infrastructure during what used to be mischaracterized as the "dark age" in Chinese economic history.

Based on a diverse pool of sources and an innovative analytical framework, Meyskens' book will remain the definitive study of the Third Front and militarized industrialization in Mao's China for the foreseeable future. While the research could go further to examine how the Third Front might impact Chinese politics and society in the 1980s and beyond, for example, through the vast networks of people that the large-scale mobilization and demobilization enabled at both the elite and grassroots levels, such questions would best furnish the themes for further research.

My questions for the author concern alternative ways to think about the Third Front. How does the Third Front fit into the patterns of Chinese economic history? Was it comparable to the massive industrial relocation to Southwestern China during the Second Sino-Japanese War? How did the Third Front projects shape the local economy, society, and environment in the subsequent reform era? How do

the participants see the Third Front as history and personal experience?

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<sup>1</sup> Naughton, Barry. "The Third Front: Defense Industrialization in the Chinese Interior". *The China Quarterly* (1988) 115, pp. 351-386, and Naughton, Barry. "Industrial Policy during the Cultural Revolution: Military Preparation, Decentralization,

and Leaps Forward". In William A Joseph, Christine P. W. Wong and David Zweig ed., *New Perspectives on the Cultural Revolution*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1991, pp. 153-181.

## Response

*Covell Meyskens, Naval Postgraduate School*

I would like to thank Yanjie Huang for his thoughtful review of *Mao's Third Front*. To fully respond to all his questions would take quite some time, so I will focus on his last question about Third Front memories and sketch out the contours of a response in the next few pages.

This issue can be approached from multiple angles. In some ways, Third Fronters are like sent down youth and other retirees the world over who hold nostalgia events for their collective younger years. This phenomenon of mass nostalgia events is in part a product of modern politics making retirement into a normative life phase for many elderly people. More broadly, it's a product of the rise of global Fordism in the twentieth century, where standardized workplaces manufacture cars and other standardized economic goods in standardized ways, and more broadly speaking Fordist social institutions writ large seek to generate national populations with standardized knowledge, occupations, consumption habits, and life phases. This process of standardizing masses of people is why I sometimes refer to participants in the Third Front as Third Fronters because giving them a collective name points to how they were a special military-economic species that the PRC state manufactured to deal with Cold War threats. One way this standardization process is visible in Third Front memories is that the state scripts penetrating people's lives is rather noticeable in nostalgia events commemorating Mao's China, like Third Fronters gathering to sing old revolutionary songs or using Mao era state slogans to recount their days working and living together. In the US, this standardization of memories is there too, but memories are much more infused with popular culture and less state discourse.

There is also much fragmentation in memory-making about the Mao era with rural-urban divides as well as regional, ethnic, economic status, bureaucratic position, and gendered splits. Third Front memories are an example of memory

fragmentation. For a local cultural official in a former Third Front location, promoting Third Front memory could be a state-business proposition, as the Chinese state generally looks favorably on publicizing Third Front history and channels resources into Third Front *lieux de memoire*.

For participants, they generally approve of the central and local state's investment in the Third Front memory business, partially because it often means that some of them benefit from having contacts with officials with slush funds, but also because it means their lives are publicly commemorated. The desire for commemoration for some Third Fronters is particularly acute because a number were well educated and experienced going to the remote mountainous hinterlands where the Third Front was located as a big step down from urban centers.

The fragmentation of Mao-era memory is also detectable in the fact that the Third Front was a secret world apart, which took part in major national campaigns, but had its own particular language too, such as Mao's famous quote that "if the Third is not built, I will not sleep well" which many Third Fronters remembered, sometimes as a motivation for why they found value in building the Third Front. Other times, the phrase was inverted to criticize the state with a stock phrase generated by Third Fronters, whose general idea was that they worked hard so could Mao sleep well, but now they didn't sleep well, referring to their poor living conditions and general neglect by the state in the post-Mao era. The fact that the Third Front was clandestine also means that their memories of what they achieved often don't hold much public currency outside the world of fellow Third Fronters, because many people in China still don't know what the Third Front is and which economic advancements were part of it, unlike someone who say took part in building the First Bridge across the Yangzi in Wuhan in 1957 which was a big public event.

