Ordinary Life within an Extraordinary Project: Demystifying the Third Front

Kendall, P.

Ordinary Life within an Extraordinary Project: Demystifying the Third Front

Abstract: Since its establishment in the 1960s and 1970s, the Third Front has undergone a major discursive transformation, from military secret under Mao Zedong and economic anachronism under Deng Xiaoping to industrial heritage under Xi Jinping. In the early twenty-first century, commemorative discourse presents this military-industrial complex of China's hinterlands as an extraordinary project within which workers led extraordinary lives. While not disputing the extraordinary ambition and scale of the project itself, this article draws on fieldwork and late-twentieth century textual sources to argue that many aspects of Third Front everyday life only seem extraordinary – and become heritage-worthy – when viewed through the lens of contemporary urban life. In contrast, when examined alongside the wider *danwei* (work unit) system, the Third Front everyday appears extraordinary not as a radical departure from Maoist industrial practices but rather as the ambitious extension of these practices into inhospitable terrain. Approaching the Third Front from this perspective, this paper argues, can help to demystify this project's legacy and locate it within existing research on the *danwei*.

In the summer of 2018, I sat under the shade of trees in a residential area on the outskirts of Guiyang, chatting with a retiree of the Third Front, a huge military-industrial project that China had launched in the mid-1960s. This residential area and an adjacent cluster of six factories had been built in preparation for an early 1990s relocation of Third Front work units from the mountain valleys of south and southeast Guizhou, and remained the home of many Third Front retirees.[1] This particular retiree, Old Liu, liked to talk about – and ask me about – big socio-political issues, ranging from Brexit to racial difference to KFC chicken scandals. As ever, I attempted to steer the conversation toward the Third Front whenever I sensed even a tenuous link, this time taking the discussion of fast food as an opportunity to ask about what workers used to eat when the factory was still in the mountain valleys. Old Liu gave me a little culinary information, before telling me, not for the first time, that there was little point (□□□□) in me studying the Third Front. Looking back, Old Liu said it was hard to know why they [the workers] even went along with the Third Front. He described how the intellectuals in his factory originally came willingly, but then discovered how harsh conditions were, and used their connections – during the Reform era – to get transferred back to the cities. For locally-recruited workers like him, there was no opportunity to leave as they lacked the formal educational credentials. Were they satisfied with their lives in the factory, I asked? It wasn't about being satisfied, he answered, rather it was about being satisfied with having no choice (□□□□□□□). If he had been asked to go and work in Beijing, then of course he would have gone, but there had been no chance of that.

[1] A seventh factory, Fengguang (506), only partially relocated to Guiyang (Chen, 2015: 372).

Around a year later, the residential area was given a makeover, including several visual motifs which commemorated the Third Front: a wall mural recounted the history of Base 083, later renamed Zhenhua Electronics Corporation, to which the six factories were subordinate; statues of two workers mock-operated an early-1970s lathe left exposed to the wet Guiyang climate; and a triumvirate of worker, intellectual-engineer and cadre statues lined the main commercial street. These were small-scale contributions to a wider discursive transformation of the Third Front, as it went from being a military secret under Mao Zedong and economic anachronism under Deng Xiaoping to industrial heritage under Xi Jinping. After decades of obscurity, the Third Front was visible amid Guizhou's cityscapes, as an important element in the branding of the province's cities as well as in the production of national narratives about the Mao era as a period of nation building and industrial development.

Having stumbled upon the Third Front in the early 2010s during fieldwork in Kaili, the capital of Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture in southeast Guizhou, its later manifestation as industrial heritage took me by surprise. As previously recounted (Kendall, 2019), the branding of Kaili had almost entirely overlooked the city's Third Front industrial legacy, since it was incompatible with a tourism-oriented focus on the culturally authentic (□□□) folk practices of ethnic minorities who were associated with the village rather than the factory. The Kaili area had been the site of 10 factories,[2] a hospital and a college under the auspices of Base 083, whose headquarters had been located in neighbouring Duyun, the capital of Qiannan Miao and Buyi Autonomous Prefecture in south Guizhou. A further nine 083 factories had been located around Duyun, together with a hospital, college, research institutes, a storage facility and communications station. In the mid-1970s, Base 083 additionally acquired two factories near to the city of Zunyi. However, all of these factories had fallen on hard times by the 1990s, with most going bankrupt, while a select few relocated to the Guiyang suburbs, accompanying the Base 083 headquarters, which had been reinvented as Zhenhua Electronics Corporation. During the early 2010s, only one Third Front factory continued to operate in Kaili. Consequently, the city branding of Kaili largely neglected this ambivalent industrial legacy to instead stress the folk practices of ethnic minorities.

[2] An additional factory, 4252, began construction in the 1970s but was extremely short-lived, being amalgamated into Factory 4262 in the early 1980s (Yang and Wang, 2017: 124)

Ten years later, commemorative Third Front sites have emerged all over the province, including several museums, prompting even the Kaili government to make attempts – albeit faltering ones – to reimagine former factory sites as industrial heritage (Kendall, 2020). The Third Front has also been commemorated in newspaper articles, academic literature, museums, documentaries, WeChat channels and even television dramas. One aim of this article is to identify some of the common themes in this sprawling commemorative discourse. Academic work on the Third Front has proliferated in recent decades but tended to avoid critical engagement with this commemorative discourse, either embracing the reinvention of Third Front as heritage (e.g. Yang Mo, 2013; Li Daifeng, 2016; Lü Jianchang, 2019; Xu Songling, 2020) or not discussing this discourse at all, perhaps because of its obviously propagandistic qualities. However, scholars in the wider field of Chinese studies have since the 1990s been alert to the need to carefully analyse – rather than simply discredit – propaganda (see Farley and Johnson, 2021). Governmental and entrepreneurial discourse on the Third Front has certainly been "doing things with words" (Schoenhals, 1992) in recent decades, in order to facilitate a radical shift from negative assessments of this project during the 1980s and 1990s towards its celebration in the present. Exactly who has been doing things with words also requires careful attention; although the Third Front has appeared regularly in CCTV documentaries, its commemorative discourse is not primarily centre-led in the Xi era, but rather driven by a diverse collection of local government institutions, real-estate developers and former Third Front participants themselves, particularly former leaders. Moreover, the line between propaganda and academia has not been at all clearcut, with academics appearing alongside real-estate developers and former Third Front leaders in celebratory CCTV documentaries, essay collections and heritage projects.

Overall, this commemorative discourse has tended to eulogize the Third Front as an extraordinary project within which heroic workers led extraordinary lives; these workers "lived their everyday lives as poetry" (□□□□□□), according to one social media piece about a Third Front museum in Guiyang (□□□□□□□□, 2021). This contrasts quite strongly with the matter-of-fact cynicism expressed by fieldwork interlocutor Old Liu in the opening comments of this article, as well as other retirees with whom I had informal, everyday conversations during fieldwork, usually in the residential area of Base 083. And yet Old Liu himself has also written his own paean to the Third Front for an edited collection of essays. Consequently, a further aim of this article is to examine ethnographic data alongside commemorative discourse in order to explore how former workers themselves have multiple

ways of doing things with words when talking or writing about the Third Front. The limited number of critical on Third Front commemorative discourse, including on museums (Lam, 2020) and documentaries (Kendall, 2024), has not yet examined this discourse alongside worker memories derived from fieldwork. Oral histories of the Third Front, meanwhile, have included little critical reflection on the extent to which worker memories are situated within – and shaped by – wider discourses of the Third Front. The formal, recorded qualities of oral history interviews have also encouraged retirees to emphasize the more extraordinary aspects of the Third Front, as well as reproduce set phrases found in wider commemorative discourse, so that these oral histories themselves have come to possess certain propagandistic qualities. In contrast, my primary method, of participant observation, encouraged former workers to talk about the Third Front in more mundane and everyday ways, if they even talked about it at all. These memories of the Third Front aligned quite closely with existing descriptions of ordinary life in the wider *danwei* (work unit) system. These memories also resembled an older strand of discourse about the Third Front, from the 1980s and 1990s, which downplayed the project as a failed relic of the Mao era. Thus, while grounded in the anthropological method of participatory observation, this article also draws extensively on textual sources, in order to examine how governmental, journalistic and academic assessments of the Third Front have evolved quite radically over the past forty years, as well as situate the memories of fieldwork interlocutors within this wider discourse.

