



# Nostalgia for the Maoist Era or for the Cold War? An Exploration of Third Front Workers' Privileged Experiences in the Cold War Context\*

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In the mid-1960s, a massive number of industrial projects were launched in China's interior, known as the Third Front Movement, a response to international tensions created by the Cold War. Although they were abandoned at the end of the Cold War, the Third Front projects left a significant impact on the country. As an embodiment of these ongoing influences, nowadays, elders sharing recollections about the Third Front projects have formed a considerable part of China's nostalgists for the Maoist era. Based on the Third Front workers' life experiences in Mao's China, this article explains Maoist era nostalgia when Chinese people generally live a better life in comparison with that during the rule of Mao Zedong. Furthermore, this article explores the question of whether their nostalgia is also for the Cold War. This exploration adds to a better understanding of the rebirth of nationalist fervor in today's China.

**Keywords** Third Front, nostalgia, Maoist era, Cold War, and nationalism

## I. Introduction

During the Cold War, when the bipolar pattern between the United States and the Soviet Union was at the center of global geopolitics, Beijing was undoubtedly an ally of Moscow from the early 1950s. However, the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations in the 1960s placed Communist China in jeopardy due to its rivalry with the world's two most powerful countries. For fear of an invasion (either from the Soviet Union or the United States), war preparedness became a top priority in the mid-1960s for policymakers at the

\* The author receives no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. The author would like to express his deepest thankfulness to the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments.

center of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), especially for Mao. It was the background for the movement of Third Front projects (三线建设), in which large numbers of factories focusing on national defense or heavy industry were relocated from coastal to hinterland areas, mainly in Southwestern and Northwestern China, known as the Third Front areas in national security.<sup>1</sup> Fueled by large amounts of personnel and resources, the Third Front projects continued running in the hinterland for at least two decades.

However, the significance of the Third Front projects dissolved with detente of U.S.–China relations in the 1970s and then with the Soviet Union’s collapse in the early 1990s. After the end of the Cold War, China abandoned the Third Front projects as a national policy. Following this transformation, most Third Front factories experienced restructuring, relocation, or even bankruptcy. The Third Front projects gradually became a dust-laden event in the history of Communist China. However, their influences, both at the state and individual levels, are keeping this movement alive.

As the noticeable expansion of visitors to Shaoshan (Mao’s hometown) demonstrates,<sup>2</sup> nowadays, the nostalgia for the Maoist era is enjoying ever greater popularity in China. Recollections from individuals who participated in the Third Front projects adds significantly to Maoist era nostalgia. This bottom-up trend among Chinese people coincides and is further stimulated by the top-down propaganda of re-evaluating the Maoist era more

<sup>1</sup> During the Maoist era, mainland China was divided into three fronts based on the possibility of and preparation for invasions. The coastal areas were the first front, and the third front was the hinterland areas in Southwestern and Northwestern China. The term “Third Front” is also translated as “Third Line” in English academia.

<sup>2</sup> According to the statistics before tourism was limited due to COVID, in 2019, the number of people visiting Shaoshan was more than 25 million, while in 2008, this number was only 3.6 million. (12年翻7倍: 从韶山游客接待量暴涨看毛泽东热 *Seven-time Expansion in 12 Years: Observing the Zeal of Mao Zedong from the Drastic Increase of Tourists to Shaoshan*. <http://www.szhgh.com/Article/red-china/tour/2020-12-26/256756.html>)

positively.<sup>3</sup> Both transformations are promoting the rebirth of nationalist fervor in today's China.

In this article, through exploring Third Front workers' life experiences—especially paying attention to the privileges they enjoyed during the Cold War when national defense was most prioritized—I aim to reveal some of the actual reasons for individuals' nostalgia for the Maoist era. During such a period when scarcity characterized the lives of most Chinese people, workers in the Third Front projects and their families enjoyed a series of privileges, including housing, dining, shopping, and entertainment. These privileges were guaranteed by structured support from the central to the basic levels across China's party-state system. This institutionalized force remained in place until the 1980s. After that, due to the discontinuation of emphasis on war preparations, Third Front workers lost the privileges that they had become accustomed. Some of them even dropped to the bottom of society after their factories were bankrupted. The huge psychological and realistic gaps make their nostalgia for the Maoist era not surprising. This is the first thing I argue in this article. Admittedly, in most cases, what these nostalgists would like to recollect are the contributions they made under the Maoist and communist ideals.

