

How does the Film Factory Boss Expose the Weaknesses of the China Model?

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Abstract: This essay explores the portrayal of the flaws within the Chinese economic development model, commonly referred to as the China Model [*Zhongguo moshi*], in the documentary film "Factory Boss [*Dagong laoban*]." The film highlights the low labour costs, lack of worker welfare, and inadequate health provisions within this economic framework. Through a detailed analysis of the film's cinematography and semiotic elements, the essay reveals how the narrative and characters highlight these issues. By focusing on the character of Lin Dalin, the factory owner, the essay illustrates the challenges Chinese manufacturing enterprises face in the competitive global market, where low labour costs are necessary. The *mise-en-scène* techniques employed in the film effectively depict the changes in China's manufacturing industry and emphasise the subpar welfare conditions for migrant workers. Ultimately, the essay demonstrates how "Factory Boss" is a microcosm of the China Model, unravelling its inherent weaknesses. This film highlights China's economic boom and raises questions about the sustainability of this development model.

1. Introduction

China's distinctive developmental routine was called the China Model by its population size, land size and rich underground resources. China concentrates its economic resources on eventually developing into the world's largest manufacturing country. The film *Factory Boss* is the epitome of China's particular manufacturing industry. However, the China Model's weakness was much-maligned as low labour cost was widely deemed as a disadvantage in the China Model. However, how does *Factory Boss* then reveal the China Model's flaws? This essay will discuss how the factory owner's film employs contextual introductions to reflect the low labour costs in the China Model, trying to prove this in descriptions of the protagonist. The essay will also explore how the feature of low welfare cost in the China Model was exposed by the film's *mise-en-scène* and semiotic analysis. The third segment of this essay will address the film's exposure of employees' low health costs. Finally, based on the preceding discussions, this essay will conclude that this film represents the flaws of the Chinese model by using cinematography while still interpreting the current height of documentary aesthetics in Chinese film.

2. The film *Factory Boss* and the China Model

2.1. The introduction of the China Model and its weaknesses

China's economic miracle was attributed to the China Model in the last thirty years. Daniel Bell defined the China Model as an emerging country with a growing labour force that is relatively well-educated and healthy and the world's largest market ^[1]. At the political level, based on its authoritarian nature and as a single-party state, China could maintain its political stability to the most significant extent. Meanwhile, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is committed to economic growth and opening to tackle livelihood issues ^[2]. The establishment of the China Model can be traced back to Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening policies because this could improve people's living standards. Deng's policies were intended to take the initiative and open China towards the global market, sufficiently utilising China's advantages to boost its economic development and strengthen its legitimacy ^[3]. This fact proved that the China Model materially fuelled China's rapid economic growth. According to statistics, since the reform and opening in 1978, China's annual growth rate has exceeded 9 per cent and has ranked second worldwide since 2012 ^[4]. Although under the global context of the raging coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), China's GDP still grew by 2.3% in 2020, making it the only country with positive economic growth ^[5]. Therefore, the China Model has prioritised economic development and political stability, laying a solid foundation for China's economic development.

Unavoidably, the China Model has its intrinsic weaknesses. Initially, the China Model's triumph might have been based on its low labour cost. According to the Heckscher–Ohlin Model (also referred to as the Factor Endowments Theory), international exchange is the outcome of unequal global allocation of productive capital ^[6]. China has undeniably many advantages in the age of modernity and globalisation, which have fuelled China's economic development. One of China's most attractive motivators for investors has historically been its cheap labour costs and ability to offer economies of scale. Considering China's relatively massive, more affordable labour force, the Chinese government employed this strength as the driving force to boost its economy. According to statistics, in 2019, China's workforce totalled approximately 774.7 million people ^[7]. A massive uneducated labour force in China was coupled with economies of scale and driven by the government, enabling coastal areas in China to generate many sweatshops. Yun-wing Sung defined sweatshops as the workplace where conditions are poor or unacceptable ^[8]. International investors sought to maximise its profits, thus constituting manufacturing factories in China. Because of China's cheap labour force, this behaviour may have been to reduce costs. For example, China is the world's largest garment exporter, accounting for 34 per cent of global clothing exports in 2009. A migrant worker's average monthly wage, after overtime, was CNY 1,690 (£150), which was inadequate to meet employees' and their families' essential needs ^[9]. Therefore, low labour costs could be considered a notable weakness in the China Model.

