

# How It Was/Is Told, Recorded and Remembered: The Discontinued History of the Third Front Construction

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**Abstract** By comparing different historical narratives of the Third Front Construction that was built as a home-front defensive industrial base against the threat of war from both the Soviet Union and the United States in the 1960s, this paper aims to explore a particular aspect of China's socialist history in a relational manner that contrasts but also connects past and present, archives and subjectivity, top-down and bottom-up perspectives. It is part of a larger effort to understand the complexity of China's socialist history and its relation to the present.

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## Introduction

Built as a home-front defensive industrial base against the threat of war from both the Soviet Union and the United States in the 1960s, the Third Front Construction (TFC) was the largest industrialization project of its kind in modern Chinese history. Spanning two decades of the last century, it has brought industrialization and development to the interior and was hailed in its early time as a "revolution" of "building up a new world" and "buying time against the imperialists."<sup>1</sup> Today, the project has essentially disintegrated. With the exception of a few key ones owned and protected by the central government, thousands of its enterprises and institutes have been bankrupted, relocated, privatized, or simply left to die a slow, lingering death. Likewise, millions of desperate and pauperized workers and numerous destitute communities have been abandoned in the vast interior of the country.<sup>2</sup> In contemporary hegemonic historical discourses, the project of the TFC is depicted as an anachronism or a historical aberration, devalued, largely written off, and eroded from history. Against this backdrop of dramatically changing images, and the equally dramatic collapsing realities of the project itself, this study asks three different, yet highly related questions. Firstly, it asks how the story of TFC was and is told by the hegemonic discourses at different historical moments, and why. Secondly, it asks how the TFC has been

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recorded in historical archives. Lastly, but most importantly, it asks how the TFC was experienced and is now remembered by the pioneering third-front workers, and how we can understand these processes of remembering. By answering these questions, this paper aims to explore a particular aspect of China's socialist history in a relational manner that contrasts but also connects past and present, archives and subjectivity, top-down and bottom-up perspectives. It is, hence, part of a larger effort to understand the complexity of China's socialist history and its relation to the present.

In mainstream Western historiography and the popular Western imagination, the socialist histories of various nations have always been imagined within a rigid totalitarian paradigm. This extremely reductive view has been challenged, nonetheless, by so-called revisionist and post-revisionist historians, who attempt to move beyond the overly simplistic, literary fantasy of Orwell's *Animal Farm* to grasp the more fully-textured histories of socialist societies.<sup>3</sup> Quite ironically, however, the official historiographies of most post-socialist states have resonated more with the former paradigm than with the latter. Even in China, where the communist party still enjoys its monopolistic role, and where any critique of the socialist past in the official line has to be more cautious and strategic – even here, socialist history, especially economic history, is often derided as “outdated” anachronism or, worse, condemned as “irrational,” or “inhumane.”

Officially published oral histories generally confirm, rather than challenge such “state-managed”<sup>4</sup> historiography. Memos written by intellectuals and offspring of pre-Culture-Revolution high-ranking officials largely focus on the tragic experiences their families suffered during the Cultural Revolution and other political movements, and then passionately hail the subsequent reform.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, since the late 1980s, there has been a tenacious wave of “Mao fever,” especially among grassroots subaltern groups in China. Portraits of Mao can be seen in many lower-end shops, hanging on family walls, or pasted on the front window of taxis to safeguard people's safety and fortune. In 2011, when a statue of Mao in one county of Hainan province was pushed over by a real estate company, indignant locals and netizens all over China joined together to force the company to apologize and promise to re-erect the statue in the near future.<sup>6</sup> This persistent wave of sentiment and sympathy toward Mao Zedong and the socialist past has caught the attention of some Chinese studies scholars.<sup>7</sup> Memories, they note, can be used in different ways. Ching Kwan Lee, for instance, suggests that rustbelt workers' memories of the socialist past should be understood as “a political force” that aims to

criticize the present and inspire an alternative future.<sup>8</sup> While this argument grasps the critical role of workers' popular memories, it implicitly presumes that such memories themselves are devoid of "historical truth" by declaring them as nostalgia or mere "imagination,"<sup>9</sup> and thus somehow "outside" of history. The argument also presumes the existence of a single, "real" history – one contains "the absolute privilege of 'what actually happened',"<sup>10</sup> and sets it against workers' purposive, yet illusive memories.

My study denies that such a single, true history exists. By comparing different historical narratives of the TFC – the official discourses/historiography of the 1960s and present, historical archives, and workers' popular memories, this study aims neither to judge which narrative contains the "pure historical truth," nor to simply re-discover the historical significance of the TFC. Rather, by exploring the relations of conflict, struggle, and correlation among these different narratives, I intend to disclose a more "discontinuous history" of the TFC. By "discontinuous history," I follow the definition given by Luisa Passerini:

The idea of discontinuity of history means in the first place an alternation of repetitions, developments and sudden complete breaks. It is also a methodological safeguard of the distance between history and historiography – in other words, between the experience of humanity and the itineraries of the historian. . . . Discontinuity further suggests the distance between the intentions of subjects and the outcomes of history, which notoriously proceeds by its bad side. It denotes, too, the coexistence of the times of the particular (as studied by micro-history) and of the general (macro-history). . . . Finally, discontinuity indicates the dialectical way in which the same phenomenon may possess two opposite values and implications in the same period, of conservation and subversion. . . .<sup>11</sup>

To this aim, this study weaves various strands of narratives of the TFC, regarding each of them as an equally important, yet incomplete facet of history. These narratives speak to each other, permeate into each other, and fight with each other. Together, they constitute not necessarily a complete picture, but a multi-faceted one in which objectivity and subjectivity are intertwined, and past and present are entangled. The interruptive (though hesitant) role of workers' popular memory against the contemporary official historiography is emphasized in this study, not because it is more important than other narratives, but because it has always been regarded as irrelevant to history – an assumption I seek to challenge. Therefore, a fine yet crucial distinction between my work and Lee's has to be highlighted here: instead of treating workers' memory as an external political force, I conceive it as an internal, subjective, and essential part of history. Along with other narratives, with which it interacts sometimes actively, sometimes

passively, workers' popular memory speaks to the inner tension and controversy of history, as well as to the present.

My case factory is a large-scale steel factory in Sichuan province, anonymously named Nanfang. Nanfang is one of the third-front enterprises built up during the early 1960s that prospered in the 1980s, but are now at the edge of bankruptcy. I selected Nanfang as my case not only because I am quite familiar with it (I grew up there), but also because the vicissitudes of Nanfang epitomize those of the TFC project itself to a great degree. The materials I use in this study include historical archival documents, mass media articles, and oral testimonies. More specifically, my archival documents come from two sources: the National and Provincial Archives, and the internal archival office of Nanfang. The mass media articles came from related local and national newspapers and magazines from the 1950s to the present. The oral testimonies of the pioneering TF workers were collected during my field trip to Nanfang between 2007 and 2010.

All of the workers I interviewed are in their 70s and 80s and have been retired since the 1980s or early 1990s. Most of them are living on their pensions – barely enough for subsistence, and a few receive extra financial helps from their adult children. Some of the workers are still living in the old enterprise communities, while others have moved to nearby cities, living with their children who work there. The interviews were conducted sometimes in the homes of the narrators, sometimes in the teahouses nearby. We talked to each other in Mandarin or Sichuan dialect, depending on which form the interviewees instinctively chose (usually, it was also the language with which the interviewees felt most comfortable). Substantively, I asked the interviewees to talk about their life experiences in the Third Front: how and why they came here, what their earlier work and life looked like, and so on. But the interviews were mostly conducted in an unstructured way: I always let the interviewees immerse themselves in their own memories and talk for hours without much interference.<sup>12</sup> All the interviews were recorded with the subjects' permission and later transcribed.

