


REVIEW ESSAY

Working for Fuyao

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Abstract

In the heart of industrial and post-industrial America, a Chinese billionaire opens a glass factory in an abandoned auto plant, closed in 2008. Hope and jobs are back in 2010 but give way as nonstop productivity goals and automation clash with workers' unionization and shop floor attitudes.

American factory (2019), 115 minutes. Directors: Steven Bognar, Julia Reichert. Higher Ground Productions (US) Production. US première at Sundance Film Festival, Provo (2019).

As a historian of the automobile industry in Brazil, one of the things that stands out in watching directors Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert's 2019 documentary *American Factory* is the contrast it evokes between US industry and mid-century Latin American industrialization, on the one hand, and the US economy's position vis-à-vis the more recent wave of East Asian industrialization, on the other. In the face of Latin American industrialization, neither the welfare of American workers nor the industrial might of the United States seemed to ever be threatened. For example, at the end of the 1950s, when Brazil and Argentina imported assembly lines that had previously produced vehicles in places like Toledo, Ohio (Willys-Overland), and Willow Run, Michigan (Kaiser-Frazer), the prosperity of US automakers continued unabated. But in contrast, when confronted with competition from Asia, anti-union legislation assailed US workers' rights, and quite rapidly, the power of US factory workers was demobilized. In fact, after the largest Japanese automakers arrived in the United States in the 1980s, the formula of low-cost labor and hostility to unions was not a solution for the Big Three US automakers to overcome the Asian challenge. Starting in the 1990s and continuing forward, the automobile industry became a key sector in China's growing effort to become a global player. At the same time, by the early 2000s, North American auto giants, like General Motors (GM), were shuttering plants around the United States in alarming numbers.

One of those shutdowns occurred at GM's Dayton, Ohio, plant in 2008. It is this event with which Bognar and Reichert's documentary begins. Shortly before Christmas that year, ten thousand jobs disappeared almost overnight. But unlike traditional narratives of deindustrialization, *American Factory* shows that this state of affairs had a different outcome. Just two years later, in 2010, it was the arrival of

Chinese capital that reignited the hopes of Dayton's once-unemployed autoworkers. When the documentary ends in 2018, the Chinese company Fuyao, which began producing windshields in the same location as the old GM factory, was finally considered profitable. According to its 2018 annual report, the company had a net profit of more than \$24.5 million and twenty-three hundred employees. Unfortunately, the report also mentions the death of an employee who was killed after being caught between falling glass sheets and a forklift, an event that took place after the end of filming in 2017.

The Buddhist billionaire philanthropist Cho Tak Wong is the chairman of Fuyao, which is today a major worldwide glass manufacturer. The 2008 financial crisis created an opportunity for him to act without competition in the United States, and from the beginning to the end of the film, the conditions of a broken US economy provide the backdrop in which Cho Tak Wong operates. Cho does not speak English, nor does he seem interested in learning it. In the film, he certainly does not come off as an imperial agent seeking to make friends. Rather, Cho is headstrong—a trait that is illuminated in how he arbitrarily chooses the site for the ceremony to mark the opening of the factory, as well as how he complains about the placement of a security device on a wall, which he simply does not want to see despite legal requirements. Beyond keeping his distance both from obsequious American executives as well as from moments of humor and socialization, Cho does not cultivate “paternalist” responsibilities. In one moment, for example, Cho does not accept a baseball cap offered to him by a worker on a day of celebration, but when a Chinese manager intervenes, he backtracks, putting on the cap, only to subsequently remove it again. In general, he appears to pay very little attention to what is going on around him. He is never in a hurry, and seems generally apathetic. This could lead a prejudiced mind to confuse his facial expressions and extended pauses with “inferiority” or a lack of business acumen, an essentialized depiction that is a constant tension in the history of US-China economic relations. But Cho is intelligent, and from the perspective of this reviewer, his distance and coldness are calculated.

Another theme that is portrayed in Fuyao's American factory is that of class struggle. Narrative, takes, editing, and the film's soundtrack project onto the screen the workers' experiences dealing with subjugation and exploitation. It is impossible to translate here the images of exhaustion, the looks, the body language, the breathing, and the attitudes of these working men and women, particularly as the initial excitement of the factory's reopening gives way to endless, repetitive, tiring, dangerous and unhealthy, hard and low paid work. As the film demonstrates, misunderstandings between workers and factory foremen are a constant issue. A scar, which is seen at one point on the leg of Robert Allen, a furnace off-loader, is illustrative of this high-tension environment. When supervisor Rob Haerr, one of the few US workers to have forged a friendship with a Chinese colleague, is fired, he is told that he is “too slow” on the computer. The grey-haired Haerr fears that he is too old for “the market.” Thus, Fuyao was maybe his last chance at a dignified job.

