

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Third Front as Method: Mao, Market and the Present in CCTV Documentaries

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## Abstract

This article examines two major recent CCTV documentaries on the Third Front and its afterlives. *The Big Third Front* (2017) and *Vicissitudes of the Third Front* (2016) construct strong narratives about the Third Front during the Mao era, depicting it as a heroic struggle against nature which was forced upon China by foreign enemies. However, both documentaries encounter difficulties in adhering to the usual presentation of the Deng era as a resoundingly successful transformation. *Vicissitudes* ambivalently characterizes the Deng era as one of relative decline in contrast to the glorious early years of the Third Front and the flourishing present. *The Big Third Front*, meanwhile, conflates historical footage of the 1950s–1990s in a way that undermines the usual official division of PRC history into Mao and reform eras. This paper concludes by suggesting that academic focus on the Third Front can serve as a methodological tool for complicating the periodization of PRC history.

## 摘要

本文探讨了中央电视台播出的两部有关三线建设的大型电视纪录片，即《大三线》（2017）和《三线风云》（2016）。这两部纪录片对于毛泽东时代三线建设的叙事都非常有力，将其描绘成一场由外敌强加给中国的、与自然搏斗的英勇抗争。然而，二者都无法将邓小平时代的三线建设表述为一场全面成功的转型。对比三线早期的辉煌与当下的复兴，《三线风云》所描绘的邓小平时代相对衰落。而与此同时，《大三线》却将1950年代至1990年代的视频素材进行混剪，破坏了中华人民共和国官方叙事中，将毛泽东时代与改革开放作为不同历史时期的划分。最后，本文建议，对三线建设的学术讨论可以作为一种方法论工具，将中华人民共和国历史分期复杂化。

**Keywords:** Third Front; documentary; footage; simulation; periodization

**关键词:** 三线建设; 纪录片; 视频素材; 模拟; 时期划分/历史分期

Wearing a formal red dress and standing in front of a computer-generated industrial background, the host of the CCTV documentary, *The Big Third Front* (2017; *Da sanxian* 大三线), recounts how the factories of east China saw a huge swell of support for the Third Front in the mid-1960s. Light piano music accompanies the narrator as she describes how the call for “top talent to head to the Third Front” (*haoren haoma shang sanxian* 好人好马上三线; literally “good people and good horses go to the Third Front”) stirred the “pioneering dream” (*chuangye meng* 创业梦) of young workers to relocate to as-yet-unbuilt factories in remote parts of the western interior. The documentary, a ten-part special for the popular *National Memory* (*Guojia jiyi* 国家记忆) series, cuts to historical footage of a percussion band providing a send-off for departing factory workers; the piano music continues, interweaving with the diegetic sounds of drums and cymbals. Non-diegetic strings join the piano as backpack-laden workers are shown passing the band and leaving the factory to begin the first stage of their arduous journey. The non-diegetic music continues alongside interview audio of a former Third Front worker, who recalls how the best cadres were encouraged to support

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the Third Front so that Mao Zedong 毛泽东 could get a good night's sleep, comforted in the knowledge that China could defend itself from foreign attack. As the interview audio continues, the camera cuts from the archival footage to the interviewee.

At the heart of this account, giving visual credibility to the documentary, is the archival footage. However, there is an issue with this footage. Scholars of Mao-era documentaries might be surprised by its high-quality colour images and location sound, given the remote, secretive qualities of the Third Front, the scarce filmmaking resources of the time and the Mao-era preference for lecture-like commentary with sparing usage of location sound. They might additionally notice that the footage comes not from a domestic source but rather from *The Generator Factory*, a chapter of the documentary epic, *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* (1976; henceforth *Yukong*), by Joris Ivens and Marceline Loridan-Ivens. In this earlier documentary, the workers were indeed leaving their Shanghai factory. However, these workers were not heading to the Third Front in the mid-1960s but rather were on a far shorter expedition to participate in local agricultural work in the early 1970s. Wrong decade, wrong project.

This paper explores how recent state television documentaries have constructed temporally – and sometimes spatially – ambivalent narratives of the Third Front. Focusing on two documentaries on the Third Front, namely the ten-part *The Big Third Front* (2017; *Da sanxian*) and the seven-part *Vicissitudes of the Third Front* (2016; *Sanxian fengyun* 三线风云; henceforth *Vicissitudes*), I argue that these televisual accounts have supported but also sometimes complicated the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) periodization of the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC). *The Big Third Front* and *Vicissitudes* are the two highest-profile works among a spate of documentaries on the Third Front in the last decade and are contemporaneous with its wider discursive transformation into industrial heritage. Former Third Front factories, with their visually striking combination of industrial architecture and mountainous surroundings, have become marketable resources for local governments and entrepreneurs. In this way, understandings of the Third Front have become intertwined with heritage discourse in China,<sup>1</sup> which has expanded to include industrial heritage.<sup>2</sup> Discourse has also extended to the physical transformation of former Third Front factories into museums, hotels and leisure complexes, as cities physically expand to absorb some of these once-remote factories and conceptually absorb the Third Front into their city brands.<sup>3</sup> Both *The Big Third Front* and *Vicissitudes* draw on the attractive imagery of these recent branding efforts. At the same time, these documentaries have greater reach than physical heritage spaces, thanks to their screening across the nation on primetime CCTV.

