


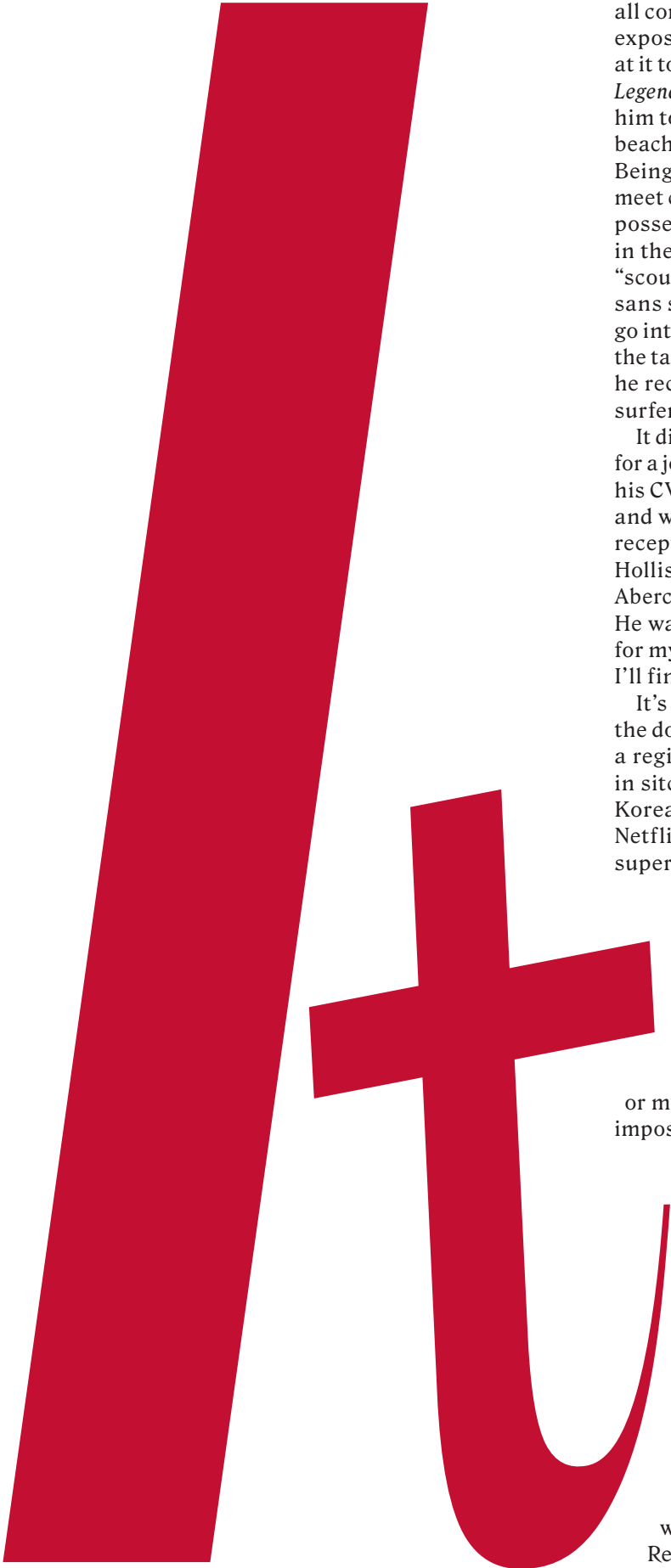
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IT'S SIMU CALLING...

A photograph of actor Simu Liu inside a phone booth. He is wearing a light-colored, patterned short-sleeved shirt with nautical-themed designs like anchors and ropes. He is holding a black rotary telephone receiver to his ear with his right hand, looking thoughtfully to the side. The background shows a window with several newspaper advertisements, including one for 'CANYON TOMORROW' and another for 'YHO BROS'. The lighting is warm and focused on him.

