

Everyday Lives in China's Cold War Military-Industrial Complex: Voices from the Shanghai Small Third Front, 1964–1988

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Modern China historians Youwei Xu (Shanghai University) and Y. Yvon Wang (University of Toronto), the latter of whom specializes in gender, sexuality and material culture, have teamed up to present an edited collection of translated accounts of everyday people who lived and worked on Shanghai's Small Third Front. Theirs is not the first book to explore the Third Front in Maoist China. Indeed, Xu and Wang follow in the path-breaking footsteps of noteworthy scholars whose works paved the way for *Everyday Lives*, namely: Covell Meyskens's *Mao's Third Front* (2020, Cambridge University Press); Barry Naughton's *The Third Front* (1988, Cambridge University Press); and a 2018 edited volume by the Chinese Communist Party's Anhui Provincial Committee Party History Research Office, entitled *Shanghai xiao sanxian jianshe zai Anhui koushu shilu* (A True Oral Record of the Shanghai Small Third Front Project in Anhui), in which Xu contributed the chapter "Overview of the Small Third Front." *Everyday Lives* is also to be followed by Koji Hirata's forthcoming book with Cambridge University Press on the rise and fall of the massive Angang steel-making company in Anshan. Works by Meyskens and Hirata, and now this volume by Xu and Wang, show that these past three years have been host to an emergent trend in analyses of Third Front politics, geopolitics and lives in China's hinterland during the halcyon-for-some, brutal-for-most days of the Mao era.

The book contains ten chapters, each a translation of Small Front workers' narratives, bookended by a helpful translator's note and questions for discussion. Chapter one presents local government official-cadre Yu Shunsheng's account of the background of, "and official line on," Shanghainese Small Third Front factories in Guichi, Anhui, complete with acknowledgement of the development's personal and logistical challenges (p. 1). Chapter two shifts to personal testimonials of individuals from varied backgrounds, albeit not those from *verbotten* "bad-class backgrounds," who worked and lived on the Small Third Front. The chapter's "from below" approach continues the trend of highlighting Small Third Front workers' personal challenges, notably leaving their families behind to relocate to the hinterland for work. Chapter three, "On the job," sheds fascinating light on harsh working conditions, with individual accounts variously describing sentiments of fear, anxiety, boredom, and even camaraderie and nostalgia. In chapter four, the editors change the focus to material culture, namely objects, as the focus of their respondents' narratives of their lives and work on the Small Front. Chapter five sheds light on Small Front workers' longing for entertainment on the job and in between in the hinterland, whether in the form of films, books or music. One respondent, Qu Huixiang, a worker-cadre and educator, provides the reader with examples of a few of the challenges of education quality, promotion rates for teachers, overwork and overtime that Small Front workers experienced up until the 1980s.

Chapters six and seven shift to Wang's disciplinary expertise – gender and sex – with additional focus on marriage and the family on the Small Third Front. "[H]eteronormative, monogamous marriage and reproductive sexuality were not widely challenged [by workers]," as Xu and Wang note in their preface to their respondents' narratives. Yet their respondents' recollections reveal

that social disapproval and the risk of reprisal “did not stop [them] from pursuing socially and even legally risky desires” and developing “extreme feelings and violent actions stemming from sexual and romantic relationships” (p. 152). The final few chapters foreground politics, hierarchies, the military and particular cleavages that emerged on the Small Third Front in one-time workers’ narratives, with the final chapter delving into appraisals and critiques by those who toiled on the Small Third Front and experienced working and living those lean years.

As *Everyday Lives* is more of a compilation of translations with helpful guides and activities for the classroom – a textbook of sorts – than a study that picks up the mantle of Meyskens, Naughton and others, this reviewer will approach this review differently than usual. The introduction reads as a comprehensive summary of Meyskens’s work – 17 of the chapter’s 27 footnotes reference either *Mao’s Third Front* or Meyskens’s 2015 article on the topic for *Twentieth Century China* – rather than a more robust survey of the extant literature on the Third Front. Indeed, per Meyskens’s introduction, the corpus of literature on this topic is much larger than the opening pages of *Everyday Lives* betray to the reader. Where, for instance, are references to work by Hans van de Ven, Rana Mitter, Sigrid Schmalzer, Judd Kinzley or Naughton’s 2007 book *The Chinese Economy?* Hirata’s articles “Steel metropolis” (*Enterprise and Society*, 2020), “Mao’s steeltown” (*Journal of Urban History*, 2021), and “Made in Manchuria” (*American Historical Review*, 2021), though recent releases, were available to the authors during the review process and appear to this reviewer as glaring omissions from the introduction. Where is engagement with other studies on military industrial development in the socialist world, notably Lennart Samuelson’s 2000 book, *Plans for Stalin’s War Machine*? Another minor issue for this reviewer concerns the logic of decision-making of whose narratives, reflections and recollections made the cut, and whose did not. This is somewhat elusive. Are all respondents Han Chinese, and if so, why not broaden the proverbial net and interview non-Han workers on the Small Third Front, if available? A note somewhere in the introduction would suffice and guide the reader to the editors’ methodology of selection.

Such queries, however nit-picking, aside, Xu and Wang have provided an eminently useful collection of translated first-hand accounts and have made an invaluable contribution to the study of labour history in Maoist China. The editors’ inclusion of guided questions and activities provide for an especially useful teaching resource for students with a keen interest in approaching 20th-century Chinese history, especially the Mao era, from below.

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Carbon Technocracy: Energy Regimes in Modern East Asia

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During the past year, countries around the world have experienced devastating natural disasters as a result of record-breaking extreme weather. In China alone, extended heatwaves, flash flooding and drought struck different parts of the country in turn. The bill for the effects of our dependence on fossil fuels has arrived and is now due.