The Third Front was undoubtedly extraordinary in its ambition and scale. However, on the basis of earlier textual sources and recent fieldwork, as well as wider academic literature on the *danwei*, this article argues that the Third Front everyday only appears extraordinary – and heritage-worthy – from the perspective of a contemporary urban society that is no longer structured around the *danwei*. From this perspective, it is not only the rural hinterland amid which Third Front *danwei* were constructed which appears distant, but also the *danwei* themselves, as configurations of space that brought together work, leisure and family life, in contrast to the spatial fragmentation of contemporary urban life. In contrast, when examined alongside the wider *danwei* system, Third Front factories appear extraordinary not as a radical departure from Maoist industrial practices but rather as the ambitious extension of these practices into inhospitable terrain. This terrain also necessitated the realisation of the spatial ideals of the *danwei* – as all-encompassing space of work, leisure and family life – in a way that was not always possible or desirable amid crowded cities. Approaching Third Front factories in this way, as paradigmatic examples of the *danwei*

system, can help to demystify the legacy of the Third Front and locate it within existing research on the *danwei.*

Intersecting Discourses of the Third Front

The Third Front resulted from Mao Zedong's concerns during the early 1960s about the nation's vulnerability to aerial strike, especially nuclear, as tensions escalated with both the United States and the Soviet Union. With industry concentrated on the eastern seaboard, Mao believed that a few well-placed strikes could severely undermine China's capacity to mount a military response. In 1964, Mao rejected a draft of the Third Five-Year Plan (1965-70) and called for specific revisions, including division of the country into First, Second and Third Fronts (Naughton, 1988). The latter, in contrast to the post-Great Leap austerity policies of the previous years, was to be a massive self-sufficient military-industrial complex created almost from scratch amid some of western China's most inhospitable terrain. The central government additionally demanded that key Third Front factories – rather than being located within existing western cities – should be "adjacent to mountains, dispersed, and hidden" (□□□□□□□□). Nearly 40% of the national capital construction budget was subsequently allocated to the Third Front between 1964 and 1980. With insufficient personnel in many inland locations, an estimated four million urban workers were relocated, along with family members, from cities across China to the Third Front, while another eleven million rural residents served as temporary construction workers (Kendall and Meyskens, 2024: 867–68).

Until the post-Mao period, this huge project was discursively hidden as a state secret. Newsreels and documentaries about the Third Front were not generally available to the public, and focused on individual construction projects that were only later publicly acknowledged as part of the Third Front, such as the Chengdu-Kunming railway. Contemporary museum exhibits and Third Front retirees frequently recount how workers were not supposed to inform family members of factory locations, but rather use a PO Box number for external correspondence. During my fieldwork, some Base 083 retirees indicated that these measures were actually quite superficial; one worker claimed that everybody soon learned where the factories were and what they were producing, with a report emerging in Japan about a Guizhou electronics base (i.e. 083) even as his factory was being built. For others, memories of secretiveness lingered; when I asked questions about the Third Front in Kaili in 2015, a descendant of Base 083 workers joked that the Public Security Bureau would have been after me in the 1970s for pursuing this line of enquiry.

In contrast to this secretive legacy, the Xi era has seen a proliferation of cultural production and academic research on the Third Front, as an element of the Mao era whose commemoration has become politically acceptable. (e.g. Chen, 2003; He, 2003; Xu and Chen, 2015; Dai, 2021). Indeed, highlighting the Third Front assists the CCP in constructing a history of the Mao era which stresses patriotic sacrifice, nation building and technological development rather than class struggle. English-language academia, meanwhile, has been slower to produce outputs in the decades since Barry Naughton's (1988) early article in *The China Quarterly*. Only in the last few years has a steadier stream of English-language work on the Third Front emerged, including a monograph that examines the project as a whole (Meyskens, 2020), studies of specific factories (e.g. Chen, 2018; Li, 2019) and of the Small Third Front (e.g. Xu and Wang, 2022; Yin, 2023). There has also been a limited number of studies that explore cultural production about the Third Front, including museums (Lam, 2020), independent films (Shao, 2021), and state-sanctioned documentaries (Kendall, 2024).

Between these discursive stages, of Third Front as state secret and as celebrated heritage, lies a second stage, from the 1980s until the 2000s, during which the project continued to have a low profile not only because of its secretive past but also because it was largely perceived as a problem. Sociologist Ju Li (2015: 314) has described how the Third Front was "depicted as an anachronism or a historical aberration, devalued, largely written off, and eroded from history". Located in mountain valleys and producing for the military according to the logic of a planned economy, the very existence of Third Front factories was incompatible with the dominant ideologies of the Reform era, that is, of marketisation, urbanism and consumerism. The most negative assessments of the 1980s presented the Third Front as an economic disaster, even listing it alongside the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution and Hua Guofeng's industrial policies (e.g. Xu and Xiao, 1981; Zhao and Liu, 1983; Zhang, 1983). More positive assessments certainly did exist, but typically began from a defensive position, acknowledging problems while resisting the characterisation of the Third Front as a "millstone" (□□) and arguing for its salvageability (e.g. Li, 1981; Lin and Ji, 1987; Yu, 1988).[3]

The Third Front has since been rescued from obscurity by heritage and nationalism, as well as the same ideologies of urbanism and consumerism that initially rendered it an anachronism during the early post-Mao years. Heritagization has swept China, as tangible and intangible elements of the past are selected and celebrated for their contributions to

[3] For a summary of these debates, see Chen (2003: 334–38).

national memory and regional development. This heritagization has been relatively slow to incorporate industrial sites; as with the post-industrial cities of Western Europe and North America, it has taken time for defunct factories to be reimagined as cultural heritage, at least beyond the industrial art zones of a few big cities. Despite earlier attempts by political leaders and academics to characterize the Third Front as heritage (e.g. Bo, 1993: 3; Chen, 2006), it has been amid the heightened nationalism of the Xi era that heritagization of the Third Front has flourished, providing as it does a narrative of the 1960s and 1970s that sidesteps the Cultural Revolution to highlight struggles against foreign enemies and nature (see Kendall, 2024). Southwestern municipal governments have subsequently reappraised local Third Front legacies as useful for developing city brands.

My own earlier research (Kendall, 2019) was shaped by the specifics of the Kaili city brand, which has yet to fully align itself with the wider re-conceptualisation of the Third Front as heritage. I initially wrote with some frustration about what I regarded as the city brand's failure to mention the contributions of Third Front workers to local development. As a partial consequence, my research shifted from solely examining the relationship between music-making in Kaili and its branding as "the homeland of 100 festivals" to include the factories of Base 083, as an industrial legacy largely omitted from this brand (see Kendall, 2019). This shift was also motivated by the desire to do research that was more relevant to the people I encountered during fieldwork. Whereas I had been told by locals not to waste my time doing research on music in Kaili city, I assumed that Third Front workers would welcome the opportunity to discuss their hitherto overlooked contributions to national security and industrial development.

This was not an entirely accurate assumption. Despite the recent discursive treatment of Third Front as heritage, workers have remained mindful of its previous status as a state secret, so that even Ju Li (2019: 17–18) sometimes encountered issues of access and trust, despite having grown up amid the Third Front steel plant that she researched. As a more obvious outsider, I found it very difficult to formally interview Base 083 retirees, particularly in the small city of Kaili, where friends promised to provide contacts but then encountered difficulties in convincing potential interviewees or reflected on possible repercussions for themselves. As a friend of a friend in Kaili explained in 2015, the old workers liked to complain and she was worried that this would negatively affect the image of the factory, which might in turn bring trouble to her own workplace. Besides, she added, Third Front retirees' way of thinking was very conservative and they might think I was a spy if I wasn't careful.

In the provincial capital of Guiyang, to which some Base 083 factories had relocated from Kaili and Duyun in the 1990s, I encountered slightly more open-mindedness in talking to foreign researchers, particularly through more informal conversations in the residential area where I was fortunate enough to stumble upon Old Liu and other retirees. However, during five month-long summer fieldtrips over 2017-19 and 2023-24, I also encountered continued scepticism as to the value of my research, as the second discourse – which downplayed the significance of the Third Front – continued to resonate in conversations. Despite holding their own commemorative events, including gatherings to mark 50 years since entering the factory, most workers seemed unwilling to closely align their everyday experiences with heritage-based eulogization of the Third Front. Whereas I responded to the public commemoration of the Third Front with a certain enthusiasm, as preferable to its omission from the Kaili brand, workers were generally far less effusive in their everyday conversations. Some workers, particularly men, did reproduce grand narratives of the Third Front as an important geo-political event, but rarely did they connect this talk of Chairman Mao and war preparation with their own lived experiences. For many ordinary workers, the wider Third Front project appeared emotionally and conceptually distant; they did not generally identify as "Third Fronters" (□□□) but rather as the workers of specific factories.

To briefly illustrate these attitudes, in the summer of 2019, I came across a new statue of workers, intellectuals and cadres in the 083 residential area, with an inscription commemorating the "Zhenhua spirit" (□□□). Bumping into Old Wang, a 083-Zhenhua retiree who I knew well, I mentioned the statue and its commemoration of people like him; he laughed, no, it was only commemorating Party members. Another time, I asked Old Wang if he had seen a new Third Front wall mural as we walked in its direction. He laughed again; we're not interested in this, *you're* interested, you can take some photos.

