

A short profile/crash-course on the cultural relevance of Zhu Yilong as an actor.

Future expansion of this piece would instead transition to discussion on Chinese “liuliang” stars and their influence, discussion of “star-chasing” culture and Chinese government regulation of the entertainment industry in response to liuliang trends.

Zhu Yilong: The quiet reckoning in Chinese entertainment

Perhaps the best representation of Zhu Yilong’s acting career lies in his first formalization with acting: his 2006 audition for the Beijing Film Academy acting performance major. In grainy camcorder recording, the teenage Zhu, wielding a prop sword before a panel of judges, sports cropped hair and a grim countenance tinged with nerves. Before he can progress beyond an introductory “Hah!” however, he trips and unceremoniously flops down to the rubber flooring. An inauspicious debut at best and lifelong factor of insomnia at worst, Zhu ultimately attracted the discerning panel for being a “blank sheet of paper” – that is, someone who learns easily, someone who can slip into any character. An acknowledgement. In the years to follow, he’d again be met with some tenuous lows before catapulting to unexpected legitimacy.

Throughout his 10-year career in the film and television industry, Zhu Yilong, age 33, has run an expansive gamut of roles. An idealistic young duke? *The Story of Minglan* (2018). The grim, reaper-like swordsman, obsessed with vengeance? *Border Town Prodigal* (2016). The cuckolded young merchant from Republican-era China? *Love Three Lifetimes* (2014). The male second lead, unlucky in love? Too numerous to count. Major character injury or death? His specialty. Some sort of grunting monkey-man, replete with a shaggy ginger wig? Company obligation gone mad. Even before his explosive popularity boost in 2018, Zhu had starred in over forty films and twenty

television dramas, maintaining that any experience was worth having. But this sheer amount of output never went beyond the continued drudgery of middling publicity and panned shows; it's something of an inside joke or painful memory, depending on who you talk to, that he was an actor with talent but zero resources. With his high cheekbones, deep-folded eyelids, and slightly unnerving resemblance to Tony Leung, Zhu retains a classically melancholic air that seems made for extensive camera pans. Instead, he weathered the entertainment industry without career payoff. Then *Guardian* (2018) happened.

Based on the 2012 homoerotic fantasy web novel of the same name, the Youku web drama *Guardian* retains very little relation to its source material, with censorship of LGBT content and a bankrupted production company changing the story from a contemporary supernatural drama to a buddy cop romp/war between two alien races. Zhu plays Shen Wei, a bespectacled professor caught up in the supernatural case investigations of detective Zhao Yunlan (Bai Yu), while also hiding his identity as the Black-Cloaked Envoy, a powerful interplanetary mediator. Despite *Guardian*'s mind-numbing plot and cringeworthy CGI – monsters have all the heft of PicsArt stickers – the two leads buzz with chemistry: Zhu's performance as a gentle professor with a secret plays off snappily against Bai Yu's reckless, suave detective, with both excelling at a magnetic push-pull camaraderie. Shen Wei's tragic backstory also allows Zhu to insert textured performance in an otherwise flat drama: forbidden realization quickly masks back to demure academic with the minute adjustment of forehead wrinkles; compilations titled "Zhu Yilong's microexpressions in *Guardian*" net millions of views on video hosting site Bilibili. By the end of *Guardian*'s 2-month broadcast period, its

episodes had garnered a total of 1.4 billion views, transforming Zhu Yilong from C-, maybe D-lister to cemented liuliang.

In Chinese entertainment, “liuliang” (literally meaning “traffic” or “flow”) refers to talent with strong digital and commercial value, which by designation requires a large and active fanbase. For a Western comparison, consider Harry Styles. Liuliang classification does not necessarily indicate industry renown; many well-known veteran actors and singers fail to rank on such social media data lists. Nor does it denote a secondary class of artistry. But connecting fandom popularity to mainstream public recognition as an artist is usually the desired mentality.

Zhu has had a strikingly different path from other liuliang actors, who often start out as teen idols without an extensive body of work. In building the bridge from liuliang to recognized artist, he’s participated in *Phantacity*, a variety show that challenges actors and producers in a combination of live theatre, music, and elaborate set design to create a live one-shot short. And despite the intense bloat typical to the *Daomu Biji* live action series, his rendition of the protagonist Wuxie in *Reunion: The Sound of the Providence* (2020) manages to shine with a softer, corner-creased maturity, having been thrust back into tomb-raiding and suffering from terminal illness. *The Story of Minglan* is one of his more recognized roles, a secondary project of the renowned production company Daylight Entertainment. He plays a side character, the naïve Song dynasty duke Qi Heng, who loves Minglan (Zhao Liying) but prefers her as an idealized image, unable to grasp the implications of her lower social status. Zhu imbues Qi Heng with the refined earnestness fitting for the most desirable bachelor in the capital while also retaining a childish obliviousness to the social protocols of the time. Later blackmailed into

marriage by a princess who takes an interest to him, Zhu stumbles down a dimmed hallway like a dazed puppet, realizing that his love is but a foolish fancy compared to the greater machinations of aristocracy. Contrary to public perception of “good acting,” the source of fascinating performance does not come from crying on demand; Zhu’s performance emerges in the calculated moment before the single tear, when long-lashed eyes start shining with simultaneous despair and pathetic resignation, producing choked-out monologues that pave the way for a fruitful awards cycle. It’s this mastery of restrained emotion that makes Zhu Yilong an integral part of *Minglan*’s period environment without falling into melodrama. Here, bloody violence isn’t the focus. The battlefield rages instead within the psychological confines of the capital walls, a gambit of reputation and political theatre – competition for any Jane Austen adaptation.

But, lacking a leading role in a prestige vehicle to really show off his skill in close-up, Zhu hasn’t been able to produce a representative work just quite yet. That’s why *The Rebel* (projected Summer 2021) looks to be his most promising exposure yet: a historical spy drama with a ten-year narrative structured entirely around the gravitas of his character, a teaching assistant-turned-Republican spy. For an actor so ingrained in the online landscape (29 million Weibo followers and a supertopic with 137 billion page views), he’s maintained the allure of being an dramatic actor among the ranks of social media popularity. In an industry so often reliant on bombast at the expense of character, Zhu retains a quiet vulnerability at 33 years, saying as much with a curated glance as any spoken line.