

# [***China-born Zhou Guanyu will be a star regardless of who wins the F1 race in Shanghai***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BTT-PH51-DYMD-64K4-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

SHANGHAI — Formula 1 returns to China this weekend after a five-year absence. And no matter who wins on Sunday, the star locally will be China-born driver Zhou Guanyu.

Despite his so-so results, Zhou is being promoted as a celebrity in China. He’s the subject of a new film as the first Chinese driver to compete in F1. And he’s, of course, a favorite of sponsors who want a Chinese connection.

Ahead of the first grand prix weekend in Shanghai since 2019, Zhou described it as more than a race for him, saying, "With a Chinese driver on the grid, we will write history.”

By the time he got to the driver's news conference on Thursday, where the questions to him ranged from China's economy and ***politics*** to its burgeoning auto industry's future potential in F1, Zhou had spent more than a week doing promotional work and meetings with sponsors, backers and fans.

“I’ve been extremely busy, you know — the busiest man, probably, in Shanghai over the last week and a half,” he said. “A lot of activities done. It’s great to see the support from the country already.”

Zhou has never won a F1 race. In 48 races since 2022, he's yet to even reach the podium. In the last grand prix almost two weeks ago in Japan, his Sauber retired with a gearbox failure and he placed 18th out of 20.

In 2023, he finished 18th with only six points from 22 races.

But the numbers don't matter much in the search for a hometown hero in F1.

“The pressure ... of course, this race is a little bit higher, but I don’t think it gets much more than for me than my debut in Formula 1,” he said. “Because by now everything feels a lot more familiar than back in the day. First day here is completely different ... now’s third season.”

Zhou was born in Shanghai and, though he's spent many of his formative years in England, Sunday's race is a homecoming for him — and for the race. The [*last grand prix in China*](https://apnews.com/hamilton-wins-his-6th-chinese-gp-mercedes-1-2-for-3rd-time-5c9baf40a4f646e392221cd513a44718) was in 2019, and the next four were canceled during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Seven-time world champion Lewis Hamilton won the 2019 race. However, his last victory anywhere was in 2021. The Japanese GP two weeks ago was the 49th straight race Hamilton failed to win.

The Chinese GP weekend will include a sprint race on Saturday. Drivers have raised [*concerns about the sprint*](https://apnews.com/article/china-grand-prix-sprint-race-verstappen-perez-sainz-bd85f2c1a631c9354fc931da22a45406) being run on a track that has not been seen since 2019.

The only practice is scheduled for Friday, followed by sprint qualifying. Saturday has the sprint race, and qualifying for Sunday — all on a newly paved track.

Zhou noted tickets sold out quicker than ever for the Chinese GP, with interest in the series growing exponentially since he watched his first F1 race.

“For me, of course, it’s been 20 years waiting until this grand prix,” he said. “Coming back here being an F1 driver ... yeah, I can’t wait.

“A lot of mixed emotions, of course, but I want to treat it as much as normal race weekend.”

A film about Zhou’s life will be released Friday by the Shanghai Media Group, a state-owned company and one of China’s largest media conglomerates. The 90-minute Chinese-language documentary is entitled “The First One."

The race is part of a campaign by the national and provincial governments to lure tourists back to China following the pandemic. It’s also part of an effort to keep businesses from moving investment out of the country .

China is relatively new to auto racing, and Shanghai held its first GP in 2004. In a statement last month, China's General Administration of Sport — combined with the commerce and culture ministry — indicated sports events were a priority.

The statement urged the recognition of “the comprehensive benefits of sports events” and cultural tourism to "fully release consumption potential.”

The national statistical bureau said 82.03 million inbound tourists entered mainland China in 2023, down from 145.31 million in 2019. Visitors from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao are counted as inbound tourists and their numbers have reached 81% of 2019 levels.

However the report, compiled by a branch of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, said “inbound and outbound visits by foreigners only returned to 36% of the 2019 level.”

According to statistics, in 2023, the number of inbound tourists received by travel agencies was less than 10% of 2019, reflecting the low recovery level in the tourism market.

Zhou is part of the effort to show the global community that China is open for business and tourism. [*His race helmet*](https://x.com/ZhouGuanyu24/status/1778656193936060742) will show details of Shanghai’s subway system and famous landmarks around the city.

“It’s an opportunity to inspire and pave the path for future generations being interested in the sport,” Zhou said.

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AP researcher Caroline Chen in Beijing contributed.

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AP Formula 1: [*https://apnews.com/hub/formula-one*](https://apnews.com/hub/formula-one)

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