Additionally, low welfare costs might be the other apparent weakness in the China Model. China's manufacturing factories are at the bottom of the international industrial chain. Only a tiny profit has flowed into China's manufacturing sector in the global market, while upstream monopolists earned the most profits. For example, Apple Inc earned a 30 per cent profit margin on the iPad and iPhone, while the value of China assembly labour accounts for only approximately 2 per cent of the cost of these devices ^[10]. Chinese entrepreneurs attempted to reap benefits from their workers. Thus, tens of thousands of sweatshops were established where entrepreneurs further condensed workers' income and working conditions. As a result, worker's welfare and income deteriorated in these sweatshops. On the one hand, many workers suffered from disease or industrial injuries in this rugged working environment. In 2009 alone, approximately one million people were

injured, and about 20,000 were afflicted with workplace disease ^[11]. On the other hand, the government's welfare system seems to be imperfect. Workers injured may have insufficient social welfare to confront unexpected situations and industrial injuries. For example, 13.6 per cent of migrant workers who worked in these sweatshops were enrolled in the government pension plan in 2010, 18.9 per cent were enrolled in the government medical care plan, and 26.2 per cent were covered by government work-related disability insurance ^[12]. Therefore, low welfare cost is another weakness in the China Model.

2.2. The introduction of Factory Boss and its director

As a story film, *Factory Boss* was considered the movie that reflected the survival state of enterprises in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone since the enforcement policy of China's reform and opening 30 years ago. The main plot of this movie is related to the narration that Factory Boss Lin Dalin takes on the responsibilities of a company and its labour's livelihood and maintains the story of the 'Made in China' dream ^[13]. This film, directed by Zhang Wei, was screened on 21 October 2014, and was shortlisted for the main competition at the 38th Montreal International Film Festival ^[14]. As a new film director and a local Shenzhen citizen, Zhang was also formerly an entrepreneur in the electronics industry in Shenzhen. He then turned to writing and became a playwright, film director, and producer committed to showing the lives of marginalised people after graduating from the Directing Department and Literature Department of Beijing Film Academy ^[15]. For this reason, the *Factory Boss* was inextricably linked with his working experience in Shenzhen as an entrepreneur. For instance, the *Factory Boss* was a powerfully realistic subject, focusing on a toy factory in the Pearl River Delta. Due to the intense influence of globalised trends and free competition in the market economy, workers and factory owners live under tremendous pressure, which is intolerable to ordinary people ^[16]. 2008 was the 30th anniversary of the reform and opening launched by Deng in 1978. At the same time, a financial crisis erupted in America, quickly burgeoning in the world. Shenzhen's handicraft manufacturing industries were severely influenced by this crisis ^[17]. This was mainly because, at the bottom of the global industry chain, Shenzhen's primary manufacturing industry relied heavily on the American and European markets, dramatically influenced by sluggish market demand. As a practitioner of the manufacturing industry, Zhang could be regarded as an insider who used to be an entrepreneur and had endured the financial crisis and significant depression in 2008 ^[18]. Therefore, *Factory Boss* seeks to coin that the Western enterprise group provided paper-thin margins to Shenzhen's companies in the troubled and challenging global context of the financial crisis. In contrast, domestic labour workers' demand rose steadily. The main character, Lin, would inevitably and unfairly treat all people, including himself, for a growing number of Chinese observers. In a fascinating perspective that had not yet been explored, the factory owner exposed the inherent deadlock of the global economy in China and Shenzhen.

