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WOLF TOTEM'S 'BIG LIFE' COMES TO THE BIG SCREEN

Filled with lengthy historical musings on husbandry and Mongolian military history, *Wolf Totem* is not the obvious stuff of a blockbuster movie.

Yet the team bringing the ethno-environmental tale to the big screens in China this week are confident of wooing audiences with tales of the age-old struggle of man versus nature and ecological Armageddon.

Based on the hugely successful 2004 novel, many of the battles depicted on screen were mirrored behind the camera. Producers had to battle with the industrialisation of the Mongolian grasslands; wolves freaked out at seeing themselves reflected on the camera lens; and blizzards and plagues of mosquitos hampering filming.

“I never thought this movie could be made,” said Jiang Rong, the author, who spent 11 years in the open grasslands of Xilin Gol during the Cultural Revolution as a “sent down youth” and fell in love with the romance of nomadic Mongols and the wolves they worshipped and fought.

Like the main character, he tried to raise a captive wolf cub that becomes a metaphor for a free spirit unwilling to submit to captivity. “I cried and cried writing about him. I soaked two towels,” he said.

Wolf Totem documents the end of both nomads and wolves due to China’s policies of converting open pastureland into farms for settlers — policies that have proven disastrous in Inner Mongolia as the region’s thin soil gives way to desert.

The lush movie ignores the fate that awaited Inner Mongolia once China’s booming growth opened a market for its vast coal reserves. Xilin Gol, on the edges of the Gobi desert, now holds the region’s largest open-pit coal mine.

Smoke-belching power plants and coal-to-chemicals refineries have mushroomed, funded by incentives to move polluting industries away from inland China’s more prosperous cities.

“My biggest worry, even greater than the wolves, was that the primeval Mongolian grasslands are already gone,” said Mr Jiang. When the team went to scope out locations, he adds: “All we found was coal mines. Everywhere there were trucks, high tension power lines, towers, one after the other”.

The production team searched for weeks in Xilin Gol before they found the magnificent open valleys featured in *Wolf Totem*. And they came none too soon — producers returned the following year to find power towers marching across the landscape, said Max Wang, the film’s producer.

The wolves are the stars of the movie, which was produced in China by state-owned China Film Group. Raised from birth by wolf trainer Andrew Simpson, the pack now lives on a ranch in Canada.

Director Jean-Jacques Annaud, who was briefly banned from China for his work *Seven Years in Tibet*, said the choice to film the movie in 3D was justified by the intimacy it gave the wolves. “Most people think 3D is best for action, for things being thrown in your face. No. 3D is best in small sets...I did a very careful 3D.”

Yet 3D also magnified the costs — by roughly one-third to \$40m — and caused lupine havoc: “The big wolves would see themselves in the camera mirror and they would sometimes get angry.”

In spite of his love for wolves, in Mr Jiang’s brand of environmentalism they — and humans — are just “little lives” that destroy themselves when they throw nature out of balance.

“The grassland is the big life. Wolves, people, sheep, cattle, horses, all these are just little lives. The little lives depend on the big life to survive. This is a higher order of understanding than in the west, where humans come first,” he said.

But while the moral may jar with Hollywood’s idea of the natural order of things, the ending likely will not.

Unlike the unrelentingly bleak close of the book, the movie leaves open a suitably romantic window of hope for the grasslands, and for the wolves. Mr Jiang, who believes his book has led to greater environmental awareness among both the Chinese population and Chinese officialdom, approves.

Mr Annaud for his part “did it according to my heart. I hate going out of the cinema being depressed”.

First FT

Lucy Hornby in Beijing