SIMU LIU dreamed of being a Marvel superhero. Now that he's done that – and then some – he's wondering, what's next? By Jessica Prupas



all comes back to Hollister. Simu Liu first got comfortable exposing his torso working there as a teenager. (He's still at it today, on Instagram and in films like *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, the 2021 Marvel film that catapulted him to global fame.) At the time, in suburban Toronto, the beach-inspired retailer was a paragon of mainstream cool. Being accepted into the club meant that not only did you meet certain (white-centric) beauty standards, but you also possessed a hang-ten "chill" that made you untouchable in the high school social order. The company notoriously "scouted" for teenage boys they could employ to hang out sans shirt at the store entrance and fold polos. Liu would go into the store and peacock for the staff, hoping he'd get the tap on the shoulder. "I definitely tried to flex a little bit," he recalls. "And match their tone like" – here he affects a surfer-dude voice – "Hey."

It didn't work. So he resorted to plan B – actually applying for a job, something "nobody did" at Hollister. He presented his CV to the store manager, who "looked me up and down, and was like" – he shrugs – "yeah. Very much a lukewarm reception." Once he got the job, though, he excelled in the Hollister-verse, eventually parlaying that gig into a job at Abercrombie & Fitch – a step up in the mall store hierarchy. He was even asked to model for them. "I guess my motto for myself is, if you just give me a little, a foot in the door, I'll find a way to surprise you."

It's been three years since Liu was first given a foot in the door of Hollywood. Before he landed *Shang-Chi*, he was a regionally famous actor living in Toronto and starring in sitcom *Kim's Convenience*, a beloved CBC show about a Korean-Canadian family that's since been picked up by Netflix. Since playing the titular Shang-Chi – the first lead superhero of Asian descent in the Marvel Universe – he memorably appeared as a rival Ken to Ryan Gosling's emotionally fragile doll in last year's *Barbie*. Two massive, zeitgeist-defining films later, he feels like he's in Hollister all over again, trying to get noticed. Ascending to a new plane of recognition means that he's now in a league with people he's looked up to for a while. "The people I admire and respect, in a very constructive way, are my rivals or my competition. I'm at a point in my career where the imposter syndrome is really setting in. I'm still the new kid at school. I've still got nowhere to sit."

In our conversation, we frequently return to those complicated years between about 12 and 22. Sometimes it doesn't take much – a clumsy comment from someone, a fleeting feeling – to make you feel like an insecure teen again.

Sitting across from me at an A-list haunt in LA – wearing a diamond-encrusted dog tag and a heavy coat that belies the warm weather – Liu tells me that's exactly how he felt after he auditioned for 2018's *Crazy Rich Asians*. He was told that he didn't land the role because, as a casting director allegedly put it, he "didn't have the X factor". Liu has said that that comment was possibly apocryphal – it was relayed to him via a string of broken telephone calls. Regardless, it hurt.



Opening page:
Shirt & trousers:
Rhude
Watch: IWC
Necklace:
David Yurman
Ring: Vargas Goteo
Bracelets: Kinn &
David Yurman

This page:
Suit: KidSuper
Shirt: John Varvatos
Watch: Panerai
Necklace:
David Yurman
Ring: Vargas Goteo
Bracelet: Kinn
Shoes: Fray London

SIMU LIU



But it also fanned a flame in him. Two years later, when he got the audition for Shang-Chi, he doggedly pursued the role, even flying himself out to LA from Toronto to meet with one of the film's casting directors (he cautions other actors not to necessarily do as he did, though: "I worry that people will read this and [spend their] last dollar flying out to show up at a person's door to, like, demand a job"). Landing the role was the result of a long period of metabolising rejection and failure. There's an expression for it in Chinese – *chi ku*, meaning persevering through hardship without complaint. Essentially, "eating shit," as Liu puts it.

He tells me that, when it comes to his career, he has an impressive capacity for eating shit. "I couldn't do it for just anything, I had to find the thing first. And it took a while. If you'd known me in college or in high school, I was very much not that person."

Liu was born in Harbin, China, where he was raised by his grandparents until age five, while his parents pursued graduate degrees in Canada. He eventually joined them and they moved a few times before settling in Mississauga, Ontario, a suburb of Toronto. "I had moved around so much in my life that I kind of just took that as given. There was a sense of, like, don't get used to anything, cause it could always change."

It's easy to imagine how that first move across the world was massively destabilising to a young Liu, especially since he didn't speak English and barely knew the parents who had left China soon after he was born. Liu has spoken

at length about those rocky early years with his parents – they struggled to understand Liu, who was becoming more Canadian by the day and whose first-world concerns puzzled his hard-scrabbling parents. "Their position was, you shouldn't be talking to girls, you should be studying. I had nowhere to go, I was desperate for mentorship."

