



SET REPORT: WOLF TOTEM

French director Jean-Jacques Annaud takes on one of China's most beloved novels — while raising his own pack of wolves.

"I like challenges," says French director Jean-Jacques Annaud, who with credits include Cambodia-set tiger tale *Two Brothers*, *Seven Years In Tibet* and *The Bear*, is no stranger to shooting in remote locations or working with animals.

But even by his own standards he has set himself a real challenge with his latest project, *Wolf Totem*. Five years in gestation, his \$38m adaptation of a Chinese bestselling novel, set in the plains of Mongolia, involved raising a pack of wolves from scratch.

"It was right up my alley," says Annaud of Lu Jiamin's novel about a young student from Beijing who is sent to teach a nomadic tribe of shepherds in inner Mongolia, forming a bond with a baby wolf and learning a deep respect for nature. "In many ways I shared the same behaviour and curiosity as the hero."

Annaud was sent the book by Chinese production company China Film Group, which held the rights. "After 200 pages I called them and said I was interested," said the director who began prepping the project after travelling to Mongolia.

Bringing on board his long-time producer Xavier Castano, the pair persuaded Canadian wolf trainer Andrew Simpson to join the project. Simpson then spent three years living in China, training 20 Mongolian wolves from cubs to adults.

"We built private parks for the wolves to be happy, to be well fed. But at the same time I didn't want dogs, I wanted to keep the wild look in their eyes and their pack behaviour," says Annaud.

Seasoned campaigners

The six month shoot — wrapping November 5 with another week of shooting scheduled for next April to capture the birth of some baby wolves — was spread across all four seasons, with the bulk of filming taking place in Inner Mongolia near the town of Wulugai, as well as some extra filming near Beijing. Some 420 crew members were of Chinese origin, with seven from France.

"The Chinese production was aware they didn't have all the experience required to make such a special film. So they asked Jean-Jacques and myself to take the time to train their teams," explains Castano.

"The production has been really smooth," adds the director who has been surprised by how much freedom he has been granted over the project. "I have the privilege to be a final-cut director in Hollywood, but here it's the same. I'm making my own decisions, for the moment, it's quite wonderful."

Annaud wanted to create authenticity by casting Mongolian actors, alongside his lead, China's Feng Shaofeng. "The movie is about a young man from Beijing who discovers this incredible civilisation of Mongols. I couldn't have

them played by Chinese actors," says Annaud, who visited remote towns in Mongolia to find his cast.

The French director who has worked in Hollywood for a large part of his career, made the first Imax 3D fiction film, *Wings Of Courage*, in 1995. He has chosen to return to the 3D format for *Wolf Totem*.



Canadian wolf trainer Andrew Simpson introduces Jean Jacques Annaud and Feng Shaofeng to the wolves.

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"The core of the story is the affection between a baby wolf and a young man, and I had to be close to the wolf's fur, the eyes, the nose of this animal. It brings a wonderful reality to intimate scenes."

Lu's 2004 novel sold more than 20 million copies in China, making it the second most read book in the country after Chairman Mao's *Little Red Book*, but, says Annaud, he is "happy to take on this responsibility".

"I can't please everyone but I've been true to my read and the emotions I went through when I read the book, and I'm trying to put them on screen."

Wolf Totem is an official 80-20 co-production between China (China Film Group) and France (Annaud's company Reperage, Castano's company Loull Production and private investor Herodiade). International sales agent Wild Bunch is holding off until Berlin and Cannes to present a 3D showreel, with the film scheduled to be released in China for Christmas 2014, before being released in France by Mars Distribution. Wild Bunch is currently negotiating on a number of other territories.

It may be set in the wilds of Mongolia, but Annaud is confident *Wolf Totem* will have international appeal. "It is about growing up, solitude, understanding others, all of which are universal themes, just in a unique environment."