Moreover, these Third Front workers, alongside other groups who gained from China's overemphasis on national defense during the Cold War, were beneficiaries of these geopolitics. The Cold War legitimized their privileges. In this sense, their nostalgia for the Maoist era could, at the same time, be understood as nostalgia for the Cold War. A recent example of Cold War

<sup>3</sup> From 2013, after Xi Jinping pointed out that the histories of the CCP from 1949 to 1979 and after 1979 are not contradictory (前后两个三十年互不否定), more and more opinions positively re-evaluating the Maoist era appeared in both Chinese academia and social media. Since 2021, when the center of the CCP launched the Movement of Learning the History of the Party (党史学习运动), the trend toward eulogizing the Maoist era has been overwhelming in China.

nostalgia is the film *Changjinbu* (长津湖) and its record-breaking performance in the Chinese film market.<sup>4</sup> Sitting in the cinema, immersed again in the imagination of fighting with U.S. army, as what happened in the Korean War, those nostalgists probably comprised a significant part of the audiences for *Changjinbu*. Concerning the intrinsic motivation of their nostalgia, it may still be debatable whether the privileges guaranteed by war preparedness or the willingness to sacrifice for a real war play a crucial role. Nonetheless, a pressing fact is that Cold War nostalgia is inevitably contributing to the nationalistic sentiment rising again in today's China.

Anti-Americanism, as the trend behind the popularity of *Changjinbu* demonstrates, is a major manifestation of Chinese nationalism. However, many other countries—including those in East Asia, such as South Korea, another major participant in the Korean War—cannot stay removed from the challenges either. Once promoted by Chinese media, there is no guarantee that South Korea will not be included in Cold War nostalgists' imagined threats from outside, such as the situation when the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system was deployed on the Korean Peninsula.

## II. Research Background

For a long period, research focusing on Third Front history was not underscored either in Chinese or international scholarship on Mao's China. It was only in recent decades that some notable works appeared and paved the way for future studies.

<sup>4</sup> *Changjinbu* is a film premiered in China in 2021. It is about a campaign between the Chinese and U.S. army in the Korean War. To agitate nationalism, it distorted some key historical facts to justify China's participation in the war. It was strongly promoted by Chinese officials and broke a series of records in China's domestic film market.

In China, Chen Donglin (2003, 2014) is one of the few scholars devoting attention to Third Front history. From the central and national perspectives, his two monographs provide large numbers of official materials for exploring the Third Front projects. However, in Chen's publications, there are few explorations of the personal experiences of those involved in the projects. Later this gap was partly filled by Zhang Yong's book (2019) focusing on the recollections of former Third Front workers.

In international academia, Covell Meyskens (2015, 2020) is a prominent figure concentrating on China's Third Front projects. His paper in 2015 explores the construction of railroads in Sichuan, which assisted in the relocation and development of Third Front factories. His book in 2020 expands the Third Front research. While highlighting the context of the Cold War, which was often overlooked or avoided by researchers in China, Meyskens focuses on the everyday experiences of individuals involved in those projects, especially paying attention to the people working and living in Panzhihua. Locating on the mountainous southwestern margin of the Sichuan Basin, hundreds of kilometers from the center of the province, it was a new city completely resulting from Third Front construction.

However, it will be risky to regard the life of the settlers in Panzhihua as representative of the experiences of all Third Front workers. Admittedly, these pioneers represent the migrators who moved with Third Front plants into places as desolate as Panzhihua, like those relocated to the Gobi Desert in Northwestern China. They began their new life on an almost unpopulated wasteland. Yet, for the majority of Third Front workers settled in Sichuan Province, their destinations were much more populous areas in the basin where the local culture of Sichuan had taken root, though their factories remained a certain distance from center cities for the reason of national defense. In comparison with settlers in Panzhihua, these newcomers were unavoidably exposed to, gradually became accustomed

to, and finally enjoyed the lifestyles that prevailed in Sichuan, such as the dining traditions popularly known as Sichuan cuisine. More importantly, the institutionalized support from populous areas of the Sichuan Basin was unimaginable for the dwellers in the virgin land of Panzhihua. It helped shape the typical kind of Sichuan Third Front lives. Therefore, to fully understand Third Front workers' experiences, more research is needed.

Chao Chen (2018) is another scholar shedding light on understanding the Third Front projects in Sichuan. In contrast to Meyskens' emphasis on Panzhihua, Chen's monograph deals with a Third Front factory near Chengdu City, the center and capital of Sichuan Province. However, besides one chapter talking about people's daily lives in the factory, the focus of the book is workers' rule-breaking behaviors, such as absenteeism, and the tolerance of group leaders. Actually, such phenomena might not be unique in Third Front factories but instead were common throughout the state-owned enterprises in Mao's China. Instead of the routine work, the featured experiences of those Third Front workers living next to Chengdu, a place full of Sichuan dining culture and institutionalized resources at the provincial level, may be more noteworthy. In fact, several sources of my article come from the same factory named Jinjiang (锦江), providing interesting and detailed information about its workers' dining and shopping issues. In Chen's book, the description about worker's food and drink is only in one page, while their shopping experiences receive almost no attention.

Given the status Sichuan held in China's Third Front strategy, it is not a coincidence that those relocated to Sichuan always play a significant role in most researchers' publications on the Third Front projects. In parallel, my article also focuses on the Third Front projects in Sichuan. Similar to Meyskens' monograph, I highlight the everyday lives of these migrants in the Cold War context. But in contrast to Meyskens' focus on the exceptional

case of Panzhihua, my research concentrates on re-examining the lives of Third Front workers who settled in populous counties or prefectures within the Sichuan Basin.