In scope and ambition, the Third Front was an extraordinary project, making it difficult for me to align these low-key everyday memories of Base 083 retirees with wider understandings of the Third Front, including my own. My initial reaction was to dismiss this downplaying of the Third Front as a defence mechanism against the questions of a foreign researcher. While some retirees were indeed cautious around me, others came to speak freely about all kinds of personal and political issues without deviating from their low-key characterization of Third Front life. Consequently, whereas commemorative and, to an extent, academic discourse have made Third Front everyday life spectacular, this article seeks to rethink it as ordinary. In doing so, it critically assesses two spatial binaries of contemporary

discourse, placing them alongside worker memories derived from participant observation as well as earlier discourses about the Third Front in textual sources and academic literature on the wider *danwei* system. The first spatial binary has marked the Third Front as extraordinary in comparison to the unmarked, ordinary practices of the First Front, including a stress on the migration of workers from First to Third Front, with the involvement and movement of other workers receive far less attention. The second spatial binary has marked the Third Front *danwei* as an anomalous "small society" of urban life amid the rural backwardness of inland China.

During fieldwork, retired workers sometimes drew on these binaries too, and so this paper does not seek to re-sensationalise worker memories as acts of resistance against heritage-making; for the most part, workers were apathetic about – rather than antagonistic towards – commemorative discourse. Indeed, worker memories have been partially shaped by the surrounding commemoration of the Third Front, just as commemorative documentaries, museums and books have drawn upon interviews with workers, albeit subsuming them beneath triumphant narratives. Instead, this article examines contemporary commemorative discourse and fieldwork data alongside two further sources of knowledge: academic literature on the *danwei*; and pre-heritage discourse about the Third Front, including newspaper articles, journal articles, gazetteers, and almanacs mainly written during the 1980s and 1990s. Taken together, these multiple perspectives can facilitate an understanding of Third Front social space as a paradigmatic version of the *danwei*, rather than as an extraordinary site of heroic practises that stood outside of the industrial everyday.

First Front and Third Front

Commemorative accounts of the Third Front place great emphasis on the material sacrifices that workers made as they relocated from factories across the big cities of the coastal First Front to mountain valleys in Guizhou, Sichuan and beyond. CCTV documentaries such as *The Big Third Front* (2017; □□□) stress that these workers willingly went to the Third Front for the sake of national security, with no subsequent regrets about the deprivations that they then suffered (see Kendall, 2024). Workers who relocated from the big cities, whether in CCTV documentaries or my own fieldwork conversations, recall the difficult journeys, as well as the deprivations they encountered at their destinations, where they initially lived in very basic accommodation. Before the completion of the Hunan-Guizhou railway in the 1970s, workers bound for factories in Kaili first took a train journey to either Duyun, the site

of the Base 083 headquarters, or Gudong station, which was somewhat closer. From Beijing, the train journey itself took over two days and nights via Liuzhou. Most memorable was the dangerous road journey across the Miaoling mountain range; retirees talked of narrow, gritty and sometimes icy roads that were as winding as sheep's intestines (□□□□).

On arrival at their factory sites, the earliest workers were involved in the building of infrastructure. Despite an emphasis on speed, most Base 083 factories took around three to four years to begin operations because of the logistical challenges of building industry from scratch in remote, mountainous terrain, as well as the political upheavals of the early Cultural Revolution (1966-69). One 083 retiree recalled to me how they had to flatten mountainous terrain using picks, while workers in CCTV documentaries have made similar references to the importance of establishing the "three connections and one levelling" (□□□□), that is, the connections of roads, water and electricity, as well as the flattening of land so that factory and welfare facilities could be constructed (see Kendall, 2024).

There is no question that this was a difficult few years for those early Third Front workers who experienced it; the word "arduous" (□□) is a recurring theme in worker memories of the early years. One worker who came over from Beijing recalled during my fieldwork how people in her contingent burst into tears upon first encountering the conditions in Guizhou and pleaded with their leaders to be sent back to Beijing. For some fieldwork acquaintances like Old Wang, the only thing that a researcher like me really needed to know was that life in the early Third Front was hard; the details were unimportant. In contrast to the narratives of documentaries and museums, these deprivations were not something that workers remembered with any great satisfaction, as glorious contributions to the nation's development, but rather as experiences that had to be endured. Old Wang could just about accept that a researcher like me was interested in this difficult past but declared it uninteresting to Third Front workers like him who had actually experienced it.

In stressing these early years, commemorative discourse tends to draw a contrast between ordinary First Front and extraordinary Third Front, with the Second Front almost nowhere to be seen. Documentaries and museums give few details about everyday life in First Front space, which instead serves as an abstraction, representing everything that emergent Third Front space was not: developed, comfortable, ordinary and urban. This is not a like-for-like comparison, but rather the comparison of life in the completed First Front factory with life in the under-construction Third Front factory. Such descriptions give the

impression that life in the Third Front was continuously extraordinary, as a life-or-death struggle against nature to protect China from foreign enemies.

Certainly, there were different standards of construction across First and Third Front. One retiree remembered the luxurious entrance and thick exterior walls of the First Front's Beijing Tube Factory (774), which reminded him of a grand office building (□□□□), as a consequence of its Soviet-informed construction aesthetics (Wu, 2008: 185–86). He further remembered its location within a clustering of factories in the northeastern suburban area of Jiuxianqiao, with tended forests to the south and north of these factories. This worker later relocated to the Third Front's Yongguang Factory (873), which was situated in what he jokingly called a mountain valley within a mountain valley near Kaili.

However, more thorough commemorative accounts continue beyond the early years of the Third Front, and indeed often continue far beyond the Mao era in their understanding of what constitutes the Third Front (see Kendall, 2024), while also indicating considerable improvements to living conditions from the early 1970s onwards.[4] For example, Kaili's Yongguang Factory had been constructed in Goat Horn Valley (□□□), which – as the name suggests – curved between mountains like the horns of a goat. From the main road, an entrance road led into the valley before ending at a junction, with a right turn leading to the residential area and a left turn leading to the factory area. It was a short, if somewhat circuitous, walk along the valley bottom from residence to factory. By 1975, according to a recent promotional video by the factory, workers were being called upon to carry out additional labour not to establish basic productive capabilities but rather to shorten the daily commute. This involved constructing a 700-metre cement road that cut through the higher levels of the valley to create a more direct route from the residential area to the factory. Although the promotional video uses the language of socialist struggles against nature to describe the exertions of workers in building this shortcut, this project was geared not so much towards saving the nation as reducing already-short commuting times.

This is not to suggest that life was ever easy in Goat Horn Valley, but rather that living standards improved markedly after the initial difficult years and also compared very favourably with wider living standards in Guizhou. Of the continuing hardships that workers recalled during my fieldwork, some were nationally experienced across the *danwei* system, such as a mere 56 days of maternity leave. The main recalled hardship that was specific to the

[4] Yin (2023: 8) describes similar improvements in a Small Third Front arsenal during the 1970s, so that it effectively became "too comfortable to leave" for many by the 1980s, in contrast to the initial hardships.

Third Front, of distance from factory to local urban amenities, was certainly a major issue for workers. However, it also ultimately led to improved living conditions in that factory leaders had no choice but to develop comprehensive welfare facilities. As argued later in this article, the completed Third Front factory in some way constituted a paradigmatic version of the *danwei*.

Examining the construction of Beijing Tube Factory (774) in Jiuxianqiao facilitates further comparison between Base 083 factories like Yongguang and those First Front factories that were responsible for their construction. Although today enmeshed within the urban fabric of Beijing, Jiuxianqiao was still a rural periphery in the 1950s (Fleischer, 2010: 1–2), when it was designated as a new electronics complex that would include three of China's Soviet-backed 156 Projects (Factories 714, 738 and 774) (Bu and Gao, 2000: 106). Given this rural location, the construction of Beijing Tube Factory was accompanied by the establishment of utility services, transport infrastructure, residential housing and welfare facilities (Lu, 2016: 9), just like Base 083 factories in Guizhou. However, Beijing Tube Factory was built alongside other important factories, and therefore lacked the spatial integration of work, housing and welfare that Base 083 factories came to possess: industrial facilities were clustered together in the north of Jiuxianqiao; while a residential area was established a couple of bus stops to the south (Geng, 1993: 49). Ultimately, the clustering of industry in Jiuxianqiao created the conditions for urbanisation, whereas Yongguang and other Base 083 factories remained isolated for decades.

