Introduction

On January 13, 1978, an article appeared on page four of the *People's Daily* that at first glance was of no particular significance. It was about a man named Zhang Xianzhong who worked at a rural cotton-processing factory in Hubei province. A fire had recently broken out at his workplace, and he had run around with an extinguisher to protect machinery and cotton. Zhang's determination to safeguard China's collective property was impressive, and his "revolutionary heroic spirit of putting his life on the line" was worthy of praise.[1] In the 1970s the Chinese press was awash with similar stories, but buried near this article's end was a detail that was not at all run-of-the-mill. Zhang had "participated in Third Front construction." The phrase "Third Front construction" had never before appeared in the *People's Daily*. If someone had wondered what the Third Front was, the article offered no hints. It merely stated that Zhang had "participated in Third Front construction" and left it at that. If someone had asked around about the Third Front, most people would have been able to provide no information. Even if someone knew about it, they would have probably feigned ignorance since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had told them that the Third Front had to be hidden from China's Cold War enemies – the United States and the Soviet Union. The concealment of the Third Front from public view might be unremarkable if it were small. Yet the Third Front was anything but tiny.

The Third Front was, in the words of Barry Naughton, "a purposive, large-scale, centrally directed program" to construct "a huge self-sufficient industrial base area" in the mountains of inland China "to serve as a strategic reserve in the event of China being drawn into war" with the United States or the Soviet Union.[2] To build the Third Front, the Party mobilized roughly 15 million workers and one million family

[1] "Lei Feng shi de minbing Zhang Xianzhong," *Renmin ribao*, January 13, 1978.
[2] Barry Naughton, "The Third Front: Defence Industrialization in the Chinese Interior," *China Quarterly* 115 (1988): 351.

members.[3] With a price tag of 20.5 billion RMB (*renminbi* – Chinese currency), the Third Front was the most expensive industrialization campaign of the Mao era, costing more than the combined total of both the First Five Year Plan and the Great Leap Forward.[4] Nearly thirty years ago, Barry Naughton pointed out the Third Front's centrality to the political economy of late Maoist China, noting that "with the exception of petroleum development, the central government's industrialization policy between 1965 and 1971 *was* the Third Front."[5] In the intervening decades, the Third Front has largely fallen out of view in Western scholarship.[6]

Drawing on recently available sources, I aim to retrieve the Third Front from the Cold War shadows where the CCP stashed it for safekeeping.[7] A history of Mao's China without the Third Front is like a history of the Soviet Union that does not consider preparations for war with the capitalist West and Nazi Germany.[8] In both cases, a historian would be omitting the profound national consequences of international military tensions. This book shows that the geopolitical antagonisms of the Cold War deeply shaped Communist Party efforts to re-engineer China into a socialist industrial nation and contributes to the growing number of studies which have demonstrated that international security concerns militarized government attempts to make China modern from the late Qing into the Mao era.[9]

The Third Front dramatically altered the economic trajectory of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Prior to its start, Party leaders were

[3] The Appendix will explain how I calculated this number.
[4] These calculations only include investments in capital construction. They do not include the long-term economic costs. For statistics on capital construction investment, see Guowuyuan sanxian jianshe tiaozheng gaizao guihua bangong shi sanxian jianshe bianxie zu, *Sanxian jianshe* (Beijing, 1991), 32.
[5] Barry Naughton, "Industrial Policy during the Cultural Revolution: Military Preparation, Decentralization, and Leaps Forward," in *New Perspectives on the Cultural Revolution*, eds. William A. Joseph, Christine P.W. Wong, and David Zweig (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 158. Italics in the original.
[6] It is not mentioned, for example, in Maurice Meisner, *Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic* (New York: The Free Press, 1999). Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012). Andrew G. Walder, *China under Mao: A Revolution Derailed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).
[7] I discuss the historiography of the Third Front in the section titled "Bringing the Third Front In."
[8] Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). Lennart Samuelson, *Plans for Stalin's War-Machine: Tukhachevskii and Military–Economic Planning, 1925–1941* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2000).
[9] Some examples are Hans van de Ven, "The Military in the Republic," *China Quarterly* 150 (1997): 352–374. Rana Mitter, "Modernity, Internationalization, and War in the History of Modern China," *Historical Journal* 48:2 (2005): 523–543.