2.3. The embodiment of low labour cost in the film *Factory Boss*

The film *Factory Boss* used a contextualised introduction to sometimes embody the low labour costs in the background. It tells the story of Factory Boss Lin's adventure in starting his own business. This film does not overuse exaggerated aesthetics of expression and focuses on a documentary style to improve its authenticity. Authenticity has long been at the heart of cinema, and realism has been a medium from the beginning ^[19]. The intrinsic ability to record objective things enriches the film's documentary nature, so this film can genuinely reproduce everyday life. *Factory Boss*' calm performance objectively portrays the Chinese manufacturing industry and the existing situation of China's economy. It also uses simple images depicting the migrant workers'

unique social relationships with their bosses. The film enables the audience to feel the hardships of entrepreneurs and workers' toil. In its choices and developing characters, this film respects the truth more. Despite the psychological depiction of the Factory Boss Lin, the factory director's facial expressions and actions, and the undercover reporter's entangled conscience, there is no exaggeration – the film reveals the confusion and struggle of the Chinese manufacturing industry against the backdrop of the times. The film was shot in Shenzhen, and it was an authentic restoration of the original factory at that time. And Lin's office is a proper restoration of the office of the factory boss. Under the general background of that time, such as the generation of entrepreneurs represented by Lin, many people did not pursue luxury. The office decoration and the boss's clothes reflected their lifestyle and personal taste. Simplicity and practicality were the main demands of the factory owners. In *Factory Boss*, spectators can observe the assembly line of thousands of workers with lunch boxes and kettles hanging on their waists, all of which are documentary details. These details lay the foundation of the documentary aesthetics in the film. For example, Lin said in the film, arguing with a female correspondent, "How could I get here? I relied upon my bare hands". Early entrepreneurs in Shenzhen were all ordinary workers. This is the poignancy of China. As a line in the movie rightly says, it is not state-owned enterprises or foreign companies that support the 'Made in China' business card, but the vast number of private enterprises. With the weak dollar and international commodity prices, many had to undertake external processing and obtain the competitive advantage of small and medium-sized enterprises that rely on cheap labour. Many Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEM) factories closed, and domestic private enterprises had to receive foreign orders; more than their competitors, they could only try very hard to hold down prices and profits. For example, in the film, Lin's factory repeatedly chose to compromise, grabbing a toy order from an American Vivian company that initially changed the sight letter of credit to the payment by Cost Insurance and Freight (CIF) first and then later cancelled even the 10% deposit. If Lin does not accept this kind of overbearing terms, a long list of companies will wait in line to receive the listing. American Vivian corporations can also choose to find manufacturing foundries in Myanmar, with lower labour costs and cheaper materials. Thus, this film created Lin's factory as a symbol to reflect the low labour cost in the China Model. Lin's factory represents itself and is a figurative symbol that all of China undertakes external processing, relying on cheap labour to obtain competitive advantages over small and medium-sized enterprises. Under the globalised context, many Chinese entrepreneurs had to lower workers' incomes to make gains progressively.

The film *Factory Boss* also has a clear-cut feature of nationalism, seeking to demonstrate the low labour cost in the China Model by describing the main character. Susan Hayward defined the sixth wave as corresponding to the modern age of what is known as post-socialist China, or the new millennium decades –which began when China joined the WTO ^[20]. The *Factory Boss*, directed by Zhang Wei, came out on 21 October 2014, possessing a series of typical features in the movies of the sixth wave. These years have witnessed an expansion of consumerism and economic miracle. There are films about contemporary China that deal with serious issues such as urbanisation and social dissatisfaction ^[21]. The film *Factory Boss* demonstrated the woes of China's manufacturing sector and the workers' dissatisfaction with their factory in the first plot. Specifically, from the perspective of negotiation between Lin and foreign multinationals, the American Vivian brand was in the upper reaches of the economic chain, indefinitely driving down the processing prices of their products. In a cutthroat competitive environment, Chinese manufacturers [Dalin Toy factory] can only survive by accepting the lowest profit, squeezing costs, and exploiting workers. The film's camera works memorialised Lin's struggle as a small business owner in a maelstrom environment, with sympathy for a subjective perspective. Facing China's strict film censorship, the film has led the audience to feel Lin in this era of tide calamity and struggle. As the audience is objective, the

