

Movie Review: “Death by China,” a film by Peter Navarro

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To call this feature-length film xenophobic, fear-mongering and hysterical almost understates the case. The whole thing is so over-the-top that, like a bad horror movie where you can see the strings moving the monster, it leaves us numbed and bored or perhaps laughing. Yet it’s not funny.

“Death by China” opens with shoppers happily buying cheap Chinese products, turns to closed American factories, then to unemployed workers. Talking heads tell us that China, without workers’ rights or environmental controls, competes unfairly with American workers. The animation shows jobs rolling away to Chinese factories, as Chinese bombers, labeled “money manipulation” or “trade deficit,” bomb the American capitol repeatedly. Someone comments, “One day they’re going to own us.”

China is shown as the conqueror of Tibet, as the persecutor of the Falun Gong (imprisoning its believers and harvesting their organs), and as the power behind Iran and Pakistan. Chinese products shown in graphic images threaten the lives and health of Americans, including poisoning American children, as well as killing American pets. Chinese pollution, dragged across the Pacific by a Chinese bomber, covers the United States with smog while dropping particulate matter. We see Chinese preparations for massive military buildup and the troops strutting and missiles rolling through Tiananmen Square, as an authority tell us that China “is the only country in the world preparing to kill Americans.” A Chinese knife stabs into the heart of a stars-and-stripes map of America, and the blood and life ooze out. (For a taste of this film, see the trailer.)

While most of the incidents in the film are true, simply turning from one to another does not help us understand the situation any better. When the movie’s over, we don’t know more about China than most of us did when we went in, and in fact, its oversimplifications of the reality of China and its impact on the world would leave us knowing less, if we could have believed them.

The film seems to be modeled on those 1950s anti-Communist films that mixed cartoons, historical footage and expert voices in the same way. In the end, the film may be so crude that it becomes almost comic, but the sentiments in it and the fears it plays to could lead to tragic consequences if its virulent nationalism were to take hold in the minds of anxious people and find expression in ambitious parties and politicians.

AFL-CIO Sponsors Showings

Who’s promoting this bizarre film with its crude cartoons and Cold War rhetoric? Organized labor. This month, in big cities and small towns throughout Ohio the AFL-CIO’s local labor councils are sponsoring a tour of Peter Navarro and showing of his feature length film “Death by China,” based on the premise that America’s central problem is an on-going and losing trade war with China, a conflict every bit as serious as a genuine military conflict. And failure to deal with trade policy now, Navarro suggests will almost inevitably lead to real military conflict in the not too distant future. America’s trade policy, the film argues, has permitted the Chinese to take over American markets, become America’s chief creditor, and undermine American security. Both at the opening and the end of the film there were brief statements that America’s enemy is the Chinese government, not the Chinese people, but those comments could not begin to temper the dominant message: that the Chinese nation threatens the American nation, and that we have to unite to stop *them*.

Only in the last third of the film does Navarro begin to argue that the real problem is multinational corporations such as Cisco, Ford, Motorola, Intel, Apple, Boeing and GE that move their facilities to China to take advantage of low wages, lack of environmental controls, and China's undervalued Yuan currency in order to reap enormous profits. These corporations and the National Association of Manufacturers, we are told, use their wealth to influence Congress and to shape America's trade policies, taking their plants, technology, and jobs to China. But, we are told by Thea Lee, the AFL-CIO's Policy Director and Chief Economist, corporations are supposed to make a profit: that's their job. Our job is to get the government to force corporations to behave. To do so, it is suggested, we need a political movement that can force the government to change our trade policy. Various speakers also suggest that we might also need a movement to lead a boycott of Chinese goods.

Navarro, an economics professor at the University of California at Irvine who has run and lost three times as a Democratic Party candidate in San Diego, calls his film non-partisan. Bill Clinton and both Bushes are castigated for their roles in bringing China into the World Trade Organization. Both Republicans and Democrats are featured in the film speaking out against China's trade policies. Liberal activist actor Martin Sheen narrates the film. Tim Ryan, a Democratic congressman from Youngstown, Ohio, who has introduced bipartisan legislation to stop China's currency manipulation, is balanced by Dana Rohrabacher, an arch-conservative Republican congressman from California. Many of the talking heads come from the U.S. government's U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, and hold a variety of mostly conservative views. At the same time Richard Trumka, president of the AFL-CIO, is prominently featured at a couple of points in the film and policy director Thea Lee more frequently. And clearly the AFL-CIO sees the film as raising their issues, or they wouldn't be promoting it.

"My goal," Navarro told the Cincinnati audience, "is to get this issue out there and to get both presidential candidates talking about it and promising to do something about it. If Mitt Romney and Barack Obama promise to deal with our China trade policy, then my job is done," he told a mostly labor union audience at the Esquire Theater in Cincinnati. Navarro's film hardly seemed necessary to do that, as both candidates have featured China trade policy in their campaign advertising. Some of those in the audience suggested that politicians will promise anything.

If trade policy is the central point of the film, the maintenance and expansion of manufacturing is the film's secondary theme. With multinational corporations as the villains, the heroes are small- and medium-sized business owners who the film argues are the country's job creators. A number of small business owners, men and women, commented on the ways in which Chinese competition and U.S. trade policy had led to the failure or decline of their business, or left them wondering how they would be able to continue. There is the suggestion that this group, the small business class, would be the ones to lead the fight for the future. Business men and women are the heroes. And the workers?

What's Missing?

Surprisingly for a film being promoted by the AFL-CIO, unions and workers hardly appear except as officials speaking up for policy changes or as workers being laid off. Unions nowhere appear as leading a social movement to fight the multinational corporations or government policies, nor are workers shown anywhere in the film in collective action. While there is from time to time talk of a need for a movement, we don't see workers occupying the capitol building in Madison in 2011, and we don't see the Occupy Wall Street movement that followed it. (Actually, a couple of the people in the film appear to have been interviewed at Occupy Wall Street, though the videography lifts them out of the occupation or demonstration, and Navarro carefully avoids mentioning the Occupy movement.) Demonstrations of real power that might lead to changes in policy are nowhere to be

seen in this movie.

Also missing are the Chinese workers. The film's Cold War approach, where China is simply described as a Communist totalitarian country fails to take into account the profound political, economic and social changes of the last few decades. Most important it leaves out of the account altogether the enormous Chinese labor movement that has arisen in the last few years. Every year China sees tens of thousands of protests involving workers and peasants, and those struggles have led both to immediate relief in some cases and to structural reforms that have given workers slightly more leeway. (See Eli Friedman, "China in Revolt.")

Talking to the audience in the Esquire Theater after the film's showing, Peter Navarro suggested that we in America need to get together and change trade policy. We need, he said, to be able to compete. The film's goal is to build a fortress America that can resist the Chinese bombers. To bring together Democrats and Republicans, small business and labor to change U.S. trade policy. Nowhere is there a suggestion of the need for a struggle to defeat the multinational corporations or to deal with the capitalist system. China, not capitalism is the problem. That's a message that should make the multinational corporate executives and medium- and small-businesspeople sleep better. Though those Chinese bombers flying toward the capitol will steal the sleep from some.