Urbanisation does not necessarily, of course, lead to comfortable living conditions. The Jiuxianqiao residential area proved entirely insufficient to meet housing demand, with many workers either having to rent from local farmers or endure long commutes from the city (Fleischer, 2010: 3–5). As with the wider construction and expansion of 1950s Beijing, the Jiuxianqiao electronics base relied on a recruitment of peasants from the wider countryside that existing housing could not accommodate. The insufficient technical knowledge of Beijing Tube Factory cadres also meant that technical workers were transferred over from existing factories in the cities of Nanjing, Tianjin, Shanghai and Luoyang, along with university students from Shanghai (Lu, 2016: 8). With the first batch of university students assigned after graduation in 1952 (Lu, 2016: 8) and work on the Beijing Tube Factory residential area not beginning until November 1953 (Zhang, Wang and Duan, 2001: 177), housing provision was always lagging behind the influx of workers, raising questions about the purported comforts of First Front life.

Commemorative discourse also tends to characterise Third Front workers as the builders of their own factories. In contrast, it is unlikely that early Beijing Tube Factory workers were involved in the construction of their factory. At the same time, the workers of Yongguang Factory in Kaili were not the primary builders of their work units but rather enlisted when the local construction company was overwhelmed, with an army unit also deployed to aid construction efforts. During my fieldwork, factory retirees particularly stressed the suffering of the assigned soldiers, who worked incredibly hard and rarely remained to enjoy the fruits of their labour.[5] With Yongguang Factory operational by 1970, only the earliest recruits – who started to arrive in 1966 – were heavily involved in construction. Moreover, early local recruits, who already constituted a major part of the workforce, were generally sent to big cities for training and so missed much of the construction. In contrast, the construction of the abovementioned shortcut to work in 1975 was a frequently-mentioned memory during my fieldwork.

Finally, it is worth noting the huge drain on personnel, equipment and finances that First Front factories experienced as a consequence of being assigned responsibility for Third Front construction. For Beijing Tube Factory, this drain of resources to the interior began even before the Third Front became formal policy, including the sending of over 200 workers to help establish two factories in Sichuan in 1958 (Lu, 2016: 19). Beijing Tube Factory's first official Third Front task involved the relocation of some 800 workers and 300 pieces of machinery to a further factory in the southwest, along with basic necessities such as beds, chairs and tables, at a total cost of around 600,000RMB. Its emerging semi-conductor production capacity was also devastated, including not only the sending of personnel to Yongguang Factory in Kaili, but also of further personnel and Japanese-imported equipment to factories in Duyun and Yinchuan (Lu, 2016: 20). Everyday life in a First Front factory remained preferable to reassignment to the Third Front but it was hardly comfortable, with ongoing problems of housing and commuting as well as considerable disruption during the 1960s. This disruption was wrought not only by the Cultural Revolution, whose effects on factories are well-known, but also the Third Front, whose impact on the everyday life of First Front factories remains underexplored.

Commemorative discourse also tends to present a linear, one-way journey from First to Third Front, to emphasize the material sacrifices that patriotic workers made for the nation. However, the connections between factories and regions were complex and multi-directional.

[5] See Zhou and Weng (2024) for what happened to some of the military labourers involved in Third Front construction.

Tracing the institutional origins of just two Base 083 work units shows that Third Front factories were enmeshed within a wider *danwei* network rather than standing outside of existing industrial structures. Responsibility for the establishment (□□) of Yuguang Factory (771) in Kaili was allocated to Guoguang Factory (776) and Hongguang Factory (773), both based in Chengdu (Ju, 2000: 103; Jiang, 2017), and themselves initially established with help from Beijing Tube Factory (774) (Lu, 2016: 19). The mere presence of these factories in Chengdu complicates a binary of First and Third Front. As Barry Naughton (1988: 355–56) has remarked, "Third Front" refers to both a government project with particular characteristics and to the geographical area in which that project mainly took place. Although located within the Third Front area, these two Chengdu factories predated the Third Front project and did not adhere to its principles of dispersal, having been concentrated together in the eastern industrial district of Chengdu (□□). As the "mother factories" (□□) of Yuguang, they were effectively First Front factories in the newly-designated Third Front region. Guoguang Factory was additionally tasked – along with a factory in Nanjing – with establishing Yaguang Factory (970) in late 1964 (Guan Chengmao, 1993: 176; Ju Qingshan, 2000: 79; Yuan Jin and He Fang, 2012). Despite a central order to avoid locating Third Front projects in Chengdu and other existing industrial centres (Li Fuchun, Bo Yibo and Li Ruiqing, [1964] 2014: 95), this new factory was established alongside Guoguang Factory on Construction Avenue (Jianshe Lu) in the eastern industrial district (Guan, 1993: 117, 176; Ju, 2000: 293; Yuan and He, 2012). Yaguang Factory was then itself tasked with establishing a second factory in Kaili, the abovementioned Yongguang (873), in partnership with Beijing Tube Factory (774) (Ju, 2000: 104). This Yongguang Factory would be located one mountain valley away from the Yuguang factory identified at the start of this paragraph, as part of Base 083 in Kaili.

Seven factories, three big cities, two mountain valleys, and many code names; there is no absolute division of First and Third Front here but rather a complex network of industrial *danwei*. The recurring usage of "optics" (□) in factory names and a shared focus on electronic components such as semi-conductors indicates further connections across First and Third Front. These factories all had code names too, while recent commemorative discourse presents code names as if they were a unique characteristic of the Third Front: for example, one book about Base 083 factories in south Guizhou is entitled *The Construction Life Behind Mysterious Code Names* (Chen, 2015). Finally, these factories all reported to the Fourth Ministry of Mechanized Industry. Responsible for the production of electronics, this ministry

emerged in 1963 as part of an expansion in the number of ministries responsible for industry, with central bureaucracy subsequently exerting increased control over the running of individual factories (Lu, 2016: 17).

The movement of humans within this network of industrial *danwei* was not restricted to a one-way journey from First to Third Front. Contemporary discourse in documentaries and museums tends to focus on those workers who made long migratory journeys from the purported material comforts of First Front factories. In contrast, some academic research has stressed the diversity of the Third Front workforce, including not only First Front factory transferees but also university students, demobilised soldiers, re-assigned sent-down youth, temporary rural workers. In doing so, this research has revealed hierarchical schisms within Third Front factories (e.g. Chen, 2016; Wu and Liu, 2021), as well as how workers from less privileged backgrounds often regarded participation in Third Front as an opportunity rather than a deprivation (Li, 2019: 58–66; Meyskens, 2020: 166–67; Meyskens, 2021: 431). Nevertheless, the overall emphasis of academic literature has been on the experience of those workers who migrated from First to Third Front, with much less about the experiences of locally-recruited workers and even less about their movement across the wider *danwei* system.

Within Base 083, many workers were locally recruited from the urban centres of Guizhou. One retired Yuguang (771) worker has described his factory as consisting of some 600 workers during the early days, with 300 locally recruited, while 200 came from the two founding Chengdu factories, and the rest were assigned university students or demobilised soldiers (Jiang, 2017). For these local recruits, entering a Third Front *danwei* often constituted an escape from greater hardship, rather than an extraordinary journey beyond the relative comfort of the First Front. My fieldwork acquaintance Old Wang started work in the Third Front in 1966 as a migrant construction worker before later gaining permanent worker status. Knowing that his family circumstances – although extremely poor – were not politically acceptable, he lied during the application process to become a permanent worker. Other locally-recruited individuals were escaping life as sent-down youth in Guizhou. This included a fieldwork acquaintance who served as a sent-down youth for two years before relocating first to a Base 083 factory and then to the 083 telephone exchange. She recalled that conditions were terrible as a sent-down youth, somewhat better in the factory, which was remote but had better food provisions, and better still in the telephone exchange, which was accessible on foot from Duyun centre.

Most of these locally-recruited workers had only received middle-school education when they entered Base 083 factories. Subsequently, they were often subsequently sent to other institutions under the Fourth Ministry of Mechanized Industry for technical training. One local recruit, at Kaili's Nanfeng (830) factory, described being sent to spend a year in the "mother factory", which was again located in Beijing's north-eastern electronics district of Jiuxianqiao. She stressed to me that this time was focused on "studying technology" (□□□) rather than play, yet added that every Sunday the factory would provide them with a vehicle to visit sites such as Tiananmen Square, the Great Wall and the Summer Palace. At Yongguang (873) Factory, one up-and-coming recruit first went to Factory 774 in Jiuxianqiao, and then later to the University of Electronic Science and Technology in Chengdu's Eastern District. Old Liu, also a local recruit, recalled being sent first to Nanjing and then to the Fourth Ministry of Mechanized Industry's school in Tianjin. Beyond my fieldwork acquaintances, other local recruits have similarly written of training in these cities, sometimes lasting as long as three years. One described himself as "one of the lucky ones" on account of being chosen as an intern, and remembers how he requested for his training in Nanjing to be extended by a further two months (Zhong, 2017: 98). For these local recruits, the Third Front provided opportunities for travel and training in big cities that would have otherwise been impossible, as Maoist industry began to incorporate southeast Guizhou into its sphere of influence. Their entry into the Third Front would initially have seemed novel, but as part of their induction into the industrial *danwei* system as it extended Maoist nation building into the mountain valleys of Guizhou.