Due to China's prolonged border limitations, now entering this country for a field trip has become almost impossible for international researchers, not to mention accessing any primary sources existing in China. However, for a better look at both Mao's and today's China, primary materials that have not been processed for propaganda are indispensable. The sources of my article are mainly in their original form. They are accessed from archives, old-book markets, and recycling stations in Sichuan areas, in addition to informal discussions with local residents.<sup>5</sup> The perspective of personal experiences in my article is facilitated by these old diaries, unpublished memoirs, official archives, internal gazetteers, and oral recollections. In ways differing from the official narration, these primary materials expand people's understanding of Mao's China.

### III. Background of Third Front Workers in Sichuan

Among all the provinces (see Figure 1, cited from Chen, 2018: 2) chosen as destinations of this industrial relocation movement, Sichuan was a major option. Between 1965 and 1975, the national investment for the Third Front projects in each of those provinces was 12.6 billion RMB, on average,

<sup>5</sup> In recent years, individuals or institutions with foreign backgrounds are often described by the Chinese government and social media as hostile overseas forces (境外敌对势力). Chinese people are taught to be highly cautious when communicating with them. Asking Chinese people to sign a consent form for an international research study may frighten or even endanger them. To ensure that I did not create any trouble for my sources, I chose to meet and talk with them informally, thereby avoiding the need for a consent form.



Figure 1

while the budget for Sichuan was 26.9 billion (Dangdai Zhongguo congshu bianji weiyuanhui, 1990: 435-436).

From 1965 to 1966, as the projects were launched, more than 100,000 immigrants flooded into Sichuan from coastal and other eastern cities. By the 1970s, more than 350 factories and institutions had relocated to Sichuan Province, whose personnel ranged from several hundred to several thousand (Xu, 2012: 38-40). These migrant workers, together with their families, formed the largest immigrant group in Sichuan during the Maoist era, in which people's mobility was strictly limited. Here, both the immigrants who settled in Sichuan and the new workers hired locally are included in my discussion.

Two Third Front factories were relocated to Hechuan County, 80 kilometers north of Chongqing City, from which many of my sources come. In January 1965, the first one arrived from Nanjing City, Jiangsu

Province. With a military production focus, it was established at the foot of the Huaying Mountain, about 50 kilometers east of the county seat. It was named the Lingchuan Machinery Factory (陵川机械厂 the character *chuan* is the same as in Sichuan's name). The second Third Front project, also a machinery factory with a military focus from Xi'an City, Shaanxi Province, was established in the next year. Also located at the base of the Huaying Mountain, it was named the Huachuan Machinery Factory (华川机械厂).

In fact, areas along the Huaying Mountain, stretching more than 300 kilometers in the middle of the Sichuan Basin, are among the representatively ideal shelters accommodating many more Third Front enterprises settling in Sichuan.

Although scattered in hilly or mountainous regions and surrounded by local villages, these factories were never a part of the countryside but enjoyed an administratively independent and privileged status. As Jeremy Brown (2012: 169-170) indicates, factories such as these were enclaves where “urban administrative status clashed with their rural physical space.” People working there held an official identity similar to that of urban residents. Inside the plants, workers and their families had their internal canteen, store, hospital, post office, and almost all the other affiliated facilities for daily needs. A feeling of cultural superiority over the locals further strengthened the isolation of Third Front participants' lives (Ding and Wang, 2003: 82-84). However, links with the outside world, including the peasants around them and the home cities from which they came, were still available. In both cases, regardless of the difficulties involved with settling in a new place, the institutionalized force backed by the state always guaranteed the daily needs of Third Front people.

#### IV. Migrating across Half of China

To understand Third Front workers' lives in Sichuan, first of all, it is necessary to know about the migrants' moving process who traveled across half of China. It was, undoubtedly, not an easy journey for any worker or family at that time. Fortunately, the institutionalized force significantly reduced many obstacles before and during the process of moving, which was a harbinger of the solutions to many impediments in their lives after the resettlement.

Politicized mobilizations were indispensable in 1965. The requirements of the state were as urgent as if a war was going to happen, leaving little time for individuals to have second thoughts. In this context, it was widely believed that if the Third Front projects were not completed successfully, Chairman Mao would not sleep well (Mao, 1964). In fact, Mao's words were specifically about the construction of Panzhihua. The fervor of the cult of Mao did motivate many workers. Another famous slogan was that good people and good horses should go to the Third Front (好人好马上三线). Besides the project of moving a factory as a whole, it was a common situation that an enterprise would be divided into two parts, and one of them would relocate as a Third Front project. The slogan mentioned above made the mobilization a selective process. Only qualified workers could receive the chance to make Mao sleep well, a supreme honor during the Maoist era. However, politically mobilized enthusiasm alone was not quite enough. Attractive conditions about private welfare were promised, proving no less persuasive. The material incentives included no change in salary, the state-supported arrangement of jobs, the promise of urban household status, or an assignment to a larger house (Shanghai fu Chongqing fangwentuan, 1966). Admittedly, none of these material temptations were consistent with the Maoist ideals.

