

## Wolf Totem

French director Jean-Jacques Annaud has made more than a dozen films over the last 30 years, an oeuvre marked by an astounding variety of theme and landscape, from “The Name of the Rose” (1986) through “The Lover” (1992) to “Seven Years in Tibet” (1997). With his latest, “Wolf-Totem,” he has added to that variety and again featured animals in the wild, as he did in films such as “Quest for Fire” (1981), “The Bear” (1988), and “Two Brothers” (2004). This time his canvas is China and its rural Eastern provinces, a world away from urban civilization. It makes for an intriguing look into an otherworldly environment.

It’s 1967 during the middle of China’s Cultural Revolution when millions of city-based Chinese were forced to live in the countryside, the better to learn revolutionary ways. A young Beijing student, Chen Zhen (Feng Shaofeng) is sent, along with a school colleague Yang Ke (Shawn Dou), to live among the nomadic herdsmen of Inner Mongolia. The two are housed in the compound of yurts belonging to tribal elder Bilig (Basen Zhabu), who becomes Chen’s mentor and seer.

Among the steppes, Chen discovers that the tribesmen are caught between the advance of civilization from the south and their traditional enemies – the marauding wolves – to the north. Complicating matters is the local communist authority (Yin Zhusheng), a clueless bureaucrat who wants to eliminate the wolves and thus disrupt the nomads’ sense of ecological balance. Chen himself becomes so intrigued by the wolves that he adopts a cub and keeps it a secret hideout, a violation of tribal practices which bodes ill for the group.

Director Annaud was in Washington during a pre-release screening of “Wolf Totem” to describe what was a unique and elaborate shoot for his film. This adaptation of author Jiang Rong’s best-selling novel (from 2004) was initiated by a Chinese production company who approached Annaud to make the film in 2008. Ultimately, it represented an enormous commitment on the part of the People’s Republic, which financed the film and was responsible for 80 percent of the personnel and crew. Though he was one of the relatively few Westerners on the set on “Wolf Totem,” Annaud said that communication among the varied crew members was possible because “we all speak the language of cinema.”

Annaud said a crucial part of creating the film was to train three separate packs of real Mongol wolves, a process that took three years. The training of the wolves “had to be calibrated to the patterns of the animals,” meaning creating their own private accommodations, their special feeding, and their own play areas. While dozens of people were involved in the wolf training, Annaud said the key was getting Andrew Simpson as the chief wolf handler. Simpson, a Scottish native long living in Canada, was hired by the Chinese producers and worked with the wolves for years to attain the right actions and behaviors. All the “wolf-work” was done by the real animals themselves; “No CGI was used,” noted Annaud.

The director stated that all the principals in the film were professional actors, but only the three leads were Chinese speakers; the rest of the cast were Mongol. He added that the production also was protracted in part because of the demands for 3-D

versions. Long lens shots were done in two dimensions, while close up segments were filmed in 3-D. The two versions then had to be painstakingly combined for consistent imagery, frame by frame, a process that took a year.

Released in China in February, “Wolf Totem” has received resounding approval from Chinese critics, and it is already is one of the top 25 grossing Chinese films in history, Annaud added.

*(The film is rated “PG-13,” runs 121 minutes, and is shown in 2-D and 3-D versions.)*

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