The Small Society

The existence of local recruits is also important for complicating a second strand of contemporary commemorative discourse, which depicts Third Front spaces as anomalous urban outposts surrounded by local villages. While the first binary contrasts the ordinary, established urban *danwei* of the First Front with the extraordinary, not-yet-complete *danwei* of the Third Front hinterland, this second binary – somewhat incongruously – conceptualizes the (completed) Third Front factory as a self-sufficient urban or semi-urban space that was entirely separate from the surrounding rural society. While commemorative discourse typically stresses the difficult early years, and some accounts give the impression that extreme deprivation remained the norm for Third Front workers, more in-depth accounts shift to describe the spaces that emerged after construction was completed. These accounts

characterise the Third Front factory as a melting pot, where people from all corners of China came together to forge a harmonious "small society" (□□□), that is, an enclosed social space where everybody shared the same experiences. In this space, everyday routines were regulated by the factory's broadcast system, meals were consumed together in the canteen or cooked at home with each family using the same ingredients (i.e. whatever the factory had managed to acquire that week), and films were watched together on a basketball court which doubled as an outdoor cinema.

Episode 11 of a documentary on the Third Front in south Guizhou, the site of the Base 083 headquarters and accompanying factories, provides a typical example of how commemorative discourse celebrates the purported uniqueness of this social space. Whereas previous episodes emphasize the difficult early years, this episode describes a flourishing everyday within the confines of the Third Front factory. One worker states that "our factory was a small society", before reeling off a list of facilities, including a shop, bathes, clinic, kindergarten, a grain shop, adding that "it had everything". Another worker claimed that people joked his factory had everything except a crematorium. The narrator proceeds to describe how Third Front workers had created a "small, complete society" (□□□□□□).

Nearly all of this terminology, including the joke about the crematorium, appeared in *People's Daily* articles during the 1980s and 1990s. Some of the *danwei* described in these articles belonged to the Third Front, even if this status was not always acknowledged (e.g. Liu, 1980; Li, 1988). However, other *People's Daily* articles used "small society" and associated terminology to describe *danwei* that existed outside of both the Third Front project and the Third Front region (e.g. People's Daily, 1982; Duan and Li, 1990; Gao and Zhang, 1993). This suggests that newspaper commentators during the early Reform era were approaching the "small society" as a common arrangement of space within the *danwei* system, rather than as something specific to the Third Front.

Definitions of the *danwei* in academic literature also align with qualities that contemporary commemorative discourse presents as unique to Third Front small societies, including the extent of welfare facilities and the sense of belonging among workers (e.g. Bjorklund, 1986: 22–24; Lü and Perry, 1997: 5; Lü, 1997: 21; Andreas, 2019: 1). Indeed, this academic literature uses the term "small society" to characterise *danwei* space throughout China (Lü and Perry, 1997: 5; Andreas, 2019: 55). A chapter by Barry Naughton, for example, describes the *danwei* system as unique on account of the extent to which enterprises provided welfare services for near-permanent employees who effectively became "citizens"

of their *danwei* (1997: 170). Naughton (1997: 176) then incorporates the Third Front into his description, arguing that its enterprises were "extreme examples of the *danwei*", in that their geographical positions forced them to "completely manage their own infrastructure and social services", so that they effectively became "small societies".

These "extreme examples" could even be understood as "paradigmatic", in that the geographic conditions and administrative power of Third Front institutions enabled a realization of the spatial ideals of the *danwei* that could not be achieved in spaces like Jiuxianqiao in Beijing. Duanfang Lu (2006: 33–4) has described Maoist work units as socialist versions of the 19th-century US company town, following adoption and modification of the company town by the Soviet Union in the 1920s. This Soviet influence on Chinese planners created – in the words of David Bray (2005: 124) – an understanding of "socialist construction as an opportunity for reconfiguring social life through intervention in spatial forms". While these radical architectural ideas were subsequently blunted by Stalin, there was greater freedom in the Chinese context to push for "a spatial realization of socialism" (Bray 2005: 124), including the attachment of housing and wider welfare to production space so that a strong sense of belonging to the socialist workplace emerged. During the early years of the Third Front, initial housing was temporary and insufficient to accommodate all Base 083 workers, with some staying in the housing of local villages (Yang, 2017: 107; Wang, Pan and Zhong, 2017: 234), while protracted negotiations with peasants over the assignment of land occurred across the Third Front (Li, 2019: 40–42). However, central-run Third Front factories ultimately had considerable power in procuring land for the construction of housing and welfare facilities, and factories that were properly located in remote areas (according to the project's principles of spatial distribution) were ultimately able to create cohesive spaces of work and welfare (□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ 1977: 12). To an extent, this reflected spatial trends in cities, where many *danwei* became akin to small kingdoms, ignoring municipal plans and seizing land for their own housing and welfare construction (Bray, 2005: 142–43; Lu, 2006: 51, 85–87). However, city-based *danwei* had to compete with each other for space (Lu, 2006: 86), with some institutions limited in their ability to develop welfare facilities by lowly administrative status (see Yang, 1989: 39–40). In addition, some municipal authorities were heavily involved in housing provision (Bian, Logan, Lu, Pan and Guan, 1997). In contrast, many central-run, remote Third Front *danwei* were paradigmatic in their ability to create enclosed, self-sufficient spaces, as the building blocks of industrial socialism in the PRC.

While Naughton's 1988 article in the *China Quarterly* is frequently cited in the massive Chinese-language literature on the Third Front, his later conceptualisation of Third Front enterprises as "extreme examples of the danwei" has been largely overlooked, with only a few PRC- based scholars approaching Third Front social space as *danwei* space (e.g. Xu and Wu, 2014; Wu and Liu, 2021), rather than as something extraordinary that existed outside of Maoist norms and thus warrants commemoration. Even fewer scholars have been prepared to examine to what extent everyday Third Front life aligned with wider experiences of the *danwei* and have ultimately defined the Third Front factory as a third socio-spatial category, distinct from both rural village and urban work unit (e.g. Zhang, 2015; Chen, 2018: 57–65). In contrast, to think of the Third Front factory as a paradigmatic *danwei* is not only to emphasize its enmeshment within a wider network of industrial institutions but also to stress that its socio-spatial configuration represented an intensification of – rather than departure from – *danwei* norms. Whereas Naughton (1997) and *People's Daily* articles of the early Reform Era conceptualised the Third Front within the context of the wider *danwei* system, the subsequent decline of the latter system in recent years has created conditions for the Third Front to be re-imagined as not only entirely distinct from contemporary urban space but also from historical PRC industrial space.

A further key difference between contemporary characterizations of Third Front *danwei* as "small societies" and discourse in the *People's Daily* in the early Reform era is that the latter's "small society" diagnosis was usually a negative one. Commentators complained that factory bosses could not concentrate their energies on production when they had to deal with issues such as housing, education, militia training and even marriage (e.g. Wen, 1979; People's Daily, 1987; Pan and Hu, 1987). These commentators also pointed to the huge financial burden that welfare facilities created for factories. One of the suggested solutions was to place responsibility for welfare provision in the hands of the local city, so that each urban area had a school, a hospital and so on, to avoid the wasteful reproduction of facilities whereby each work unit provided only for its own workers. Municipal authorities subsequently gained increasing power, while the work unit declined and became less of a small society. Commentators provided little in the way of practical solutions for those work units that were geographically isolated, other than a marketisation of welfare facilities that eroded worker privileges.

As with contrasts between First and Third Front, it is important to emphasize that positive conceptualisations of the Third Front factory as a "small society" featured during my fieldwork conversations, as well as in commemorative discourse**.** Remembering everyday life

in Kaili, Base 083 retirees often stressed the self-contained nature of their factories. The *danwei* was an all-surrounding social space and constant sensory experience of this space forged strong factory-specific identities, even while a sense of attachment to the wider Third Front project remained relatively weak.

In conceptualising the factory as a small society, retirees claimed little interaction with local settlements. If they mentioned interaction, it was usually in the context of trips to the markets that they visited on their single rest day. Some also spoke in quite dismissive tones about the low education level of the surrounding Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Prefecture in which Kaili is located. For workers, life in the Third Front may have been "arduous" during the early years, but material deprivation and even a local Guizhou upbringing were not commensurate with being "backward" (□□); this tag was instead applied to wider Qiandongnan, as a prefecture whose ethnic minority population lacked formal education and even the ability to communicate in Mandarin.