In my research, I also encountered a common issue oral historians face. There is a strong tendency for people to think of the past not in terms of what happened but in terms of what they wished had happened.<sup>1</sup> This ex post facto wish fulfillment is a phenomenon that Chinese historian Chen Donglin explicitly warned me about when conducting oral history interviews with Third Fronters. They did not want to think of decades of their life at the Third Front as a complete waste. They instead found meaning in these experiences, sometimes in mundane events such as cultural happenings, family milestones, or workplace accomplishments. Other times they found meaning through grand narratives of the nation such as how the Third Front contributed to national development and national security by building up industry in inland regions. This securitized-developmental memory is in stark contrast to dominant recollections of the socialist era in the United States which tend to represent socialism as a total mistake or a period of utter failure, oppression, and destruction.

Some interviewees talked directly about finding meaning in the grand narrative of socialist revolution and wanting to serve Mao through Third Front construction. When the word “revolution” came up, it usually appeared not as 革命 but as 文革 in other words as shorthand for the Cultural Revolution, whose factional politics were talked about as being at cross-purposes with the Third Front’s military-economic drive, but how party and especially Zhou Enlai protected the Third Front from the Cultural Revolution due to its connections to national security, which was one way that Third Fronters liked to talk about how they were special compared to other people in China. Given that they also took part in the Cultural Revolution, some with much fervor, it seems quite possible that participants are reconstructing their memories after the fact to favor the grand narrative of development over the grand narrative of revolution. This is not too surprising given the anti-revolutionary ethos that has been at the core of Chinese politics for a few decades now. Third Front participants did, however, frequently pepper their speech with the party-curated phrases of the Mao era, and these words were used to encapsulate memories of experiences, which upon further questioning would at times become quite detailed

descriptions of going to the Third Front, living there, and often wishing to go back home.

Many did not talk openly about the violence of the Cultural Revolution, probably in part because of the common concern of making China look bad in front of foreigners, but also probably because as one interviewee said, I was basically like a graveyard digger, unearthing dead people and asking folks to tell their painful memories about their lost loved ones. They preferred for the dead to remain dead, sometimes though I would become the receiver of confessions about normally repressed events about what violence they had committed or what violence others had done to them, and they bore the marks of still.

Some interviewees lightened up with emotion when they discussed their participation in factional conflicts that were both verbally and physically violent. Some recalled being heavily criticized or making a criticism of someone else, losing out in a factional struggle, and then being given menial labor as punishment, a sign that though the party liked to talk about all labor as glorious in the Mao era, certain forms of manual labor still had strong social stigmas. Others regretted the violence they inflicted on their peers. Others did not. I still remember one man who was very excited to recount in detail the impromptu tank his coworkers and him cobbled together to fight a rival faction. Others talked longing for the community of equality in austerity of the planned economy days which many scholars have noted in memories of state socialism in China.<sup>2</sup>

When I asked about the Third Front’s environmental consequences, others brought up a different strand of memory. Interviewees talked about how projects denuded the land of trees, polluted the air and waterways, blew up mountains for mines and transport, and overhunted fish and game – all to power China’s industrialization. In this regard, Third Fronters are some of the earliest in China to come to an awareness of development’s deleterious ecology, which sometimes gained a critical edge because development literally made them sick.

It is worth noting that the CCP leadership has found meaning in the Third Front too, as party leaders also face the problem of making a usable past out of the



variegated and conflicted memorial landscape of Mao's China. The party leadership, as currently constructed, does not want to just forget the Mao era and block it out. But it does not want to remember the Mao era as a time of political conflict, state-sanctioned violence, and of yes economic improvements but mixed with stunning economic failures. The party wants, as Xi Jinping has said, to "tell a good China story." It wants a Whiggish history in which the party has been and always will be a good guardian of the Chinese nation and its people who has tirelessly worked to promote its constant economic uplift and military safeguarding.

The Third Front helps to tell that story. The Third Front's focus on national development and national security helps to link the story of the party's commitment to protecting the nation by fighting off foreign imperialism and predatory domestic political figures in the 1930s and 40s to the post-Mao story of the party serving the Chinese people through economic growth, scientific and technological

advancements, rising living standards, increasing China's global influence, and heightening global respect for the PRC. With the Third Front the party can tell a "good China story" of its constant dedication to bettering the national economy, strengthening national defense, and advancing the people's interests. This is a good story that the party would like to become a national standard, but the fact that many people's own experiences of the Mao era contradict this narrative of the party always lifting the country up by its bootstraps is a problem, as is that fact that many folks don't know much about the Third Front. The party has tried to address this memory hole with several Third Front documentaries. Based on my observations, it has only partially worked.

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<sup>1</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Ching Kwan Lee and Guobing Yang, eds., *Re-envisioning the Chinese Revolution: The Politics and Poetics of Collective Memories in Reform China* (Washington, DC: Stanford University Press, 2007).