Both documentaries construct strong, positive narratives about the Third Front during the Mao era, depicting it as a heroic struggle against nature, forced upon China by foreign enemies. However, neither documentary treats the Third Front as a project that simply ceased with the economic and political transition of the late 1970s. Both subsequently encounter difficulties in adhering to the orthodox presentation of the Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 era as a resoundingly successful economic transformation; this was a time of serious hardship for many Third Front factories, as they struggled not with foreign enemies or nature, but with a third opponent, the market. Consequently, *Vicissitudes* ambivalently characterizes the Deng era as a time of decline as much as of revival, in contrast to the glorious early years of the Third Front and the unambiguously positive present. *The Big Third Front*, meanwhile, conflates historical footage taken from the 1950s through to the 1990s in a way that undermines the usual division of PRC history into Mao and reform eras. In doing so, it packages the 1950s–1990s as a hazily remembered past that is only vaguely linked to the achievements of the present. While oral histories have already complicated the CCP's

1 For this heritage discourse, see Su and Teo 2009; Evans and Rowlands 2015.

2 See Xu, Yanqiu 2012.

3 For celebrations of Third Front branding, see Li 2016 and Liu, Sheng 2016. For a more critical assessment, see Lam 2020.

periodization of PRC history,<sup>4</sup> it is striking that even CCTV-sanctioned mainstream documentaries about the Third Front do not appear able – or willing – to strictly adhere to the standard treatment of 1976 as the dividing line between chaos and normality, or of the Third Plenum of 1978 as the bringer of purely positive reforms. In the conclusion, I tentatively suggest that the Third Front can serve as a methodological tool for further complicating this periodization of PRC history.

### Legacies of the Third Front and Mao-era Documentaries

This paper explores how two distinct Mao-era legacies, of the Third Front and of documentary, come together in the production of contemporary documentaries on the Third Front. Since the introduction to this special section has already provided contextual information on the Third Front, this section mainly focuses on Mao-era documentaries, highlighting their ongoing importance in providing legacies of footage and representation for contemporary mainstream documentaries.

In the last couple of decades, scholars have made a strong case for the importance of the documentary to the Maoist state.<sup>5</sup> While documentary was already used as a propaganda tool by the KMT and the CCP during the 1930s and 1940s, the establishment of the PRC saw an increased emphasis on this cinematic genre. In her PhD on Chinese documentary, Qian Ying compares the 800 fictional films released between 1949 and 1978 to her incomplete inventory of nearly 1,800 documentaries, newsreels, and science and education films for the same period.<sup>6</sup> The documentary was a useful medium for the state to project its messages beyond the literate population, along with more thoroughly researched methods of dissemination such as propaganda posters and revolutionary songs.

Chu Yingchi notes that by the turn of the 21st century, CCTV alone was producing more than a thousand documentaries a year.<sup>7</sup> However, Chu and other scholars have seemed reluctant to explore the possibility of continuities between Mao-era documentary practices and those that followed in the 1980s. Instead, scholarship has generally been dismissive of Mao-era documentary, treating it as a homogeneous mass of propaganda against which the independent documentary of the post-Mao era can be defined.<sup>8</sup> English-language histories of Chinese documentary generally skim over the Mao era before describing the limited reforms of “special theme documentaries” (*zhuantipi* 专题片) in the 1980s. These summaries of special theme documentaries focus on the thematically controversial but stylistically conservative *River Elegy* (1988, *Heshang* 河殇), whose lecture-like expository is critiqued as Mao-era documentary with modifications and contrasted with the genuine stylistic breakthrough of *Bumming in Beijing* (1990, *Liulang Beijing* 流浪北京).<sup>9</sup> Chu, for example, describes the transition from the “dogmatic” documentary of the Mao era to the “polyphony of voices” that can be heard from the 1990s onwards.<sup>10</sup> Contemporary mainstream documentaries have also received less academic attention than independent documentary, despite their far greater prominence on Chinese television. Those studies of the mainstream that do exist have often examined how state-channel documentaries have moved away from being pure propaganda, as documentary makers grapple with the sometimes divergent demands of market and state.<sup>11</sup>

4 See, e.g., Hershatter 2014; Evans 2020. See also Schoenhals 2002; Bramall 2007 and Brown 2015 for problematizations of CCP periodization.

5 Chu 2007; Qian 2013a; Pei 2017.

6 Qian 2013a, 4–5.

7 Chu 2007, 7.

8 Pei 2017, 14.

9 Qian’s work (2013a, Ch. 4) is an exception, giving extensive attention to the documentary of the early post-Mao era, so that *River Elegy* is the culmination of post-Cultural Revolution developments rather than a false beginning for the New Documentary Movement.

10 Chu 2015.

11 See, e.g., Chan 2002; Berry 2009; Müller 2013.

In some ways, recent documentaries on the Third Front reflect these tensions between market and state, as documentary makers strive to create works that are both aesthetically appealing and politically acceptable. However, despite significant aesthetic departures from Mao-era documentary, both *The Big Third Front* and *Vicissitudes* remain situated within what Bill Nichols has referred to as the “expository” mode of representation in their attempts to construct detached, omniscient narratives. This is documentary as one-way visual lecture, with visible “voice-of-God” commentary or invisible “voice-of-authority” commentary exerting dominance over images.<sup>12</sup> Of the two documentaries, *Vicissitudes* shows a certain willingness to develop, but not depart from, the expository mode, with its slightly more interview-oriented approach to narrative creation. The more high-profile production, *The Big Third Front*, is – at first glance – a sophisticated combination of visible female commentary, invisible male commentary, interviews, historical footage, contemporary shots, CGI and animation. Yet while this sophisticated presentation contrasts with the often-crude delivery of Mao-era documentary, its mode of representation is firmly expository, with commentary that seeks to exert strict control over interviewees and viewers alike. Although expository practices did not die out after the Mao era, these recent documentaries constitute a re-intensification of this mode when compared with Third Front documentaries from the Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 era, such as *Migrants of the Western Third Front* (2007, *Qiantu de ren zhi xibu sanxian jianshe* 迁徙的人之西部三线建设) and *Apprentice Soldiers of the Third Front* (2009, *Sanxian xuebing* 三线学兵), with their less intrusive commentaries and freer interview segments. This is not to suggest that all state documentaries of the Xi Jinping 习近平 era are expository, or to deny the considerable aesthetic changes since the Mao era, but rather to argue that the expository mode, as an attempt to convey a single correct way of knowing, continues to thrive despite the emergence of other representational modes.