In emphasizing cultural difference, these worker memories align quite closely with commemorative discourse, which also draws a line between industrial and rural-minority settlements, albeit with the subsequent claim that a harmonious fusion ultimately resulted. In doing so, both retirees and wider commemorative discourse have downplayed the existence of local-run industrial *danwei*, conceptualising "the local" in terms of the minority village or market town, rather than the factory. Certainly, it is true that Duyun and Kaili possessed little industry prior to the 1960s. However, many local-run factories emerged in the 1960s and 1970s following the establishment of Third Front infrastructure, as well as a national trend towards the construction of small-scale factories in county towns (Andreas, 2019: 148). These local-run factories further complicate proclamations about the uniqueness of Third Front social space.

Describing conditions in the late 1980s, the Qiandongnan gazetteer of urban construction and environment protection makes no categorical distinction between Third Front and local-run factories in its section on "independent industrial areas" (□□□□□) (Li, 2005: 142–47). In fact, this section does not directly mention the Third Front or Base 083 at all, with the introduction instead stating that various electronic industries came over to Kaili in the 1960s (Li, 2005: 142). Subsequent entries describe individual factories as having a nursery, school, medical facility, cultural clubs and flood-lit outdoor courts, as well as accommodation. The listed local-run factories were not discernibly inferior to the Third Front

factories in their provision of entertainment, education and other facilities. Some were even superior in their provision of residential space (Li 2005: 142–45).

Thus, despite commemorative discourse lauding the unique "small society" qualities of Third Front factories, local-run factories possessed similarly bounded welfare spaces by the 1980s. As noted in literature on the wider *danwei* system, the early 1980s saw an initial expansion of welfare, as managers gained more control over budgets and improved amenities for the sake of labour relations (Walder, 1986: 226–27; Bian, Logan, Lu, Pan and Guan, 1997: 229–30; Andreas 2019: 166), so that factories in Kaili and Duyun experienced relatively high living standards before the restructuring of the 1990s. Of course, there were differences of production and personnel, with local factories not needing to import the same number of educated workers as Third Front factories or place as much emphasis on political background. Consequently, some Third Front retirees looked down upon these local factories. However, by the 1980s and 1990s, Third Front factories were suffering from brain drain and declining production quotas, and so a certain levelling of standards occurred across Base 083 and local-run factories in Kaili and Duyun.

This levelling is further reflected in newspaper articles of the early Reform era, in which factories are often just factories, rather than Third Front or local. If mentioned at all, the "Third Front" receives little eulogization. This was due to the lowly status of the project during this period, rather than considerations of secrecy, with promotional articles on 083 factories even providing the factory address and phone number (e.g. Guizhou ribao, 1988). In fact, factory products, as the aspect of the Third Front that my fieldwork acquaintances considered most secret, were often central to these newspaper articles, which distinguished not so much between Third Front and local factories as between financially successful and unsuccessful factories. There are frequent pieces, for example, on the successful products of Hualian Factory (851) in Kaili, with minimal reference to its Third Front or 083 origins (e.g. Meng, 1986; Zhang, 1987; Chen and Yang, 1987). Hualian even appeared in a *People's Daily* article that managed to describe the factory's location, history, administrative status and products without once mentioning the Third Front. In a reversal of contemporary discourse, the Third Front was more unmentionable than the Cultural Revolution, whose negative impact upon factory production were described as part of the wider mid-1980s campaign to "utterly negate the Cultural Revolution" (People's Daily, 1985; see Forster, 1986). Newspapers gave far less attention to financially unsuccessful 083 factories, who received occasional coverage for welfare-based innovations (e.g. Sheng, 1986), entertainment

provision (e.g. Fu, 1991), and even their poor financial state (e.g. Shi, 1995), rather than for successful products.

Gazetteers and newspapers also reveal the extent to which Third Front factories – far from being institutionally isolated – had linkages with local factories and administrative institutions. Requiring a local supply line for certain goods, 083 factories contributed to the transformation of the local Kaili cork factory into a Standard Fastener Factory in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Pan, 1994: 86–87; Xiong, 1998: 547). By the 1980s, newspapers were reporting on the "establishing of horizontal linkages" (□□□□), as part of a new language of "connectivity" (see Wank, 1996: 826), to positively describe how Third Front factories were teaming up with local industrial and administrative *danwei* to create new enterprises; Yuguang Factory (771) and Kaili Glass Factory, for example, came together to construct a factory for the production of glass bottles (Xu and Zuo, 1986). The Eastern Machinery Plant in Duyun was even transferred away from the First Ministry of Mechanized Industry to local authorities in the early 1970s (Lu, 2007: 952); it became an important local-run factory only to be reimagined as a Third Front museum in the 2010s following bankruptcy.

This Eastern Machinery Plant, moreover, had never been in a particularly remote location, but rather established alongside other factories in the northern suburbs of Duyun, near to the trainline. Similarly, in Kaili, the Long March Wireless Factory (4262) of Base 083 was established close to the urban centre, as the Third Front directive regarding spatial dispersal was sometimes interpreted loosely during the second wave of construction in the early 1970s. In this way, even the distinguishing feature of being "adjacent to mountains, dispersed, and hidden" could not be applied to some Third Front factories. Indeed, the language of being located in "mountain valleys" (□□), used in contemporary discourse as a marker of the Third Front, was frequently used in 1980s and 1990s discourse in a more general sense, to describe the difficult geographical conditions with which *danwei* of all kinds had to contend in Guizhou. In this newspaper discourse of the 1980s and 1990s, the narrative of industry in Guizhou was not a narrative of the Third Front but rather of a more multi-faceted modernizing of the province, involving local- and central-run institutions that received journalistic coverage according to the criteria of economic performance rather than historical background.

Conclusion: Demystifying the Third Front

Remembering previous visits to the Long March Wireless Factory in Kaili, a former sent-down youth wrote of how this once-flourishing "secret central-run factory" (□□□□□) had gone bankrupt around the turn of the century. While the factory land had been transformed into transport infrastructure and real estate, a few remaining residential buildings survived as a "village within a city" (□□□), out-of-sync with the surrounding, ever-evolving city (Gu, 2017).

Under these changing urban conditions of the last twenty years, once-mundane Third Front spaces have become worthy of commemoration and heritagization. This constitutes a major reversal in formal assessments of the Third Front, after its previous treatment as a failed relic of the Mao era. This commemoration has provided belated recognition to Third Front workers for their contributions to the development of the Chinese interior. However, the heritage-making discourse of museums, documentaries and newspapers has exaggerated the uniqueness of everyday life and social space within the Third Front, through an implicit comparison with contemporary urban society rather than with the wider *danwei* system to which the Third Front belonged. By examining this commemorative discourse alongside worker memories derived during participant observation, earlier textual sources, and academic literature on the *danwei*, this article has sought to demystify Third Front social space, by highlighting the many qualities that it shared with the spaces of the wider *danwei* system. Whereas Barry Naughton had described Third Front as an "extreme" version of the *danwei,* I have used the word "paradigmatic" to highlight how some Third Front factories realized the spatial ideals of the *danwei*, as all-encompassing spaces of work, leisure and family life.

While commemorative discourse has often conceptualised an absolute distinction between First and Third Front to emphasize the sacrifices of workers travelling from big cities to the interior, this article has sought connections between the two. In doing so, it has highlighted the institutional networks in which First and Third Front factories were enmeshed, as well as the movements of locally-recruited workers, who did not undertake an arduous journey from First to Third Front, but did travel from Third to First Front for training, as part of their immersion into the wider *danwei* system. This article has also examined a more detailed strand of commemorative discourse which identifies Third Front factories as "small societies". This discursive strand accurately describes the welfare and sense of belonging that these spaces possessed, and yet fails to contextualise these qualities as part of the wider

danwei system, and thus as ordinary qualities of everyday industrial life, until this system's organisation of space receded in the 1990s.

Whereas this article has sought commonalities across the *danwei* system, it is important to remember the differences that existed even between individual work units under the same institutional umbrella. This paper has mainly examined the memories of those Base 083 workers whose factories successfully relocated to Guiyang, yet those Base 083 workers who remained in Duyun and Kaili subsequently experienced factory bankruptcies which may have shaped their memories in quite different ways. There were also important differences of worker experience across the wider Third Front. For example, while the factories of Base 083 mostly adhered to the remote, dispersed principles of the Third Front, studies of other Third Front areas suggest significant spatial variation, with some factories constructed either close to each other or to existing cities (e.g. Jin, 2024), so that worker memories again may vary significantly.