### **Contextualizing the Third Front Construction**

Two major factors – the intensified military threat and pressure from the United States, and China's split with the Soviet Union – directly engendered the Third Front Construction in China in the 1960s. First, the United States' blockade of and confrontation with China escalated in the early 1960s when the former became more deeply involved in the Vietnam War.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, the prospect of China becoming another nuclear power further aroused anxieties

in the U.S. According to a recently released collection of U.S. government documents, in the early months of 1964, the Joint Chiefs of Staff studied several options for military action, including the use of U.S. nuclear weapons to prevent China from becoming a nuclear power.<sup>14</sup> Such action was finally abandoned, yet the threatened hostility was tangible.

Secondly, during the same decade, the relationship between China and the Soviet Union broke. Since the late 1950s, Mao's strong desire for China to shake off its dependence upon the Soviet Union and hence achieve self-reliance and independence had irritated Nikita Khrushchev to a great extent.<sup>15</sup> Tensions deepened in the early 1960s when China explicitly raised the issue of territory lost through unequal treaties with tsarist Russia in China's subjugated period.<sup>16</sup> In 1964, Moscow began to strengthen its military build-up along the border with China, as well as in Mongolia, which led to the final breaking-off of the two countries in 1966.

These overlapping events in the 1960s strengthened the perilous and isolated status of socialist China in the postwar international structure – encircled within the Cold war framework, China was then beset by two imperialist superpowers. It was against the backdrop of these geopolitical circumstances that Mao Zedong initiated the TFC in 1964. The objective was then to create an entire industrial system within the naturally remote and strategically secure region of China's interior – the so-called Third-Front. This area included all of the provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, Gansu, Qinghai and Ningxia, a portion of Shanxi, and the western, mountainous portions of Henan, Hubei and Hunan. The thinking behind this initiative was that if war was to erupt and the coastal and borderland regions were attacked, China would still have a solid interior area on which to rely.<sup>17</sup> In that sense, the TFC was mainly a defensive project created within the specific geo-political context of the 1960s, by a society at the periphery of the world economy trying to defend itself ideologically, economically, and militarily. Yet, on the other hand, as I have illustrated in another work, it was also an immense industrialization project implemented through the state's central plan and direct investment, coherent with the modernization strategy adopted by Maoist China.<sup>18</sup>

From 1966 to 1975, thousands of institutes and enterprises were built, bringing industrialization to the area on an unprecedented scale. Transportation was also developed according to the requirements of industrial expansion – 8,000 km of railroad tracks and 250,000 km of roads were constructed to support the establishment and maintenance of the Third Front projects. Cities and industrial towns developed nearby and, in some cases, literally came into existence in response to these Third Front enterprises.



Nanfang Steel in Sichuan province was such an example: industrial towns, transportation networks, and commercial areas developed and prospered because of it, and for a little more than a decade it was one of the biggest taxpayers in Sichuan province and employed around 30,000 workers. All these achievements brought modern development to these areas and largely reduced the extreme imbalances across regions by evening out the distribution of industry nationally.<sup>19</sup>

The coming of the “new reforming era” put a sudden end to this ambitious project. Starting from the late 1980s and early 1990s, the state began to reconstruct the TF by closing and transferring some plants out of the remote mountainous areas. In the 1990s, dismantlement of the Third Front sped up. Many third-front enterprises have been simply de-industrialized, abandoned, and marginalized under the neo-liberal reforming policies since then. In Nanfang, half of the workers have been laid-off, while the currently-employed earn an average wage far below that of the Sichuan province. The previously fully functioning, consolidated, and prosperous industrial community supported by the enterprise has irreversibly declined into a working class slum, with its old comprehensive welfare system totally smashed and all of its supplies (hospitals, schools, recreation centers, housing systems, and many others) degraded or abandoned. And, worst of all, the threat of bankruptcy hangs ever present in the air.<sup>20</sup>

Not only have the material fortunes of the TFC shifted dramatically over time, so also have the discourses surrounding it. In the following two sections, I will compare three levels of narrative – the official discourses propagated in the 1960s, the related archival documents from the national, provincial and factory archives, and the contemporary hegemonic historiography of the project – to reveal how and to what aim power and ideology has shaped the meanings constructed around the TFC and how such meanings contrast with the archival documents.

### **The Story Told by The Historical Slogans and The Archives**

We are marching on the Great Avenue  
Full of militancy and revolutionary ardour  
Chairman Mao leads our revolutionary people  
forging ahead through brambles and thorns, and marching onto the future  
Marching on! Marching on!  
Nothing can stop our zeal of revolution  
Marching on! Marching on!  
Toward the direction of victory!  
The five-star flag sways in the wind  
Working people determine to work hard

Build up the gorgeous land diligently  
Swear to change our motherland into paradise

...

Marching on! Marching on!  
Toward the direction of victory!

– A martial song made by Li Jiefu in 1962<sup>21</sup>

Created in 1962, the song “We are marching on the Great Avenue” soon became the anthem of the Third Front Construction. Full of revolutionary idealism and romanticism, it calls on the pride and confidence of the Chinese people: when faced with coercion and threats from the international society, the Chinese people will create their well-being with their own hands, without depending on anything or anybody. “Victory” here is endowed with meanings of not only the triumph of communism, but also the triumph over imperialism. In accordance with the song, the project of TFC was described by the official discourses at the time as another “revolution,” a revolution of “building up a new world” and “buying time against the imperialists.”<sup>22</sup> In this way, the whole construction process was endowed with an exciting revolutionary romanticism and a heroic, epic, even sacred aura – working for the Construction meant protecting the motherland and the ideal of communism/socialism. Meanwhile, industrial workers involved in the Construction were pushed even more prominently to the main stage of history, hailed as the masters of modernization, the builders of independence, and the defenders of socialism.

The archival materials from this period, however, tell a different story, a story devoid of heroism and optimism, but laden with hardship, coercion, and conflicts. The following part of this section will illustrate this contrast in two distinct themes: third-front migration and construction.

### Migrating to the TFC: “Good People and Good Horses Go to the Third Front”

Given the TFC’s defensive aim, almost all TF projects had to be located in the most remote area of inner China, as outlined in the official guideline “near the mountain, easy to hide and geographically decentralized.” Most of the enterprises were built from nothing. Confronted with the shortage of technology, labor, equipment and experienced labor for most TF enterprises, the central state had to mobilize and, when necessary, force a massive migration.<sup>23</sup>

“Good people and good horses go to the Third Front” and “Going to the places where our motherland needs us most” were the slogans used during this migration process. By appealing to people’s patriotic feelings and highlighting the highly selective standard of

participants, these slogans emphasized the importance and singularity of the project – only people who were “progressive,” “revolutionary,” and “patriotic” enough could be selected by the Party as honorable participants of the TFC. Such slogans also implied the free will of participants eager to serve their country. The real migration process in historical archives, however, was a far more complicated one than these grand discourses described.

To a certain extent, migration to the TF was not an entirely distinct or autonomous event. Rather, part of it was the final act within another even more extensive state-directed migration – the “great downsizing” movement in the early 1960s. The largest state-directed migration in the history of socialist China, the “great downsizing movement” aimed to reduce and relocate the “redundant workers” who had been recruited from the countryside during the Great Leap Forward (GLF) when many factories had been built in order to realize the goal of “running into communism” through extensive industrialization. The failure of the GLF left behind not only these abandoned factories, but also millions of industrial workers who had to be moved back to the countryside in order to alleviate the demand pressure of the cities for marketable grain.<sup>24</sup> The climax of the movement ended in 1964, after more than 20 million of workers had been mobilized or forced to the countryside.<sup>25</sup> The reduction policy nevertheless lasted into 1965 only that since then, most workers who were laid off no longer went to the countryside; they were assigned instead to the TFC. The decision to go ahead with the TFC in 1964 had created an immediate need for a vast labor force, a need that could be filled perfectly by these laid-off workers. One report claimed, for instance, that the 50,000 posts that should have been created in the metallurgy industry according to the requirements of TFC in 1965 were filled by those workers.<sup>26</sup>

No statistics show what proportion of the early TF workforce these previously laid-off workers constituted. Yet, even among workers from other major sources – industrial workers who were relocated from the first or second-front enterprises,<sup>27</sup> students who graduated from universities and technical schools and were assigned to the TFC, construction workers from the engineering troops who stayed after the project, and educated youth who had been sent down to the countryside<sup>28</sup> and were then recruited to the TFC – many of them were simply administratively assigned there by the state, along with or against their will, according to the numerous government documents issued in that era. This meant that, to a great extent, most pioneering TF workers actually had few choices – if they did not go to the TF, they had to go to the countryside or simply get fired. This is the fact that was concealed by slogans such



as “going to the places our motherland needs us most” and “good people and good horses go to the Third Front.”