In its usage of historical footage, *The Big Third Front* links back to Mao-era documentaries in two further ways: first, through its recycling of shots from these documentaries; and second, through its often-deceptive usage of these shots, just as Mao-era documentaries themselves frequently adjusted visual reality. This contemporary recycling of previous deceptions in PRC documentaries has received little attention in the English-language literature. However, it does align with studies of authenticity and reproduction, including Jean Baudrillard’s argument about the death of the relationship between “authentic” original and copy<sup>13</sup> (discussed below), as well as China-specific work that examines the “art of cloning” within Mao-era cultural (re)production.<sup>14</sup> The extensive Chinese-language literature on documentary includes specific articles on the wider *National Memory* series of which *The Big Third Front* is a part. However, these works have, with one honourable exception,<sup>15</sup> praised the services of this series’ purportedly rigorous research and authentic footage in the war against historical nihilism while themselves lacking rigorous research.<sup>16</sup> As my article demonstrates, far from being “authentic,” the footage and narrative of *The Big Third Front* frequently diverge by tens of years and thousands of miles.

The formally secretive nature of the Third Front has also shaped the relationship between past and contemporary documentaries. During the Mao era, newsreels and documentaries about the Third Front were rarely available to the public. They also avoided explicit reference to the Third Front, given its secret status, and instead focused on individual construction projects that were only later officially recognized as elements of the Third Front. The cinematic celebration of railway construction was most common, including *The Chengdu–Kunming Railway* (*Cheng-Kun tielu* 成昆铁路), which received a public release in 1974. Given the lack of easy access to archival footage of the Third Front, many recent documentaries have drawn heavily on the footage of these earlier

12 Nichols 1991, 34–38; 2001, 105–09.

13 Baudrillard 1983.

14 Pang 2017, 13. See also Clark 2008 and Mittler 2012.

15 Deng 2018.

16 See, e.g., Pan 2018; Xu, Xiaomei 2018; Ouyang 2019.

documentaries and newsreels. For example, the six-part CCTV documentary, *Rollercoaster: The Chengdu–Kunming Railway* (2007, *Guoshan che: Cheng-Kun tielu 过山车：成昆铁路*), is effectively an expanded update of *The Chengdu–Kunming Railway*. In this case, the documentary makers clearly credited the earlier work's imagery while combining it with contemporary interviews and commentary. Other documentaries, such as *Vicissitudes*, choose to rely less on historical footage and more on interviews, together with contemporary footage of picturesque factory ruins and dynamic new factories. A third strategy, discussed later in this paper, sees the makers of *The Big Third Front* select footage in ways that conflate Third Front and non-Third Front projects, as well as the Mao and Deng eras.

### Heroism in the Time of Mao

*The Big Third Front* was released in 2017 as part of *National Memory*,<sup>17</sup> a documentary series whose 30-minute episodes have broadcast on CCTV-4 in the weekday primetime 8pm slot since 2016, with claimed audiences of up to 35 million for a single episode.<sup>18</sup> *National Memory* has previously covered key events of China's 20th century, such as the founding of the PRC in 1949, the discovery of the Terracotta Army in 1974 and Deng Xiaoping's visit to the United States in 1979. Whereas these major events had been allocated no more than five episodes, *The Big Third Front* was allotted an unprecedented ten episodes. And whereas *National Memory* has typically produced documentaries at a prolific rate, *The Big Third Front* itself took two and a half years to make. It was also a project with considerable institutional and personal links to the Third Front. First, its chief director, Liu Weiyang 刘卫阳 had previously directed the ten-part documentary, *The Railway Corps Forever* (2014, *Yongyuan de tiedao bing 永远的铁道兵*), which included episodes on the Third Front and personnel who later joined Liu to work on *The Big Third Front*. Second, it featured key scholars of the Third Front as consultants, including Chen Donglin 陈东林, a historian from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and Wang Chuncai 王春才, who has played a major role in the rehabilitation of the Third Front during the post-Mao era. Third, the documentary was produced in conjunction with numerous Third Front-related institutions, including the municipality of Liupanshui 六盘水, which has constructed its city brand around the Third Front. Indeed, a ceremony to mark the beginning of the documentary's shooting took place in Liupanshui's Guizhou Third Front Construction Museum in 2015.<sup>19</sup>

*Vicissitudes* was released in 2016 as part of the documentary series, *Military Memory (Jungong jiyi 军工记忆)*, which has aired on CCTV-9 since 2013. Although far less prolific than *National Memory*, with its first season consisting of just eight episodes screened over two years, *Military Memory* devoted a similar amount of coverage to the Third Front, with *Vicissitudes* released as a seven-episode special. Historian Chen Donglin again featured as a consultant, while documentary credits indicated cooperation with an array of Third Front-related institutions. Both documentary series thus constituted major undertakings with access to considerable resources.

This televisual stress on the Third Front reflects wider recent efforts to extract political capital from this former state secret. My reading of the two documentaries' depictions of the Third Front under Mao indicates multiple factors that make it attractive for documentary makers who seek to address the legacy of the Mao era. Such documentaries have emerged in the context of Xi Jinping's assertion, made in his January 2013 speech, that the both pre- and post-reform and opening-up eras were essential to China's development, despite their differences, and that neither

17 *The Big Third Front* was also broadcast in slightly re-edited form in 2019 as part of the *Stories of National Defence (Guofang gushi)* documentary series.