preoccupied with recovering from the Great Leap Forward, which had been intended to create a communist society and rapidly boost heavy industry but instead produced economic depression and famine. After the Great Leap, the CCP leadership had slowed down the pace of industrialization and invested more in coastal regions and the production of consumer goods. The Third Front put China on a very different path. It shifted China's economic center of gravity towards inland regions, and it remade quickly expanding heavy industry into a top national priority. Afraid that the United States or the Soviet Union could demolish Chinese industry with a few air raids or nuclear strikes, nearly 400 state-owned enterprises were moved from coastal cities to clandestine mountain locations.[10] This policy shift had significant consequences. It reduced coastal development, intensified consumer austerity, and militarized Chinese developmental strategy. If the CCP had stuck with its original plans, this choice would have probably led to less funding for inland industry, wider regional economic differences, and the pillars of modern industrial society becoming less entrenched in the Chinese interior.

The Third Front campaign also gave a second life to some of the Maoist economic techniques that had underpinned the Great Leap. With the inauguration of the Third Front, the Party again proclaimed that China should learn from how the CCP dealt with the underdevelopment of domestic science and technology during the revolutionary war era.[11] Like the Red Army, managers of Third Front projects should not view the scarcity of technical personnel, industrial equipment, and foreign aid as an insurmountable obstacle to the advancement of Chinese socialism. They should be self-reliant and mobilize any available resources into quasi-military campaigns that leaned heavily on large labor brigades to rapidly enlarge China's economic base. If anyone even so much as urged alternative policies, they ran the risk of being denounced as traitors who supported American or Soviet developmental methods over Chinese.

Last and not least, the Third Front provides a window onto how people within China responded to the CCP's attempts to socially engineer a population that conformed to Maoist principles. According to Maoist norms, when someone received a transfer order to the Third Front, they were supposed to willingly pack up their lives to participate in constructing a secret heavy-industrial base in China's mountainous hinterlands. Once someone became a Third Fronter, they were never supposed to want to be

[10] Zhao Dexin, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo jingji shi 1967–1984* (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1991), 183.
[11] Sigrid Schmalzer, "Self-Reliant Science: The Impact of the Cold War on Science in Socialist China," in *Science and Technology in the Global Cold War*, eds. Naomi Oreskes and John Krige (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 79.

anything else. They had to make the Third Front their life for as long as the Party needed. If they encountered hardships, it was politically incorrect for them to complain. They were supposed to remain wholeheartedly committed to struggling to build a Maoist version of industrial modernity in the Third Front even if that meant engaging every day in taxing manual labor at a remote construction site, only to return at night to a group canvas tent to eat a barebones meal and sleep on a thatched mat far away from family. In practice, people's responses to participation in the Third Front were shaped by a variety of socioeconomic, political, and geographic factors and only sometimes personified the CCP's prescriptions.

The Origins of the Third Front

The first known mention by Mao Zedong of the Third Front dates from 1964. Mao recommended building it after reading a General Staff report in April that year. The report noted that most Chinese industry was in fourteen big coastal cities prone to air raids or a nuclear strike, and so the General Staff suggested researching measures to guard against a sudden attack.[12] Mao proposed the Third Front as a solution to this security predicament at State Planning Commission meetings in May. Mao asserted that in the nuclear age China must have "a rear defense area [and] . . . prepare to go the mountains," like the Party had done in its battles against Japan and the Guomindang (GMD).[13] The Third Front was that military safe haven. China had to be divided up into three war zones: a First Front along the coast and in the northwest, a Second Front behind the coast, and a Third Front in the southwest. In the last area, Mao ordered a heavy-industrial base to retreat to in the event of a foreign occupation. This area was subsequently named the Big Third Front.[14] Mao wanted coastal enterprises relocated to the Big Third Front and to assist in developing heavy industry in inland areas. To further bolster national security, Mao demanded at a Politburo meeting on June 8 that every province set up a military industrial complex, or, as it was later called, a Small Third Front.[15] Then, on June 16, Mao told the Politburo to

[12] Chen Donglin, "Sanxian jianshe," in *Zhongguo gongchandang yu sanxian*, ed. Chen Donglin (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe, 2015), 4. The official editor of this volume is Chen Xi. Multiple Chinese scholars have told me that Chen Donglin edited this volume, and so I have listed him in this role.

