Geopolitics, coal production, and labor processes in the Fushun coalmine, 1946-1948

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INTRODUCTION: SOVIET REMOVALS

As Japanese defeat appeared imminent in 1944, high-ranking members of the Chinese Nationalist government in Chongqing began preparations to take over Japanese-controlled territories. Their attention quickly trained on Northeast China with its vast natural resources and heavy industries that Japan had controlled, directly and indirectly, for over four decades. Re-establishing Nationalist control in this region required careful planning, which Song Ziwen 宋子文 (1894–1971), Minister of Foreign Affairs between 1942 and 1945, spelled out in his proposal *Dongbei jingji yijianshu* 東北經濟意見書 [Suggestions for the Economy in the Northeast].[1] Song's proposals for governing the region's economy included peaceful cooperation with the Chinese Communists and the Soviet Union. Yet Song's plan came to naught when the Soviet Union declared war on Japan on 8 August 1945 and the Soviet Red Army began its military offensive to take Northeast China on 9 August 1945. After the Japanese surrendered on 15 August 1945, Soviet troops occupied the region for the next seven months, denying entry to Nationalists troops. Talks between the Soviet and Nationalist government over the terms and timeline of Soviet troop withdrawal dragged on for months as both sides failed to agree on the Soviets' demand for joint management of several key industrial enterprises in Northeast China, including Fushun Coalmine.[2]

When the Soviet Red Army finally announced on short notice its intention to completely withdraw from Manchuria on 15 March 1946, it took with them considerable amounts of industrial equipment, raw materials, and finished stock that it regarded as war reparations. The Soviets declared that the reparations were worth US$ 95 million while the Americans disagreed, estimating the value of removed industrial goods and equipment at US$ 895 millions and the losses in production and replacement costs at US$ 2 billion.[3] Soviet withdrawal, according to historian Odd Arne Westad, was timed to "destroy the possibility of a U.S.-led comprehensive peace settlement and to leave the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) in control of as much of Manchuria as they could grab by their own force."[4] As the Soviets desired, U.S.-led peace talks between the Chinese Communists and the Nationalists broke down, and shortly thereafter armed conflict broke out in Siping, a railway town in Jilin province. For the next three years, Northeast China became one of the major theaters of the Chinese Civil War.

Given the region's centrality in the Chinese Civil War, it is not surprising to find a wealth of scholarship on this period of the history of Northeast China, focusing on the explicit question of Communist victory and the implicit question of Nationalist defeat. Steven I. Levine's *Anvil of Victory* examines how the Chinese Communists mobilized rural areas in the fight against the Nationalists. Harold Tanner's books on the major military campaigns – the Battle of Siping (1946) and the Liao-Shen Campaign (1948) – illustrated the

1 Song Ziwen – 宋子文, "Dongbei jingji jihua yijianshu 东北经济计划意见书," Folder 45.12, Box 45, T.V. Soong Collection, Hoover Institution Archives.

2 Chang / Gillin / Myers / Zen (1989), 199.

3 Pauley (1947), 77; Levine (1987), 69.

4 Westad (2003), 35.

brilliance of Chinese Communists' military strategists and the miscalculations of the Nationalists' military leaders. Diplomatic historians Odd Arne Westad, Niu Jun, Shen Zhihua, and Yang Kuisong utilized increased archival access in mainland China and the former Soviet Union in recent decades to revisit the complex alliances and rivalries between the Chinese Communists, the Nationalists, the United States, and the Soviet Union driving events in Northeast China in these years.[5]

A curious gap in this rich literature is the topic of Soviet removals. Despite the considerable value of the removals, there has been scant attention given to the question of how Soviet removals affected work and life in the industrial mining towns of Northeast China. This essay addresses this question by investigating how the removals impaired mining work and daily life in the coalmine and city of Fushun in Liaoning Province. Using documents from Nationalist archives and a mineworker's publication, I chart the consequences of Soviet removals on mining operations, labor processes, workers' welfare, and Nationalist governance. Soviet removals, I argue, imposed greater constraints on the Nationalist state's capacity for governance than historians have acknowledged, and thus the standing view of the Nationalist party-state as ineffectual deserves reconsideration. This study of Fushun under Nationalist control (1946–1948) adds to the growing body of scholarship re-examining the wartime Nationalist party-state.[6]

