



Born to be

Wild

Wolves are masters of their own. You can never force them to do things they don't want to do.

From the first day he was on the set, Feng Shaofeng had known he was not the biggest star.

The 36-year-old actor, a heartthrob for young Chinese women, was led to a camp to meet 16 wolves, which had been training for two years.

Under the direction of French director Jean-Jacques Annaud, Feng and the wolves co-star in *Wolf Totem*, a Sino-French co-produced epic based on Chinese writer Jiang Rong's 2004 best-seller by the same name.

It's the story of the life-defining days a young student spent with nomads and wolves, during the "cultural revolution" (1966-76), that brings Feng and the wolves together on the grasslands of the Inner Mongolia autonomous region in northern China in 2012.

Feng was excited to meet his co-stars, but Canadian wolf trainer Andrew Simpson asked him to calm down. He told Feng wolves do not like excited people, and if they do not like someone at the first sight, they will never like him.

"I was so nervous," Feng recalls. "The feeling was like I was requesting the approval of a superstar, who would ask the director to cast me aside immediately if he doesn't want to work with me."

These clever creatures posed a great challenge for 71-year-old director Annaud, too, although he is acclaimed for *The Bear* and *Two Brothers*, two brilliant films respectively on bears and tigers.

"Wolves are so special," Annaud says. "Wolves are masters of their own. You can never force them to do things they don't want to do."

Working with wolves poses a great challenge for director Jean-Jacques Annaud in *Wolf Totem*, a movie adapted from a Chinese best-seller.

Though clear about the difficulties, Annaud insisted from the first that the film must cast real wolves, not dogs or other substitutes.

When animal-trainer Simpson got the invitation from Annaud, his first sentence was: "I knew you would call me."

"I read the book, and I knew the filming was going to happen, so I was sure he would call me one day," Simpson recalls.



Wolf trainer Andrew Simpson on the set of Wolf Totem



Andrew Simpson with some of his wolf pack in Mongolia

Simpson has been training animals for more than 20 years and has worked on US films like *Braveheart* (1995) and *Eight Below* (2006). In 2012 he filmed the training of wolves for the French film *Loup* and produced a documentary called *Wolves Unleashed*.

“Wolves are one of the most difficult animals to train,” Simpson says. “They are not trusting or understandable. The only way to build their trust is to spend time with them, long enough for them to forget to care about your existence and that of the camera.”

Simpson lived with the wolves in China for almost three years since the beasts were babies so as to build an emotional bond with them. In fact, he was the first thing the wolves saw when they were born.

He also required Feng and another actor, Shawn Dou, to spend extra time with their wild colleagues. The two had to sit in the camp with the wolves for at least one hour every day.



Actor Feng Shaofeng with wolf pup C-Saw

“It was like meditation in Buddhism,” Feng says, smiling. “At first I didn’t get it. But Simpson told me although the wolves seemed not to be noticing you, actually they were observing you while they were playing and eating, and making sure you are not a threat.”

Feng also had to clean the cages, cut meat and feed the wolves. One of the baby wolves suffered from bad

sight and was kept in the cage to avoid being bullied by other wolves. Feng felt sorry for him and often secretly gave him more meat than others. The cub grew stronger than the others and ultimately became the lead wolf actor in the film.

“We developed some friendship,” Feng says. “When the director and I gave him meat at the same time, he would only take it from me.”

One of the most demanding scenes in the film involved not only Feng and the wolves but also horses. Annaud had detailed storyboards, demonstrating the sequences on a table with miniature props of wolves and horses. But the scene of wolves and horses fighting in snowstorm – only 12 minutes in the film – took two winters to finish.

As Annaud explains, the scene could only be shot from the end of October to November, because after that it would be too cold on the grasslands. Cameras and equipment could not work in extreme ice and snow.

Besides, Simpson made it a rule that the wolves work only for one hour every day. Otherwise, they would get tired of the shooting and ignore further orders.



Director Jean-Jacques Annaud with wolf Cloudy

“No matter how famous the actors are, they have to wait for the wolves to be ready, and Andrew will stop the shooting anyway when time is up,” Annaud says.

The director refused to use computer-generated images, so he had to split the shooting over two winters. “You can finish the scene in two weeks with blue screen, but it will look like blue screen.”

The wolves are now in Canada, where Simpson is building a camp for them to lead a semi-retired life.

“The wolves never lived in the real wild. They were trained in English, and most importantly, we cannot possibly think of anyone who loves and understands them better,” says Wang Weimin, the film’s producer. “We think we made the right decision.”