[13] Mao Zedong, "Yao ba Panzhihua he lianxi dao Panzhihua de jiaotong, mei, dian jianshe de gao qi lai," May 27, 1964, in *Zhongguo gongchandang yu sanxian*, ed. Chen Donglin (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe, 2015), 43.

[14] Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, *Zhou Enlai zhuan, Volume 4* (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1998), 1768.

[15] Mao, "Yao ba Panzhihua he lianxi dao Panzhihua de jiaotong," 43. Mao Zedong, "Mei ge sheng dou yao you yi, er, Sanxian," June 8, 1964, in *Zhongguo gongchandang yu sanxian*, 52.

Map 0.1 The First, Second, and Third Fronts

form militias in every county, so that localities did not have to rely on the Party center or the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Only then could China be undefeatable.[16]

Mao advocated constructing the Third Front at the time when Party leaders were making preparations for the Third Five Year Plan. In the preceding year, Deng Xiaoping, vice premier Liu Shaoqi, director of the Planning Commission Li Fuchun, and a few other top leaders had sketched out a rough plan that was informed by the aftermath of the Great Leap.[17] Spurred on by the Taiwan Straits crisis of 1958, CCP leaders tried in the Leap to follow the example of Stalin's rapid industrialization drive between 1929 and 1941 and make China into a major industrial and military power by severely curbing consumption and directing all resources into a large militarized campaign to increase heavy industry.[18] During the Leap, the Party also invested in inland heavy industry to act as a rear base and reduce the economic gap between the coast and the interior.[19] In the end, the Leap precipitated a famine that killed around 30 million people and brought to a halt the CCP's big push to augment industry.[20] Deng Xiaoping and his colleagues oversaw the economy's recovery. Investment was drastically cut, material incentives were reintroduced, and rural markets were reopened. With these policy measures, the Party was able to revive economic production.[21]

This developmental approach, however, did not address China's increasing international vulnerability. In the early 1960s, China was a technologically scrawny military power with no weighty allies, and the Cold War was heating up in Asia. Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan talked ceaselessly about retaking mainland China and launched several commando raids into the southeast. China fought a border war with India in 1962, and Beijing's friend-turned-bitter-enemy – the Soviet Union – had

[16] Mao Zedong, "Difang dangwei yao gao junshi, yao junbei da dan bu yao huangzhang," June 16, 1964, in *Zhongguo gongchandang yu sanxian*, 53.
[17] Naughton, "Third Front," 352. Chen Donglin, *Sanxian jianshe: Zhanbei siqi de xibu kaifa* (Beijing: Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe, 2013), 43–45. The group also included Bo Yibo and Chen Yun.
[18] John Garver, *China's Quest: The History of the Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 113, 131, 143.
[19] Judd Kinzley, "Crisis and the Development of China's Southwestern Periphery: The Transformation of Panzhihua, 1936–1969," *Modern China* 38 (2012): 574–576.
[20] There is an extensive debate on how many people died during the Great Leap famine. I follow Andrew Walder, who puts the number at around 30 million. See Walder, *China under Mao*, 169. Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–62* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 324–334, has given a much higher estimate of 50 million. As Walder has noted, this higher estimate "cannot be reconciled with age-specific population data." Walder, *China under Mao*, 364–365.
[21] Barry Naughton, *The Chinese Economy: Transitions and Growth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 71–72.

sided with New Delhi. Making matters even worse, in the wake of the Sino-Soviet split, Moscow had stationed hundreds of thousands of troops on China's northern border.[22] In 1964, Sino-Soviet tensions reached a new level when the CCP publicly claimed that the Soviet Union faced the "danger of capitalist restoration" since Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's "revisionist clique" had installed itself atop the party-state as a "new Soviet bourgeoisie" and endorsed rising income inequality. China also accused the Soviet Union of giving up on the defense of international socialism against imperialism by showing interest in a policy of peaceful existence with American empire.[23] Beijing, in stark contrast, saw Washington as a major imperial threat. The United States had waged war against China in Korea, and American military bases and security alliances were geared towards stymieing socialism's global influence and undermining postcolonial and decolonizing states.