18 Xu, Xiaomei 2018.

19 Liu, Hongbao 2020.



should be used to negate the other.<sup>20</sup> More recently, the 2021 “Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the major achievements and historical experience of the Party over the past” has been far less sustained and detailed in its criticisms of the Mao era than the previous 1981 “Resolution,” with greater stress on this era’s military and technological achievements. Temporally, the Third Front’s commencement in 1964 and continuation into the present day (in the form of continued factory production) facilitates positive discussion of pre- and post-reform eras, while sidestepping the Cultural Revolution as an aspect of the Mao era that cannot be rehabilitated. Although it does not explicitly mention the Third Front, the 2021 “Resolution” highlights the development of China’s defence industries and the resistance of foreign enemies as achievements of the Mao era. Aligning with these discursive priorities, the Third Front facilitates the discussion of external rather than internal enemies, and of defence construction rather than class struggle. The first episode of *The Big Third Front*, for example, examines the United States’ secret plans to destroy China’s nuclear facilities. Indeed, both documentaries present the foreign threats of the 1960s as so significant that the central leadership had no choice but to launch the Third Front.

In opening episodes, both documentaries directly discuss foreign enemies, particularly the US and Taiwan. However, in later episodes, these documentaries tend to indirectly address this human threat through reference to a second enemy, the untamed environment, and the sacrifices of Third Front workers in taming this opponent to protect the nation.<sup>21</sup> In the second episode of *The Big Third Front*, workers in Guizhou’s Liupanshui recall the early deprivations of Third Front construction, as snakes stole eggs from under beds in temporary dwellings and contaminated water caused gastrointestinal problems. In the second episode of *Vicissitudes*, a former worker recalls how they had to first establish the “three connections, and one levelling” (*santong yiping* 三通一平) – that is, the connections of roads, water and electricity, along with the flattening of land – as prerequisites for the construction of work units.<sup>22</sup> Subsequent interviewees stress the hardships that this entailed, as they hauled construction materials across difficult terrain; it really was “cutting paths through mountains and building bridges across rivers” (*fengshan kailu, yushui daqiao* 逢山开路, 遇水搭桥), as one interviewee puts it.

To an extent, these tales of the sacrifices made to tame nature and protect the nation constitute “old wine in new bottles” in that they have similar narratives to Mao-era Third Front documentaries, such as *Panzhihua under Construction* (1970, *Panzhihua zai jianshe zhong* 攀枝花在建设) and *The Hunan–Guizhou Railway* (1974, *Xiang-Qian tielu* 湘黔铁路), even if the presentational style of the latter was far less sophisticated. In the earlier works, the camera first slowly pans across an untamed mountainous landscape, then details its traversal, survey, detonation, excavation and flattening by workers, before concluding with shots of socialist construction amid the tamed landscape. The spirit of “fearing neither hardship nor death” (*yi bu pa ku, er bu pa si* 一不怕苦, 二不怕死) in the struggle with nature resonates in both Mao-era documentaries and their Xi-era successors.

The Mao-era documentaries, however, have little to say about where these workers came from, let alone their individual emotional states; they arrive in the mountains of south-west China without much in the way of backstory or personality. In contrast, *The Big Third Front* and *Vicissitudes* highlight the migratory experiences of Third Front workers as symbolizing not only sacrifice but also national unity. While rural migrants, returned sent-down youth and locally recruited apprentices all contributed to the Third Front,<sup>23</sup> *The Big Third Front* and *Vicissitudes* focus on workers who relocated from big cities to remote factories. These workers undertook major journeys to

20 “Haobu dongyao jianchi he fazhan Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi” (Unswervingly uphold and develop socialism with Chinese characteristics). *People’s Daily*, 6 January 2013, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2013/0106/c1024-20100407.html>. Accessed 9 July 2023.

21 See Shapiro 2001 on the wider “war against nature.”

22 See Bray 2005, 143.

23 Chen 2016; Meyskens 2020.

cross the internal fissures of China, including the rural–urban divide, regional difference and, at times, ethnic difference. The documentaries show these workers struggling together to build and operate factories in inhospitable conditions, before ultimately integrating with the local population, despite initial differences. In the second episode of *The Big Third Front*, the commentary describes the early relations between factory workers and local peasants in terms of “two life systems” (*liang ge shenghuo tixi* 两个生活体系). The commentary also describes the problems that the long rainy season in Guizhou’s Liupanshui created for “lads from the north” (*beifang lai de hanzi* 北方来的汉子), before the camera cuts to an interviewee – who has long since integrated into local culture – commenting that “our Liupanshui’s climate is now much better” (*xianzai zanmen Liupanshui qihou hao duole* 现在咱们六盘水气候好多了).

### Decline in the Time of Deng

While *The Big Third Front* and *Vicissitudes* share certain commonalities in their narratives of the Mao era, there are also stylistic differences, which, in turn, relate to differences in their narrations of the Third Front beyond the Mao era. The first episode of *Vicissitudes* opens with on-location shooting at a contemporary factory in the suburbs of Zunyi 遵义, as a Shanghai worker describes his relocation to Guizhou in 1970. This kind of on-location interview does occur in *The Big Third Front*, but never so prominently, with most interviews instead taking place against blurred studio or home backgrounds. *Vicissitudes* has these formal sit-down interviews too, but it typically opens episodes and segments with on-location shoots. In contrast, opening scenes in *The Big Third Front* are dominated by its “voice-of-authority” female host, who delivers stern lectures from within a CGI-enhanced studio-cum-futuristic-library. Both documentaries have invisible “voice-of-God” commentaries, but *Vicissitudes* allocates more time to interviewees. *Vicissitudes* also uses less historical footage, instead preferring contemporary imagery, including panoramic shots of ruined factories nestled amid mountains and dynamic shots of new high-tech factories.

