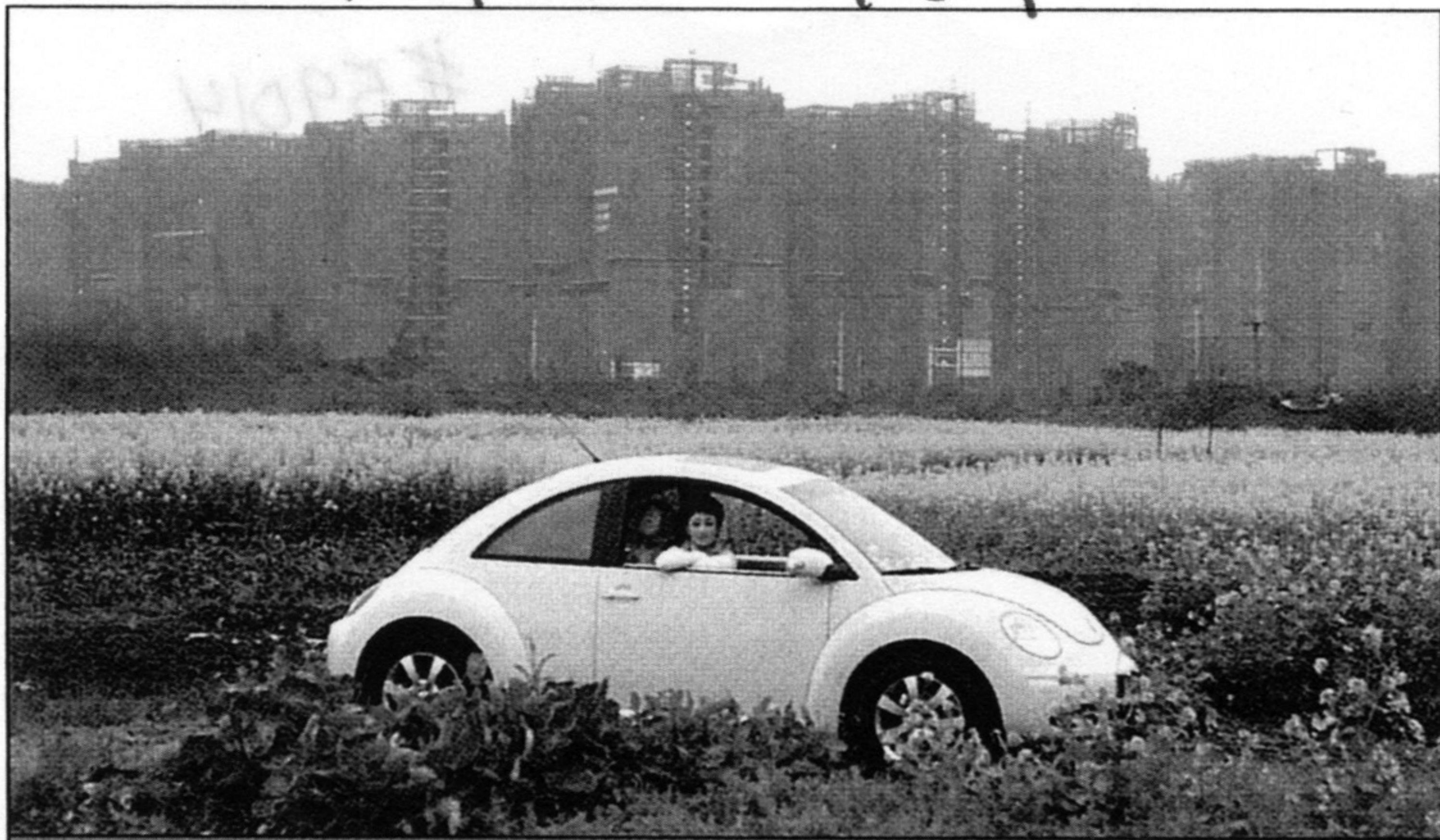


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Helmer Jia Zhangke's "24 City" uses the story of a factory being demolished for new development to comment on recent Chinese history.

## 24 CITY (ERSHISI CHENG JI)

(HONG KONG-CHINA)

An Xstream Pictures, Shanghai Film Group, China Resources (Holdings) Co. presentation, in association with Office Kitano, Bandai Visual, Bitters End, of an Xstream Pictures production. (International sales: MK2 Intl., Paris.) Produced by Jia Zhangke, Shozo Ichiyama, Wang Hong. Executive producers, Chow Keung, Ren Zhonglun, Tang Yong.