Once assigned, workers would be organized to pack up and set off as soon as possible. For those departing with family members, as mentioned in many memoirs, their factories would manage the house-moving process, in which ticket booking, trip planning, furniture shipping, and settling in upon arrival were all included (Zhang, 2019: 39, 65, 199). Some aging parents chose to move with their sons. In this case, the coffins prepared for the elders were transported as well. Under the centrally planned economy when every resident's consumption level was limited according to the national plan,<sup>6</sup> a house-moving and whole-family journey across half of China was unaffordable for most people on their own. This unified arrangement, supported by their factories along with the regional authorities upon both departure and arrival, proved helpful in speeding up such a large-scale relocation. By 1966, the number of Shanghai workers' families migrating together to the hinterland increased by nearly 40% compared with a year earlier (Shanghai fu Chongqing fangwentuan, 1966).

Because of the basin terrain surrounded by large mountains, by the mid-1960s, only two railroads connected Sichuan with other provinces. As a result, taking a ship up the Yangtze River was still the only choice for many migrants to enter Sichuan. Although quite time-consuming and exhausting, the journey provided a valuable and cost-free opportunity for sightseeing at a time when travel was as scarce as luxury items for most Chinese people. A retired Third Front worker vividly retold his fascinating journey via Beijing, Wuhan, the Three Gorges (三峡 *Sanxia*), and Chongqing. He was a child when, together with the factory, his parents moved the entire family in 1970 to Sichuan from Liaoning Province (He, 2019: 197-207). He did not

<sup>6</sup> Driven by the centrally planned economy, most of the essential goods that Chinese people needed every day during the Maoist era were rationed. In practice, besides the salary, a worker's income included specific coupons that were indispensable when buying rationed commodities or services, such as coupons for grain, cloth, and oil.

need to worry about anything in the relocation but had a sense of curiosity and eagerly looked forward to his new life in Sichuan.

## V. Daily Food Security Was the Most Prioritized Issue

Based on instructions from Mao (1963), the urgency of preparing for possible warfare was always prioritized. Consequently, production tasks were viewed as more important even than fulfilling the needs of basic life; this was expressed via a popular slogan, “Production first, living conditions second” (先生产, 后生活). However, for Third Front factories, securing everyday needs—especially food—was actually the highest priority (Niu and Liu, 2014: 66-68). To achieve this goal, two issues, as urgent as war preparedness, were guaranteed by the institutionalized force.

The first was the supply of foodstuffs. In terms of the national policy regarding grain rations for Third Front workers, when the standard in the factories’ original sites was higher than that in the new places (which was the common situation among Third Front enterprises moving from the coastal areas to the hinterland), the higher standard would be maintained for a period of time, normally half a year (Zhongguo guowuyuan, 1965). Although reductions in grain rations were unavoidable later, in many cases, Third Front workers were still favored in the supply of staple foods. In the Huachuan Machinery Factory, according to the modified grain rations, workers in 25 of the 70 job types received slightly higher rations than the local standard of Hechuan County (Hechuanxian shengchan zhidao zu, 1971). For example, the monthly grain ration of a packer in Hechuan was between 14.5 and 15.5 kilograms (Sichuan sheng liangshiju, 1975: 277-279), while a packer doing the same job in the Huachuan Factory received 2 additional kilograms per month. Even the ration of a gardener there was 1 kilogram higher than the local

standard. Such preferential policies persisted throughout the 1970s. Until the early 1980s, maintaining Third Front workers' grain rations no less than those in the prefecture-level city was still highlighted by the State Council (Chen, 2014: 283).

Compared with the supply of staple foods, which was strictly regulated by national policies, the resources of Third Front factories themselves played much more active and influential roles in the supply of many non-staple foods. Such non-staple foods included meat, vegetables, and fruits. In addition to the factories' collaboration with local government and rural communes,<sup>7</sup> the institutionalized force was further strengthened and fully utilized. Considerable amounts of material, financial, and human resources were devoted to large-scale procurement and transportation of meat, including but not limited to pork. In his 1970s work notes, a former driver in the Lingchuan Machinery Factory often mentioned the task of pork delivery. A significant part of the meat was not from Hechuan County. Instead, his factory bought and transported the pork from distanced places, such as Chongqing and Nanchong City (Work notes of a former driver in the Lingchuan Machinery Factory). The factory staff enjoyed the delivered pork, although it was beyond the official ration of how much meat a worker could eat.

For some Third Front plants with richer resources, buying from outside was not the only way to secure the meat supply for the workers. In the early 1970s, a Third Front factory in Guangyuan Prefecture (in the northern part of the Sichuan Basin) began raising pigs on site and even invested 2 million RMB in the construction of a slaughterhouse. Both projects aimed to

<sup>7</sup> After the Movement of Communization in rural China in the late 1950s, under the scheme of the people's commune (人民公社), production teams were the most basic level in collective farming. Typically speaking, a commune consisted of a number of brigades that equaled traditional villages, and a brigade was divided into several production teams.

provide pork more directly to the staff. Nevertheless, workers in this factory were not yet satisfied. Each year, this factory also purchased 4 to 5 tons of canned pork from a cannery in Bazhong County, which is about 200 kilometers away, in addition to 3 to 5 tons of seafood from coastal areas. Alongside all of these endeavors to ensure the meat supply, thousands of kilograms of fruits, including mandarins, apples, and bananas, were bought by the factory at the same time (Zheng, 2019: 153-162). During those years, such a situation was undoubtedly enviable. Until the early 1980s, many Chinese people were still only familiar with locally grown fruits, due to the limits on free marketing and long-distance transporting.