Meanwhile, notwithstanding the mass mobilization and strong state power, open resistance against Third Front migration did happen. On Aug 1965, for instance, 250 workers who were relocated to Yunnan Yangchang coal mine, one of the third-front enterprises, held a large protest and even made a futile attempt to return to their “mother-factory” – Kailuan coal mine.<sup>29</sup> This was not an isolated case. Before the National Day in 1965, the National Construction Committee, the Ministry of Metallurgical Industry, and the Metallurgical office in Sichuan issued several documents successively, demanding that the local governments ensure no petitions and demonstrations from relocated workers took place in Beijing or Chengdu during the holidays. All these documents complicate and contradict the buoyant images painted under the state slogans.

#### Constructing the TFC: “Building Socialism With Greater, Faster, Better and More Economic Results”

With little capital accumulation at hand in the 1960s, the central government propelled the TFC under the guideline of “building socialism with greater, faster, better and more economic results.” To exemplify this, the Propaganda Department chose Daqing oil field as a model for all enterprises in China and especially for those TF factories that were still under construction at the time. Daqing oil field, the largest oil field in China, was successfully explored at the end of 1963. Such success was soon exploited by the Chinese government as a victorious symbol of China’s socialist modernization. On 20 April 1964, *The People’s Daily*, the highest official newspaper, published a news report titled “The spirit of Daqing and the people of Daqing.” The report praised “Daqing Ren” (the people of Daqing) for their spirit of bearing extreme hardship and working unselfishly for their motherland.<sup>30</sup> After this report, the movement of “learning from Daqing” quickly swept the whole country. Among the highlighted “Daqing experiences,” “working with revolutionary spirit and selfless devotion,” “first production then living” and “hard working, plain living” were widely adopted by many TF factories in the early stage.

The slogan of “working with revolutionary spirit and selfless devotion” highlighted the romanticism that always accompanied the modernization process in socialist China. By treating each construction/production task as a battle or even a revolution, it effectively equated the meaning of socialist industrialization with the meaning of socialist revolution, thus endowing industrial work

with a glorified aura. In this way, it encouraged the totally selfless devotion of industrial workers to their factories. Meanwhile, it also effectively legitimated two other slogans, “first production then living” and “hard work, plain living,” which soon became two major guidelines promoted by the state as strategies of saving money. Limited money had to be used for where it was mostly needed, namely, factory construction and production, rather than for the living necessities of workers, including dwellings. Most often, the pioneering workers had to build up their own mud cottages, the so-called “Gandalei,” a creation of Daqing, upon their first arrival. Complaints and grievances were prevalent. Different government and factory documents show that many meetings were held in order to appease the disgruntled workers. They also show that under the pressure of workers, factory directors had to appeal constantly to higher authorities for money and to the local governments for land acquisition in order to build more living quarters for workers and their families.<sup>31</sup>

Ironically, in many ways, the slogans themselves have revealed the most about the extreme hardship and cruel exploitation that Third Front workers had to bear during the early construction era. Yet at the same time, they have also covered up all the grievances, struggles, resistances hidden underneath the abstract patriotism and nationalism, which are disclosed by the historical archives. More than fifty years have passed since the initiation of the TFC in the 1960s. Today, the highly patriotic and significant image of the TFC endowed by these slogans has long disappeared. However, rather than confronting this socialist industrializing project seriously and reflectively, the contemporary official discourses have meaningfully left the arbitrary power of the state unexamined; instead, it has strategically reinterpreted this project as an anachronism or a historical aberration from the “Economic Law”, ready to be wiped off the record and, hence, implicitly justifying the state’s new developmental ideology.

### **The Story Retold by Contemporary Historiography**

On June 2006, an article titled “The Third Front Construction: the Closest Industrial Heritage for Us” was published in the *Chinese National Geography*, one of the most widely-read “intellectual” magazines in China. It was paired with other pieces to address the special topic of that issue, named “The Industrial Heritage.” The article bluntly declared the “passing” of the Third Front and implied that the wheel of history had run its course, leaving the era of large-scale industrial projects behind, and moving towards a future as yet unknown, but destined, the article suggested, to be more

advanced and more modern. The Third Front, equated with the “departed and early stage of industrialization,” was sealed into history, framed as part of the “heritage” of something over and gone.<sup>32</sup> The linear teleology of this narrative has become quite palpable since the central government launched another project named “the Campaign of Western Development” in 2002. Unlike the TFC that was entirely funded through state investment, this so-called second wave of “Western Development” (with the TFC as the first wave) called on private and foreign capital inflow, a strategy unanimously praised by mainstream economic scholars as a higher-level economic strategy that conforms not only to the historical trend, but also to universal “economic law.”<sup>33</sup> Such comparisons also hinted at the innate irrationality and inefficiency of the TFC as an earlier, immature, “lower-level” industrializing project.

Denigration of the TFC becomes bolder in another contemporary historiographical branch. In Barry Naughton’s article in 1988 – the first article to introduce the TFC to the western public – the TFC was described as an irrational, even hysterical response of Mao Zedong to the international situation of the time.<sup>34</sup> His comments are later echoed in other western scholars’ and many Chinese liberal scholars’ writings.<sup>35</sup> Their main criticisms mostly focus on the huge cost and the inefficiency of the project and how it defies the “Economic Law.” They argue, to varying degrees, that the real-existent imperialist threats that China faced during the 1960s was largely paranoia fantasy imagined by Mao. Under this interpretation, the TFC then bears no merit at all – it is merely a deviant industrializing project that, in the words of Naughton, “[had] a negative impact on China’s economic development that was certainly more far-reaching than the disruption of the Cultural Revolution.”<sup>36</sup> In this way, this discourse uses the TFC as yet another proof of the innate inefficiency, irrationality, and xenophobia of Mao’s totalistic socialist regime.

What has to be highlighted here is that both discourses, though different, serve the same role: they do not just ignore the destruction brought by the current neoliberal policies to many TF factories; they justify it. Since the project itself was an aberration, or at best an anachronism, sweeping it away into the historical trashcan only proves the progressiveness and rationality of the current regime. The changing official discourses of TFC over time from the socialist propaganda of glory and patriotism in the 1960s, to the narrative of anachronism and aberration today, hence serves to legitimate different developmental policies adopted by the state in different eras. Here, we can detect a remarkably similar logic of modernization and development in both discourses – the constant process of creation and destruction by treating human society as an abstract

laboratory designed by the will of the state and/or the capital.<sup>37</sup> In these processes, the real lives of human being are always irrelevant and invisible – people can be called on or dispersed and their communities can be built up or abandoned, quite arbitrarily, all depending on the shifting requirement of “development.”

In a deliberate effort to interrupt this narrative, it is exactly here that we can turn to the ordinary people who have actually lived through all these developmental tides, not as abstract tenets but as irreversible life experiences. What are their responses toward the vicissitude of their fates that have been and continue to be shaped by external events out of their control? When facing the contemporary hegemonic historiography that tries to tell their stories for them, are they just passive receivers or indignant critics? How do they themselves like to tell their life stories and how are these stories shaped by different discourses? And through these memories and retellings of the past, what is it that they are trying to say about the past, the present and their futures?