film motif has been emphasised from ‘made in China’ [*Zhongguo zhizao*] to ‘created in China’ [*Zhongguo chuangzao*]. This is what the generation of the processing industry must face and overcome. They could only eliminate the downstream risks by transforming into a private brand. Thus, this film sets the central conflict between Lin and his worker through the Vivian boss's introduction because this boss only gave 2 per cent profit to Lin's company. From his conversation with the boss's aides, we gather he wants the best quality at the lowest price. Meanwhile, the second plot highlights that Lin's character suffers inwardly, based on his conversations with other characters. Lin described that the depreciation of the US dollar and the rise of international commodity prices had caused many small and medium-sized enterprises, which undertake external processing and rely on cheap labour, to gain competitive advantages to get into trouble. Many factories have closed. Lin's enterprise can only try its best to lower prices and compress profits to receive orders from abroad and surpass its peers in the competition. Lin even uses a series of tricks to lower the factory's labour cost. For instance, in this film, Lin told his manager that he reduced the original fixed amount of unit pay by 5% and increased the excess by 15%. Lin would also have his underlings secretly speed up the production lines and get workers to speed up production. Nonetheless, the director adapted Lin's monologue to illustrate that foreigners order 100 million dollars, while Lin's profit is only a few million yuan. A single toy costs only 5 yuan, and the profit is only 5 cents. Migrant workers also have only 5 cents of income in one toy, but one toy sells for 400 dollars each in America. Foreign entrepreneurs have made away the considerable price difference between them. Accordingly, the director seemingly reflected the low labour cost in the China Model by setting up a series of the protagonists' conflicts and dialogue.

2.4. The embodiment of low labour cost in the film *Factory Boss*

The feature of low welfare cost in the *Factory Boss* is manifested in vivid *mise-en-scène* elements. *Mise-en-scène* was interpreted as the arrangement of scenery and stage properties in a play, literally translating to setting the stage. However, film analysis refers to anything in front of the camera, including set design, lighting, and actors ^[22]. In this film, the director decided to step out of the photo studio and then touch the actual scene of the plot, acting without or with a less artificial device scenario. He will cancel dramatic lighting and filming to hold the performer in a natural state, ultimately mobilising the actor's imagination and attempting to erase any signs of performance. This series adheres to realism's artistic values and practices, forcing the *Factory Boss* to set aside the past in its grandiose fashion and focus on the current substance of social life. For example, one of the episodes centres on an old employee in the factory; because he did not wear a mask for the long term, he fainted in the workshop and was tested for leukaemia after being sent to the hospital. Incredibly, this sweatshop offered workers no social welfare or medical insurance. So, the workers began to protest. They went on strike, caused trouble, put up banners, talked to journalists, and litigated at the local court. The director shot all scenes on site and used props in real sweatshops, so the group scenes of the workers' strikes and protests in the film are powerful because the film follows the logic of reality rather than drama. While preparing for the film, the incident of "Foxconn Worker Jumps from Factory Roof Amidst Job Cuts" [*Fushikang yuangong tiaolou shijian*] happened in Shenzhen, which vastly enhanced the film's authenticity ^[23]. Under the choking working pressure at Foxconn – which produced iPhone, Nokia, and other famous brand products in Shenzhen – working and sleeping comprise almost the whole life for most workers. Due to this, 13 people at Foxconn committed suicide within three days, their purpose only to acquire high compensation after they died ^[24]. These are a series of *mise-en-scènes* in this film and actual events. It furthers the idea that although China recently experienced high-speed economic development, this economic miracle was based on violating human rights and low welfare costs.