COLD WAR POLITICS OF MINING OPERATIONS

In Fushun Coalmine alone, the Soviet Red Army took the most advanced electric power shovels, which resulted in shutting down production in the Eastern Open Pit. They also removed railroad rolling stock and electric motors from the west oil shale plant.[7] Most damaging to both mining production and urban life were the removals from Fushun Power Plant. There, twenty-one Soviet engineers, ignoring pleas from the former Japanese manager and a local citizens' committee, directed a hundred Soviet soldiers and several hundred more Chinese workers and Japanese technicians to dismantle six turbo-generators, three feed pumps, the overhead crane in the generator room, five boilers, five transformers and six switchboards.[8] The removals halved the electricity capacity, causing coal production to plummet, and streets and homes in Fushun to go dark and cold. Without adequate electric supply, machinery to extract and haul coal ground to halt, mine water flooded underground tunnels, electric lamps went out, and heating boilers went cold.

The Soviet Union defended these removals on the basis of its right to Japanese assets in Manchuria as war compensation. These removals so outraged the U.S. government, whose plans for rebuilding a Nationalist-led China centered on Manchuria's heavy industries, that U.S. President Harry Truman commissioned a special ambassador, Edward A. Pauley, to conduct an inventory of Japanese assets removed and to survey damages to the Manchurian economy arising from the removals. Pauley and his team of twenty-one experts spent June 1946 touring factories, power stations, mines, and other industrial plants throughout Manchuria. Pauley's team discovered that in addition to the Soviet troops' systematic removals, they also "permitted and even encouraged Chinese mobs to pillage, taking official movies of the process in some instances."[9] Pauley concluded that the "conservative estimate of the damage to Manchuria resulting

5 Westad (1997); Niu (1987); Niu (1989); Shen (1994); Shen (2008); Yang (2001); Yang (2004).

6 Mitter / Moore (2011).

7 Pauley (1946), 77–78, Appendices 4 & 9.

8 Pauley (1946), Appendices 1 & 8.

9 Pauley (1946), 10.

from the Soviet occupation" approximated two billion U.S. dollars.[10]

Perhaps the most damaging consequence of Soviet removals was the reduction in power generation capacity. Mechanization of mining operations in underground and open pits under Japanese management had replaced muscular power with electric- or steam-powered machines to perform all aspects of mining operations, from coal extraction to haulage to dressage. In other words, mechanization made mining operations completely dependent on electricity and any disruption to power generation would halt mining operations. Pauley foresaw the consequences of Soviet removals on mining operations in Fushun. The most urgent task, Pauley recommended, was restoring power supply. He elaborates, "If sufficient power generating equipment can be quickly transferred from Japan, there is a good chance of salvaging one or two important coal mines that are not flooded or in grave danger of flooding."[11]

Pauley's predictions came true in the winter of 1946, which was Fushun's coldest in ten years. Mine Director Xie Shuying 謝屬鶯 reported to the Natural Resource Committee (NRC) Director Weng Wenhao 翁文灝 that more than one foot of snow had accumulated over the period of 30 November and 5 December.[12] Temperatures did not rise above −30 degrees Celsius, freezing pipes in power plants, damaging boilers, and eventually shutting down power generation. Mining operations came to a near standstill without adequate power supply. In the underground pits, water pumps stopped pumping out water from the flooded tunnels, electric-powered conveyor belts and hoists stopped conveying coal, and ventilation fans stopped circulating fresh air into and mine gas out of the pits. In the open pit, skips, electric shovels and locomotives stopped transporting stripped coal and overburden.