The demand for vegetables, another necessity on Third Front workers' dining tables, was satisfied by the institutionalized force too. Peasants living near the factories were assigned to shift their work focus from grain to vegetable cultivation. In Hechuan, from 1965 to 1970, 310 and 250 *mu* (亩)<sup>8</sup> of farmland were appropriated for vegetable production for the Lingchuan and Huachuan factories, respectively. In return, peasants there were exempt from the grain tax, which was replaced by the vegetables they produced. It was highly profitable for the peasants due to the different output-input ratios between grain and vegetable farming, although that surely was not the original goal of this policy (Hechuanxian shangye weiyuanhui, 1988: 170). Peasants around a Third Front factory in Mianyang Prefecture in Northern Sichuan probably had an even better experience, since official technicians and chemical fertilizer supported their vegetable farming. Moreover, 2 kilograms of grain and 4 *chi* (尺)<sup>9</sup> of cloth were bonuses for the peasants there, aiming to motivate their vegetable cultivation efforts (Mianyangshi

<sup>8</sup> *Mu* is a traditional Chinese unit of measurement. One *mu* equals approximately 666 square meters.

<sup>9</sup> *Chi* is a traditional Chinese unit of measurement. Three *chi* equal approximately one meter.

shangyeju, 1995: 279).

With reliable food sources, the second issue in dining was to open canteens in Third Front factories. It was pressing because large numbers of immigrant workers did not bring their families together during the first few years in Sichuan (some might consider the possibility of returning to their home cities in a couple of years). In June 1968, less than one year after the Huachuan Factory began production in Hechuan, two local veterans were hired as cooks in its canteen (Guanyu Lize, Jianshan gongshe Xiang Xianwei, Liu Jingfu qu Huachuan jixiechang zuo chuishi gongzuo de tongzhi, 1968). The recruitment of local cooks was certain to introduce the dining culture of local areas to these migrating workers.

Another factor further stimulating the introduction of local dining culture in Third Front factories was the expansion of local workers. Between 1964 and 1965, 4,996 peasants from rural Hechuan were recruited to construct the Third Front projects (Hechuanxian laodong renshi ju, 1990: 27), although they rarely became formal staff members at those factories. Then, under the policy of Combination of Factories and Communes (厂社结合), no more than two months after the formal start-up of the Lingchuan Machinery Plant in 1965, Hechuan authorities allowed peasants in villages around it to take temporary jobs in the factory (Zhonggong Hechuan xianwei, 1966). At the same time, graduates from tertiary institutions, especially those born within Sichuan Province, received privileged opportunities to become formal workers at Third Front factories in Sichuan. From the early 1970s onward, the recruitment was extended to sent-down youth who finished their service in the countryside.<sup>10</sup> In 1971, a rusticated young man who had labored for more than one year in rural Hechuan was hired by the

<sup>10</sup> In the Movement of Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside (上山下乡运动) that lasted from the 1960s to the 1970s, about 17 million Chinese urban young people were relocated to the countryside, known as the sent-down youth or educated youth (知识青年).

Huachuan Plant (Huachuan Jixiechang, 1971). Later on, benefitting from the policy in which workers' offspring or other family members (in case there were special difficulties in a family) were preferred in recruitment, more and more local youngsters entered Third Front factories. The Huachuan Factory hired 21 new workers at one time in 1977, all of whose family members belonged to the factory, and the majority of them were local residents in Hechuan (Hechuanxian laodong renshi ju, 1977).

The expansion of local people in personnel (both in workshops and canteens) exerted strong influences on the living environment at the factory, especially regarding dining issues. As an older man in Hechuan who began to work in the Huachuan Factory in 1972 remembered, the dishes in the canteen were mainly in Sichuan style and flavor, similar to the homemade food he was used to (Informal discussion with a resident in Hechuan who began to work in the Huachuan Factory in 1972, male, Hechuan, July 2019). But what would happen when the newcomers with different dining habits encountered the featured Sichuan dishes? As recalled by a former worker at a Third Front plant in Pengxian County, in the northwest of the Sichuan Basin, "in the beginning, those immigrant colleagues didn't dare to take the spicy food in our canteen, not to mention those with *huajiao* (花椒 a special kind of pepper in Sichuan, which can make one's mouth feel numb). If someone learned to eat a little *huajiao*, their lips would be stinging quite a while" (Yang, 2019: 50-60). Although, at first, they were unaccustomed to the dining habits, many newcomers and their children gradually grew accustomed to and even began to enjoy the unique flavors of Sichuan dishes. An older man who moved from Hangzhou City, Zhejiang Province, remembered that, when he had just arrived in Sichuan Province with his wife, they continued to make dishes in their hometown taste, which is normally not spicy at all. However, a couple of years later, they began to use some chili in their home cooking. As for their offspring, the typical Sichuan dishes with plenty of spice had

become favorites in their daily lives (Han, 2019: 70-76).

