



The Making of Wolf Totem has been a Real Challenge

Even for Jean Jacques Annaud, known for his animal films *The Bear* and *Two Brothers*, the making of *Wolf Totem* has been a real challenge.

The 71-year-old French director has spent the past four years in China, mostly in Beijing and the Inner Mongolia autonomous region, where he trained 35 wolves with Canadian trainer Andrew Simpson and longtime producer Xavier Castano.

The wolves are important characters in *Wolf Totem*, a film based on the Chinese bestseller of the same name by Jiang Rong. It traces two young men's experiences on the Inner Mongolian grasslands, especially their interactions with the wolves there. Penguin published the book's English edition in 2008.

Many scenes in the film deal with wolves fighting with men and other animals. They could have been computergenerated, but Annaud insisted on using real wolves. Some also suggested using dogs and manipulating their tails with steel strings to look like those of the wolves', but the director refused.

"Only with real wolves is this film a picture that shows the genuine nature of the animal," he says.

To cast the wild animals challenged the crew's patience from the very beginning. The Mongolian wolves the novel depicts are rare, and the adult wolves could barely be trained. So they had to raise the wolves from cubs to adults, during which time some new cub wolves were born. Only wolves that grew up with the crew would feel accustomed to people being around and not try to escape when the camera rolled.

Filming started in July 2012, when the grass in Inner Mongolia's Wu La Gai area was green. Over the

following 18 months the team experienced all kinds of extreme weather in the grassland. In winter the temperature fell to 30 C, while in summer everybody wore masks to keep the thousands of mosquitoes away.

"I should have made a Mosquitoes Totem," jokes Annaud.

Although well trained, the wolves are still dangerous animals, so the crew built small zoos to keep them inside fences and electronic nets. The crew spent six weeks to film a six minute opening scene of wolves fighting with horses.

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Annaud also reveals that the team, including him, once had to walk 8 to 10 kilometers to set up the cameras every day.

"If we shot on land we could only see grass," he says, "but if you want to have a view of the grassland and the landscape, you have to climb the mountain. We cannot go by car, because that would ruin the grass".

Filming wrapped in December. The four month postproduction has finished, too. Coproducer Wang Weimin says he took the film to the Berlin Film Festival in February this year and sold the copyright to "more than half the European countries", including some countries that do not traditionally buy Chinese films, such as Switzerland. The price for minimum guarantee was \$8 million, says Zhang Qiang, executive of China Film Group, one of the investors.

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