Power shortages causing work stoppages occurred frequently. Soviet removals reduced power supply in Fushun Coalmine from 100,000 kilowatts to 28,000 kilowatts.[13] In April 1947, mine management reached an agreement with the Northeast Power Board for the Board to supply the mine and its residential areas with supplemental electric power.[14] In addition to this measure, mine management also restricted non-mining power usage in the evening hours, alternating production shifts and limiting night shifts, and using manual labor where possible.[15] Workers carried water in buckets from flooded tunnels, dug out collapsed roofs with hand shovels, and drove trucks.[16] Power shortages returned mining operations to the days of manual tools, which were not used in the mine for two decades.

Soviet removals also created an acute shortage in machine equipment and parts. Although mining operations especially in the open pit were given priority in the delivery of power supply, stripping operations could not be fully restored due to missing key parts. Mercury rectifiers, which were necessary for providing direct-current electricity to high power consumption machines, were damaged in the open pit, but the mine had no more replacement left in its stock. As a result, existing electric shovels and locomotives stood idle even when the open pit received its share of power supply. The central office of NRC sent supplies of mercury rectifiers.[17] But replacement equipment and parts were not always in easy reach.

10 Pauley (1946), 37.

11 Pauley (1946), 14.

12 Institute of Modern History Archive, Folder 24-12-05-004, 1–2.

13 Academia Historica, Folder 003-01301-0235.

14 Academia Historica, Folder 003-010303-0419.

15 *Fukuang xunkan*, Sep 11, 1947, Sep 21, 1947, and Dec 21, 1947.

16 Academia Historica, Folder 003-010303-0419.

17 Academia Historica, Folder 003-01301-0235.

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Because the majority of the mine's machinery were of Japanese make, replacement parts had to be purchased from Japan. The flexible shafts that the oil shale distillation plant needed had to be obtained from Daian Heavy Industries Company in Tokyo and most of the parts for the electric locomotives had to be ordered from Mitsubishi Denki Company, Toyo Denki Company, the Department of Railway in Japan, Hitachi Works, Shibaura Company, and Koito Company. But the absence of formal trading relations between occupied Japan and the Nationalist government posed both bureaucratic and diplomatic problems. Nationalist officials did not know which appropriate department in the Nationalist government should conduct the business, who their counterparts in occupied Japan were, and which party should handle the customs paperwork. It was eventually decided that a Nationalist government representative would be appointed to handle all requests to import goods from Japan, and this official would be responsible for obtaining permission from the U.S. occupation forces in Japan or SCAP (Supreme Command for the Allied Powers) and for preparing import documents from the Chinese Nationalist government.[18]

The ingenious solutions that Nationalists officials, mining engineers, and mineworkers put in place did not bring mining output back to its pre-1946 levels. Coal output in Fushun Coalmine under Japanese management declined steadily from its peak in 1937: annual output fell from its peak of 9,529,693 tons in 1937 to 6,368,800 tons in 1942.[19] But coal output under Nationalist management was even lower than in the final years of the Second World War. In the three years of National management, output in 1946 stood at 1,266,862 tons, before climbing to 1,401,517 tons in 1947 and then tumbling to 1,074,290 tons in 1948.[20] Accompanying declining output was falling productivity, which was largely due to the return to manual labor in mining operations. According to the calculations of Nationalist mining engineers, mining productivity in 1946 was one-third lower than that in 1942, though it rose in 1947 when mining productivity reached half of that in 1942.[21] Productivity figures for 1948 are not available, but it is safe to assume that productivity in 1948 could not have risen higher than the figures for 1946 and 1947. An unexpected outcome of reduced coal output was food scarcity.

FOOD SCARCITY IN THE COAL CAPITAL

Two years after the Chinese Nationalist Government assumed control over Fushun Coalmine, mineworkers and other residents faced one of the worst food shortages in the recent past. A mineworker, Li Chengrong 李承榮, recounted his experience over the course of three days, 9–11 June 1948, in an essay published in the 11 July 1948 issue of the Fushun Coalmine workers' periodical, *Fukuang xunkan*. Food was a recurring topic –he dreamt of food that he hadn't had in a while, he fought with his wife over lack of food, and his supervisors often used the promise of food deliveries to spur on production. The most poignant part of his account was his description of his sons' hunger when they learnt of a rare availability of pork at the butcher's. Li would love to buy the meat but he would have to go into debt and he preferred not to do so. As he deliberated, his sons ran over to him and begged him to buy some meat. His oldest son said "Papa, let's buy some meat! Liu Xiaozhu's family are frying up meat. Papa, it smells so good ..." Before the oldest boy could finish, the younger one chipped in, "Papa, Old Yang's family is enjoying a meal of rice, stewed meats and even noodles. How wonderful the smell! My good father, let's get some of that!" After Li gently turned