As a partial result of these stylistic choices, *Vicissitudes* conveys a clearer sense of the Third Front as extending from the historical past into the living present. Indeed, its commentary explicitly refers to the Third Front’s “50 years of history” – that is, from the mid-1960s to the present. As early as episode three, *Vicissitudes* begins to extend beyond the Mao era. The episode’s title, *1000-Li Trek* (*Qianli bashe* 千里跋涉), signals an emphasis on the longevity of construction projects and the accompanying toil of workers, for whom everyday life on the Third Front did not simply come to an end with the beginning of the reform era. This episode does not even mention the 1978 Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee that is so important in CCP history; the factories just keep on operating. In the fourth episode, the documentary starts to align itself with the well-worn historical divide of the Mao and the reform eras, describing the 1980s as a “watershed” (*fenshuixian* 分水线) for the Third Front. However, it continues to conflict with official periodizations by presenting the 1980s and 1990s as a time of decline for the Third Front, following its heyday of the 1960s and 1970s. The narrative defensively explains that Deng Xiaoping focused on improving China’s economy rather than its military power, since the world had turned towards an “era of peace and development” (*heping yu fazhan de shidai* 和平与发展的时代). Since reform and opening up “needed” to prioritize the economic development of the coastal regions, so the country drastically reduced its investment in military enterprises and the purchase of military goods.

To its credit, *Vicissitudes* does not flinch from describing the operational difficulties that Third Front factories encountered during the Deng era. With the decline in state demand for military goods, Third Front factories had no choice but to attempt to produce civilian goods for the market. However, their remote locations left them uniquely ill-equipped to conquer the marketplace, which ultimately proved a more dangerous opponent than either foreign enemies or untamed nature. In desperation, many work units relocated to cities, with central government only providing limited

financial assistance in the costly construction of entire new production facilities and worker accommodation.

*Vicissitudes* has far less to say about the many bankruptcies of Third Front work units, or the erosion of worker security, status and rights that accompanied marketization. In episode six, for example, the documentary describes the financial difficulties that Guizhou's 083 electronics base encountered. However, it does not mention the many factories under 083's auspices that went bankrupt during the transition from military base to Shenzhen Stock Exchange-listed company. Nevertheless, the documentary is forthright in treating the Deng era as a time of decline for the Third Front. *The Big Third Front* is somewhat less forthright, referring to the "new challenges and opportunities" (*xin de tiaozhan yu jiyu* 新的挑战与机遇) that the Deng era brought and tending to frame the struggles of this era as success stories – without following them into the present day. For example, episode nine recounts how a Third Front factory in Hubei, having previously produced hand grenades, struggled to adapt to the market, producing everything from hydraulic presses to electric fans but with little success. The factory finally achieved success with a knitting machine in the late 1980s. After a couple of years, however, its knitting machine was no longer successful, as copycat manufacturers crowded the market. The narration ends abruptly at this point, leaving viewers to guess what happened next.

As I elaborate in the section below, *The Big Third Front* packages the 1950s–1990s as a vaguely delineated past and does not follow specific Third Front factories into the present day. In contrast, the timeline in *Vicissitudes* presents factories emerging with the heroic construction of the Mao era, experiencing almost fatal decline during the Deng era and then finally rebounding spectacularly in the present. Stylistically, emphasizing the "unprecedented difficulties" (*qiansuoweiyou de kunnan* 前所未有的困难) of the Deng era heightens the sense of resolution when the documentary later reveals the purported prosperity of the present. For example, episode five of *Vicissitudes* tells the story of a shipbuilding factory in Sichuan which had once produced submarines but was facing bankruptcy in the 1990s. The factory director recounts how the higher authorities encouraged him to accept bankruptcy and take a good job in the coastal regions, but he resisted, feeling that it was a waste of a good enterprise and bad for the workers. In the early 2000s, the factory seized an opportunity to make stainless steel chemical tankers. The segment ends with the now-retired model leader returning to the contemporary high-tech factory, his footsteps made dramatic by slow-motion camerawork and swelling orchestral strings.

While this is a compelling narrative of the Third Front's journey into the present, it is also an ambivalent repackaging of the Deng era, as not a success in itself, but rather a second era of hardship that had to be traversed before Third Front factories could prosper. The present, in contrast to both the Mao and Deng eras, is a dynamic world of technological sophistication, with time-lapse photography of gleaming new Third Front facilities. This conceptual and visual distinction between the Deng era and the documentary's present did not feature in Third Front documentaries of the Hu era, which instead adhered to a more established division of time into the Mao and reform eras, if indeed they moved beyond the Mao era at all. This new distinction may well reflect new discursive emphases, as Xi Jinping extols the benefits of reform and opening up while downplaying Deng's personal legacy,<sup>24</sup> and extends the reach of the state in a way that Elizabeth Economy even describes as a "third revolution" of "reform without opening up."<sup>25</sup> It may also be owing to the extra decade that has elapsed since the 2000s, creating a greater sense of distance between the Deng era and today. Moreover, in *The Big Third Front*, as I argue below, this sense of distance sees the 1980s

24 See the speech Xi Jinping gave in Shenzhen on the 40th anniversary of SEZs during which he mentioned Deng Xiaoping only once while making 17 references to "reform and opening up." "Xi Jinping: zai Shenzhen jingji tequ jianli 40 nian qingzhu dahui shang de jianghua" (Xi Jinping: speech at grand gathering marking 40th anniversary of Shenzhen Special Economic Zone). *Xinhua wang*, 14 October 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2020-10/14/c\\_1126611290.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2020-10/14/c_1126611290.htm). Accessed 9 July 2023.