### **Pioneering Workers' Memories: Remembering The TFC**

The life experiences of the workers I interviewed varied greatly. These workers had come to Nanfang under varied circumstances, whether as transferred workers, college graduates, or construction workers. They performed different jobs, from steel workers to technicians to engineers. Their current financial status varied also, though not so much due to their pensions – which are similarly meager, despite minor differences – as due to their children's income. Some workers have to help out their children (usually the case if their children are also workers in Nanfang, or have simply been laid-off or early-retired), while others receive financial assistance from their children (usually the case if their children have high-paid jobs outside Nanfang). Yet, importantly, despite all these differences, almost all those I interviewed chose to narrate their stories in a similar tone: they all tended to highlight their beliefs, romanticize the hardships, and neglect the exploitation and coercion they experienced from the state. In other words, their stories, though varied in content, all shared a high degree of accord with the propagandist slogans created by the state in the 1960s. These narratives stand in sharp contrast to the very conditions revealed by archival materials, and are at odds with the contemporary hegemonic narrative.

#### Remembering the Migration to Nanfang

Workers' oral testimonies regarding the third-front migration emphasized an underlying image of patriotism and nationalism.

While some vaguely hinted at the compulsory factors shaping the migration process, most workers downplayed or completely ignored the prevalent political coercion and the degree of workers' resistance that existed against migration. Instead, by frequently referring back to the propagandist slogans, such as "going to the places our motherland needs us most," many workers attributed their choice of going to the Third Front to their patriotism or their heartfelt adoration of Chairman Mao. Even those workers who candidly acknowledged that they had little control or choice regarding migration rarely complained about it during the interviews; they merely claimed it as duty or fate.

Before retirement, Ma Ruixing was one of the best technical experts in Nanfang. She was born from a "red" family – her father had studied in the Soviet Union before 1949 and was a veteran of the Revolution. One of her uncles, a communist military officer, died in the liberation war. Ma came to Nanfang after she graduated from Qinghua University in the mid 1960s. The decision to go to Nanfang, she told me, stemmed from her passion and eagerness to devote herself to her "motherland":

We were so ardent and ambitious at that time. I knew that the circumstance here was very arduous. I chose it by myself. Just before my graduation, the cadres of Nanfang went to Qinghua University to check the backgrounds of applicants. They finally picked up several students from many. Those students who had not been picked even cried. They thought that the party did not trust them. I felt very honored. . . . In my job-assignment wishing list, I wrote in the first line as "going to the most arduous and needed place by our country." I did not mean just saying beautiful words. I really meant it.

Such words might sound like propaganda, cliché, or even satire to Western, liberal, and individualistic ears, but not to Ma Ruixing. She said them with sincerity and pride. She has worked in Nanfang since then. Staying away from politics and never attaining a rank higher than ordinary engineer, Ma Ruixing has earned the widest respect, especially among workers, for her expertise, diligence, and integrity. Now, in her 70s and with no offspring, Ma Ruixing has begun to worry about her husband's and her own old-age future. Facing the reform of "burden alleviation" and actual abandonment by the state and the factory, the old working-class community has collapsed. All the previous forms of welfare have gone, including the senior nursing homes. The place that Ma described as once "needing her the most" in the name of the motherland just does not need her anymore.

Many other interviewees also mentioned the determination of "going to the most arduous and needed place by our country" as their first choice of job-assignment upon their graduation from



colleges and universities. They all emphasized their eagerness to connect their individual lives with the fortune of the whole country, and to equate the meaning of life with the contribution they could make to their country. Striking a slightly different tone from this nationalist fervor, Zhang Zhiyu, a worker who was transferred from “the mother factory” of Nanfang (Daye Steel) in 1971, referred to his deep emotion toward Mao Zedong as his reason for migration:

In 1971, the Central Communist Party called upon supporting the Third Front construction. The party branch in our department tried to mobilize several comrades for the construction of Nanfang. Most of them did not want to go. In order to fulfill the quota, the party secretary came to me. I agreed. . . . But many of my comrades tried to persuade me not to go by saying that there was no sunshine, no fish to eat in Sichuan. I told these comrades, “as long as other people can survive there, I can survive. The worst thing can only be hardships. In order to let Chairman Mao have a good rest, I was determined to go to the Third Front.” You know, Chairman Mao could not sleep well if the Third Front construction failed.<sup>38</sup>

In his statement, Zhang Zhiyu did not deny the compulsory elements of the migration by mentioning the need to “fulfill the quota” and the resistance of “others” against the migration. Rather, he used these circumstances to contrast and highlight his own “progressiveness” and his devotion to Chairman Mao. Zhang Zhiyu is not the only one who referred to his admiration for Mao Zedong as his motivation for migration; many other workers I interviewed also mentioned this. “Chairman Mao could not sleep well unless the TFC succeeds” was cited frequently during the interviews. Far from the indifference or sarcasm some intellectuals later developed toward Mao, all the workers I interviewed – especially the older ones – still expressed their devotion towards him. The older workers who experienced the Maoist era missed the dignity and pride they felt the era had granted them and that they attributed to their Chairman Mao. In the shabby home of Laocui, a retired worker in his 80s, there are two large portraits of Chairman Mao hanging on different walls and another smaller one pasted on the door. When Laocui showed me the latter, he stared at the portrait, caressed it, and murmured, “Chairman Mao looks so young.” Then he sat down and told me a story about his childhood: his father used to be penniless beggar; he and his brother were always hungry; it was Mao who liberated his whole family and gave him a good job. Qiubo, also in his 80s, told me that he would offer incense to Mao every Qingming Festival.<sup>39</sup> Today, many of these veteran workers, like Zhang Zhiyu, with their children or even grandchildren still working in the factory, choose to stay in the old destitute working-class community after their retirement in the 1980s.

Certainly, not all workers elevated their migration to such sublime levels of nationalism or idolatry. Some of them simply described it as more of a practical survival strategy than a proof of their “progressiveness” and “patriotism.” Ma Caifang came from Shanghai. There used to be a lot of Shanghai workers who had been transferred to different TF factories. Ma Caifang was one of them. It is hard to believe that workers such as he never had any resentment toward such transfer. After all, given the insurmountable urban-rural gap in China, they had to give up all the benefits associated with living in such a big city. But when I asked Ma Caifang about his migration to Nanfang, instead of pouring out his resentments as I had expected, he calmly admitted the uncontrollable fate, while, at the same time, emphasizing his willing obedience out of a sense of duty and respect:

I came to Nanfang in 1968. More than forty years has passed since then. . . . At that time, it was the military managerial committee that took charge of everything. You could not decide your own fate. . . . But I did not feel sad. It was fine for me, as it was for many of my colleagues. Everybody told us that Sichuan was arduous. We made preparation for it . . . . When we got here, it was better than we imagined. . . . We were still so young, with no family burden; besides, we wanted to work after some chaos brought by the Cultural Revolution. . . . When I look back on this experience, I do not feel the pain. It was not a forced behavior too. It was true that we could not resist our fate, but nobody even thought of resisting. We were just workers. . . . We did not have any wild wishes. We just thought of working hard and maybe making some technological renovations if possible. That was all.

Many other workers I interviewed also highlighted such willing obedience, which might originate from a combination of several factors – namely, a sense of duty and honor, admiration for Mao Zedong, and, perhaps even more importantly, the necessity of survival. Ma Caifang and his colleagues were assigned to Nanfang in 1968, the heyday of the Cultural Revolution (CR). After their initial enthusiasm, many young people, including the students, got confused by the chaos caused by the CR and lost their direction. Going to the Third Front at least provided them a way out of such chaos and confusion. In this sense, Third Front Construction was a salvation for these young students. But in Ma Caifang’s narration, such factors, mentioned in passing as “besides, we wanted to work after some chaos brought by the Cultural Revolution,” are overshadowed by the declaration of willing obedience and a sense of optimism. Now, retired, Ma Caifang has left Nanfang, since “that place is becoming more and more dirty.” But instead of going back to Shanghai, his real hometown, he is now living with his son in Chengdu, where his son has found a job after college. “I cannot afford to live in Shanghai with its high living-expenses, and besides, it has become so unfamiliar to me after so many years’ leaving,” Ma Caifang said.

