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ZHOU GUANYU AT MACAO ON HIS SECOND OF THREE VISITS IN 2017

MAN OF THE MOMENT:
ZHOU GUANYU

Zhou Guanyu will be the first Chinese driver to race in Formula 1 when he joins Alfa Romeo Racing for the 2022 world championship.

As a result, the 22-year-old from Shanghai is a man in demand, with numerous media requests for his time yet, just a few weeks before making Chinese motorsport history, Zhou was keen to recall his rise through the ranks and his days on Macao's Guia Circuit."

As with nearly all his contemporaries, Zhou's long road to the top began in karting. "It was indoor rental karts in Shanghai, and I went quite often," he recalls. "Then we went to outdoor tracks and I started racing when I was eight years old." One of the big names of Chinese motorsport was involved: "Ma Qing Hua was there all the time, driving the karts himself and giving all the drivers little tips.

"In my second year of karting I became the champion of China in my category, and in my third year I was champion in a higher category, against older people." Things were becoming serious, and a decision was made by the family... "To reach Formula 1 I had to move from my homeland. We went through all the lists of motorsport, and England was clearly one of the homes of the sport. It produced loads of F1 drivers, and the competition was tough."



MA QING HUA WITH A YOUNG ZHOU GUANYU DURING HIS KARTING DAYS

That was how Zhou, at the age of 12, left China to live in England. But not in the cosmopolitan capital of London. Instead, he settled in the northern county of Yorkshire to be close to his kart team. "It was definitely really difficult, because you are still going to school," he relates. "I was going into Year 7 in a completely different atmosphere to home. The way of people working, the way of studying, the culture... everything was different. I had to adapt not purely my driving and racing, but my whole way of life. But when you're young, you can adapt quickly."

Added to this was the fact that many of Zhou's peer group on the UK karting scene had started out in the sport when they were five, and he to make up for lost time. "In China, starting at eight is OK, but that's a big difference to Europe," he points out. "And you can't ignore schoolwork, so I was studying, racing and testing. I had to do schoolwork on planes and at airports!"

The karting went well, and so, at the age of 15, Zhou moved into car racing in the Italian Formula 4 Championship – with backing from the Ferrari Driver Academy (FDA). This was a huge deal for such a young driver, meaning he raced in 2015 with not only support from his team Prema, but also the world's most famous F1 squad. "Suddenly I had Ferrari, the biggest F1 team in history, inviting me to do a test," he says. "It was a special thing and I had a lot of support. They had engineers coming to circuits. There's me as a rookie in single-seaters, age 15, and able to play in a football match with Fernando Alonso! Prema has a great partnership with FDA, and the two combined together worked really well. There was a lot of information to take in."

After finishing runner-up in Italian F4, Zhou graduated to the hotly-contested FIA Formula 3 European Championship ranks in 2016-18, in the first year with Motopark and then back at Prema for the following two seasons. He competed against current F1 racers Lando Norris, George Russell, Lance Stroll and Mick Schumacher, as well as many other top-rank talents. "It's quite an honour to see some people have become F1 drivers," states Zhou. "That shows how competitive the championship was before it stopped at the end of 2018. Obviously racing against all of them was a nice period of my career, and I gained experience against some very strong drivers."

The experience gained in 2016 and 2017 was put towards a title attack in 2018, and after four of the 10 rounds Zhou was just one point from the top of the championship table, in a fight with Prema team-mates Marcus Armstrong and Ralf Arón. Then this trio had a mysterious loss of form in the second half of the year, while their other team-mates Schumacher and Robert Shwartzman began to dominate. "I still don't have an answer to what happened," puzzles Zhou. "We went from fighting for victories and podiums to not even getting in the top 10 in qualifying. I didn't have grip or speed anymore – really strange."

Of course, the big glamour race for F3 drivers has long been the Macau Grand Prix, which Zhou contested in those three seasons. What does racing here mean to a young Chinese driver? "I think it's important not as a home event, but as a challenging event," he muses. "You don't get many tracks harder than Macao. That middle sector is sensational! I love driving the circuit, and love qualifying laps there – they are so intense.

"The first year I was just taking experience; the second year we didn't have a lot of speed at Prema, but we showed good potential and pace; and the third year we had the opportunity to fight for the podium." Indeed, Zhou was running a strong fifth on the final lap of the Qualification Race when he hit the wall, putting him to the back of the grid for the Grand Prix and out of realistic contention: "That was really tough, but I also learned from it. On a street circuit, you cannot relax until the finish line. I was in P5, thinking it was an amazing opportunity for the main race, and then I clipped the wall and broke the front suspension. But I was happy to take experience from Macao – it made it a little bit less difficult when I went to Monaco in F2."

And F2 is where Zhou has raced since 2019, with the UNI-Virtuosi team based in England. His step up coincided with a departure from Ferrari to the Renault Sport Academy for the French manufacturer's F1 protégés, and which was rebranded Alpine for 2021 to reflect the company's switch of its high-level motorsport programmes to its sister marque. "It's a tough championship, as well as a support race for F1, so there's pressure on you, eyes looking on you, and all the drivers are trying to make their way to



ZHOU GUANYU IN THE MACAO PADDOCK WITH HIS PREMA TEAM DURING THE 2017 MACAU GRAND PRIX



ZHOU GUANYU ON HIS WAY TO WINNING THE 2021 F3 ASIAN CHAMPIONSHIP CERTIFIED BY FIA (PHOTO SOURCE: TOPSPEED

F1," says Zhou. "You can do well or badly in junior single-seaters, but when you are performing in F2 you have a chance of F1."

After an encouraging rookie season, Zhou experienced a lot of bad luck in 2020, but has put that behind him in 2021 to mount a concerted attack on the title. Furthermore, over the European winter he took victory in the F3 Asian Championship with Abu Dhabi Racing by Prema. With that came the final superlicence points necessary to qualify to become an F1 race driver: "In 2020 I could easily have finished in the top four in F2, but when you have bad luck in race one of a weekend it damages your grid position for the second race. At one point I was down in P10 or P11 in the championship, so it was amazing that I finished P6. This year we are in a good position fighting for the title, and it proves we are ready for F1."



GUANYU ZHOU DRIVING THE ALPINE A521 RENAULT DURING PRACTICE AHEAD OF THE F1 GRAND PRIX OF AUSTRIA AT THE RED BULL RING ON JULY 02, 2021 IN SPIELBERG, AUSTRIA.
(PHOTO SOURCE: BRYN LENNON/GETTY IMAGES)



CAN ANOTHER DREAM COME TRUE FOR ZHOU IN 2022? (PHOTO SOURCE: GETTY IMAGES)

This year Zhou also had the honour of representing Alpine in the first free practice session for the Austrian F1 Grand Prix. Remember he played football with Alonso in 2015? This time he was driving his car! "It was really exciting," he enthuses. "At the same time, I was really nervous. You are on a track with drivers like Lewis Hamilton, who when I started karting was already racing in F1 and was one of the guys I was looking up to. To be on the same track was like a dream come true. My job that day was basically communicating with the engineers, giving a lot of information. There was a lot to take in, but everything went smoothly well. I built up and did a decent lap time without even using soft tyres."

The dream of F1 has come true for Zhou. Is there another youngster in China looking up to him and beginning the same dream? It's not impossible to make it but, as Zhou has proven, you need hard work and possess dedication as well as talent.