Beyond the spatial specifics of Base 083 memories in Guiyang, my broader analysis of textual sources suggests that a shift towards commemoration of the Third Front as heritage is a more universal trend, facilitated by nationalism and urbanism, as well as the fact that wider *danwei* socio-spatial practices are now far removed from contemporary urban life in China. During my fieldwork, most former Base 083 workers presented themselves as fairly aloof from this commemorative discourse. At the same time, my observations of visitors in the Third Front museums of wider Guizhou has indicated that some retirees *are* interested in the commemoration of the Third Front, while their children – nostalgic for the spaces in which they were raised – have played an important role in this commemoration, again indicating the need for ethnographic work focused on other Third Front bases and factories. A further important research task will be to examine the ways in which this commemorative discourse advocates the propagation of a patriotic, selfless "Third Front spirit" (□□□□) for transmission to future generations, as something that can be extracted from the Third Front past and applied to the present, and the extent to which this is successful.

References:

ANDREAS, JOEL (2019) *Disenfranchised: The Rise and Fall of Industrial Citizenship in China*. New York: Oxford University Press.

BIAN, YANJIE, JOHN R. LOGAN, HANLONG LU, YUNKANG PAN and YING GUAN (1997) "Work units and housing reform in two Chinese cities." Pp. 223–50 in Xiaobo Lü and Elizabeth J. Perry (eds.), *Danwei: The Changing Chinese Workplace in Historical and Comparative Perspective*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe.

BJORKLUND, E. M. (1986) "The danwei: socio-spatial characteristics of work units in China's urban society." *Economic Geography* 62, 1: 19–29.

BO YIBO □□□ (1993) "□□□□□□□□□□□——□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□" (A major and urgent strategic adjustment: preface to 'Big Third Front reportage series'). Pp.1-5 in Wang Chuncai (ed.), □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ (China's holy flame: Big Third Front reportage series). □□□□□□□□□□.

BRAY, DAVID (2005) *Social Space and Governance in Urban China: The Danwei System from Origins to Reform*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

BU SHICHENG □□□ and GAO YUQING □□□ (eds.) (2000) □□□□□·□□□ (Beijing industrial gazetteer series: electronics volume). □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□.

CHEN, CHAO (2016) "Labeled clanization: the social structure of a Third Line enterprise." *Labor History* 57, 5: 671–94.

——— (2018) *Toleration: Group Governance in a Chinese Third Line Enterprise*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

CHEN DONGLIN □□□ (2003) □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ (Third Front Construction: development of the west during an era of war preparation). □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□.

——— (2006) "□□□□: □□□□□□□□□□□□" (Third Front Construction: our closest industrial heritage). □□□□□□ 6: 96–102.

CHEN JIANHONG □□□ (ed.) (2015) □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ (The construction life behind mysterious codenames: an oral history of Third Fronters in Qiannan, Guizhou). □□□□□□□□□□□.

CHEN YONGHE □□□ and YANG BO □□ (1987) "□□□□□□□□" (The courage and resourcefulness of Hualian's workers). □□□□, August 12.

DAI FAJUN □□□ (ed.) (2021) □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ (Social life and cultural identity among Third Fronters). □□□□□□□□□□□.

DUAN XINQIANG □□□ and LI ANDA □□□ (1990) "□□□□□'□□□'——□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□" (The 'small society' of a big enterprise - a record of how Jilin Chemical Industry Company' runs a society according to national conditions). □□□□, May 12.

FARLEY, JAMES and MATTHEW D. JOHNSON (2021) "Introduction." Pp.1-20 in James Farley and Matthew D. Johnson (eds.), *Redefining Propaganda in Modern China: The Mao Era and Its Legacies*. London: Routledge.

FLEISCHER, FRIEDERIKE (2010) *Suburban Beijing: Housing and Consumption in Contemporary China*. University of Minnesota Press.

FORSTER, KEITH (1986) "Repudiation of the Cultural Revolution in China: the case of Zhejiang." *Pacific Affairs* 59, 1: 5–27.

FU YUANFENG □□□ (1991) "Untitled." □□□□□, October 14.

GAO PEIJIE □□□ and ZHANG XIANCHUN □□□ (1993) “□□□□□‘□□□’□□□□” (Huangtai Power Plant performs major surgery on its ‘small society’). □□□□, November 28.
GENG ZONGCHAN □□□ (ed.) (1993) □□□□□□□□□ (Place name gazetteer of Chaoyang district, Beijing). □□□□□□□□.
GU LI □□ (2017) “□□ 4262 □□□□□□□□” (Some exchanges with my friends in Factory 4262). Pp.143-45 in Wu Zhiguo □□□ (ed.), □□□□□□□□ (The Third Front in Qiandongnan). □□□□□□□.
GUAN CHENGMAO □□□ (ed.) (1993) □□□□·□□□□□ (Electronics gazetteer of Sichuan Province). □□□□□□□□□□□□.
Guizhou ribao □□□□ (1988) “□□□□□□□□□□——□□□□□□ 1987 □□□□□□□” (State-operated Qunying Radio Equipment Factory – four products win 1987 provincial award), February 5.
HE HAOJU □□□ (2003) □□□□□□□□□□ (The Third Front Construction and the great development of the west). □□□□□□□□□.
JIANG YICHENG □□□ (2017) “□□□□” (Past events of Yuguang Factory). Pp.212-14 in □□□(ed.), □□□□□□□□ (The Third Front in Qiandongnan). □□□□□□□.
JIN, YI (2024) “Contingent attachment: long-term lived experience in the redevelopment of a Third Front neighbourhood.” *The China Quarterly* 260: 887–905.
JU QINGSHAN □□□ (ed.) (2000) □□□□·□□□□□□□ (Electronic instruments gazetteer of Chengdu Municipality). □□□□□□□□□.
KENDALL, PAUL (2019) *The Sounds Of Social Space: Branding, Built Environment, and Leisure In Urban China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai□i Press.
——— (2020) “Ruins on ruins: forgetting, commemorating and re-forgetting the Third Front.” *Contemporary China Centre Blog*. June 3. https://blog.westminster.ac.uk/contemporarychina/ruins-on-ruins-forgetting-commemorating-and-re-forgetting-the-third-front/.
——— (2024) “Third Front as method: Mao, market and the present in CCTV documentaries.” *The China Quarterly* 260: 872-886.
KENDALL, PAUL and COVELL MEYSKENS (2024) “Afterlives of the Third Front.” *The China Quarterly* 260: 867–71.
LAM, TONG (2020) “Ruins for politics: selling industrial heritage in postsocialist China’s rust belt.” Pp.251-69 in Stefan Berger (ed.), *Constructing Industrial Pasts: Heritage, Historical Culture and Identity in Regions Undergoing Structural Economic Transformation*. New York: Berghahn Books.
LI DAIFENG □□□ (2016) “□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□” (Research on the construction of Guizhou’s Third Front brand). □□□□□ 543: 11–14.
LI FUCHUN □□□, BO YIBO □□□ and LUO RUIQING □□□ ([1964, October 10] 2014) “□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ 1964 □□□□□□□□□□” (Report on the issue of factory relocation in 1964). Pp. 94-5 in Chen Donglin (□□□) (ed.), □□□□□□□□□□ (The Chinese Communist Party and Third Front Construction). □□□□□□□□□□.
LI HUI □□ (1988) “□□□□——□□‘□□’□□□” (Sparrows and eagles: a second tour of Zunyi’s Fenghua Factory). □□□□, April 23.
LI, JU (2015) “How it was/is told, recorded and remembered: the discontinued history of the Third Front Construction.” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 28, 3: 314–41.