### Remembering the Construction

When asked to describe their early lives in Nanfang, all workers highlighted the abominable environment and the arduous work, but they did so in a way that was quite proud, rather than resentful. Being able to endure all these hardships and difficulties constituted a meaningful part of their lives. For these senior workers, it also proved the “progressiveness” of the working class as a leading class in the socialist era – daring and willing to work hard. Even though the old heroic image of the working class has been totally toppled by the current discourses, these elder workers still firmly hold on to it, declaring that it once granted, and should continue to grant them well-deserved dignity and respect.

One day, I talked with Zhang Bobo, a retired worker in his 80s, in his home. Like many others, he began his story by talking about the hardship of Nanfang of that time. His wife, Zhang Yi, who also wanted to join our conversation, cut in: “Life in Daye (the mother factory of Nanfang) had been so good. We had lived in such a good apartment. We had had everything. But after coming here, everything changed. We had nothing. We even had to fetch water from the well. I did not have that strength. . . . I cried. I quarreled a lot with my husband. I asked him why he asked us to come here!” Listening carefully to his wife, Zhang Bobo smiled, “How backward you were!” Beneath this half-joking reprimand, Zhang Bobo was telling me that he had never been so “backward.” Here, being backward meant being afraid of hardships and difficulties. In their statements, it was and still is a shame for these elder workers to refer to such fears, as it goes against not only the socialist image of the “new working class,” but also the working class’ basic ethics. Laboring, especially laboring under the name of “building and defending our motherland,” granted these workers a sense of dignity. While they may well have realized the existence of extreme exploitation during the process, in their testimonies, these workers justified it as the need to “build a new China” or to “be a good worker.”

As in the testimonies about the TFC migration, revolutionary romanticism can also be found here. Ma Ruixing, the retired female engineer, described such revolutionary romanticism vividly: “My father always said that our generation fought to establish a new China, now it was your generation’s turn to build a new China.” Such a grand goal trivialized and even romanticized all the arduousness and hardships she had to confront when she came to Nanfang at that time:

I was first assigned to the construction team in Nanfang after I graduated from the university. We went to work at 6am every morning. . . . Sometimes we had to work until the midnight. You see, we worked from 6am in the morning to the midnight!

Our overalls were always wet. The sweat just soaked with cement dusts in our overalls. When we got off work and went back home, we took off the overall and hung it up. We were too tired to wash it. We could not wash ourselves too. There was no place to take a shower, and no hot water. We just let it be. We just lied on the bed to sleep. Next morning when we got up, the overall had dried up, right? When it dried up, the overall seemed being starched and it was so hard! We just put it on. It felt like armor! I even felt proud (laugh). When the sweat wet it, it was soft again. It was just like that. No time and no place to take a shower. At that time from my deep heart, I just felt so proud. I always thought of Paul, you know, Paul Kocakin, the character in the book *How the Steel was Tempered*. Do you remember that part when he was repairing road? When he was repairing road, the sole of his boots fell off. But he still stepped on the frozen soil with his bare feet and worked. How hard that might be! I thought my situation was almost the same (laugh). When I was old, I could write something about these too, right (laugh)? I really felt proud, really. . . . In the letter I wrote to my mother, I proudly described my life here. And soon my mother wrote me back. She said, "My child, you can work revolutionarily and with all your life, but also remember to keep your life" (laugh).

While Ma Ruixing was talking, her eyes glowed behind the spectacles – she was apparently very happy. That was her younger life, full of passion and beliefs, full of the eagerness to enrich or even transcend one's personal life. Ma was able to grant all the hardships a romantic beauty as working and living for a higher aim in connection with grand ideals, beyond mere physical and material survival. It was also an era when such passions and beliefs were highly encouraged and cherished. To believe and behave in this way had brought Ma pride, and she wanted me to know that. And, perhaps more importantly and urgently, by telling the story in an outpouring of passion, she also wanted me to know that it still brings her pride to this very day and should not be mocked or denied.

Most common workers, on the other hand, hardly connected their hard work with such romanticism. They simply reminded me of this building or that workshop, and proudly announced that they built them with their hands: "we built them bricks by bricks." They built this tremendous factory from nothing. It was a project full of their effort, sweat, and even sacrifices. And they, just like Ma Ruixing, were quite proud of that. Zhang Guirong, a former construction worker, now in his 70s, came to Nanfang in 1965. He claimed that he "did not have any feeling of doing a great and honored job," but like others, he highlighted hard and good working:

When we marched into this place, there was no bridge across the river. All the transportation depended on ferry. So, the first thing for us to do was to build the bridge; otherwise the equipment could not be transported in. We built the bridge from day to night. We even established a precast concrete factory near the bridge to produce the necessary supply. . . . Within one month, the bridge was done. That was really something. You know, our team was so strong in technology. Workers were so good. They did not fear any hardship.

“They did not fear any hardship” was the recurrent theme in almost all workers’ testimonies, no matter whether they put it within a framework of patriotism and nationalism or not. This is cited as proof of how good they were as workers, how they did not bring shame to the project and their own lives.

In sum, workers’ popular memory largely dismisses the compulsion, exploitation and struggle narrated by historical archives in both migration and construction processes; rather, it is filled with upbeat, sublime, and slogan-prone tones that emphasize workers’ self-sacrifice, compliance, and devotion. Workers’ memories, in fact, echo the propagandist images created during the 1960s. But how should we understand these testimonies? Are they just moral claims being made by the workers in retrospect? Should we simply attribute this particular way of remembering to workers’ nostalgia and imagining of the socialist past,<sup>40</sup> or worse, their dogged “backwardness” in remaining “brainwashed” by an outdated ideology? Or, to the contrary, should we view these marginalized memories as a revolutionary alternative to the “positive”/official history, or even, as THE “real” history? In other words, how should we situate workers’ oral history in the history of the TFC?

### **At the Bottom of Popular Memory**

Early advocates conceived the role of oral history in two aspects: to provide “a more realistic and fair reconstruction of the past”<sup>41</sup> by “bringing recognition to substantial groups of people who had been ignored,”<sup>42</sup> and to criticize and correct the usually “state-managed”<sup>43</sup> history. Inspired by the so-called post-positivist approaches to memory and subjectivity,<sup>44</sup> my interpretation of workers’ oral testimonies avoids both of these assumptions. Firstly, I do not treat oral testimonies “simply as a series of given facts, to be discovered and described,”<sup>45</sup> but rather as “the conscious and unconscious meanings of experience as lived and remembered.”<sup>46</sup> That is to say, I regard workers’ oral testimonies as “problematic sites of query in themselves,”<sup>47</sup> and, hence, focus not only on what is remembered, but also on how and why. Secondly, I also question the optimistic assumption that oral history will always challenge the hegemonic discourses. Instead, I argue that the relationship between oral history and hegemonic discourses is more complex.

### **Bridging the Past and the Present**

The fact that workers’ oral testimonies accord with the socialist discourses, yet conflict with the contemporary historiography of workers’ oral testimonies has to be understood in two seemingly contradictory ways. On the one hand, it confirms the argument made by the Popular Memory Group that dominant historical



discourses often “supply the very terms by which a private history is thought through.”<sup>48</sup> These senior workers, to varying extents, have internalized and identified with the socialist beliefs and discourses that permeated their working lives. And, importantly, it needs to be recognized that these workers cherish those beliefs and discourses. This is the cultural and subjective aspect of the socialist regime also noticed by Stephen Kotkin when he claims that “more than simply a battle for political power culminating in the Bolshevik dictatorship . . . the revolution constantly announced itself as being about values, behavior, and beliefs.”<sup>49</sup> The socialist past, for these workers, in other words, is “a widely shared and legitimate aspiration.”<sup>50</sup> Such internalization and identification, rarely revealed by historical archives, has, to a great extent, implied the inner legitimacy of the socialist regime in these workers’ perception.

