

# Kenny Leu

The international actor-martial artist shares his journey from a Silicon Valley startup to portraying action heroes and real-life characters in film and TV

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Acting was not the first career that Kenny Leu pursued. After graduating from the University of California, Berkeley with his Mechanical Engineering degree, the Taipei-born, Bay Area-raised actor went straight into tech startups in Silicon Valley. “When I graduated college, I made a list of things I wanted to do in my life, to live my version of a most fulfilled life. One was to start my own company and see it through. I started it with some friends. After a year of working on it out of my parents’ house, we were pretty much out of money, and were about to go under. Then, miraculously, we got funding from Google! We incubated at the Google Ventures Startup Labs for two years. It was so fun; we had snacks, skill training, office space and supplies for something like \$5 a month. We were then bought by a much larger company. The success of that startup gave me leeway to do something even crazier: acting.”

A few months later, Kenny relocated to Los Angeles to become an actor. Today, five and a half years later, the award-winning Chinese martial artist (specializing in open hand, Chinese broadsword and staff)/international actor is best known for his role as Gohan in *Dragonball Z: Light of Hope*, a live-action adaptation of the legendary anime show. "Anime fans haven't seen their shows faithfully adapted, and we really pulled out the stops in getting the characters, the world, and the DBZ-style action right. Based on the fans' reaction, we did! It feels great being an Asian superhero! This was filmed years before *Shang-Chi*, before *Crazy Rich Asians*. Asian representation was especially lacking then, and it was incredible having kids/DBZ fans look up to you as a different kind of hero than what's out there," says Kenny. Kenny has also appeared in a number of television shows, including *NCIS*, *NCIS:LA* and *The Player*, and has portrayed several real life people.

Recently, Kenny portrayed Zhu Xuesan, a heroic schoolteacher in rural China during WWII, in the film, *Midway*. Released in theaters last month, *Midway's* cast includes Woody Harrelson, Dennis Quaid, and Mandy Moore.

**Tell me about *Midway* and what it was like working on it?**

**Kenny Leu:** It's the true story leading up to the Battle of Midway —the fight that turned the tide for America against Japan in World War II. What's so special about the film is how they captured the insanity of what it was like to be an aircraft carrier pilot back then. These guys were flying these clanky, unreliable death machines, landing on a tiny, moving strip in the middle of an ocean. Not to mention, they also had to shoot each other out of the sky! I saw an early screening of it, and the action is exactly what I dreamed air combat could look like on the big screen. I nearly jumped out of my seat; I was so thrilled.

But it also stayed very true to how it was out of combat. I've been a WWII aviation fanboy since I was a kid. And many of the stories I've read about, I saw in this movie. Many of those guys died not from enemy fire, but because they crashed trying to land. It was an insane time.

Roland Emmerich also directed *Independence Day*, one of my favorite feel-good blockbusters of all-time, but this one's different. I've been a part of authentic military stories before, *The Long Road Home* in 2017, and he's done an incredible job honoring the men — American and Japanese— who fought in that war. He made me real proud to show this film to not only my veteran friends, but my Japanese friends, too.

**Zhu Xuesan was a real-life war hero, how did you prepare for this role?**

**KL:** Zhu Xuesan was a poor schoolteacher who lived in a village in China. Doolittle [portrayed by Aaron Eckhart], a famous American pilot, crash lands in Zhu's village, after his team is sent on a suicide mission to bomb Tokyo to get Japan back for Pearl Harbor. The Chinese army was about to execute him because they thought Doolittle was a German spy. Doolittle was in bad condition; he had just survived this crazy mission, had no food, water, and worst of all, couldn't speak any Chinese! Zhu hears about this and being the only guy to speak any English for hundreds of miles, rushes his way over, intervenes, and ends up saving Doolittle, not only from execution, but nursing him and his men back to health and getting them back to American territory. Doolittle went right back into the fight and became a pivotal part of the U.S. winning the war.

So Zhu is a special kind of hero. He was not a hero that fought. He was only a schoolteacher, but his courage to step out of that, would save many lives. Preparing for this role was fun because Zhu spoke a very distinct dialect of Chinese, so I had to prepare my Chinese to have that accent. Then, I had to prepare my English to speak in an accent reflective of that dialect. Two accents for two languages, in one role!

**You're also the lead in the indie, *A Shot Through the Wall*. This is another real-life role, how did you land this part?**

**KL:** *A Shot Through the Wall* is inspired by a real-life case. In New York, an Asian American rookie cop on patrol named Peter Liang accidentally shoots and kills a black man. This case truly was an accident, it was an accidental discharge into a dark stairwell. The bullet ricochets off a wall, strikes and kills a man a floor lower

that Peter didn't even know was there. In the context of many cases of much more obvious police brutality, the Asian American kid is the only one to get indicted by a grand jury. The Asian American community goes into an uproar over this, in the midst of the black community saying, "Stop killing us" and the police saying, "We're just trying to do our best." This movie takes a similar circumstance and explores it. I play the Asian American cop, and we see how an Asian American family copes with the fallout.

