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The detritus of an old factory provides the starting point for an exhibition exploring the mainland's industrial identity, writes **Kristina Perez**

Memories are made of these

Ou Ning is well aware of the effects of the mainland's rampant urbanisation. As construction workers toil outside his gleaming new office block in central Beijing, his non-profit Shao Foundation is curating an exhibition about the social costs of development.

Jia Zhangke's *24 City* showcases the memorabilia of workers from state-owned Factory 420, in Chengdu, which in 2006 was sold to property developers who plan to transform it into a luxury real-estate project named 24 City. Jia directed a docudrama of the same name that recorded workers' memories of the plant, and during filming the crew collected the items that are on display in the show.

The factory was originally relocated with its staff from Shenyang in Liaoning province to Chengdu in Sichuan province in the late 1950s, at the height of political tensions with the Soviet Union.

Factory 420 became a virtual city in its own right, with 30,000 workers and housing, a hospital, schools and even a soda plant for 100,000 people.

Ou sets the exhibition's tone by recreating Factory 420's *weishengqiang* walls, the lower half of which are painted green (a common colour scheme in mainland factories in the 1980s). It's an apt backdrop for the lightbox photo collages of workers who contributed memorabilia from the plant and described life there.

The show also features unused footage from the film *24 City*, notably an interview with a worker who was injured in a factory accident and another with a worker sent to study in Italy in the 1980s.

A real-time video feed showing the construction sites outside the gallery contrasts the displays of the past with the modernisation of the present.

In the exhibition's centrepiece,



Photo: Nie Zheng

packets of cigarettes, tattered copies of the "little red book", antique clocks, flower-painted tea thermoses, metallic flashlights, 1980s calendars and department signs are displayed. Ou, who is also an artist, says the items illustrate the routines of a distant time and highlight the ubiquity of urban development.

"We can see a public memory of the factory from these kind of objects," he says. "These objects are actually a reflection of the memory of the workers and the people who were in the factory."

Jia says the most meaningful displays are the tea mugs, which were handed out every Labour Day as a reward to model workers. On each of the mugs was written the date and the reason for the reward.

"In this factory you can feel that time stopped... and that modernisation was hiding somewhere deeply," he says.

"You can see the old system everywhere in all the details."

These objects are actually a reflection of the memory of the workers and the people in the factory

Ou Ning (left), curator

Jia says he started on the script for his film about the factory in 2000 but put it aside until 2006 when he heard of its sale to a property developer. "I was shocked," the director says.

"That factory has 50 years of history. Many of the workers are from Shenyang.

"They moved to Chengdu, and within one year the factory would be demolished for a commercial real estate project.

"That city, that factory, was the memory of 100,000 people's lives and it was going to be smashed into

powder," Jia says. "I was really attracted by that story and I thought the new angle would be memories of the factory and about China [and the transition] from planned economy to market economy and of the sacrifice of the workers.

"It's also a history of socialist practice over 50 years."

He wrote a script blending interviews with former staff with monologues by actors Zhao Tao, Joan Chen, Lu Liping, and Chen Jianbin.

Ou says the factory community is a "sinking city", because it no longer generates products and the workers have all lost their jobs.

"The workers and the people have had to leave the city - to go, for example, to southern China or to other big cities to find jobs," he says. "So the cities which were built in the 1960s for historical reasons are now sinking."

The story of Hou Lijun highlights the spirit of the film and the exhibition. One of more than 100 workers interviewed for Jia's film, and the subject of his book, *A Collective Memory of the Chinese Working Class*, Hou was born in Shenyang in 1953.

She arrived in Chengdu with her mother when she was five. She worked at Factory 420 until she was fired in the first round of lay-offs in 1994, and expresses childlike bewilderment at having lost her job, even though she says she never failed her boss and was never late.

Hou describes her fruitless

search for work and how eventually she took to selling flowers on the street and tailoring at home. "Come rain, come shine, I must go forward," she says.

Hou's story represents the loss of her generation, Jia says.

"This film was to remind people that the fast-developing Chinese economy was based on workers' sacrifices," the director says.

"They were the so-called owners of society. They were the leaders of workers and they were pushed to the edge," he says.

"You can feel it so strongly when you enter their dormitories or living areas and you see their electronics - they are still in the 1980s, and only one or two things remind you that this is the 21st century."

Ou hopes the exhibition will remind mainlanders of their past and help them to search for their contemporary identity.

"[The exhibits] remind you of the daily life of the past 20 years in China, especially in common people's daily lives.

"Now Chinese people are trying to build an identity, and they always go back to the past, go back to history, to find their common memory.

"The whole country actually wants to build its identity from memories," the curator says.

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