On the other hand, the relation of these workers’ memories with both socialist discourses and dominant contemporary historiography also exemplifies the agency of remembering. These elder workers choose to identify with the discourses that sound legitimate to them, and thus remember their past in particular ways, both consciously and subconsciously. People are always “actively making memories,”<sup>51</sup> in different ways at different life stage. While doing my research, I kept wondering whether workers’ stories might be different if I interviewed them during different periods – for instance, in the 1970s or 1980s when most of them were still in their middle age. Differences seem likely, not only because the process of aging itself changes the way we remember our past – i.e., factors that are important in youth and middle age are not necessarily important in old age, but also because these workers’ later years have been highly disturbed by the turbulent social transformations through which they have lived. The respectable, peaceful and well-to-do retiring life that the regime used to picture for them and that they used to take for granted has never been realized; instead, as I described earlier, most workers’ old-age lives have become quite vulnerable. The implications of this particular way of aging, I believe, have been crucial in shaping workers’ memory. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues, “memory is, not only the constituting consciousness of the past, but an effort to reopen time on the basis of the implications contained in the present.”<sup>52</sup> Hence, the shared eagerness and even urgency in workers’ oral testimonies to highlight past beliefs reflects a desire to do more than merely confirm their identification with those beliefs or justify the harsh early years. Instead, by highlighting the historical significance or, at least, the meaning of their work/life in the past, workers attempt to challenge multiple forces in their present: not only their erasure or denigration within contemporary historiography, but also the

current wave of market reform that has destroyed all their efforts and achievements, and thrust them into poverty and insecurity. I elaborate briefly on these efforts below.

Firstly, workers' popular memory should be read as their spontaneous strategy to defend both their part in a history that has been neglected or derided by contemporary historiography, and the deserved, but often lost respect and dignity they should have earned as devoted and hardworking socialist workers. The denigration of the TFC has erased workers' past contribution to the project and the country, and taken a significant source of life-meaning from them. Furthermore, since the 1990s, the heroic and muscular image of socialist workers has slowly been replaced by an inefficient, lazy, and incapable one, deserving of nothing but pity and in need of enlightenment. The workers I interviewed strived hard to defy such denigration. Their eagerness to restore the meaning of their work and, hence, their dignity, was illustrated most explicitly by my interaction and interview with Zhiyu Bo. Now in his 80s, Zhiyu Bo had been a steelmaker before his retirement in the early 1980s. When I first asked him for the interview, he was surprised, "What do you want to hear from me?" After I briefly explained my project, he agreed quite happily. We met the next day in a community park that was built by the factory during the 1980s. Zhiyu Bo brought a draft titled "My memory" with him. I later realized that 82-year-old Zhiyu Bo had spent the previous night writing out that draft before he came to talk to me, even though I had told him that the interview would just be a casual one. He recited the draft word by word to me. All his past achievements, and all the rewards he had received were listed in the draft – they composed his "memory" and gave meaning to his life. Sentences like "because I was always very conscientious towards my work, since the first day I took the job, I had never made one single waste product out of my hand," or "I was honored to attend the model-worker conference twice as in 1964 and 1965" were underlined in the draft. A week after the interview, we bumped into each other again in front of one of the residential buildings. When Zhiyu Bo saw me, he walked straight up to me, and formally thanked me for looking up to him. He read the fact of being interviewed as an embodiment of respect and acknowledgement, at least from me. Such respect and acknowledgement might have been long forgotten in the turmoil of neoliberal reform and the resulting downfall of the TF factories, but it still clearly meant a lot to him.

Secondly, and maybe even more urgently, workers' popular memory is also trying to defend their present lives – lives that, today, are irreversibly sliding into poverty, decay, and instability. The so-called market reform has brought nothing for this

generation of workers who retired in the 1980s and early 1990s. Their pension has rarely been increased for many years, thus remaining extremely low compared to ever-rising living expenses. Most of their children and even grandchildren are still working in the factory and are constantly threatened by lay-offs, coercive and even hazardous working environments, low wages, and worse, the seemingly unavoidable bankruptcy of the factory sooner or later. The community, in which they have developed a sense of homeland and to which they have become attached over the decades, is declining and disappearing, suddenly making most of them rootless. And worst of all, they can rarely do anything about any of these developments.

Hence, it is against this present that these workers now remember the past. In this way, their selective memories serve as a weapon, or more precisely, as a fortress, against the tide of the so-called “historical trend.” If the contemporary hegemonic historiography of the TFC aims to legitimate the abandonment of the third-front factories, workers, and their communities, workers’ popular memory seeks to question such hideous attempts. By intuitively resorting to the ever-present socialist discourses that once granted them respect, cherished their work, acknowledged their contribution, and promised them a secure and decent elderly life – even if only symbolically, these veteran workers are actually reprimanding the contemporary state for betraying all its previous promises.

As Ann Stoler and Karen Kessler have noted, “idioms of the past are reworked with a differently inflected but equally active voice in the present,” so “recursive play occurs in the very terms in which memories are stated, in the possibilities of using a single phrase to ‘play different game.’”<sup>53</sup> Here, workers have actively re-worked the socialist hegemonic discourses (that they also internalized and identified with), made them part of their remembered life experiences, and used them as weapons against the contemporary hegemonic historiography and reforming policies. But they have done so in ways that also make them quite vulnerable.

#### “Was I Insane?” – The Vulnerability of Popular Memory

The current dominant discourse is always, as argued by Mahua Sarkar, “simultaneously constitutive of and challenged by (these) oral accounts.”<sup>54</sup> For most subaltern groups, the process of narrating one’s story has always involved the eagerness to resist, as well as the eagerness to be accepted. At the bottom of this struggle is the disturbing ontological insecurity that, as suggested by Tim Strangleman, has been created when discourses of modernization

cast traditional practices as arcane, backward, and outmoded.<sup>55</sup> As I observe in this study, even though workers never specifically referred to contemporary hegemonic historical discourses in their testimonies, they clearly recognize the existence of more powerful, louder voices outside their stories, out of their reach. This realization has brought pain, anxiety, and reluctance to their narrations and, ultimately, blunted their critical force.

Despite the general defensive tone of the workers' stories, I have noted the uneasy coexistence of contradictory feelings such as doubts and affirmations, anxiety and pride, throughout workers' oral testimonies. Glorious episodes were always interrupted by almost apologetic comments, such as "we were so naïve that we were almost dull" or "you must think that we were stupid then." Ma Ruixing, the respectable retired female engineer, had initially refused to talk to me about her stories, saying:

People might think that my story was a fiction from the *Arabian Nights* and could not really happen. Or they might think that I am a fool. How could there exist such a fool in the world! Let alone for the Americans to understand. They held different values from us. My daughter studied in the U.S.A. Once, after working extremely hard in the lab for her professor, she got the correct experimental results. Her professor praised her highly and immediately raised her wage. . . . Afterwards, she called me, saying that she had thought that working hard was a natural thing because she saw her mom always working in that way. She had never thought of the rewards before. She then told me, "Mom, this is America. Your working performance is closely tied to your material gains. It is not like China. In China, what you did always have to be selfless dedication, and you should never care about fame and money. This is America. Mom, have you ever felt being fooled in China?" So the American value is different from ours. If the Americans heard my story, they will think it absurd. They might deepen their bad impression about China since they would use my story as a proof to suggest that there was no human right in China or China did not respect individual values. Is that right? But to tell you, I am unregretful even today! They could not understand me? I could not understand them either! Especially those corrupt officials! Why did they need so much money? You just have one mouth to eat and one body to wear. Even if you have nine luxury houses, you only need one bed to sleep at night, right? I just could not understand them. Maybe I was a fool. Or was I insane? (Voice rose) I did not want to talk to young people about my life because they might either do not believe me or think I am a fool.