Facilitated by the institutionalized force, the dependable supply of foodstuffs made the traditional cuisine of Sichuan more attractive, even to the workers who migrated from large cities. “I found that Sichuan dishes, as served in our canteen, were more complex than those in my hometown,” A former Third Front worker in Pengxian County remembered his astonishment when comparing Sichuan flavors to the dining culture of his hometown (Wang, 2019: 37-50). Actually, this factory is the same one explored by Chao Chen in his 2018 book. One more recollection about the same factory comes from a migrating worker from Shanghai. While residents in Shanghai were generally viewed as worldly people at that time, he also enjoyed the stewed meatballs in chili sauce and fried pork liver in the canteen. (Ni, 2014: 68-73).

Yet neither the reliable supply of food nor the satisfiable service in canteens resulted from good fortune or coincidence. Instead, it was the institutionalized force from the central to the local levels that persistently guaranteed Third Front workers’ memorable experiences in dining.

## VI. Shopping Was Also Indispensable

After satisfying their appetites, as another significant part of their leisure life, Third Front workers could shop in stores operated exclusively for them. Despite the shortage of commodities that characterized the planned economy, the institutionalized force again was effective in providing solutions. As records indicate, in 1966 and 1971, two general stores were opened, respectively, at the Lingchuan and Huachuan Plants in Hechuan. Given that those migrant workers came from large cities, to meet their higher level of consumption and pickier tastes in goods, the stores

changed their purchase channel from the county seat of Hechuan to Beibei District, a suburb of Chongqing City, where commodities with better brands and quality were available. In 1973, a purchasing station was built in Beibei to service this valuable channel of commodities. What remained on its purchasing list included high-grade non-staple foods, such as different types of canned food, which at the time was a symbol of quality nourishment (Hechuanxian shangye weiyuanhui, 1988: 168-169).

In addition to the difference in available goods, the shops at Third Front plants were both active and friendly when selling their commodities to workers. Conversely, outside Third Front factories, it was common during those years that salesclerks did not exhibit a positive attitude toward customers, due to the significant imbalance in the relationship between supply and demand. According to the factory's specific situation, points of sale were operating at the entrances of workshops and crossroads that saw a large flow of workers. Every day, non-staple foods were available both in the early mornings and late evenings so as to ensure that workers had something to eat when they toiled extra hours. During the summer, mobile sales groups supplied soft drinks, even in workers' dormitories (Hechuanxian shangye weiyuanhui, 1988: 169-170). Stores in Third Front factories also helped supply food for the canteens. To meet workers' needs for fresh fish, the store in the Lingchuan Factory contacted nearby communes, purchasing more than 0.5 million kilograms of pond fish from them (Hechuanxian shangye weiyuanhui, 1988: 169-170).

The data regarding the annual sales of these stores can also provide a picture of the actual level of Third Front workers' consumption. In 1966, the first year the store was open in the Lingchuan Factory, the total annual sales were 0.539 million RMB. The following year, the number climbed to 0.6676 million, despite that year's social unrest caused by the Cultural

Revolution (Hechuanxian shangye weiyuanhui: 1988: 171).<sup>11</sup> The next three years' sales data are unavailable due to the continuing chaos. In 1971, the annual sales of this store plus another store newly founded in a coal mine had reached 1.8998 million RMB. From 1973 onward, the recently opened store in the Huachuan Factory was included in the statistics. The stores' annual sales at all the three plants (the two Third Front factories and the mine) sustained a growing trend, from 2.1243 to 2.542 million RMB by 1976 (Hechuanxian shangye weiyuanhui: 1988: 171). Undoubtedly, Third Front workers and their families with stronger purchasing power and higher purchasing need contributed greatly to this noticeable and continuous growth, which goes beyond people's stereotypical image about Chinese residents' consumption levels in the Maoist era.

Even so, perhaps these data did not reveal the entire picture of Third Front-related consumption, especially for those migrating from large cities or coastal areas. As the aforementioned Shanghai worker at a Third Front factory recalled, although he was satisfied with the dishes in the canteen, it was still difficult to buy many non-staple foods and industrial products, including malted milk, Dacron shirts, and leather shoes, all of which still had to be purchased from Shanghai (Ni, 2014: 68-73). In this aspect, workers who also moved out of Shanghai but served in the Small Third Front projects (小三线建设)<sup>12</sup> enjoyed more convenience than their peers who moved to remote areas. Benefitting from their shorter distance to Shanghai, Small

<sup>11</sup> The Cultural Revolution (文化大革命) was launched in 1966 and ended 10 years later. In 1966–1968, driven by the political struggle at the central level of the CCP, the entire country fell into chaos due to factional fighting.

