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Obamas' first film charts life in US factory under China bosses

"They refer to us as the foreigners," says a downbeat employee at the Ohio car glass factory where hundreds of Chinese laborers have come to work, far from their wives, children and homeland. But the worker in question is American, not Chinese, and is finding life very different under new management after billionaire "Chairman Cao" swept into town to reopen the shuttered, iconic former General Motors factory in 2014. This is "reverse globalization," say Oscar-nominated directors Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert, who filmed the GM plant's closure in 2008 and returned to chronicle its reopening by Fuyao corporation for the documentary "American Factory."

The film charts a Midwestern rust belt community's journey from optimism at the giant plant's reopening—bringing back vital jobs—toward creeping anger and disillusionment as the Chinese management imposes its strict, exhausting demands on workers and sacks those who don't comply. The all-access look at how both American and Chinese workers, from blue-collar to management, had their lives transformed by powerful global economic forces caught the eyes of none other than Barack and Michelle Obama.

The former first couple acquired "American Factory" at January's Sundance Festival, and will release it on Netflix and in select theaters from August 21 as the first offering from their Higher Ground Productions company. "Mrs. Obama said it resonated with her because her father had done an intense, hardworking job for decades just to provide for his family, and she felt the Midwestness of the film in what she saw on screen," Bognar told AFP. "She felt her own family in the film, and I think the President felt there was a certain amount of policy issues and big broad globalization" themes in the documentary, added Reichert.

'Cultural chasm'

The battle for economic supremacy between the US and a rising China is perhaps the defining geopolitical story of the 21st century. The filmmakers set out to understand what that rivalry looks like on a human level, and were granted extraordinary access by Fuyao founder and chairman Cao Dewang, who was as interested in bridging the cultural divide and showcasing Chinese capitalism as making a profit. "The chairman's a maverick—he's very much his own person, an independent self-made business guy," said Bognar.

"He'd seen our earlier film and liked it, and so he took a chance on us," he added, referring to 2009's "The Last



In this file photo Julia Reichert, Lindsay Utz, Steven Bognar and Chad Cannon pose at Film Independent Presents Special Screening Of "American Factory" at ArcLight Hollywood in Hollywood, California. — AFP photos



In this file photo Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert pose at Film Independent Presents Special Screening Of "American Factory" at ArcLight Hollywood in Hollywood, California.

Truck: Closing of a GM Plant." In the new documentary's early scenes, genuine attempts by the US and Chinese workers to bond with their new colleagues, including fishing and shooting lessons and shared Thanksgiving dinners, appear to bear some fruit. But as the new Chinese owners become alarmed by heavy financial losses, they fire the American middle managers and increasingly invoke their Chinese replacements' sense of nationalistic pride to spur harder work, leaving the workforce ever-more divided.

Despite promises, wages remain frozen far below those of the GM era, while workers' attempts to unionize and confront slipping safety standards are aggressively shut down from above. "The cultural chasm was wider than people anticipated," said Bognar, noting that the new Chinese owners felt equally baffled and let down by

the attitudes of US workers. "To their credit, as the pressure mounted they did not kick us out, they certainly could have kicked us out at any point," he added.

'Sense of unease'

While the factory in Moraine, Ohio is of symbolic significance due to its size and legacy, it is not unique—Chinese-owned factories are now abundant across the American South and Midwest. Like Fuyao, many are housed in the same buildings formerly shut down by American bosses who shipped jobs overseas to Mexico and elsewhere. "You're getting a slice of what globalization really looks like on a human level," said Reichert, adding: "I think the film leaves you with a sense of unease."

Nobody has tapped into that disquiet better than

President Donald Trump, whose 2016 victory was built on successes in Ohio and nearby Michigan and Wisconsin. For Ohio-based Reichert and Bognar, who have spent years interviewing blue-collar workers, that result was no surprise. "We saw that coming, being in Ohio—the enthusiasm, the yard signs," said Reichert. "Hillary Clinton was not well liked."

Trump promised the region's laid-off workers they would get back their jobs. Earlier this year, another enormous GM factory in nearby Lordstown, Ohio became the latest to close. But in a strange quirk, even as Chinese investment in the US has plummeted by over 80 percent under Trump's tariff war, jobs like those provided by Fuyao have become an important lifeline. — AFP

'Good Boys' tops N. American box office

Universal's kid-oriented comedy "Good Boys" topped the North American box office this weekend, taking in an estimated \$21 million for the weekend, industry watcher Exhibitor Relations reported Sunday. It was the first time an R-rated comedy had placed No. 1 since the same studio's Melissa McCarthy film "The Boss" in early 2016, according to Hollywood Reporter. "Good Boys," produced by Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg, follows three 12-year-olds—played by Brady Noon, Jacob Tremblay and Keith L. Williams—as they desperately try to get into a kissing party.

The three-day weekend was a good one for Universal, as last week's top movie "Fast & Furious Presents: Hobbs & Shaw"—starring Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson and Jason Statham—slipped just one spot from first to second, taking in \$14 million. In third spot for a second straight week, showing considerable staying power, was Disney's animated "The Lion King," at \$11.9 million. Its all-star voice cast includes Rogen, Donald Glover, Beyoncé, James Earl Jones and Chiwetel Ejiofor.

