

SHANGHAI FILM FEST:

Q&A with director Jean-Jacques Annaud

The film is based on “Wolf Totem,” the biggest-selling contemporary novel of all time in China. “Wolf Totem” follows a Chinese student from Beijing who is sent to Inner Mongolia in 1967 for reeducation at the height of the Cultural Revolution. By living with the nomads and among the wolves on the steppe, the protagonist builds a deep respect for freedom and nature, themes Annaud has explored before in his films “The Bear” and “Two Brothers.”

Annaud spoke by phone from his country home in France about his second chapter with China.

Did you first read “Wolf Totem” in French or English?

I read it in French. I was approached by the writer, Jiang Rong, who became a wonderful friend. I spent three weeks with him in Inner Mongolia. He knew my work, and some of his friends at the production company also knew my work. They came to me, and I found it was right up my alley. It has been my conviction to find true stories about the environment. I was very excited to see that one of the bestselling books in China was precisely about something that everyone in the West is unaware of — that China has a deep movement that understands the need for the conservation and protection of nature and promotion of environmental issues.

Talk about the idea of shooting in Mandarin.

It’s going to be made in Mandarin, possibly with an English version, but that’s still a question mark.



It’s going to be 85% Mandarin and some Mongolian and the rest in wolf language.

The story’s protagonist grows fascinated by wolves and tries to raise a pup. Tell me a bit about raising and training wolf pups for the film?

We went to different zoos in the country. Wolves in Mongolia are very different from North American wolves. They are brown with bright eyes. They are more the color of lions. We acquired young wolves from those different zoos with all the proper authorization — I insisted on that — and we have the very best wolf trainer in the world, Andrew Simpson, a Canadian from Alberta, who is working at a ranch that we built specifically for our wolves. We had 11 of them and have acquired five new ones. They are quite remarkable.

We are making sure they will remain wild wolves, but not too frightened by human presence.

What’s the next step?

We’re starting storyboarding. Three weeks ago I went up north looking for places with access and good roads and some hotels, not too far away. I decided we’ll shoot in Inner Mongolia [a region of China]. It has all the beauty and remoteness that is described in the book and is more accessible and reassuring than Mongolia [which is a separate country]. Hopefully, we are going to start shooting this fall. There are a number of scenes that require early snow. We will have access to those places in March or April. I was up there in late May, and we had to stop and sleep in a yurt because the wind was so strong, and we were caught in a snowstorm in May.