<sup>12</sup> When the Third Front projects were carried on in Chinese hinterland areas, the coastal provinces were also required to move some industries to the inner parts of their own or nearby provinces. Due to the comparatively smaller scale, it is called the Small Third Front projects. The southern part of Anhui province, which is near Shanghai, was a major base for the relocation of Shanghai factories during this process.

Third Front plants in the southern part of Anhui Province managed to run an agency for commodities purchasing in and delivery from Shanghai. This channel guaranteed the supply of high-grade goods, including White Rabbit candies and soda drinks. As a former worker there recalled, all of these products were usually unavailable in rural Anhui and even became symbols of social status in and out of the factory (Xu, 2013: 22-25). As for those who moved to Sichuan, chances of returning to their home cities for family visits became especially valuable. None of them would come back to Sichuan without a heavy bag filled by high-grade commodities. Even children could benefit from candies received as gifts. As mentioned by a man who was born and spent his childhood at the Lingchuan Factory, one time, he received some candies from his father's workmates who had returned after a family visit to Nanjing City. While playing outside the factory, he shared these candies with some rural children, unexpectedly making him popular across the whole village next to the factory (Informal discussion with a former worker of the Lingchuan Factory who was born in the factory in the 1970s, male, Hechuan, January 2019).

Although Third Front workers and their families often would not step out of their factories, thereby becoming relatively isolated from local communities, they never lost their links to the outside world. Nor did they fall behind regarding the developments of China under Mao, if any. Instead, the stores operating at the Third Front factories and the purchasing channels behind them, both supported by the institutionalized force, guaranteed their access to the limited signs of China's economic progress, such as those enviable products from Shanghai.

In summary, both the dining and shopping experiences enjoyed by Third Front workers and their families were privileges unavailable to peasants or ordinary urban residents in local areas. Under the national flag of war preparedness, the institutionalized force made these workers' expectations

of a good life come true.

## VII. Peasants' Accidental Good Days

Although all of the institutionalized support from the central to the local levels was exclusively provided to Third Front workers and their families, the unexpected but unavoidable result was that the peasants living near the factories usually benefited from their association with these Third Front plants. In comparison with their experiences before the relocation of the Third Front factories, these were indeed good days for the peasants. Their good fortune happened accidentally and lasted as long as the bountiful days of Third Front workers.

Thus far, this article has mentioned several times when local peasants had an opportunity to do something for Third Front workers. Whether it was temporarily working on the project construction, planting vegetables for the workers, or fishing in ponds for them, all of these activities were arranged in accordance with the top-down instructions to support war preparedness. However, they also brought actual profits to peasants in return.

In addition, as the promotion of the Combination of Factories and Communes, the institutionalized force continued to encourage Third Front factories to build more stable partnerships with neighboring villages and provide direct help to the peasants.

In February 1966, soon after the Lingchuan Factory's settlement in Hechuan, two communes nearby were placed under the administrative leadership of the factory (*Zhonggong Hechuan xianwei*, 1966). With a rural population of more than 14,000, the two communes became responsible for providing a labor force, vegetables, fruits, and other agricultural products for the adjacent Third Front factory. In exchange, the factory furnished the

peasants with a series of public services, including tap water, electricity, healthcare. As for the Huachuan Factory, a similar policy was published later (Huachuan jixiechang, 1966). In the field of healthcare, alongside opening the factory's hospital to peasants, classes to train barefoot doctors (赤脚医生)<sup>13</sup> were held in the Huachuan Factory. Additionally, professional doctors were regularly sent from the factory to visit patients in the villages (Yanjing qu, Tanzi gongshe, huachuanchang zhigong yiyuan 6.26 zuotanhui jiyao, 1976). In Jiangyou County in Northern Sichuan, a Third Front plant chose to co-found clinics in the countryside with neighboring communes. At the same time, this factory helped establish night schools, aiming to improve peasants' literacy levels (Zhonggong jiangyou xianwei gongye jiaotong zhengzhibu, 1974). Guang'an County to the north of Hechuan saw more experiments in the combination with communes. As recalled by a former worker, no wall was built around the Third Front factory there. Instead, neighboring peasants were mobilized and organized to guard the factory (Lin, 2003: 552-562). It was indeed a pioneering move nationwide at that time, and the guard would surely be paid, since these responsibilities took the peasants away from their farming tasks.

Besides all the outreach services, the most common benefit from Third Front factories was still the uplift of peasants' income levels. In 1965, hundreds of peasants in Mianyang Prefecture participated in the capital construction for Third Front projects. As a result, the entire commune earned 34,000 RMB (651 Gongcheng gongnong jiehe xianghu zhiyuan de qingkuang he xiayibu dasuan, 1974). In Jiangyou County, from 1969 to 1970, peasants from those villages near Third Front factories earned more than 50% higher than

<sup>13</sup> During the Maoist era, some peasants and sent-down youth were selected to receive short-term and straightforward training in medicine and healthcare; then, they acted as semi-professional and part-time medical workers in the countryside, known as barefoot doctors.

other peasants in the same county (Zhengxie jiangyoushi weiyuanhui, 2010: 35). The extra money, normally in cash, was very precious for rural people under the planned economy since they did not have a stable wage. As a Hechuan resident, who was born into a large family with five brothers and sisters in a village near the Lingchuang Factory, remembered, in the mid-1970s, it was almost impossible for her to attend secondary school. However, her parents earned extra money through temporary work in the Lingchuan Factory. They later sent her to school (Informal discussion with a resident from a village near the Lingchuang Factory, female, Hechuan, July 2019).