——— (2019) *Enduring Change: The Labor and Social History of One Third-Front Industrial Complex in China from the 1960s to the Present*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH.
LI YUE □□ (1981) "□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□" (On correct handling of the relationship between coastal industry and inland industry). □□□□, December 15.
LI ZHENLAI □□□ (ed.) (2005) □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ (Gazetteer of urban construction and environmental protection in Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture). □□□□□□□□□□.
LIN XIN □□ and JI YIN □□ (1987) "□□□□□□□□□ ——□□□□□□□□□ □□" (A huge economic stage – insight and inspiration from visiting Third Front Enterprises). □□□□, May 24.
LIU BINYAN □□□ (1980) "□□□□□——□□□□□□□□□□ (The secret of success - a visit to a model factory in the national electric carbon industry)." □□□ □, June 29.
LU, DUANFANG (2006) *Remaking Chinese Urban Form: Modernity, Scarcity and Space, 1949-2005*. Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge.
LU FENG □□ (2016) □□□□□□□□□□□□ (Changing Optics: An Enterprise and Its Industrial History). □□□□□□□□□□.
LÜ JIANCHANG □□□ (2019) "□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ □□" (Current status and future solutions: on the protection and utilization of Third Front industrial heritage), □□□□ 2019 (3): 6–12.
LÜ, XIAOBO (1997) "Minor public economy: the revolutionary origins of the danwei." Pp.21-42 in Xiaobo Lü and Elizabeth J. Perry (eds.), *Danwei: The Changing Chinese Workplace in Historical and Comparative Perspective*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe.
LÜ, XIAOBO and ELIZABETH J. PERRY (1997) "The changing Chinese workplace in historical and comparative perspective." Pp.3-17 in in Xiaobo Lü and Elizabeth J. Perry (eds.), *Danwei: The Changing Chinese Workplace in Historical and Comparative Perspective*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe.
LU XINGHE □□□ (ed.) (2007) □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ (Gazetteer of Qiannan Buyi and Miao Autonomous Prefecture (concise edition) volume 2). □□□ □□□□□□□□.
MENG YINGFU □□□ (1986) "□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□" (Hualian Factory persists with technology reforms, productivity increases). □□□□, January 24.
MEYSKENS, COVELL (2020) *Mao's Third Front: The Militarization of Cold War China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
——— (2021) "Experiencing the Cold War at Shanghai's secret military industrial complex." *Cold War History* 21, 4: 429–47.
NAUGHTON, BARRY (1988) "The Third Front: defence industrialization in the Chinese interior." *The China Quarterly* 115: 351–86.
——— (1997) "Danwei: the economic foundations of a unique institution." Pp.169-94 in Xiaobo Lü and Elizabeth J. Perry (eds.), *Danwei: The Changing Chinese Workplace in Historical and Comparative Perspective*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe.
PAN DIDU □□□ and HU YUEPING □□□ (1987) "□□□□□□□□□□□□" (The socialization of enterprises cannot continue). □□□□, August 29.
PAN WENKE □□□ (ed.) (1994) □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□ (Gazetteer of heavy industry and township enterprises in Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture). □□□□□□□□□□.
People's Daily (1982) "□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□" (Harbin Bearing Factory reforms its enterprise management system), August 4.

——— (1985) “□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□” (The Central Commission for Discipline Inspection recommends the experience of Factory 851 for rectifying the Party’s methods), October 28.

——— (1987) “□□□□□□□□□□□□□□——□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□” (Carry out reform and opening up, promote economic development - excerpts from speeches by representatives at the Fifth Session of the Sixth National People’s Congress (4)), □□□□, April 6.

SCHOENHALS, MICHAEL (1992) *Doing Things with Words in Chinese Politics: Five Studies*. Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California.

SHAO, XUESONG (2021) “Restoring and reimagining socialist-built cities: Wang Xiaoshuai’s ‘Third Front trilogy.’” *Telos* 197: 13–33.

SHENG MAO □□ (1986) “□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□” (A preliminary solution for worker difficulties in buying vegetables, buying breakfast and making clothes). □□□□, November 26.

SHI, HUA □□ (1995) “□□□□’□□□’” (Kaili has a ‘holiday village’). □□□□□, September 20.

WALDER, ANDREW (1986) *Communist Neo-Traditionalism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

WANG JUN □□, PAN XINYI □□□ and ZHONG JIFENG □□□ (2017) “□□□□——□□□□□□□□□□□□□” (Factory 873 – an old military enterprise entrusted with a mission at a time of crisis). In □□□□□□□□ (The Third Front in Qiandongnan), edited by Wu Zhiguo □□□, 233–38. □□□□□□□.

WANK, DAVID L. (1996) “The institutional process of market clientelism: guanxi and private business in a South China city.” *The China Quarterly* 147: 820–38.

WEN BOQI □□□ (1979) “□□□□□□□□□□□‘□□□□’□□□□□□□” (How do we ensure that enterprises leaders spend ‘five sixths’ of their time on production?). □□□□, May 15.

WU HAILIN □□□ and LIU SIYAO □□□ (2021) “□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□——□ S □‘□□□□□’□□” (The social structure of identity during the transformation of the danwei system – the example of ‘Third Front Family dependent workers’ in Factory S). Pp.337-50, in Dai Fajun □□□ (ed.), □□□□□□□□□□□□□. □□□□□□□□□□.

WU HUNG (2008) *Making History: Wu Hung on Contemporary Art*. Hong Kong: Timezone 8.

XIONG GUILUN □□□ (ed.) (1998) □□□□ (Gazetteer of Kaili Municipality). □□□□□□□□.

XU KEZHONG □□□ and ZUO GUOGU □□□ (1986) “□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□” (Horizontal linkages between Qiandongnan Prefecture and Zhenhua Company gain results). □□□□, July 20.

XU RIQING □□□ and XIAO ZHENGQIAN □□□ (1981) “□□□□□□□□” (On macro-financial supervision). □□□□□□ 4: 27–33.

XU SONGLING □□□ (2020) “□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□” (The significance of Third Front industrial heritage: understanding institutional value from the perspective of political economy). □□□□ 2020 (1): 6–11.

XU YOUWEI □□□ and CHEN DONGLIN □□□ (eds.) (2015) □□□□□□□□□ (Collected papers on the Small Third Front Construction). Vol. 1–5. □□□□□□□□□□.

XU YOUWEI and Y. YVON WANG (2022) *Everyday Lives in China's Cold War Military-Industrial Complex: Voices from the Shanghai Small Third Front, 1964-1988*. Cham: Springer Nature.

XU YOUWEI □□□ and WU JING (2014) □□ "□□□□□:□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□——□□□□□□□□□□□□" (Crisis and response: the marriage life of young workers in Shanghai's Small Third Front: a study centred on Steel Plant 85). □□□□□□, no. 04: 34–43.

YANG FENG □□ and WANG JUN □□ (2017) "□□□□□——4262 □" (A record of the old Third Front – Factory 4262)". Pp.124-26, in Wu Zhiguo □□□ (ed.), □□□ □□□□□ (The Third Front in Qiandongnan). □□□□□□□.

YANG, MAYFAIR MEI-HUI (1989) "Between state and society: the construction of corporateness in a Chinese socialist factory." *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 22: 31–60.

YANG MO □□ (2013) "□□□□ '□□□□' □□□□□" (The cultural function of Third Front as industrial heritage)" □ 24: 085.

YANG WEISHAN □□□ (2017) "□□□" (Third Front feelings). Pp.106-11, in Wu Zhiguo □□□ (ed.), □□□□□□□□. □□□□□□□.

YIN, QINGFEI (2023) "Between the mountains, the city, and the world: the microhistory of a 'Small Third Front' Chinese arsenal during revolution and reform." *Labor History* 65, 4: 457–75.

YU DAJIANG □□□ (1988) "□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□" (A brief discussion of Third Front construction and the establishment of Third Front development zones)." □□□□□□, no. 01: 63–67.

YUAN JIN □□ and HE FANG □□ (2012) "□□□□ 970 □□□□□□□□□□□□□" (An oral history of Factory 970: everything that I remember of Yaguang Factory)." November 30. https://www.sohu.com/a/www.sohu.com/a/504498698_121117463.

ZHANG CHONGWEI □□□ (1987) "□□□□□□□□□□□□LX-85 □□□□□□ □□□□" (Hualian Factory strives to absorb imported technology, all inner parts of LX-85-type recorders now localised). □□□□, August 3.

ZHANG DA □□ (1983) "□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□" (On the expansion of capital construction investment and economic reform)." □□□□□□, no. 03: 8–14.

ZHANG MINGYI □□□, WANG LIXING □□□ and DUAN BINGREN □□□(eds.) (2001) □□□ □□□ □□□□□ □□□□□□□□. □□□□□□□□.

ZHANG YONG □□ (2015) "□□□□□□□□□□□: □□□□□□□□□□□" [Work unit societies between the city and the countryside: an exploration of the characteristics of Third Front enterprises]. □□□□□□ 10: 26–31.

ZHAO XIAOMIN □□□ and LIU RONGCANG □□□ (1983) "□□□□□□□□□□□" (On fundamental changes in the work of public finance). □□□□ 04: 51–54.

ZHONG JIFENG □□□ (2017) "□□□□□□□□□□□□ (Memories of Goat Horn Valley and Third Front feelings)." In □□□□□□□□ (The Third Front in Qiandongnan), edited by Wu Zhiguo □□□, 97–103. □□□□□□□.

ZHOU, TAOMO and WENG, CUIFEN (2024) "Soldiering in the Special Zone: the People's Liberation Army Engineering Corps in Shenzhen." *The China Quarterly* 260: 906–24.

□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ (1977) "□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ (The special characteristics of factories and welfare areas constructed in mountainous regions)." □□□□, no. 02: 9–17.

□□□□□□□□ (2021) "□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ (Enter Guiyang Third Front Construction Museum, experience a piece of history,

relive a slice of memory).” *Sohu.Com*. September 26. https://m.sohu.com/a/491713701_120398913/m.sohu.com/a/491713701_120398913.