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China's Christian Bale PR Nightmare



By Marty Kaplan

The only thing the Chinese could have done worse with Christian Bale would have been to pepper spray him.

China has a lot riding on "The Flowers of War." At \$100 million, not only is it the biggest-budget Chinese movie ever, and its entrant for the foreign film Academy Award. It's also China's best hope to crack the U.S. domestic box office, and to demonstrate that its films have global appeal.

With a non-Chinese star, Christian Bale, and with about 40 percent of the dialogue shot in English, the fate of the film is also being closely watched in Hollywood, where American moviemakers are looking Eastward with longing. Co-producing with a Chinese studio is a way to end-run the Chinese quota on foreign films, which restricts distribution of imported movies to 20 a year. China is on track to have the most movie screens on the planet — a lot of yuan for Hollywood to hanker for — so U.S. producers are searching for the right creative formula to attract both domestic and foreign audiences.

"The Flowers of War," starring actor Christian Bale as an American priest attempting to rescue young Chinese women during the 1937 Japanese invasion of Nanking, is being heavily promoted in China. Everyone there knows the star of "The Dark Knight," and everyone there knows about "The Flowers of War." That's why Bale's violent visit to Chen Guangcheng has become a public relations nightmare for China.

Chen, a blind masseur in rural China who taught himself to be a lawyer, has been illegally imprisoned in his home in Dongshshigu village along with his wife and child for protesting forced abortions and sterilizations and other human rights abuses by the government. Bale, fresh from the Beijing premiere of "The Flowers of War," traveled eight hours with a CNN camera crew to Chen's home, where he intended to pay his respects. Instead, they were punched, pushed and chased by guards who had cordoned off the village.

Now China, which has invested so much of its branding and pride in Bale, has to deal with a CNN video that really puts them in a box. The chances of the government successfully suppressing the viral distribution of the video in China are just about zero. So the more they market the movie, the more they throw a spotlight on their own injustice and corruption.

Suddenly, ironically, being a Bale fan can now — for an ordinary Chinese citizen — signal opposition to officially-sanctioned human rights abuses and corruption. It's a debacle they designed themselves, which makes it especially delicious, and it's way worse than anything faced by companies who tied their brands to O.J. Simpson, Tiger Woods and other endorsers whose messages weren't quite what they had in mind.

It can't be long before Internet remix artists will be mashing up the "Flowers of War" trailer with the video of Bale being roughed up. Talk about irony: I can't wait for China to protest to Google-owned YouTube about the infringement on their intellectual property.