25 Economy 2018, 10.



and even the 1990s become part of a vaguely remembered past in which footage of the Mao and Deng eras freely intermingle.

### Doing New Things with Old Fakes

*The Big Third Front* does not follow the stories of specific factories into the 21st century. Where contemporary China does feature, the documentary trumpets the sophistication of its infrastructure and weaponry, claiming connections to the Third Front past but without concretely describing these connections. This documentary also presents the Mao and Deng eras in ways that make them appear to have far more in common with each other than with the present. This blurring of the Mao and Deng eras as a vaguely remembered past is most apparent in the documentary's freewheeling usage of historical footage.

Having traced around 60–70 per cent of the historical footage in *The Big Third Front*, I can confirm that much of it has been used out of context. When considered against the historical context of documentary making, this visual deception does not make *The Big Third Front* an anomaly. Jerry Kuehl, a documentary producer and historian, has argued that documentaries created from historical footage have “never been free from the taint of mythologizing, invention or falsehood.”<sup>26</sup> He points, for example, to how an extended sequence of an Austro-Hungarian battleship sinking in the Adriatic in 1918 has featured in rather diverse contexts: “Spectacular shots of sailors trapped on the upturned hull of the stricken vessel ... have been the salvation of lazy film producers from that day to this – they have sent it to the bottom in virtually all of the world’s seven seas, whenever a naval disaster is called for.”<sup>27</sup> Kuehl also worked as a historical advisor for *The Great War* (1964), a critically acclaimed BBC documentary but one whose re-broadcast, as Kuehl recounts,<sup>28</sup> presented difficulties in clearing the rights for scenes taken from major feature films which had been indiscriminately mixed with actuality footage. Kuehl later ensured far greater “visual authenticity” in Thames Television’s *The World at War* (1973), as its associate producer, but not without coming into conflict with colleagues who felt that archival footage “could be treated as wallpaper.”<sup>29</sup>

Deception in documentary making has not, of course, been confined to capitalist nations. Qian Ying has explored the ways in which re-enactment and dramatization became standard practice in Soviet non-fiction cinema after vigorous debates about how best to film reality in the 1920s.<sup>30</sup> Qian shows how the 1950 Sino-Soviet production, *Victory of the Chinese People*, used re-enacted footage of decisive CCP victories over the KMT in north-east China, even when actuality footage existed. Soviet texts translated into Chinese in the early 1950s condemned “on-the-spot-realism” as a cold and detached naturalism; the task of documentary makers was not to superficially record visual reality but rather to illuminate the underlying social character of events. Documentary, despite its non-fiction status, was not exempt from the wider principles of socialist realism, which demanded the re-crafting – rather than the mere reproduction – of reality.<sup>31</sup>

This short history of deception in documentary does not excuse the editing practices of *The Big Third Front*. It does, however, indicate that *The Big Third Front* has abused not unsullied originals but rather older newsreels and documentaries that themselves have a strained relationship with visual reality and thus provide shaky foundations for accurate depictions of the past.<sup>32</sup> This leads my argument into Baudrillardian territory, particularly his two essays in *Simulations*, which propose an

26 Kuehl 2007, 32.

27 Ibid., 34.

28 Ibid., 35.

29 Ibid. See also Chapman 2011.

30 Qian 2013b.

31 Wang 2016.

32 In his history of compilation film, Jay Leyda (1964) provides multiple examples of deliberate and accidental falsification in early works as well as the seeping of these falsifications into later works.

era of simulation in which the link between original and copy has been broken.<sup>33</sup> Following an industrial era, whose ability to reproduce exact copies succeeds a previous era of the counterfeit, the contemporary era of simulation sees the usurpation of exact reproduction by DNA-like models of generation.<sup>34</sup> Thinking of these different eras of production in concrete terms, the copy – *The Big Third Front* – appears to reproduce the original footage of *The Chengdu–Kunming Railway* both accurately, to represent construction of this specific railway, and inaccurately, to represent the construction of another Third Front railway and the Liupanshui coal complex, among other projects. However, *The Chengdu–Kunming Railway* is itself not an original; it recycles footage from even earlier works, such as *The Railway Corps Struggles on the Chengdu–Kunming Line* (1970, *Tiebing zhandou zai Cheng-Kun xian shang* 铁兵战斗在成昆线上). Both works were produced by The Central Newsreel and Documentary Film Studio, giving their makers access to similar batches of archival footage. In addition, Mao-era edicts – established at the First Conference on News Documentary Filmmaking in 1953–1954 – dictated that script came first and shooting second.<sup>35</sup> When combined with considerations of political correctness, together with a lack of intellectual property rights, this encouraged documentary makers to closely – but not exactly – emulate existing documentaries. As a consequence, Mao-era Third Front railway documentaries closely resemble each other in both script and shot. Third Front documentaries thus cannot be understood in terms of authentic originals and counterfeits, or of identical reproduction, but rather as variants within a complex model that generates partial truths.

Baudrillard usefully moves studies of authenticity away from condemning the counterfeit towards destabilizing the relationship between original and copy. This is relevant to the study of innovation in contemporary China, where creative copies can transcend the multiple branded “originals” upon which they are modelled.<sup>36</sup> However, Baudrillard’s argument only goes so far for the analysis of Third Front documentaries.

