

FILM/DOCUMENTARY

24 City

Jia Zhangke, 2009, 112 minutes, China, Hong Kong, Japan

Reviewed by Kin Tsui



In early March, 2009, Jia Zhangke's new film *24 City* began to be shown at movie theatres in Chinese major cities. It is a film that is quite different from Jia's former films in the way that it uses the documentary form. *24 City* is the name of a real estate project in construction on the site of a state-run airplane engine factory (now called Chengfa Group) in the city of Chengdu. Like many Chinese state-run factories that moved out of city centres during the 'structural reform' of the mid-90s, Chengfa Group and its workers underwent a painful experience in this unprecedented social change. Structural reform uniformly amounted to factory closures, worker lay-offs, and the selling of land to real estate developers, or the setting up private-public joint-ventures. Reflecting this transformation on film is a challenging job for a film director who works in a social environment that lacks of basic freedom of speech and with a government that frequently intervenes in any film production that might challenge its power and ideology.

Jia Zhangke is a Chinese film director who is well known for representing the daily life of migrant workers in urban areas, a very sensitive topic in China that other directors refrain from addressing for both political and commercial reasons. Jia purposely keeps his distance from mainstream Chinese commercial films and sincerely tries to use his specific perspective to represent marginal social groups that are often neglected and forgotten in the grand narrative of globalization. In *24 City* Jia uses a documentary approach. His camera does not construct a narrative, or arrange the plot with its consequent closure, key elements to most feature films. By using the documentary format, the camera acquires freedom and independence from narrative, and can capture any object, event, or detail, that reflects social reality or a certain social group's daily life. In comparison with his early films that focus on migrant workers or young people who live in rural areas or small cities and towns, but yearn for big city life, this film directly touches on issues of land development and financial capital, both of which play an extremely significant role and function in the drastic reconstruction and reshaping of urban form and urban reality in present-day China.

Jia bases his film on interview and portrait photography, letting interviewees tell their own stories and explain their experiences of daily life directly to the camera. He is able to promote a marginal social group's image on screen to a dominant position usually occupied by the upper class in a portrait painting of traditional art history, or by the main 'heroic' characters in a commercial film.

There are a number of details within the film that are worth ruminating on. At its beginning, factory workers attend a land transfer ceremony arranged by the factory management and the property developer. Together they organize a performance to create a celebratory atmosphere. This is quite common in China, but what appears incongruous is that the workers continue to prefer to sing socialist songs popular in the 1950's to 1970's. On one hand, this reveals the workers social identity and their historical memory. On the other, it reflects China's social reality: that socialist ideology and the capitalist market economy coexist in an extremely contradictory way within the 'reform and opening' era and that the state still steadfastly believes that 'socialist' ideology can dominate and control the capitalist market economy, even though the reform policy adopted in the past three decades by the state is substantially neoliberal. The next scene can be used to further explain the extreme contradiction of the current social situation in China and the great impact of reform policy on a state-owned enterprise worker who has devoted his or her lifetime to the state, and the construction of socialism. While the sound of the speech delivered by a

bureaucrat on the platform still lingers, the camera turns to shoot the first interviewee who is walking up a long stairway. This is then followed by the shot of a broken window. The camera moves from left to right, fixing on the retired worker standing by the window, and then the camera comes into focus. The retired worker's facial expression is so serious, sad and unforgettable that audiences can perceive his most intimate feelings, his confused affection and the tragedy and hopelessness that he has undergone during this transition. At the same time, you begin to sense that this is not an ordinary documentary, but one that is epic, heroic, and sublime. What follows is the shot of a truck moving dismantled machinery out of city. The factory and the workshop, the space where workers work and spend most their lifetime, finally comes to end. In the process of worldwide globalization and the reform and opening in China, this space will inexorably and irrevocably make room for a new master, finance capital and its associated interest groups.¹ The vice president of Chengfa Group mentions in a casual yet definite way that a five-star hotel will be built on the site of his office.

In the interviews, former factory workers talk about what has happened to them in the past several decades. In Post-Mao China, factory workers began to lose the traditional social status that they enjoyed in Mao's time. According to Lisa Rofel's analysis, workers live as "absent presence" or "historical lack" in Post-Mao China's modernization project.² We cannot take their stories simply as nostalgia, expressing their dissatisfaction with the current situation. These narratives, in more academic terms, "evinced the culturally specific means by which people represent and therefore experience the worlds in which they live. Yet narratives also provide the moment of challenging those world order. As Kathleen Steward argues, narration opens up gaps and in the order of things and the meanings of signs."³ In the Chinese social context, these worker's stories can be taken as a way to maintain their political consciousness, to subvert and to refuse the image and identity shaped by the government and its ideological propaganda.

In *24 City*, the image of future city itself appears only in the form of high-rising buildings still under-construction and the sand table model that a salesgirl displays to a potential buyer (one of the interviewees whose parents work in the same factory and who now works for the local TV station). The final shot shows the grey, gloomy, dusty panorama of Chengdu, seriously challenging the official ideology of a bright future for the urban landscape in China.

2. Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernity: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 96.

3. Rofel, 14.

Kin Tsui teaches art history at the Sichuan Art Profession College. His research focuses are contemporary Chinese social and urban changes, Marxist critical theory, and Chinese film.

Notes

1. The transfer and sale of land and real estate industry is one of the most lucrative businesses in present-day China. According to Chinese media, local governments depend on the sale of land for approximately 50% of their revenue, although it varies between different regions and cities. In addition, the government charges 52 different taxes on each real estate project. These taxes plus land price together form a large proportion of the cost of a real estate project, from 30% to 50%. 70% to 95% of the money that a real estate developer invests on each project comes from a state-owned bank's loan. So the State is a driving force in the unprecedented large-scale urban construction or reconstruction across China. Meanwhile, the government has speeded up the commercialization of urban housing since the mid 1990's by privatizing former public housing (making danwei(work unit) employees buy their formerly allocated housing), greatly reducing the supply of affordable housing and pushing the vast majority of people into the market to solve their housing problems. The quantity of affordable ownership and rental housing provided by the government makes up a very small proportion of the total housing supply, around 3% to 5%. Rural migrant workers and un-registered urban residents are not entitled to apply for this public housing.