Directed by Jia Zhangke. Screenplay, Jia, Zhai Yongming. Camera (color, HD), Yu Lik-wai, Wang Yu; editors, Lin Xudong, Kong Jinlei; music, Yoshihiro Hanno, Lim Giong; production designer, Liu Qiang; sound, Zhang Yang; assistant director, Han Jie. **Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (competing),** May 17, 2008. Running time: **112 MIN.**

With: Joan Chen, Lu Liping, Zhao Tao, Chen Jianbin, Jiang Shanshan, Chen Rui, Zhai Yongming, Yang Mengyue, Liu Xiangquan, Luo Gonghe.

Interviewees: He Xikun, Wang Zhiren, Guan Fengjiu, Hou Lijun, Zhao Gang. (Mandarin, Shanghainese dialogue)

By **DEREK ELLEY**

**F**ollowing "Still Life" and "Useless," documentary and fictional artifice are combined ever more egregiously by Mainland helmer Jia Zhangke in "24 City," in which demolition of a state-owned factory for a new development becomes a tool to reminisce on 50 years of modern Chinese history. Result is far more accessible than Jia's previous two pictures, with moments of genuine emotion by the real-life interviewees. But the technique of interweaving name actors into the docu fabric smacks of auteurism for its own sake, and the pic says nothing new or revealing. Further fest play beckons.

The factory was set up in Chengdu, capital of the southwestern province of Sichuan in 1958 to produce aviation engines, and became known as Factory 420, after its military code number. Workers were shipped there from all over China, and, as one character notes, the place was virtually a self-contained town, with its own living quarters, cinema, sports facilities, school and so on, with little contact with the local denizens of Chengdu.

Its fortunes declined during the '80s, when it switched to making consumer goods. Now it's being almost entirely demolished — like many crumbling state-owned factories in China — to make room for new apartments, business centers and a theme park called 24 City.

History emerges through straight-to-camera interviews with nine characters. Some are genuine, like repairman He Xikun, who misses the old days of self-sufficiency and companionship, and movingly visits his old boss, now senile, after many years. Or Hou Lijun, who first moved there as a young girl with her mother and stayed for 14 years, and remembers the first layoffs as economic realities started to bite.

However, after the opening half-hour, and with no warning beyond the audience's ability to spot the faces, Jia and co-writer Zhai Yongming start including fictional characters played by known thespians. First up is Hao Dali (Lu Liping), who tells of her long journey there by boat; later is Gu Minhua (Joan Chen), from Shanghai, who tells of her first love affair there.

Finally, there's a TV presenter, Zhao Gang (Chen Jianbin), who inspects the model of the new development; and twentysomething Su Na (regular Jia muse, Zhao Tao), who went to school in Factory 420 and now works as a Hong Kong shopper for local rich women. Other characters are played by no-names or members of Jia's crew.

The scripted characters, though fitted with plenty of wordage, end up saying much less — and in an obviously actorly way — about history and change than the real-life interviewees. Lu, a fine actress, comes off the best and most natural, though even she can't hide her thespian tics; weakest and showiest of all is Chen as a sassy Shanghainese now whiling away her time in an opera troupe, while Zhao's modern miss is little more than a cliché on legs.

Jia's reason for mixing real and fictional characters is that "as far as I'm concerned, history is always

a blend of facts and imagination." But the effect is to elevate the former at the expense of the latter, and thus the whole emotional fabric of the film. The fact that the viewer is watching "a Jia Zhangke film" seems more important than the subject itself, and when Chen's character says she was dubbed "Little Flower" because she looked like that character in a Joan Chen movie, it's pure film styling at the service of nothing.

Strongest moments are when the pristine HD lensing by Hong Kong's Yu Lik-wai (a Jia regular) and Wang Yu, and warm string music by Yoshihiro Hanno, take over in montages showing the gradual dismantling of the factory. These immaculately composed, often painterly images of state-owned and modern commercial China say much more than the staged and scripted interviews.

Though rarely as grindingly slow as much of Jia's recent work, the film would benefit from trimming by 15-20 minutes, with Zhao's section a prime candidate for excision.