First, his analysis takes capitalist society – particularly 1970s US capitalist society – as the cradle of simulation, with his references to Disneyland, Watergate and early reality television. However, studies of Mao-era cultural production indicate that socialism did not lag behind postmodern capitalism in the field of simulation. Laikwan Pang does not use the language of Baudrillard but has examined how the Cultural Revolution saw the establishment of cultural models whose mass emulation led to “proliferating copies that constantly diversified and distorted these models.”<sup>37</sup> For this same period, Barbara Mittler has described how Mao’s image was not simply reproduced but rather functioned as a “standardized pattern,” including for the 10,000 different Mao badge designs in circulation during the 1966–1971 period.<sup>38</sup> This model-based production of difference during the Cultural Revolution also included “cross-genre ties-ins” wherein model heroes were recycled through posters, songs, pencil cases and other mediums.<sup>39</sup>

Second, Baudrillard did not follow his theory with in-depth research on the complex relations between simulations. He declared Disneyland to be an overt simulation that functions to conceal the unreal qualities of Los Angeles and the wider United States, but he did not pursue the matter further.<sup>40</sup> This merely replaces the old binary of original and counterfeit with a new binary of seeming-original-that-is-actually-counterfeit and obvious counterfeit. In contrast, I attempt here to dissect the relations between simulations in order to understand what the makers of *The Big*

33 Baudrillard 1983.

34 Ibid., 83–112.

35 Chu 2007, 58–60.

36 Yang 2016.

37 Pang 2017, 13.

38 Mittler 2012, 267–68, 275.

39 Clark 2008, 4.

40 Baudrillard 1983, 25–26.

*Third Front* have done with historical footage, what may have motivated their choices of footage, and what unintended consequences may arise from these choices.

The first tendency of historical footage usage in *The Big Third Front* is to use images according to what they represent generally rather than specifically. If the commentary mentions a factory by name and there is no footage of that particular factory, then footage of any PRC-based factory from the 1950s to 1980s will do. For example, in episode six, the commentary introduces Factory 432 in Sichuan, which was responsible for shipbuilding. A contemporary shot of the factory's front entrance cuts to historical footage of shipbuilding, as the commentary describes the difficulties of building a large submarine so far from coastal areas. It seems that there were also difficulties in finding footage of the factory, as the images show shipbuilding in 1950s Dalian 大连, which featured in the documentary, *Celebrating Ten Years* (1959, *Huanqing shinian* 欢庆十年). It would, of course, be naive to take the commentary of *Celebrating Ten Years* at face value: 1959 was not, for example, the bumper year for agricultural production that it makes out. However, even if there are doubts about location and commentary, the fact that *Celebrating Ten Years* was produced in 1959 makes it certain that this shipbuilding footage has nothing to do with Factory 432 or the Third Front, since neither existed then. For the purposes of the *Big Third Front*, the exact time and location of shipbuilding is less important than the general category of "mid/late-20th century shipbuilding" as a symbol of the PRC's industrial past.

A second tendency is to draw repeatedly on a limited number of sources for footage; the less effort expended searching for general symbols of socialist history, the better, even if some of the footage is subsequently wildly inaccurate. Footage from *Celebrating Ten Years* is used plausibly in *The Big Third Front* to show the visit of Khrushchev to the PRC in 1959. However, the same documentary has also been mined for further footage – such as the aforementioned shipbuilding shots – irrespective of the incompatibility of late-1950s footage with commentary on the Third Front in the late Mao and Deng eras. Thus, *The Big Third Front* takes car production footage from the late 1950s to represent the technological progress of the 1980s. Elsewhere, its commentary describes workers playing a new card game of the 1980s; however, the footage comes from *One Woman, One Family*, a chapter of *Yukong* shot in the early 1970s. Sometimes the maximization of footage is such that the same shot reappears across multiple episodes and contexts.

A third tendency is a preference for high-quality colour footage. *Celebrating Ten Years*, for example, was a politically important documentary, and thus features higher production values than most other Mao-era works. This stress on visual quality also prompts the makers of *The Big Third Front* to look beyond domestic productions and draw on multiple chapters of *Yukong*, as well as the Canadian documentary, *North China Factory* (1980). Whereas Mao-era domestic documentaries provide shots of marching, digging and welding, their staged qualities do not provide the correct veneer of visual authenticity for delineating non-work life. The observational, fly-on-the-wall approaches of *Yukong* and *North China Factory*, together with their colour images and synchronous sound, provide more intimate portrayals of the everyday, such as getting a haircut or playing cards.<sup>41</sup> *North China Factory's* focus on Shijiazhuang 石家庄, rather than the Third Front, is not an issue for the makers of *The Big Third Front*. In contrast, the presence of a portrait of Hua Guofeng 华国锋 alongside one of Mao in the Shijiazhuang factory is an issue and has been cropped out; only certain high-quality images of the everyday socialist past are desirable. *The Big Third Front* even fuses observational documentary footage with scenes from Wang Xiaoshuai's 王小帅 *Shanghai Dreams* (2005, *Qing hong* 青红), an observational-style feature film set in the Third Front.

A fourth tendency is the frenetic cutting of footage. Although *The Big Third Front* only draws on a limited number of documentaries, its fast-cutting approach means that it consumes a lot of footage. Images are extracted then strung together into fast-cutting montages, which are held together by sonic continuities of commentary and music. For example, the aforementioned shipbuilding

41 *Yukong* has its own issues of representation; see Schoots 2000, 329, 348–49.

shots from the 1950s, taken from *Celebrating the Ten Years*, are followed by shots of factory workers and machinery from the same documentary. The montage then skips to shots of workers and machinery from *The Generator Factory* before returning to *Celebrating the Ten Years*, without any deviation in commentary theme. From the 1950s to the 1970s and then back to the 1950s in around a minute.

