



## Cdrama: You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you

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Like my original love for Korean drama, Chinese drama (AKA cdrama) has all the trappings of the very best Jane Austen has to offer: lush costumes, stunning scenery, complex characters in worlds you want to linger in, and – most importantly for me (and you, if you're a romance addict too) – gorgeous, sincere, and meaningful One True Pairings (OTPs) 🥰 Squeeeeeeee!

Although I will include some older Chinese dramas I've watched, I'll only give the awards to dramas released in 2023 (the ones I've seen, obviously). So, are you curious to know who the Mr Darcy of cdramaland might be? Who's the clever Elizabeth Bennett? Which drama has the most swoony romantic moments? Oh, and let's not forget the best kiss 🥰

Who's with me? Let's do this!

### THE MR DARCY AWARD FOR BEST MALE LEAD

Ah, male leads in Chinese dramas are chockful of Darcy-esque scowling, misunderstood, and often maligned antiheroes whose loyalty (to the emperor, or their moral crusade to right a wrong, or to their league of equally loyal comrades) is unwavering and just and sometimes a little bit unhinged.

From the sharp downward angle of Wang Hedi's eyebrows as **Dongfang** in *Love Between Fairy and Devil*, to Wu Lei's darkly glittering **General Ling** in *Love Like the Galaxy*, to Zhang Linghe's manipulative and calculating **Xie Ju'an** in *Story of Kunning Palace*, cdrama excels at delivering compelling lead characters who feel fully-rounded – heroes but not without flaws. They can be both brooding and kind, loving and prone to acts of rage. Yes, on occasions this brewing inner torment can make our cdrama male leads a tad overbearing 😏 but just as Elizabeth Bennet comes to see Mr Darcy is more than just his pride and disdain for others, we too are allowed to understand them – and will them to do better. Perhaps no darker male lead this year than Luo Yunxi in *Till the End of the Moon* as the unflinching, unapologetic, beautifully misunderstood demon lord **Tantai Jin**. As someone rightly pointed out to me, he's more Brontë's Heathcliff than Austen's Mr Darcy – but that's not a bad thing, is it?! Every incarnation is vivid and captivating, from the halo of fire as Demon God, the seething weak mortal Tantai Jin, the regally aloof God of War, Mingye, the gentler disciple Cang Jiumin. Let's face it, no one can be that tortured, and cough up that amount of blood, and not be redeemed by love – and this award 🥰



*Luo Yunxi as Tantai Jin, Till the End of the Moon*

## THE ELIZABETH BENNETT AWARD FOR BEST FEMALE LEAD

Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennett is shrewd, independent, and full of wit – and our heroines of cdramaland generally embody this spirit to dazzling effect. Whether it's Zhao Yiling's resourceful **Sheng Minglan** in *The Story of Minglan*, or Peng Xiao Ran as the resilient **Xiao Feng** in *Goodbye My Princess*, or Lui Shishi as deadly-with-a-bamboo-leaf **Ren Ruyi** in *My Journey to Love*, these astute lead characters are strong, capable women despite many of the stifling period societies they are trapped within.

While the oft-times reckless spirit of Zhao Lusi's **Sang Zhi** in *Hidden Love*, as well as her quick-witted **Niao Niao** in *Love Like the Galaxy* are excellent, it's Jing Tian's intelligent and determined **Mu Zhuohua** in *The Legend of Zhuohua* who really epitomises Austen's Elizabeth Bennett and steals the award 😊



*Jing Tian as Mu Zhouhua, The Legend of Zhouhua*

## THE MERYTON AWARD FOR BEST ENSEMBLE CAST

While the leads in any cdrama can be the gift that keeps on giving, a truly great drama requires an imaginative cast of characters we can despise and root for. In Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the village of Meryton, with the colourful militia, the ambitious neighbours, the friends, the families, and the gossips, all help populate the world to make our leads shine.

Never is this truer than in cdrama, whose very nature of drawing a story out over thirty, fifty, eighty-plus episodes, provides scope for a wealth of characters who can equally infuriate and delight. Even the humblest eunuch, the distant cousin, the passing general, can steal a moment and convey a story.

Adapted from two novels by the same author, *Love Like the Galaxy* and *The Story of Minglan* are both a tour de force in their respective array of characters – so many to love and detest, a true, very Austen reflection of the pressures of societal expectations, indifference, and hypocrisy.