I auditioned for this while I was still shooting *The Long Road Home*. I was playing a soldier, and I got to play with a .50 cal machine gun —a gun as long as your arm and bullets as long as your fist is wide. When you fired this thing, you could feel it shake your soul. Not because it's firing in your hands, it's usually mounted to a vehicle, but because of the air vibration. It's terrifyingly powerful. And on *The Long Road Home*, there is a horrific part of the story where the American soldiers are forced to fire cases of these bullets into rows of women and children. As an actor, it was my job to vividly imagine them be decimated. From there, it wasn't difficult for me to imagine the horror of accidentally killing someone with your own gun.

**Additionally, you did fight choreography in Warner Bros. feature *Yakuza Princess*, what was the most challenging part about that?**

**KL:** The most difficult part was having to fight and act with my wife, Masumi, on camera. We had gotten married two days before we left for Brazil, where we shot *Yakuza Princess*. It was her first role ever. They were teaching her to be an action hero: stunt fighting, swordplay, falls. I really didn't want her to get hurt, so I trained her thoroughly myself. I'm an actor, but I have a lot of experience doing stunts, action choreography, teaching, and competing. We worked our butts off, and it really paid off! It was a challenge getting someone with limited experience to look sharp and clean after only a month or so of training. But she did it, and I'm really proud of her.

So then when I was asked to choreograph and perform our fight, I had a lot of things on my mind. It had to be good, because what a great thing



## WHAT WOULD FANS BE SURPRISED TO FIND OUT ABOUT YOU?

“Before I got into acting, I was on the United States Chinese martial arts team and competed all over the world, like Mexico, Turkey, and China! My body is loaded with sword scars from those days.”

to share with your new wife. It had to be easy enough, because she wasn't as experienced as I was. It had to be well-rehearsed, because I wanted to keep her safe —and furthermore, myself! At the same time, I had to try to kill her, because that's what my character is trying to do. And she had to try to kill me! Talk about a great honeymoon.

**I saw your IG post about the notes given to you be the director for your character in *Yakuza Princess* —how did you bring your character to life?**

**KL:** Originally, I wasn't supposed to be in *Yakuza Princess*. When my wife booked it, I went along with her only to hold her coffee and rub her back. I had been the lead of a movie before, and I know how much pressure and stress it is. But after seeing how quickly my teaching was helping her, they looked me up and realized that I am an established actor. They then offered me a role. They also increased the size of the role and added some great action scenes. The best part was that they gave me free rein to reinvent the character. Vicente just said, “He's sadistic. He's nuts and drives a taxi filled with kooky shit.” It was incredible fun, because as an actor, you're used to only interpreting the writer's story. Rarely do you get to create a whole character from scratch. I had many iterations for the role, but what I settled on I think is *really* cool. If you can find a picture on my IG, you'll see what I mean. I can't wait for you to watch it.

**You're known for your role as Sgt. Eddie Chen in Nat Geo's miniseries, *The Long Road Home*, which is based on a true story. What was it like playing him?**

**KL:** Deeply gratifying. When you're playing a true story about real people, you're filled with a sense of purpose I can't describe. Some may see it as pressure, but I am fired up because that's what I live for. Eddie Chen was a man deeply loved and respected by his men. By playing him, I received so much love and support from people who knew him, many veterans have treated me like a brother from the moment we met. It was stunning for me to experience, because I have never seen an Asian man —Eddie was an immigrant and didn't speak English very well— so admired and loved, especially by people who don't come from big cities or liberal states. I felt so proud to represent this man who transcended being so different yet connecting us all.

**What's next for you?**

**KL:** With *The Long Road Home*, *Midway*, and *A Shot Through the Wall*, I have developed a reputation for playing real people, reflecting authentic Asian stories. I'm very proud of that! I want to represent my experience growing up as an Asian man in America and in the world. It's unprecedented that Asians are finally being seen and understood, and I'm so happy to be able to be a part of that. I think there are all kinds of people who would see themselves reflected in our experience, and realize we're not all that different. With *Dragon Ball Z*, *Midway* and *The Long Road Home*, I'm also becoming known as an action hero, the guy who fights for what he believes in and isn't afraid to sacrifice to save people. Who hasn't dreamed of being that! Let that be a hint to the next thing

I'm working on, which I can't speak about yet. You'll just have to stay tuned.

**Any plans for the holidays?**

**KL:** I'm big on family, so I always go home for the holidays. I believe all of my success stems from my inner peace, which I owe to the incredible group of people close to me, who love me and support me. I reserve my holidays so I can focus on them, and let them know they are special to me. I also just started being a spokesperson for Lancer Legacy Ranch. It's a home for homeless veterans in Maud, Texas, founded by my friend Matt Fisk, who is one of the soldiers at the center of the tragic events of *The Long Road Home*. It offers a long list of services from mentorship to suicide prevention & PTSD counseling, to legal assistance, to employment assistance. The ultimate goal being the empowerment of its residents to create personalized, long-term strategies for success. He's one of life's true heroes. He took a great tragedy and transformed it into hope —a life mission to lift others from the same depths he suffered. I'll be visiting Lancer Legacy Ranch for the first time over the holidays, and extending my family. If you know a veteran who could use something like this, you can find them at [ancerlegacyranch.org](http://ancerlegacyranch.org) or call 903-585-2023. **ML**

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*Keep up with Kenny at @TheKennyLeu on Instagram and don't miss *Midway*, in theaters now.*