

DIRECTOR JEAN-JACQUES ANNAUD PRESENTS



Most French film folk have come to Cannes from Paris. Director Jean-Jacques Annaud came from Ulaighai, Inner Mongolia.

You would expect no less from Annaud, a helmer who shot “*The Lover*” in Vietnam, Brad Pitt starrer “*Seven Years in Tibet*” partly in Tibet, and tiger sibling tale “*Two Brothers*” in Cambodia.

A singular director by any standards, Annaud’s films lie at a unique halfway house somewhere between Hollywood (with their high concepts and bold ambitions) and French arthouse (in the urgency of their themes).

“I love movies where you have the huge scale of, say Mongolia, and then intimacy with extreme close-ups,” he said at Cannes, where he plans to stay for less than 24 hours to show early footage of “*Wolf Totem*,” which he is shooting over the course of four seasons in Mongolia.

“*Wolf Totem*” is “just up my alley,” Annaud said. It’s set on the vast plains of Inner Mongolia, “one of the most remote places in China,” per Annaud.

The 3D, widescreen movie is budgeted at a reported \$38 million — big for France, huge for China.

It adapts the eponymous 2004 novel by Lu Jiamin, published under the

name of Jiang Rong, which has sold over 20 million copies, making it the second most read book in China after Chairman Mao Tse-Tung’s “*Little Red Book*.”

The China Film Group, Bill Kong’s Edko Films and Annaud’s Paris-based

Reperage produce; Wild Bunch sells rights to Europe.

Lu’s autobiographical novel was 30 years in the writing and is, according to Annaud, “an emotional story with the emotion of vastness.” It follows a student, Chen Zen, sent from Peking to Inner Mongolia to teach a nomadic tribe of shepherds in 1969.

But it is Chen who ends up learning from the tribes folk about existence on the plains and their

near-mystical bond with that wolves that a government apparatchik wants to exterminate.

Annaud sees Lu as a soul brother. The year that Lu was dispatched to Mongolia, Annaud was sent to teach

film in Cameroon as part of his military service.

“It changed my life entirely. I was so transformed, my whole life was modified. I was so proud of being

French from Paris, knowing Latin, Greek and medieval history. And then the next day I was sitting in the middle of the forest with an old chief,” Annaud recalled. “I discovered

myself, I discovered the balance between man and nature, respect for other creatures.”

The wolves in “*Wolf Totem*” are a metaphor for human society: Annaud says he sees little difference between the behavior of a pack of wolves and a pack of politicians.

But China is “much more complicated, fascinating, amusing” than most people imagine, Annaud said. If Chinese authorities didn’t like his version of *Wolf Totem*, he would not have made the film, he added.

But then Annaud, who thinks films have a duty to entertain and educate, may be an ideal director for “*Wolf Totem*,” one able to deliver an instructive bigscreen, mainstream experience without being based in Hollywood or, indeed, China.



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VARIETY