In 2023, the show that particularly stood out to me for its collection of individual idiosyncratic characters is *My Journey to You*. From the intrigue of female spies to their richly dark mentors, to the suspicious Gong family and their guards, to the weird isolation of the Back Hill, the ensemble cast are surreal and highly original, but even while the plot of the show doesn't wholly work out, I never tired of it, and that's thanks to them.



*Omid as Han Yasi, My Journey to You*

## THE LADY CATHERINE DE BURGH SCENE-STEALER AWARD

Lady Catherine would refuse this award with a querulous wave of her hand. Scene-stealer? There's no one worthy for her to steal it from when the show is naturally *about* her. And, as Elizabeth Bennett and Mr Darcy can attest, even the most hard-won romances can be usurped by a savagely witty side character.

A Special Mention here goes to Cao Cui Fen's **Old Mrs Feng** in *The Story of Minglan* whose bottomless wisdom struck me as the most poetic and practical I have ever had the pleasure of watching.

But for this year, hands down and on more than one drama occasion, the brilliant Zeng Li monopolises the screen. From her questionable mothering in *Love Like the Galaxy*, to her conniving **Empress Rong An** (or wrong-un, as I like to call her) in the flawed *Unchained Love*, to her more likable but no less impressive turns in *Hidden Love* and *Only for Love*, Zeng Li is my kind of scene usurper.



*Zeng Li as Empress Rong An, Unchained Love*

## THE MR BINGLEY & JANE AWARD FOR BEST SECONDARY STORYLINE

Our OTPs in cdramas can suffer too at the hands of secondary characters when the emotional thread glitters a little more brightly than theirs.

Lui Yunning's **Haodu**'s stunning commitment to first finding then protecting Zhao Lusi's **Li Leyan** in *The Long Ballad* impeccably distracts from the main storyline, so much so I fast-forwarded most of it except when they appear 🥰

Like the bonds of the Bennett sisters, it's the twin sisters He Xuan Lin as **Liguang Qingkui** and Landy Li's **Liguang Yetan** who won me over in *The Starry Love*. Their separate romances in the heavenly and demon realms were a bit predictable; it's the bond between the sisters that's the affecting love of this show.

However, the overall winners for me are Ryan Cheng's **Gong Shangjue** and Lu Yu Xiao's spy **Shangguan Qian** in *My Journey to You*. The whole show is a dark and intricate web of manipulation which succeeds best when in the hands of these two characters. I love the way I'm left guessing on what is true and what is a lie – and ultimately for me it doesn't matter. I choose to believe in them 🥰



*Ryan Cheng as Gong Shangjue and Lu Yu Xiao as Shangguan Qian, My Journey to You*

### THE MR & MRS DARCY AWARD FOR BEST OTP

It's a truth universally acknowledged that a good cdrama in possession of single lead characters, must be in want of an OTP 🥰 As I hope I've made clear, a heartfelt romance is the key to my cdrama enjoyment. Yes, the characters might be interesting, the setting pretty, but if the One True Pairing is askew, my overall viewing pleasure dampens. It's unthinkable if Mr Darcy does not fall for Elizabeth Bennett after witnessing her true strength of character; it's cruel if Elizabeth never understands Mr Darcy's aloofness hides a kind and honest heart. The crime if we didn't embrace them as a couple and will them to fall in love!

Cdrama has a happy knack generally of developing love stories s-l-o-w-l-y and therefore, in believable fashion. Often from opposing backgrounds – or borrowing the words from *Story of Kunning Palace*, the difference between the cloud in the sky and mud on the earth, '云泥之别' – seeing two people slowly

forced to trust each other by the tangled twists and turns of a gripping plot is incredibly gratifying to me. The more sparks flying, the better!

Wu Lei's intense **General Ling** is consumed by vengeance in beautifully directed *Love Like the Galaxy* but it's his OTP with Zhao Lusi's **Niao Niao** that ultimately lifts this show into the romance stratosphere.

*Ten Miles of Peach Blossom* isn't one of the most watched dramas for nothing. Mark Chao's **Ye Hua**'s all-consuming love for Yang Mi's **Bai Qian** is heaven sent.

