



TO FILM 'WOLF TOTEM,' FRENCH DIRECTOR RAISED CHINESE WOLVES

Jean Jacques Annaud had a chance to direct "Life of Pi," a 2012 film that went on to win four Academy Awards.

But the French director of "Seven Years in Tibet," "The Name of the Rose" and "Enemy at the Gates" says he declined the offer from Hollywood and instead decided to helm "Wolf Totem," based on the bestselling and influential Chinese novel.

The novel, published in China in 2004, tells a story of a young student sent from Beijing during the Cultural Revolution to work as a shepherd in the countryside of Inner Mongolia, where he encountered wolves in the wild. Mr. Annaud said that when he read a French translation five years ago, he saw himself in the book.

"The same year the novelist was sent to Mongolia, I was sent to Africa in the same way," said the 70-year-old filmmaker, who was sent to Cameroon for military services. "I found the people there and their life together with nature were so fascinating and the experience changed my life."

The 3-D film is scheduled to be released in China in December, with most dialogue in Chinese and some in Mongolian.

Yangtze River Art and Literature Publishing House says it has sold about five million copies of "Wolf Totem" in Chinese and estimates that another 16 million pirated copies have been sold. It has been translated into 39 languages for 110 countries so far, and won the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2007.

The novel had a heavy ecological focus, as protagonist Chen Zhen mourns the development that erodes the Mongolian nomadic culture he embraces. Some also see it as a call for Chinese to shake off centuries of agrarian culture and become more wolf-like and aggressive.

It has detractors: Critic Wolfgang Kubin has called its entreaties for China to discover its inner wolf "fascist." The New York Times said it was "full of set-piece didacticism."

Mr. Annaud said the criticism didn't bother him. "You cannot please everyone," he said. "I just go with what I feel."

Some read this state-backed project as an implication that China wants to change its national image from being sheepish to wolfish. Mr. Annaud said he didn't agree.

"I was excited that his book became a great success in China, which is very refreshing for me," said Mr. Annaud, who says he visits China frequently. "China has an image of a polluted country, so it is very exciting to see that there are people who are conscious about this problem."

Chinese officials' decision to allow him to direct this film was a surprise to some. A previous film — 1997's "Seven Years in Tibet," starring Brad Pitt — was banned in China for its negative portrayal of China's military forces.



Wolf trainer Andrew Simpson introduces the wolves to Director Jean Jacques Annaud.

Co-productions with Chinese production houses, as this one is, can be difficult for Western filmmakers. Director Oliver Stone, for example, has previously voiced his concern over the strict control by China's film regulators on co-production projects.

But Mr. Annaud said he felt no such challenges. "I did not feel any pressure so far and it was even a surprise to me," he said. "So far I have the most incredible level of freedom."

Making a film that puts a group of real wolves among human beings was deemed too difficult by many when the film project was launched 10 years ago, said Zhang Qiang, vice president of state-run China Film Group, which is in charge of the film's production and distribution in China.

"I talked to almost all the prominent Chinese directors, but I got the same reply—that they loved the novel but could not make it a movie," he said.

To make it happen, after rejecting the idea of heavily relying on computer-generated imagery, the crew raised a dozen newborn baby wolves from a local zoo in China's northern city of Harbin that were then trained for the movie for more than four years.

The film was shot in Inner Mongolia for over a year, where the crew endured mosquito attacks and capricious weather. "Now the 13 Mongolian wolves are all happily living in Canada, because their trainers were Canadians so they can only understand English now," said Mr. Zhang.

— Lilian Lin. Follow her on Twitter @LilianLinyigu