18 Institute of Modern History Archive, Folder, 24-12-05-001-01.

19 Minami Manshū tetsudō kabushiki kaisha Bujun tanko 南満洲鉄道株式会社撫順炭鉱 (1942), 142.

20 *Fushun meikuang gaikuang*, 10–12.

21 *Fukuang xunkan*, May 1, 1948.

down his sons' request, his younger son burst into tears and wailed, "Why do we have to eat those horrible-tasting bean cakes!" The poor boy had eaten nothing but bean cakes – blocks of steamed or fried dough made from soybean flour – for months.

In fact, many mineworkers in Fushun Coalmine had been relying on bean cakes since December 1947. In his telegram to NRC Director Weng, dated 26 December 1947, mine director Xie pleaded for assistance from the central government in Nanjing.[22] Food supplies in the mine had dwindled so low in December 1947 that workers resorted to eating bean cakes, instead of their usual diet of sorghum grains, to stave off hunger. Instead of overseeing mining operations, he was consumed with the urgent task of feeding mine workers. He bartered coal with grain merchants in exchange for sorghum grains and used emergency funds from the NRC to purchase wheat flour. Mine management was under tremendous pressure to provide food for mineworkers because their salaries did not keep pace with rapidly rising food prices. According to Xie, the price of sorghum at the time of sending the telegram had risen threefold in a single day. The effect of runaway inflation on mineworkers is explained in a worker's article in the 21 January 1948 issue of *Fukuang xunkan*. In his article, Wei Sheng 魏聲 lamented that the food situation in Fushun coalmine had worsened despite winning the war. When the Japanese surrendered, the price of sorghum grains was no more than 0.80 to 0.90 yuan per 600 grams, and now it was over 4000 yuan. This rise came within a span of two years. Workers had to spent at least 90 % of their wages on food. Coalmine staff with monthly salaries below 200 yuan, who made up 84 % of the staff, could not afford to purchase 30 kilograms of sorghum. Because of the inflation, mineworkers depended on the mine for providing basic sustenance.

Food scarcity in turn caused malnutrition, which became a public health concern. Fushun Coalmine Hospital doctors reported in March 1948 of a sharp rise in the number of patients suffering from a severe eye infection that led to the softening of corneas and even blindness.[23] The identified cause of this infection was malnutrition, namely vitamin A deficiency. Young children between the ages of 1–5, the most susceptible group, accounted for most of the admitted patients, but the doctors believed that there were many more unreported cases among mine workers. By August 1948, the situation of food scarcity in Fushun Coalmine deteriorated to a low point. A delegation from General Trade Unions, sent by the NRC to look into the food situation in Fushun, reported that "workers have no food and must stop work ... 80 per cent of workers subsist on beancakes and soy pulp. While investigating the situation, we do not dare to ask [the workers directly] but we have heard about instances of those who starved to death and those who killed themselves. [...] Now, we're facing the worst situation."[24]

CONCLUSION: MORE THAN INEFFECTUAL GOVERNANCE

Almost four decades of Japanese control (1907–1945) transformed the coalmine in Fushun into the largest and technologically most advanced coal producer in all of China, earning its moniker "Coal Capital." Moreover, Japanese control also transformed Fushun into an industrial city that manufactured steel and chemicals, distilled petroleum and lubricants from oil shale, and generated electric power for much of southern Liaoning. Enabling this transformation was a workforce that grew to more than 80,000 workers by the mid-1940s. This sizeable workforce with a majority of Chinese workers was subjected to the racism of Japanese imperialism,

22 Institute of Modern History Archive, Folder 24-12-05-004.

23 *Fukuang xunkan*, March 1, 1948.