The relationship between Chen Kun's **Ningyi** and Ni Ni's **Zhiwei** in the epically long *The Rise of Phoenixes* unfolds organically from mistrust to comradery to reliance, to love – beautiful to watch, despite the terrible ending 🙄😏💕

But the award for the best OTP with the most Austen happy ending goes to... well, actually, let's not mention the ending... but it goes to the perfection of Liu Yunning's assured **Ning Yuanzhao** and Liu Shishi's assassin **Ren Ruyi** in *A Journey to Love*! It has everything a truly great OTP should have: respect, kindness, friendship, and *oodles* of chemistry. Plus, Liu Yunning 🥰 I *luff* him 😍



*Liu Yunning as Ning Yuanzhao and Liu Shishi as Ren Ruyi, A Journey to Love*



## AWARD FOR BEST KISS JANE AUSTEN WOULD LIKE TO HAVE WRITTEN

(or so I speculate!)

Austen may not have been explicit, but of course those characters she designed to fall in love were just a page away from kissing. Cdrama follows a similar restraint when it comes to physical displays of affection which means when they happen, it's invariably incredibly meaningful if a tad brief. However, there are several heart-stopping moments I think it's only right I share with you 😊

Luo Yunxi and Bai Lu share some very nice kisses as **Tantai Jin** and **Su Su** in *Till the End of the Moon* and as **Yuan Shuai** and **Jiang Jun** in *Love is Sweet*.

And Zhao Lusi's **Shang Zhi** has great chemistry with Chen Zheyaun's **Duan Jiaxu** in *Hidden Love* which ends up being, well, not so hidden.

While the infighting and backstabbing in *The Sword and the Brocade* isn't quite my cup of tea, the love that blossoms between Tan Song Yun's intelligent **Lui Shiyi Niang** and Wallace Chung's **Xu Lingyi** is the highlight, leading to one of the best kisses I've seen in cdrama. It's totally swoony. I exaggerate not. Episode 35, start nine minutes in. [ENG SUB \[The Sword and The Brocade\] EP35—Starring: Wallace Chung, Seven Tan \(youtube.com\)](#) No need to thank me 😊

However, despite that overbearing streak sometimes coming into play, Zheng Linghe's **Xie Ju'an** and Bai Lu's **Jiang Xuening** share some gorgeously heated romance in *Story of Kunning Palace*. I was quite smitten. Allow me to talk you through it. First there was the hug...



*The Hug: Zheng Linghe as Xie Ju'an and Bai Lu as Jiang Xuening, Story of Kunning Palace*



Then there was the intensity after the hug – I got a little flustered here 🔥



*The Look: Zheng Linghe as Xie Ju'an, Story of Kunning Palace*

\*sidenote: the hats look like droopy bunny ears which only adds to the super-cute factor!

Next came the confession – yep, totally with Bai Lu and melting 🥰



*The Melt: Zheng Linghe as Xie Ju'an and Bai Lu as Jiang Xuening, Story of Kunning Palace*

Until at last, smooches 😍 Need I add more?



*The Kiss: Zheng Linghe as Xie Ju'an and Bai Lu as Jiang Xuening, Story of Kunning Palace*

## THE MR COLLINS RAZZIE AWARD

As Mr Collins was the obsequious unwelcome cousin set to inherit the Bennetts family home, it's only right the award for the less than welcome cdrama is named in his honour. But what might not work for me, may for you and vice-versa. I mean, even Mr Collins gets married, right?

I know many people enjoyed *New Life Begins*, for example, but it just didn't grab me, mostly because the romance left me underwhelmed and I stopped watching.

Conversely, where others switched off, I powered through the troubled *Unchained Love*. In part, it was because of my appreciation of scene-stealer Zeng Li as Empress "Wrong-un" and also because I really never tire of Wang Hedi's eyebrows 😏 His **Xiao Duo** is magnificent – one of his best performances so far. However, the show, on the brink of being fabulous, crumbles with the bizarre "humour" of the female lead, Chen Yuchi's **Bu Yinlu**. Whether an acting choice, or directed to do so, her character makes for a painful and frustrating watch.

And speaking of Wang Hedi, he's still impressive in *Only for Love* alongside the unfaltering Bai Lu. And the rest of the cast are doing their best (hello Zeng Li!) with some likeable characters BUT it's a very dry premise about investments and finance and... I'm bored even writing about it. Oh dear. I think we have our Razzie winner. Sorry!



*Wang Hedi as Shi Yan and Bai Lu as Zheng Shuyi, Only for Love*

Well, thank you for allowing me to share my love of *love* in cdrama! It's always best to finish with a quote, and who better than Elizabeth Bennett?

"I just finished the best cdrama and am the happiest creature in the world. Perhaps other people have said so before, but not one with such justice."

Try one and let me know if you end up head over heels too 💕



**cdrama**  
**LOVE**