So, like many teenagers do when they feel lost or misunderstood, Liu acted out. After his parents scratched together enough money to send Liu to a high-performing private school in Toronto, he thanked them with lacklustre grades. They fought constantly. His parents were disappointed when Liu didn't show an interest in STEM subjects – they emphasised maths and science because "it was the same no matter what language you spoke".

"There's an objectivity to it, there's a fairness to it," he says. "Say what you want about grades, but theoretically anyone can score in the top percentile, get a great scholar-

"I'm at a point in my career where the imposter syndrome is really setting in. I'm still the new kid at school. I've still got nowhere to sit"

ship, go to a great school. And contrast that with an industry like entertainment, where nepotism is so pervasive it's not even a thing. That seems infinitely more scary because it's more variable."

Young Liu sought out non-academic outlets for self-expression (and attracting girls). As this was the 2000s, he discovered breakdancing. Soon he was popping and locking at school dances. "It [was] like, okay, how do I become – please let the record show that I'm wincing as I'm saying this – the king of the dance floor?" he remembers. "I [felt] girls would be like, 'Oh my God, I have a crush on Simu, he's a breakdancer.' I wanted to bust a move and girls flock to me. I think instead they were like, there he goes again."

Though it didn't help him in the romance department, breakdancing allowed him to eventually link up with the parkour community, which then exposed him to people

*Left: Suit: Win Rian
Tank: Tom Ford
Watch: IWC
Necklace: David Yurman
Ring: Vargas Goteo
Bracelet: Kinn
Shoes: Aldo*

KING OF LATE NIGHT

LIU'S CHAT SHOW ANECDOTES ARE LEGENDARY. HERE ARE SOME OF HIS BEST



Liu's brought some photos of his stock modelling days to Fallon.

"The numbers are in, Jimmy. They're looking good!" he joked of the above photo.

Liu has also mined his time as a children's birthday entertainer for interview material.

He told Jimmy Kimmel that he would dress up as Spider-Man for "six-year-olds' birthday parties" and "basically get physically assaulted by them for an hour".

During his most recent visit to Kimmel, he told of a family visit gone awry.

His parents got into his, ahem, stash (mistaking it for "gummy bears and trail mix with dried mushrooms"), ate the whole thing, and crashed the actor's car outside his LA home.



Liu admitted that he was once nearly the victim of a Craigslist scam, also on Kimmel.

As a struggling actor, Liu was lured into a fake audition and told he got the job by the "casting director" – so long as he paid him \$5,000 to join SAG. He came across a police photo of the scammer six months later.

doing stunt work for film and TV. Liu himself trained as a stuntman so he could get onto local sets. “The cool part of it is that sometimes the beginning of these things is rooted in something dumb, like wanting to impress girls, but then it actually leads to a real passion for the thing,” he says.

Liu couldn’t help but think of that lost, performatively macho teenager when he was shirtless on a fake beach filming *Barbie*. In one scene, the Kens serenade the Barbies with an acoustic cover of Matchbox Twenty’s *Push*, a classic dude-bro fireside jam. Liu tells me he felt very called out in that moment. “I used to be that guy, 100%. If it wasn’t Matchbox Twenty it was, like, *Wonderwall*, it was John Mayer.”

He had spent most of his younger years “trying to emulate Chad Michael Murray”, because all he could see on TV was blond guys with six packs. I ask him if that’s why he so frequently strips off on Instagram; if it is, in a sense, a political statement.

Yes, he says. “For so much of my life I felt like I was very invisible, whether as an Asian person or an Asian man.” He wants to show the world that Asian men can be sexy. But he also wants more three-dimensional roles for Asian people onscreen. He tells me that he feels Hollywood is more accepting than ever of diverse voices, which he characterises as “incredibly awesome”. Still, he sometimes feels like the old rules are still in play. “It’s hard sometimes to watch people I perceive are less talented get more opportunities. And I feel like I’ll never know the true reason,” he says. “Hollywood is very opaque. Sometimes I’m, like, that script was clearly written a certain way, with a character in mind.”