According to Cho, output was low at Fuyao because of American workers' inefficiency, and also because he was not able to “manage them.” “When we try,” he remarks, “they threaten to get help from the union.” During a unionization

campaign at the factory, the confrontation becomes institutional, collective, and open. As a result, Fuyao, not unlike US automakers, resorts to tactics of espionage, counter-intelligence, repression, and firings to prevent the union drive. One United Auto Workers (UAW) trade unionist featured in the documentary notes how proud he is of the fact that from the post-World War II period onward, workers and management found a way for the firm to be profitable and for the workers to earn good wages. "That's what unionization at Fuyao is all about," he says at a meeting. Cho, however, remains strongly opposed since he sees the workers' right to form a union as a growing threat to his right to manage. In one conversation, an American employee and a Chinese employee (both possibly team leaders) complain that the US workers are at the factory not to make windshields but to make money—meaning a decent salary. Cho shows no passion for windshields either; rather his interest is clearly profits. From the perspective of the workers, who are far from crystal blowing artisans creating pieces of art, this means tireless engagement in the manufacturing process. There is no artistry in the production and stacking of car windows.

Windshields are for vehicles in a society on wheels. This is common knowledge on the factory floor, and nobody falls in love with a heavy product that breaks and cuts easily, and requires extremely high temperatures for its manufacture. Imperfections are impermissible. When the workers consider the context either of their lives, of the city of Dayton, or of the United States in general, they see in Fuyao a way to stay afloat. Before they found work at the factory, many Fuyao workers had, just like the economy, hit economic rock bottom. That does not mean that with the arrival of Fuyao everything is like it once was. In fact, the wages that Fuyao offers to its employees are lower when compared with their prior earnings. But in the post-recession world, there was no choice. In terms of the future, the workers fear being left behind when the market comes along with the next gold rush. Despite not appearing in the documentary, one trend is the opioid crisis, a phenomenon that grows as employment drops—or worse, still, disappears.

The two hundred Chinese workers, foremen, engineers, and managers at the Dayton factory make their own comparisons. In talks for only the Chinese employees, the cultural differences between China and the United States are a frequent topic of discussion: the way the Americans dress, their unshakable self-confidence, their taste for compliments. The US workers fingers are fat and, before going to the production line, they need to be trained repeatedly. When problems of performance are discussed, a Chinese lecturer in the film draws upon age-old words of wisdoms about how to deal with Americans, and thus asserts a sense of cultural superiority. Indeed, for the Chinese, the Americans are lazy. The Chinese workers complain, not because they have to work more, but because the US workers are not subjected to the same labor and disciplinary regime. Generally young, the Chinese workers at Fuyao are separated from their families, they work longer hours, earn less than their US counterparts and are unable to freely return to their homes in China. They are reduced to a life that moves between the factory and their places of lodging. The president of their union in China is even the brother of Cho, the boss of Fuyao. The US workers can refuse overtime and go home, but the Chinese workers at Fuyao do not have this liberty. For the Chinese, the factory floor in Fuyao is Chinese

territory. In fact, as a US worker points out, “they refer to us as ‘the foreigners.’” She also observes that “they [the Chinese workers] work nonstop.”

Although the differences are acknowledged, Fuyao emphasizes the slogan “one roof, one culture.” There is indeed one notable point of commonality between the American way and the Chinese way: the aversion—be it liberal or Communist—to workers’ rights and the right to unionize. This is essential to Cho from the get-go, and is a non-negotiable item. At the end of the documentary, an American executive, who Cho ends up firing, regrets having opposed the UAW. Cho also has his own doubts and admits not knowing if he is even contributing to the improvement of society or not. He also ponders if he is upsetting social harmony and destroying the environment, instead of improving both.

American Factory concludes with the topic of robots and automation taking centerstage as Fuyao’s future is considered. Near the end of the film, viewers are warned that, by 2030, 375 million workers will have to find totally different jobs due to automation. In predicting the end of manual labor in this way, the documentary shocks its audience, rather than providing a story of industrial hope. This reviewer is unable to understand the point that the documentary seeks to make with this ending, but it seems to be an ultimatum of sorts. It is reminiscent of the type of warning that comes from managers, who make unions and workers take the worst possible agreements. Either you give up some of your rights or the factory closes. Either you accept this salary or the robot will take your job. This ending clashes with the main question of the film: how the accumulation of capital is a daily problem to be confronted head-on in the bodies and souls of the working men and women who are making History. As Timi Jernigan, a furnace technician, says: the American dream on the American shop floor of a Chinese factory is to “get treated with common decency.”