When Deng Xiaoping and his colleagues started work on the Third Five Year Plan in 1963, they did not give first consideration to China's worsening security environment. They advocated continuing with post-Great Leap policies and concentrating on agriculture and coastal areas for industrial development.[24] Mao, on the other hand, was concerned that post-Great Leap policies exhibited signs of Soviet revisionism and that his colleagues in the Party center were steering China towards a Soviet-style capitalist resurgence. In the months following Mao's first proposal of the Third Front in May 1964, he often switched in meetings between pressuring his colleagues to construct the Third Front and warning them that there was a significant risk that Soviet revisionism could take hold in China. Meanwhile, Deng Xiaoping, Liu Shaoqi, and Li Fuchun only partially supported the Third Front and continued to stress the Third Five Year Plan's original coastal and consumer focus. It was only after the Gulf of Tonkin incident in early August caused Party leaders to worry that a Sino-American war was about to explode that they firmly backed the Third Front campaign.[25] After the Third Front campaign started, Mao made a series of assertive actions. In December 1964, he accused Liu Shaoqi, Li Fuchun, and Deng Xiaoping of sidelining him in the policy-making process. In January 1965, he said that Liu Shaoqi was a revisionist like Khrushchev, and he formed a "small planning committee" to take over work on the Third Five Year Plan which did not include Liu, Deng, or Li.[26]

[22] Chen, "Sanxian jianshe," 4–5. Garver, *China's Quest*, 182.
[23] Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution, Volume 3, The Coming of the Cataclysm, 1961–1966* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 363.
[24] Naughton, "Third Front," 351. [25] Chen, *Sanxian*, 44–54.
[26] Chen, *Sanxian*, 72–73. MacFarquhar, *Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, 426–427, 430.

Instead, the committee was headed up by oil minister Yu Qiuli, whom Mao admired for successfully establishing the Daqing oilfield through forced-draft industrialization during the Great Leap, an accomplishment which supplied large quantities of much-needed oil to China's petrol-poor economy.[27] Following Mao's criticism of Li Fuchun, Yu Qiuli effectively took over as Planning Commission director. As for Deng and Liu, they remained involved in Third Front planning. However, Mao told a small number of high-ranking leaders that he thought Liu and Deng were trying to set up "separate kingdoms."[28] Mao's undercutting of his colleagues' authority around the same time that he urged building the Third Front raises the question of whether the Third Front was part of an effort by Mao to advocate for the revival of a fast-paced large-scale industrialization drive similar to the Great Leap while simultaneously pre-emptively pushing back against potential critics of this policy change.

According to Barry Naughton, when Mao suggested prioritizing national security and building the Third Front, he received wide support from the CCP leadership.[29] In his book on the Third Front, Chinese historian Chen Donglin presents a more complicated picture. He claims that Mao's and the central Party's decision was based on "how to handle the small possibility of war" since "ignoring that possibility . . . would be gambling with the nation's fate."[30] Chen provides no archival documents as support. What he does provide is evidence of meetings in which Mao and other Party leaders presented conflicting views about China's economic future and disagreed about the necessity and size of the Third Front. The historian Chen Jian has asserted that the start of the Third Front campaign fits with Mao's tendency to treat "international tension . . . as a useful tool for domestic mobilization," but had few sources with which to substnantiate his claim.[31] Based on the materials Chen Donglin presented and on recently published documentation, I argue that Mao employed international tensions to overcome resistance from his colleagues to undertaking the Third Front campaign, and that

[27] "Zhongyang guanyu chuanda 'shiyou gongye bu guanyu daqing youtian huizhan qingkuang de baogao' de tongzhi," in *Gongye xue daqing xianji lu ji shiliao xuanbian*, ed. Zhonggong Daqing shiwei dangshi yanjiushi (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2004), 29–30.
[28] Chen, *Sanxian*, 71.
[29] Naughton, "Third Front," 351. Lorenz Lüthi concurs with this view. "The Vietnam War and China's Third-Line Defense Planning before the Cultural Revolution, 1964–1966," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 10 (2008): 26, 32–33. Li Danhui and Yafeng Xia agree with Naughton too. *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Split, 1959–1973* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 95.
[30] Chen, *Sanxian*, 100.
[31] Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 13, 214–215.

they ultimately only backed down when Washington ramped up its military involvement in Vietnam after the Gulf of Tonkin incident.