In addition to improving material conditions, the projection of movies in Third Front factories enriched peasants' cultural life when there was a general scarcity of culture and entertainment in Mao's China. In the first few years after the settlement of those plants, movies were generally screened in outdoor spaces, which was not different from the open-air projections typically found in rural areas. Yet, in comparison, Third Front plants with the institutionalized force enjoyed a more stable and more affluent supply of film copies. For some sought-after movies, vehicles would be reserved to deliver the copy of the film (Zheng, 2019: 153-162). As a result, many peasants around the factories were attracted to the screenings. They normally arrived at night with flaming or electric torches, forming a spectacular scene of a torchlight parade both before and after the screenings. Between the early and mid-1970s, cinemas and theaters opened in the Lingchuan and Huachuan factories. While screenings were no longer affected by bad weather, the attending peasants then needed to buy tickets to enter. Even so, it seemed that their enthusiasm for movies was not influenced. As mentioned in the memoir of a former Third Front worker, when the factory used its canteen to project movies (later moving to the newly constructed workers' club) and began to sell tickets to people from outside, peasants continued their visits and often comprised more than half of the crowd on weekends

and holidays (Zheng, 2019: 153-162).

Apart from these official influences of Third Front plants, there were always private interactions between workers and local peasants. A common form was free trading, either at the gate of the factories or in the town near them. Given Third Front workers' interest in agricultural products with homemade flavors, such as eggs, poultry, and preserved meat, many peasants were probably well-paid for these sideline activities, although no statistics were officially recorded.

Furthermore, what Third Front people introduced to local peasants included the new type of consumerism found in Western and industrialized cultures. The industrial products from coastal areas—from the candies mentioned earlier to durables such as radios, sewing machines, and bicycles—became enviable items not just in the factories but also in the villages nearby. It was a similar story regarding fashion. In 1968, Shanghai workers resettling to Jiangyou County enjoyed wearing tight trousers; this latest style could easily show off one's slim shape. Young people in the villages nearby soon mimicked the newcomers, leading to a popular trend across the entire county (Cui, and Zhao, 2019: 343-351). Given the specific political atmosphere in China in the late 1960s, this trend seems exceed our typical picture of that time, since tight trousers were not revolutionary at all.

Admittedly, the interaction between Third Front workers and local residents was not smooth in every case. However, to resolve any problems, the institutionalized force still worked to produce a win-win result. A significant conflict happened in a Third Front factory in Pengxian County when peasants entered the factory to collect waste from the toilets and carry it home as fertilizer. While peasants regarded it as a matter of course, some workers, especially those from Shanghai, disliked the foul smell exuded during the process (Yang, 2019: 50-60). Some Third Front factories successfully tackled this issue by institutionalizing waste collection, a

strange but effective response. At a Third Front plant on the south of Hechuan, peasants needed to register and present a special permit to enter the factory and collect the toilet waste (Zhang, 2019: 263-273).

Paralleling Third Front workers' privileges under the context of war preparedness, rural residents living near the plants were also privileged peasants. In comparison with most rural residents in China at the time, they were beneficiaries of the Cold War, too, although indirectly.

However, for these peasants, the good days that began accidentally also ended unexpectedly. From the late 1980s onward, most Third Front factories no longer remained on the state's prioritized list and were failures in market-oriented competition. Many factories ended up in bankruptcy, and those that survived chose to leave hilly regions and resettle in cities. As an old man living near a former Third Front site lamented: "Now our good life has gone with Third Front factories" (Zhang, 2019: 263-273).

However, only as a peasant who profited in a small way from the Third Front projects, he still cherishes the experiences so much, as do Third Front workers who enjoyed the comprehensive privileges that enriched their daily lives for more than two decades.

## VIII. Conclusion

In the recollections of many Third Front workers, they sometimes call themselves Three Xian (三献) workers, which means "to sacrifice your youth, then to sacrifice your whole life, and finally to sacrifice your offspring (献了青春献终身, 献了终身献子孙)." Although expressed with a sense of self-mockery, this saying clearly highlights how much the Third Front generation had sacrificed in Mao's China, thereby justifying their nostalgia for the Maoist era. Undoubtedly, the sacrifice was almost non-compensable for those

who relocated from coastal areas and spent 20 years in the hinterland. Even so, under the Cold War background, their migrating experience and the dining, shopping, and entertaining privileges they enjoyed for the sake of war preparedness should not be overlooked when re-examining these nostalgists. This context rationalizes their nostalgia for the Cold War and contributes to the rebirth of nationalist fervor in China, which is challenging many countries, from the United States to South Korea.

Submitted: October 15, 2021 | Revised: March 24, 2022 | Accepted: April 1, 2022

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