That’s why he’s started to dip his toes into producing; he wants to make sure there are enough opportunities for Asian actors to go round. He was inspired working with multi-hyphenate Jennifer Lopez on the new Netflix sci-fi action thriller *Atlas*. Liu plays the villain to Lopez’s data analyst sent on a suicide mission to capture a renegade robot. It’s Lopez’s baby – she also produced the film. “I really watched Jen move as somebody who is focused on her character, but also on the project,” he tells me. It motivated him to keep “fighting



“It’s hard for someone who looks like me to be in this position and adopt any sort of complacency, saying I’m just going to wait for the right part”

for the stories” he wants to get made. “It’s hard for someone who looks like me to be in this position and adopt any sort of complacency of just saying, I’m just going to wait for the right part to come. I think I have to keep working.”

The fickle nature of Hollywood can be frustrating, he tells me, but he’s learned to go with the flow. His guiding principle now is picking projects which sound fun to film. That’s what pushed him to sign on to Mark Wahlberg-fronted drama *Arthur the King*, released in March. The film shot over three months during the pandemic in the Dominican Republic and off days were spent “surfing by sunset, biking, hiking”. He even met his best friend during filming: a street dog named Chopa, who he brought home to LA. After a difficult early life, she’s thriving in her new environment. “She’s just the best and sweetest. [She’s] very spoiled. She claims the whole couch, hates rain, hates water. Which is weird because she’s from an island. But if it’s raining, she would just look outside – like, not even.”

*Above: Shirt & trousers: Harago from FWRD
Watch: Rolex
Necklace: David Yurman
Ring: Vargas Goteo
Bracelets: Kinn & David Yurman
Shoes: Aldo*



Left: Suit & shirt: Paul Smith
Watch: Rolex
Necklace: David Yurman
Ring: Vargas Goteo
Bracelets: Kinn
Shoes: Aldo

From above: In Barbie and Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings

“I thought winning an Oscar would put me in a good position to become a Marvel superhero. And it kind of happened backwards”

So after landing a job at Hollister, modelling for Abercrombie, fronting a Marvel film, playing the world’s most famous doll and racking up thousands of thirsty comments on his Instagram photos, does he finally feel like he has the X factor? “I would say, something that for sure people with the it factor don’t do is constantly question whether they have the it factor,” he says. “It doesn’t come from trying to prove yourself. I spent the first 29 years of my life [thinking] I need to prove things to people, I need to [mimes taking his shirt off].”

Liu is much more settled in himself now than he was as an anxious teen, but that doesn’t mean he’s complacent. Now that he’s checked off his early career goal of appearing in a Marvel film, he’s pursuing another major goal. “Twenty-seven-year-old me thought winning an Oscar would put me in a good position to become a Marvel superhero. And it all kind of happened backwards. And if you’ve got one before the other, I think you will always try to course-correct because everyone wants it all in this industry.” That eager kid who bulldozed his way into a Hollister gig? He’s still here. He just has his shirt on – most of the time.

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WHAT A MARVEL!

SIMU LIU’S CV



BORN

On 19 April 1989 in Harbin, China, where he spent five years of his life before moving to Canada.

EDUCATION

Liu attended the private University of Toronto Schools, then the University of Western Ontario, where he studied business administration.

FUN FACT

After working at the firm for a short time, Liu was fired from his accounting job at consulting firm Deloitte. On the 10th anniversary of his termination, he wrote an Instagram post thanking his boss for cutting him loose. “No amount of money is worth compromising your vision for yourself.”



KEY WORK

Blood and Water (2015)

Liu’s first starring role came in this well-received Canadian crime drama, which mixes Cantonese, Mandarin and English dialogue.

Kim’s Convenience (2016–21)

In this adored comedy about a Korean-Canadian family, Liu embues black-sheep Jung with plenty of pathos.

Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings (2021)

In 2014, Liu tweeted at Marvel, “Now how about an Asian American hero?” Seven years later, he stars as the titular Shang-Chi in this blockbuster, based on the Marvel comics.

Barbie (2023)

Liu stole the show as one of the hyper-fragile Kens in this Greta Gerwig juggernaut. The “beach off” scene is extraordinary.