



DANCES WITH WOLVES

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This year Jean-Jacques Annaud, the mastermind behind *Enemy at the Gates* and Academy Award-winning *Black and White in Color*, has recently been scouting the steppe of Inner Mongolia for his latest project, an adaptation of best-selling Chinese novel *Wolf Totem*.

Written by Lu Jiamin under the pseudonym Jiang Rong, *Wolf Totem* won the inaugural Man Asian Literary Prize in 2007, and is reportedly the most circulated piece of literature in the country after Mao's Little Red Book.

Movie rights were snapped up by the Beijing Forbidden City Film Company right after its original publication in 2004, but the project had been languishing for five years before Annaud announced his participation in 2009.

“I read the book in a magnificent French translation,” says the 68-year-old, recalling his initial interest. “I was fascinated by the fact that a Chinese writer had incredible success in China with a novel about nature conservation and fighting for a number of themes that for decades have been at the center of my own preoccupations.”

His original peregrinations to China's northern border were taken with Lu, visiting the area in preparation for writing the screenplay. What started out as a professional acquaintance has since blossomed into a true bond. “He is a man I love and respect. He has become in the meantime a wonderful friend of mine,” says Annaud.

As the title suggests, *Wolf Totem* deals extensively with *Canis lupus*, particularly

as a metaphor for China's nomadic cultures in comparison to the ethnic Han “sheep.” Mirroring Lu's own life, the protagonist leaves Beijing for the grasslands of Inner Mongolia during the Cultural Revolution, where he is schooled in the way of the land and comes to understand the importance of equilibrium between man and beast.

If you are expecting extensive CGI and motion-capture effects to be used in place of the genuine article, you obviously aren't familiar with Annaud's previous body of work. In both *The Bear* and tiger tale *Two Brothers*, the director made a point of using real animals for much of the shooting. His upcoming release will prove no exception.

“What I did was pick the best wolf trainer in the world and convince him to live in China for several years,” reveals Annaud. “Andrew Simpson is a highly respected and specialized Canadian wolf specialist. We built a ranch for him and his animals an hour away from Beijing. He is getting exceptional results from our blue-eyed, brown-fleeced Mongolian stars.”

Simpson and his company Instinct have utilized their expertise in numerous commercials, television shows and films that required potentially dangerous beasts, including the 2009 *Loup*, shot in Siberia and described as the biggest wolf film ever. The trainer has even had an award-winning documentary made about his affectionate relationship with his canine friends, *Wolves Unleashed*.

In an interview with Canadian weekly *Maclean's*, Simpson mentioned that the wolf

pups being used for *Wolf Totem* were bred in Chinese zoos. Before the little balls of fur were 21 days old he was by their side to ensure they would imprint on him the moment they opened their eyes, thus identifying him as a trusted figure.

Using real wolves is a crucial part of Annaud's philosophy towards environmental protection. “I love to be reminded that we share the same basic instincts and emotions as animals. Directing animals is a great humbling lesson compared to directing babies, children or Hollywood film stars.”

He believes that the similarities between homo sapiens and other fauna are too often ignored by modern man, who would rather consider himself on a different plane of existence. “Most people are very uncomfortable about their wild impulses. If only they would realize that they are just evolved mammals.”

Wolf Totem's schedule is still being discussed with the China Film Group, the influential state-run enterprise that owns stocks in Beijing Forbidden City Film Company, but Annaud hopes to finalize the cast in a few weeks and start second unit photography in the fall. With the promotion for his last film, Middle Eastern drama *Black Gold*, now behind him, he can concentrate all his attention on the Jiang Rong adaptation.

“For a filmmaker, next year sounds like an eternity,” remarks Annaud. “*Wolf Totem* is my eternity.”