Furthermore, Lin's role as a typical representative in the current time's background was interwoven with his relationship with the workers, reflecting the workers' adverse low welfare cost in this film. This is evident through semiotic analysis, interpreted as understanding signs and signals, including metaphors and analogies of all inanimate objects and characters in a movie ^[25]. Since symbols have multiple meanings, writers often need to determine the meaning of a particular symbol in a film and a broader socio-economic context. For example, Lin symbolised a homogeneous boss group struggling in the whirlpool of interests. The film's subtle relationship between Lin Dalin and the workers is commendable. On the one hand, they are interdependent and use each other, and simultaneously, they are fighting with each other. In this film, Lin would also have his underlings secretly speed up the production lines and get workers to speed up production. As the delivery time drew closer, Lin became increasingly anxious, and he had to gradually shorten the worker's lunch breaks and extend his working hours there. As the conscientious reporter Ai Jing shouted at Lin, "The reality is you will not even pay a worker's medical bill at all! Is that the dream and social responsibility you are talking about?" Lin seemingly became the symbol of profiteers managing the sweatshops in China's coastal area, seeking to exploit workers' most immense value and offering no medical care or insurance. However, the film also emphasises their mutual understanding. Still, this mutual relation does not represent any sense of harmony but rather that of the forced and helpless under the system construction. Even if Lin treats workers as working machines in the film, he also shows compassion for the workers in a rich and three-dimensional attitude. For instance, Lin also advocated lenience for the workers who burned cars, and he took the medical bills of the sick and elderly workers and was willing to bear all the treatment costs. Nevertheless, a worker unwarily put a needle in a toy, which may lead to the return of toys from America, leading to this incident being strictly investigated and handled by Lin. He has no mercy in creating their toy brand dream and ambition, unwilling to be controlled and manipulated by foreign enterprises. When the capital turnover does not open a factory, he does not choose to sell but continues to mortgage the house. When he debates with a female journalist, Lin said that he thought the rural workers in the factory could not go back to villages. When the movie ended, and the court sentenced Lin to lose money, Lin neither committed suicide nor had any default. However, as long as he lives, Lin must pay the debt he owes towards his workers. This is Lin's social responsibility as an entrepreneur. The leading actor, Yao Anlian, played Lin's role worthy of sympathy based on human nature and was awarded Best Actor in Montreal ^[26]. Similarly, those migrant workers who worked for these sweatshops contributed to China's economic take-off even when they had no medical care and insurance. This is a forced and helpless situation based on the global economy, symbolising their inferior position in welfare cost.

3. Conclusions

China's economy has grown dramatically and ranked second worldwide in recent years. Behind this economic miracle, economists concluded this developmental model as the China Model, that the relatively educated and healthy workforce has focused on the primary processing industry and has the world's largest market. However, this developed model has inherent weaknesses: Chinese workers' lower labour costs in the global market, the disadvantage of workers' lower welfare costs and an imperfect social welfare system. Under the macro background of China's economic boom, the film *Factory Boss* might have been the miniature of the China Model based on the enterprise status of Shenzhen Special Economic Zone in China over the past 30 years. This film told the story of Lin Dalin, a Factory boss who experienced a breathtaking course in starting a business, vividly embodying the weaknesses of the China model. Firstly, the factory owner's film uses contextual introductions to reflect the low labour costs in the context of the times. Western multinational

enterprises in the upper reaches of the economic chain keep the processing prices down indefinitely. In the harsh competitive environment, Chinese manufacturing enterprises can only survive by accepting the lowest profit, reducing costs, and exploiting workers' labour. In the meantime, the prominent director Zhang seemed to reflect the lower labour costs in the China Model by establishing conflicts and dialogue between the main characters.

On the other hand, the feature of the low welfare cost for migrant workers is subtly characterised by the *mise-en-scène* factors. This film was set in Shenzhen, which looks like the original factory, depicting 30 years of changes in China's manufacturing industry. Regarding expression methods, it focuses on ordinary scene details and uses live scenes and non-professional actors, reflecting workers' low welfare cost with documentary techniques. Lin was also regarded as the archetypal character intertwined with his relationship with workers, reflecting the film's unfavourable low welfare costs for workers.

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