The overall effect of these tendencies is the creation of a documentary that draws on the expository style and footage of the Mao era but also differs in the sense of time and space that it conveys. The Mao-era Third Front documentaries give a sense of being grounded in a particular time and space. Long shots slowly pan over the landscape, before giving way to shots of workers shaping the landscape and then finally shots of socialist infrastructure imprinted on the landscape. There is a sense of linear time passing in a specific space, from the beginning to the completion of a construction project. *The Big Third Front*, in contrast, is not restricted to a particular time and space, but rather has the entire history of the Third Front within its remit. It goes beyond even this wide remit in its usage of footage, drawing on shots of coastal areas as well as conflating the various decades of the PRC. Instead of a concrete sense of time and space, there is the sense of a vaguely remembered past whose purported ongoing contribution to the present is not grounded in the details of specific factories. This presentation of time, as I argue below, is unorthodox in the context of the CCP's periodization of PRC history and also points to the ways in which even state-sanctioned accounts of the Third Front may disrupt dominant historical narrative.

### Conclusion: Third Front as Disruptive Method

1978 was a watershed year. Everything changed after that. But if this is so, then why do the makers of *The Big Third Front* feel comfortable showing, for example, footage of railway journeys in the early 1970s to represent the early 1980s? Could the material conditions of railway infrastructure have remained so untouched by the great transition from the chaotic Cultural Revolution to the prosperous reform and opening up? The material realities of the early 1970s vis à vis the early 1980s are not so important here as the documentary makers' implicit conceptualizations of the recent past as well as their assumptions about audience conceptualizations of this past. The conceptualization appears to be that the PRC past is a foreign country and things look different there, and moreover, that distinguishing differences within this past is far less important than distinguishing the past from the present. This past warrants positive treatment, as a process that had to be undergone in order to achieve prosperity in the present. But it is also to be held at arm's length and viewed from a position of distancing nostalgia, as a period whose heroic struggles against nature, foreign enemies and the market were necessary for – but also distinct from – the glorious present.

This paper has shown how two major documentaries have not only evinced the usefulness of the Third Front for contemporary state propaganda but also, consciously or otherwise, undermined the CCP's traditional periodization of PRC history. *Vicissitudes* maintains a fairly clear distinction between the Mao and Deng eras, but it also ultimately portrays the Deng era quite unfavourably, as a period of decline for the Third Front, in clear contrast to the rejuvenation of the present. *The Big Third Front*, meanwhile, transgresses historical watersheds in its freewheeling usage of historical footage, so that everyday life from the 1950s to the 1980s (and occasionally even the 1990s) is reduced to a hazily recalled past. In doing so, both documentaries present the Deng era in quite ambivalent ways. Both documentaries also, to varying extents, continue the expository tradition of Mao-era documentary. *The Big Third Front* is particularly marked in its links to these older documentaries, both in its recycling of their footage and in its resistance to the constraints of visual reality.

Further research is needed to ascertain whether this ambivalent treatment of the Deng era is reflective of wider contemporary representations, as Xi Jinping moves away from Dengist policies such as the opening of the domestic economy, the maintenance of a low-profile foreign policy and the restriction of personality cults. My initial assumption was that the documentaries' ambivalence towards the Deng era was a deliberate shift; however, my viewing of other *National Memory*

and *Military Memory* episodes suggests a more complicated picture. The *National Memory* series, for example, generally presents the early reform era as glorious while avoiding the second half of the Mao era entirely, with the exception of episodes on foreign policy that, similar to the Third Front episodes, freely cross the Mao/Deng divide. Notably, the CCP's 2021 "Resolution" is not critical of reform-era policy, even though it mentions Deng and his accompanying "Thought" far less than it mentions Xi, Mao and their respective "Thoughts."<sup>42</sup> The 2021 "Resolution" also maintains a clear distinction between the Mao and the reform eras, and yet its history of these periods is brief enough that the differences are not as sharply defined as in the 1981 Resolution; an increased distance between the present and the 1980s may lead to further blurring of the Mao and Deng eras, irrespective of the official periodization.

Further research will also be necessary to see if the duplicitous recycling of footage in *The Big Third Front* is representative of wider documentary practices in contemporary China. A shortcoming of this study has been my inability to interview the makers of *The Big Third Front* to ask how and why, given the project's considerable resources and expertise, there are so many errors in the usage of footage. These are sensitive questions in sensitive times, and it would require a researcher with pre-existing close contacts at CCTV to procure answers. Another approach could be to look across a wider set of state documentaries for general patterns of footage usage. The high-quality colour footage of the 1970s used in *Yukong*, for example, appears to feature quite regularly across the *National Memory* series.

From my study of two Third Front documentaries, it can already be seen that the timeline of the Third Front provides methodological potential for seeing the history of the PRC in new ways. David Bachman has argued that the political history of the PRC from 1958 to 1965 has mainly been studied for the ways in which it gave rise to the Cultural Revolution, rather than as a period in its own right.<sup>43</sup> Bachman accepts that the traumatic nature of the Cultural Revolution makes it understandable that the preceding period has mainly been researched for clues as to how it emerged. However, he also argues that "new avenues of research can and should be opened up if scholars try to imagine that there was no Cultural Revolution."<sup>44</sup> While the Great Leap Forward and famine years of this 1958–1965 period have received significant attention since the publication of Bachman's article, the legacy of the Third Front – as a project beginning in the mid-1960s – continues to be marginalized in the English-language literature. Studying this legacy, however, can contribute to ongoing attempts to problematize histories that treat 1966 and 1978 as complete breaks in China's socio-economic development.<sup>45</sup> Such studies need not entail imagining that the Cultural Revolution – or Third Plenum of 1978 – did not happen, but they can provide new perspectives on how these shifts were experienced outside of those coastal regions which benefited so much from Deng's reforms.

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<sup>42</sup> Thornton 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Bachman 2007.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>45</sup> See, e.g., Schoenhals 2002; Bramall 2007; Brown 2015.



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