Sony's new animation "The Angry Birds Movie 2" placed fourth, at \$10.5 million. That was a big drop from the original "Angry Birds" movie, which opened in May 2016 at \$38.2 million. And in fifth was Lionsgate's "Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark," at \$10.1 million. Based on the children's horror books, it stars Zoe Colletti, Michael Garza and Gabriel Rush. Rounding out the weekend's top 10 were:

"47 Meters Down: Uncaged" (\$9 million)
 "Dora & the Lost City of Gold" (\$8.5 million)
 "Once Upon a Time in...Hollywood" (\$7.6 million)
 "Blinded by the Light" (\$4.5 million)
 "The Art of Racing in the Rain" (\$4.4 million).

— AFP



In this file photo taken (from left) Actors Brady Noon, Jacob Tremblay, Keith L. Williams and Chance Hurstfield arrive for the premiere of "Good Boys", at the Regency Village Theatre in Westwood, California. — AFP



The Ignalina nuclear power plant is pictured in Visaginas, Lithuania. — AFP photos



A man stands inside the monitoring room inside the inoperative Ignalina nuclear power plant in Visaginas, Lithuania.



Tour guide Jurgita Norvaisiene points at a measurement device during a guided tour inside the monitoring room of the inoperative Ignalina nuclear power plant in Visaginas, Lithuania.



People take part in a guided tour at the inoperative Ignalina nuclear power plant in Visaginas, Lithuania.

HBO's 'Chernobyl' sparks tours, stokes fears in Lithuania

Walking along the top of Lithuania's decommissioned nuclear reactor, the set of HBO's critically acclaimed "Chernobyl" TV series, tourist Vytas Miknaitis says he's not "afraid at all." "They know what they're doing," the retired computer engineer from Chicago says, referring to organizers of the three-hour tour of the Ignalina power station in eastern Lithuania. Similar in design to Chernobyl, some 450 kilometers (280 miles) away, the Ignalina reactor provided the backdrop for the show's outdoor scenes, shot last year.

The Baltic state's only nuclear power plant built in Soviet times was open to the public even before the "Chernobyl" drama first aired in May but has since seen a steady uptick in visitors on the heels of the show's success. Tourists don white overalls, walk on top of the reactor and tour the various work stations, including a command post built to resemble the one in the series.

They can even pretend to be the protagonists pushing the various buttons. Ignalina plant spokeswoman Natalija Survila-Glebova said that the series had attracted a new stream of visitors, mostly Lithuanians but also foreign tourists from countries like Poland, Latvia and Britain. Last month, there were 900 visitors, she told AFP, adding that tours were "almost completely booked through the end of the year". Due to the ongoing dismantling work, tours are only open to adults.

Dark tourism

The Soviet Union's Chernobyl plant, in what is now Ukraine, was the scene of the world's worst nuclear disaster, when one of its reactors exploded in 1986 during testing. It polluted a big part of Europe, with the area immediately around the power plant the worst affected. In recent

years, the abandoned site has become a "dark tourism" destination, even before the eponymous TV drama that has picked up 19 Emmy nominations.

Lithuania, which like Ukraine is a former Soviet republic, began decommissioning Ignalina in December 2009. The European Union made its closure a condition of the small country's 2004 entry into the bloc as the plant had two reactors that were the same model as those at Chernobyl.

Drab is fab

"Chernobyl" tours have also sprung up in other parts of Lithuania where the series was filmed, including the capital, Vilnius. Visitor Vytautas Kastanauskas, who works in tourism, marveled at how the producers were able to recast parts of the picturesque city as a Soviet-era industrial outpost. "The atmosphere of the time and the nature of the relationships between people, everything was recreated perfectly in the series," the 47-year-old, who experienced Soviet times, told AFP.

The northern Fabijoniskes neighborhood was transformed into Pripyat, a city of nearly 50,000 people near Chernobyl that was abandoned after the disaster. The makers of "Chernobyl" used the drab, grey district, with row upon row of Soviet-era housing blocks, as the location to shoot Pripyat's mass evacuation. And one young Lithuanian has even refurbished his grandparents' Fabijoniskes apartment in the Soviet style and opened it up to visitors and Airbnb stays.

Jurate Pazikaite, of the Vilnius Film Office, says that the series has "focused a lot of attention" on the city of around half a million people, putting it on the map as a prime location for filmmakers. Tax breaks for production

companies introduced in 2014 have lured a growing number of crews, she said.

The BBC's 2016 miniseries adaptation of Leo Tolstoy's "War and Peace" cast Vilnius as both 19th-century Moscow and the Austrian Alps. A new HBO drama series, "Catherine the Great" starring Oscar winner Helen Mirren, has also partly been shot in the Lithuanian capital.

Emergency iodine, sirens

But the "Chernobyl" series is not only generating curiosity and pride in Lithuania. It has also fed into unease that was already felt over a new nuclear plant, set to open in neighboring Belarus. Spearheaded by the Russian state energy corporation, Rosatom, the plant, featuring two reactors, each with a capacity of 1,200 megawatts, is expected to go online later this year.

Lithuania says that the facility in the northwestern Belarusian town of Ostrovets, just 20 kilometers (12 miles) from its border, does not meet safety standards. Minsk rejects the claim. "The Chernobyl series has affected us deeply, my friends and I talk about this topic (nuclear risk)," says Ieva Nagyte, a 27-year-old, who works at the Vilnius Academy of Arts. "If the Ostrovets nuclear reactors exploded, I'm not sure we'd know what to do," she told AFP.

However, Lithuanian authorities are preparing for the worst—they have stockpiled iodine tablets used to ward off certain forms of radiation poisoning, established evacuation routes and are testing emergency sirens, according to the internal affairs ministry. — AFP