Ma's original refusal to be interviewed came from her fear of being jeered at and misunderstood. With ongoing market reform and efforts to re-write China's socialist history, all her previous efforts, passions, and beliefs that she had cherished and derived so much pride from, are mocked as "outdated" and "brainwashed." The younger people, especially engineers and managers in their 30s from Nanfang, talked about Ma Ruixing with respect, but always with a tinge of pity. Like Ma's daughter who studied in the U.S., they somehow regarded Ma as a victim of the "old era," cheated and

used by the old regime. In a society and culture that now cannot envision any other reason for working hard if not for money or some other forms of material benefits, Ma could be seen as nothing but a duped fool. Ma tries to stand firmly by her own interpretation of her experience and fights against the values she believes are now being imported from the West (America) and embraced by “the young people” of China. But this has exhausted and confused her – why does she have to defend herself so hard? What was wrong with her life? Or really, was she insane?

While listening to her indignant statement, I could not help but notice that she slid seamlessly from interrogating the “individualistic American value” to interrogating the “corrupt officials” in China. When she said, “I could not understand them either,” she used “them” to refer to “Americans,” but then she continued, “Especially those corrupt officials!” Why did she parallel them together? Is there any similarity between these two in her consciousness? But how could there be? Isn’t corruption always the moral target of “American values”? I forgot to ask her. But even if I had asked, she might not have been able to respond – most likely, she just made the shift subconsciously. But, as I listened to her asking, “Why did they need so much money,” I realized that, for her, there was indeed a similarity between “American values” and Chinese corruption – both could be traced to the same worship of money and perhaps also power; a form of worship that hides at the bottom of “American values” and that is now pursued unabashedly by corrupt bureaucrats in China. This sort of worship as the secret of capitalism has become so justified and dominant in today’s China that it ridicules all the previous beliefs, passions, and forms of pride that workers such as Ma used to hold. Indeed, it ridicules the whole history of the TFC and China’s entire socialist past.

## Conclusion

This article serves two aims. First, by investigating the often tense co-existence of different narratives of the TFC (official discourses and historiography at different periods, historical archives, and workers’ oral testimonies), and treating each of them as one particular way of “telling stories” and forming the fabric of history, this study has sought to provide a multi-dimensional or “thick”<sup>56</sup> understanding of the historical study of socialism – a field in which much understanding is unusually “thin,” whether in China’s (and other East-European/Russian) contemporary official historiography, or in the Western popular imagination. In this way, the article has also rejected the dominant “continuous narrative” of history that “purports to establish or explain sequences of events in terms dominated



by political and economic forces, while excluding aspects that matter a great deal – to some of us – such as subjectivity or daily life, and ‘subaltern’ figures such as women (and others, such as workers – added by the author).<sup>57</sup> The bewilderment, controversy, uncertainty, lacunae, and struggles provoked by such discontinuous history disturb the neatness and legitimacy of contemporary official historiography, which all too often tries to justify the present by oversimplifying and therefore denigrating the past.

Second, the article’s focus on discontinuous history is meant to emphasize that history is not “a developmental process in which that which is possible becomes actual by tending to a future that is singular.”<sup>58</sup> That is to say, if the socialist past cannot be seen as an aberration that mistakenly deviated the rational historical path, but a complex reality with its own legitimacy, then the future can not be seen as a desirable or inevitable blueprint, waiting to be realized. To borrow Dipesh Chakrabarty’s understanding of Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, we need to think about the past and the future “in a nontotalizing manner,” and about the present as “a state of partial disclosedness, without the suggestion or promise of any principles . . . that can or will override this heterogeneity and incompleteness and eventually constitute a totality.”<sup>59</sup> Such heterogeneity can be witnessed everywhere in contemporary China. One example is the keen so-called left-right debate. When facing the anxious uncertainty of China’s future, new liberals (many of them are entrepreneurs and middle-class intellectuals) wholeheartedly curse Mao and the socialist past in order to embrace a westernized (hence universalized) democratic capitalist ideal, while many others, especially the grassroots masses turn to the “old” ideology to question the rampant corruption, injustice, and inequality. As an object of memory, Mao was and continues to be a monster *and* a saint – both are mythical constructions that serve different aims. Yet, no matter what, “Mao fever” does always come back, not just among the senior workers I interviewed, but also among younger generations who treat Mao and the socialist ideology not necessarily as a myth, but as possible inspiration for alternative futures to the present. It is in this sense that “there is . . . no ‘desire for going back,’ no ‘pathological’ nostalgia that is also not futural as well.”<sup>60</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Instructions given upon hearing Gu Mu and Yu Qiuli report on planning work, in *Mao Zedong Sixiang Wansui* (毛泽东思想万岁), 606.

<sup>2</sup> Li, Ju, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: an Exploration of the Transformation Process of a Third-front Enterprise in China* (Doctoral Dissertation, Binghamton University, 2012); Chen, Donglin, “The Adjustment and Reconstruction of the TFC in the transition to the Market Economy”, *Contemporary China History Studies*, 9, 3 (May, 2002), 34–42; Li, Caihua, “An Historical Investigation of the Adjustment and Transformation of Third Front Construction”, *Contemporary China History Studies*, 9, 3 (May, 2002), 43–51.

<sup>3</sup> For detailed discussion of the research paradigms in the study of state socialism, see Fitzpatrick, S. “Revisionism in Soviet History,” *History and Theory* 46, 4 (2007), 77–91. Also see Edele, M. “Soviet Society, Social Structure, and Everyday Life: Major Frameworks Reconsidered,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 8, 2 (2007), 349–373. For historical works challenging the totalitarian paradigm, among many others, see Fitzpatrick, S., *Stalin’s Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Kotkin, S., *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Kligman, Gail and Verdery, Katherine, *Peasants under Siege: The Collectivization of Romanian Agriculture, 1949–1962* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011). For specific writings on socialist China, among many others, see Friedman, Edward, Paul G. Pickowicz, Mark Selden and Kay Ann Johnson, *Chinese Village, Socialist State* (Yale University Press, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Guha, Ranajit, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Most of these authors have become new riches in contemporary China by successfully transforming their cultural capital into material gains.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.chinanews.com/sh/2011/03-15/2908315.shtml>

<sup>7</sup> For a collection of these studies, see *Re-envisioning the Chinese Revolution: the Politics and Poetics of Collective Memory in Reform China*, ed. Lee, Chingkwon and Yang, Guobin (Stanford University Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Lee, Ching kwan, “Introduction,” in *Re-envisioning*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Lee, Ching kwan, “What Was Socialism to Chinese Workers? Collective Memories and Labor Politics,” in *Re-envisioning*, 141–165.

<sup>10</sup> Passerini, Luisa, “Discontinuity of History and Diaspora of Languages,” in *New Left Review*, 1 (Jan Feb 2000).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>12</sup> According to Gabriele Rosenthal, such narrative interview method that asks for the whole life story to be told regardless of specific research question was first developed by Fritz Schutze. The method is based on

some fundamental theoretical assumptions: “in order to understand and explain social and psychological phenomena we have to reconstruct their genesis – the process of their creation, reproduction and transformation”; “in order to understand and explain people’s actions it is necessary to find out about both the subjective perspective of the actors and the courses of action”; “in order to be able to understand and explain the statements of an interviewee/biographer about particular topic and experiences in his/her past it is necessary to interpret them as part of the overall context of his/her current life and his/her resulting present and future perspective.” See Rosenthal, Gabriele, “Biographical Research”, in Seale, C. / Gobo, G. / Gubrium, J. F. / Silverman, D. (Eds.): *Qualitative Research Practice*. London: Sage, 48–64.