America's strong response to the Gulf of Tonkin incident is well known. On August 7, 1964, Congress granted President Johnson the power "to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression."[32] Johnson then authorized bombing North Vietnam and sending troops into the South. By the end of 1965, the United States had 184,300 troops in the South, and by the end of 1967, American planes had dropped 864,000 tons of explosives on the North. Most Pentagon analysts expected American military power to cause the North Vietnamese to realize that they could not defeat Washington and retreat to engaging in small skirmishes and propaganda campaigns. And yet, Communist forces never backed down, in part because Johnson dreaded that dispatching ground forces into North Vietnam would provoke a huge Chinese intervention like it had in the Korean War.[33]

China's response to the Gulf of Tonkin incident has received less attention. In preparation for a possible war with the United States, Beijing commenced the Third Front campaign. On August 12, Zhou Enlai approved the construction of a massive industrial system in southwest China consisting of Panzhihua Steel in Sichuan, the Liupanshui coal mines in Guizhou, and three railroads connecting the provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou.[34] Then, on August 19, Li Fuchun, vice premier Bo Yibo, and chief of the general staff Luo Ruiqing issued a report. According to its terms, no new industrial projects could be built in fifteen large cities mainly along the coast; all new projects had to be concealed in the mountains, and industrial enterprises, universities, and research institutes had to relocate to the Third Front.[35] By supporting these policies, the Party radically altered the direction of the Third Five Year Plan.

The greenlighting of the Third Front campaign switched the Third Five Year Plan's focus from consumption and material incentives to heavy industry and austere living. By backing the Third Front's establishment, the Party center also reoriented investment inland and ended the post-Great Leap moratorium on mass-mobilizing resources for big industrial projects. Lastly, by deciding to build an industrial base in the

[32] Robert J. McMahon, *The Limits of Empire: The United States and Southeast Asia since World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 113, 116.
[33] Mark Philip Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 110–112.
[34] "Zhou Enlai deng pizhun Lu Zhengcao guanyu jiasu xiajian Chengkun deng xinan tielu de bao gao," August 12, 1964, in *Zhongguo gongchandang yu sanxian*, 57–60.
[35] Chen, "Sanxian jianshe," 8–9.

mountains, Party leaders made Cold War military pressures dominant in economic affairs and imprinted the guerilla tactics of the CCP's revolutionary base areas into the physical layout of China's economic geography. When Party leaders launched the Third Front in August 1964, they not only propelled militarized rapid industrialization policies back into the motor of the national economy, they also joined the long list of statesmen fighting the last war.[36]

Third Front Construction: An Overview

When Mao and his lieutenants initiated the Third Front campaign, they did not fully reinstate Great Leap policies. To begin with, the Third Front was not a nationwide aboveboard movement which granted localities power to instigate projects. It was a covert campaign whose developmental spotlight shone on western and central China. Authority was also more concentrated. Central ministries planned and administered the Big Third Front in co-ordination with Third Front offices in regional, provincial, and municipal committees, while county towns operated Third Front support offices to oversee the mobilization of local labor and supplies for construction projects. The Office of the National Defense Industry performed the same function for the Small Third Front in conjunction with provincial and municipal committees, while again relying on county Third Front support offices to direct local resources to building sites.[37]

The Third Front campaign also did not revive the utopian ambition of leapfrogging into communism. After the Great Leap, austerity without the promise of an abrupt rise in material welfare became the national norm. But the goal of austerity was not asceticism. The aim was building socialism. What made austerity seem to become an end in itself was that the time horizon for achieving socialism was not an immediate prospect. It was a process whose accomplishment was put off into the indefinite future.[38] Repressed consumption was not evenly distributed across China's social landscape. Especially important was the Party's decision to enforce a residence permit system which provided significantly more socioeconomic benefits to urban than to rural residents and only very rarely sanctioned urban–rural migration or relocation to cities higher up

[36] Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).
[37] Guowuyuan, *Sanxian*, 24–26.
[38] On austerity in Mao's China, see Maurice Meisner, *Marxism, Maoism, and Utopianism: Eight Essays* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 118–131. Ci Jiwei, *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution: From Utopianism to Hedonism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 134–167.