24 Institute of Modern History Archive, Folder 24-12-05-004, 56–57.

but was reliably provided with food, even after the Japanese empire mobilized for total war in the years 1941–1945. Fushun under Japanese colonial rule was neither fair nor equal, but as mineworker Wei Sheng wryly noted, at least food scarcity was not a problem under colonial rule. Rather, it was the mine's return to Chinese sovereign control in April 1946 that marked the arrival of food insecurity for mineworkers and other residents of Fushun.

As a non-agricultural producing area, Fushun Coalmine relied on revenues from extracted coal to procure necessary food supplies. Most of agricultural lands in Fushun had been converted into land used for mining or urban development. Food was supplied by other parts of Northeast China. Sorghum, millet, rice, maize, and soybeans came from farms in eastern and southern Liaoning province while wheat came only from farms in northern Jilin and Heilongjiang provinces.[25] Merchants acted as intermediaries in purchasing and transporting food from distant suppliers to Fushun, and then selling the acquired stocks of food directly to residents via local markets, stores, and restaurants. They also sold to the mine for resale in its company stores or use in its dining halls. Sustaining this system of food procurement was the consistent flow of revenue generated from coal sales. Without this revenue, the mine could not purchase any food for its stores or dining halls, or pay its workers the wages they needed to buy food from company stores, markets, or restaurants. This reality of food security was true under both Japanese and Nationalist managements, but the latter confronted constraints that curtailed coal production and revenue that the former did not.

This is not to say that the Nationalists' missteps, especially at the central level, did not exacerbate the situation in Fushun. The central government's inability to curb hyperinflation and its rigid coal pricing policy made food procurement more difficult for Fushun mine management. Hyperinflation, as mentioned above, rendered the wages of individual workers useless as wages seldom caught up with skyrocketing food prices. Mine management succeeded in blunting the effects of hyperinflation when it started issuing workers food rations in place of money wages. Because the mine bought in larger quantities than individual workers, it wielded more leverage with food merchants in setting purchase prices. In addition to hyperinflation, the national government's rigid coal pricing policy also limited the mine's ability to provide for its workers. In its attempt to rehabilitate industrial production, the NRC set the selling price of coal but, unfortunately for these nationalized coalmines including Fushun, it often fixed the price of coal much lower than actual production costs. For instance, the price of a ton of Fushun coal was fixed at 88,000 yuan but the cost of producing a ton of Fushun coal was well over 170,000 yuan.[26] To make up the shortfall in revenue, mine management took out loans from the NRC and banks. These loans provided immediate relief but did not remedy the situation. Future interest payments added to the mine's expenses in the long term, making it more difficult for mine management in subsequent months to afford wage payments or food purchase.[27]

Food shortages during the Chinese Civil War were common occurrences, though more so in the countryside than the city.[28] Food scarcity, hyperinflation, ineffective and even counterproductive economic policies, and tensions between central and local levels of government plagued various parts of Nationalist-controlled China in the years 1945–1948.[29] Historians such as Lloyd Eastman and Suzanne Pepper have viewed these socioeconomic problems as indicative of

25 Murakoshi/Trewartha (1930), 482–493.

26 Institute of Modern History Archive, Folder 24-12-05-004, 81-83.

27 *Fukuang xunkan*, Jan 21, 1948.

28 Lary (2015), 38 & 114.

29 Pepper (1998), 95–136.

the Nationalist party-state's ineffectual governance.[30] The Nationalists in these earlier narratives, from its leader Chiang Kai-Shek to local officials, are frequently portrayed as nepotistic, corrupt, and incompetent. But the experience of Fushun in 1946–1948 challenges this portrayal of Nationalist governance. Its ineffectiveness in preventing food scarcity stemmed more from dislocations in coal production that Soviet removal engendered than from faults commonly attributed to Nationalist governance. Mitter and Moore argued in their re-interpretation of the wartime Nationalist party-state that they sought to see the Nationalist party-state as "a state attempting a project of state-building in which its intentions ultimately outran its capacity."[31] The same could be said for Fushun, where Soviet removals critically damaged the Nationalists' capacity for state-building.

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