<sup>13</sup> Shane, Scott, “Vietnam Study, Casting Doubts, Remains Secret”, *The New York Times* (October, 31, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Zhang, Zhengjia and Wang, Chen, “Nuclear Explosion in the United States and China”, *Contemporary Chinese History Research*, 3 (1999); Mann, Jim, “U.S. Considered ’64 Bombing to Keep China Nuclear-Free”, *Los Angeles Times* (September 27, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> Chen, Jian, *Mao’s China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 179; Shu Guang Zhang, *Economic Cold War: America’s Embargo against China and the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1949–1963* (Stanford University Press, 2001), 210; Dai, Chaowu, *The Era of Hostility and Crisis—The Sino-U.S. Relations from 1954 to 1958* (Beijing: The Social Science Documents Press, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> It refers to the treaties of Aigun and Peking that China was forced to sign with Russia in the 1860s. China lost a great tract of territory in Central Asia to Russia, which took the entire north of the Amur River and east of its tributary, cutting off China from the Sea of Japan.

<sup>17</sup> Bo, Yibo, *Reminiscences on Several Important Decisions and Events, Volume Two* (People’s Press, 1997); Cong, Jin, *The Era of Winding Development* (Henan People’s Press, 1989); Ma, Quanshang, *The Industrial History of the PPC* (Beijing: Jingjiguanli Publisher, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Li, Ju, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Hu, Sheng ed., *Seventy Years of the CCP* (The CCP History Publish, 1991), 400.

<sup>20</sup> Li, Ju, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Li Jiefu (李劫夫) was a famous musician during the socialist era in China.

<sup>22</sup> “Instructions given upon hearing Gu Mu and Yu Qiuli report on planning work, in *Mao Zedong Sixiang Wansui*, 606.

<sup>23</sup> Chen, Donglin, “From ‘the plan of food, clothing and daily necessities’ to ‘preparing the war’ – the changing process of the third-fifth thoughts”, *Contemporary Chinese History Research*, 2 (1997), 2.

<sup>24</sup> Luo, Pinghan, *Big Migration: Reducing the Urban Population from 1961 to 1963* (Guangxi People’s Publication, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> “The main points of the working conference regarding workers’ relocation in Liaoning Province, passed by the Party Central Committee and the State Council”, No. [65] 578 (“中共中央，国务院批转辽宁省安置巩固工作会议纪要”，中发[65]578号) (1965, 9, 15).

<sup>26</sup> “The report from the department of metallurgical industry regarding the reduction of workers within the metallurgical industry” (“冶金工业部关于冶金系统精简职工情况的报告”) (1965, 9, 11).

<sup>27</sup> “First front” refers to China’s coastal and border areas; “Second front” refers to areas between first and third fronts.

<sup>28</sup> Educated youth refers to those urban middle or high school students who were sent by the state to live and work in the countryside, according to related policies implemented during the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>29</sup> “The notification from the State Infrastructure Commission about the several recent affrays from the relocated workers” (“国家基本建设委员会关于最近发生的几起内迁职工闹事的情况通报”) (1965, 9, 17).

<sup>30</sup> Yuan, Mu and Fang, Rongkang, “The spirit of Daqing and Daqing Ren”, in *The People’s Daily* (1964, 4, 20).

<sup>31</sup> “Appealing for more resources to build up workers’ dwelling,” from the enterprise archives, 1965, 4; “Appealing for the land acquisition to build up workers’ dwellings,” from the enterprise archives, 1966, 8.

<sup>32</sup> Chen, Donglin & Chen, Jiagang, “The Third-Front Construction: the Closest Industrial Heritage”, *Chinese National Geography*, 6 (2006), 99.

<sup>33</sup> Li, Xianghe and Cao, Xia, “A Comparative Study of the Development of the West and the Reconstruction of the Third Front”, *Neimenggu Shifan University Journal*, 3 (2002); He, Haoju and Xiang, Jiagui ed., *The Construction of the Third Front and the Campaign of Western Development* (Dangdai Publisher, 2003); Luo, Wen, Guosheng Chen, Gang Yang and Xueyin Qin, “Three Economic Developing Movements in Western China”, in *Nanhua University Journal*, 4 (2002).

<sup>34</sup> Naughton, Barry, “The Third Front: Defence Industrialization in the Chinese Interior”, *The China Quarterly*, 115 (Sep., 1988), 351–386.

<sup>35</sup> Frankenstein, John and Bates Gill, “Current and Future Challenges Facing Chinese Defence Industries”, *The China Quarterly*, 146, Special Issue: China’s Military in Transition (Jun., 1996), 394–427; Huang Zhipei, “Discussing some problems in the construction of industry in inland areas,” *Economic Management*, 5 (1979), 14–24; Chen Dongsheng, “An exploration of the theories and methods of industrial location,” *Exploration of Economic Problems*, 2 (1980), 7–17.

<sup>36</sup> Naughton, Barry, 1988, 351.

<sup>37</sup> Many Western scholars have explored the destructions brought by deindustrialization in the West when capital escaped to the developing countries for cheaper and usually unorganized labor. Among many others, see Bluestone, Barry and Harrison, Bennett, *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry* (Basic Books, February 1984); Dandaneau, Steven P, *A Town Abandoned: Flint, Michigan, Confronts Deindustrialization* (State University of New York Press, 1996); Flinn, Gary, *Remembering Flint, Michigan: Stories from the Vehicle City* (The History Press, 2010); Linkon, Sherry Lee, *Steeltown U.S.A.: Work and Memory in Youngstown* (University Press of Kansas, 2003); High, Steven and Lewis, David W. *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization* (ILR Press, 2007).

<sup>38</sup> “Chairman Mao could not sleep well if the TFC did not succeed” was a widespread saying during the mobilization process of the TFC.

<sup>39</sup> Qingming Festival has also been called Tomb-sweeping day. It is a traditional festival in China to show people’s respect to their ancestries and seek protection from them.

<sup>40</sup> Lee, Ching kwan, 2007, 141–165.

<sup>41</sup> Thompson, Paul, “The voice of the past – Oral History, in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 1998), 24.

<sup>42</sup> Perks, Robert and Thomson, Alistair, “Introduction, in *The Oral History Reader*, 2.

<sup>43</sup> Guha, Ranajit, 1997.

<sup>44</sup> Thomson, Alistair, "Four paradigm transformations in oral history," in *The Oral history review*, 34 (winter–spring 2007).

<sup>45</sup> Passerini, Luisa, "Work Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism," in *The Oral History Reader*, 54.

<sup>46</sup> Passerini, Luisa, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>47</sup> Stoler, Ann Laura & Strassler, Karen, "Casting for the Colonial: Memory Work in 'New Order' Java," in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 42, 1 (Jan., 2000), 4.

<sup>48</sup> Popular Memory Group, 1998, 75–86.

<sup>49</sup> Kotkin, Stephen, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (University of California Press, 1997), 14.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>51</sup> Puaa Hamilton and Linda Shopes, "Introduction," in *Oral History and Public Memories*, eds. Hamilton and Shopes (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), vii–xvii, viii.

<sup>52</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. trans. Kegan, Paul. *Phenomenology of Perception* (Routledge Classic, New York, 2003), 210.

<sup>53</sup> Stoler & Strassler, 2000, 9.

<sup>54</sup> Sarkar, Mahua, "Difference in Memory," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 48, 1 (January 2006), 144.

<sup>55</sup> Strangleman, T., "The Nostalgia of Organisations and the Organisation of Nostalgia: Past and Present in the Contemporary Railway Industry," *Sociology* 33, 4 (1999), 725–46.

<sup>56</sup> Geertz, Clifford, "Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," *The Interpretation of Culture* (NY: Basic Books, 1973).

<sup>57</sup> Passerini, Luisa, 2000, 137–138.

<sup>58</sup> Chakrabarty, Dipesh, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton University Press, 2000), 249.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.