**（一）Flash Fiction TV: Why China Is Betting Big on Ultrashort Dramas**

*With domestic markets nearing saturation and facing stricter regulations, China’s billion-dollar ultrashort drama industry is looking to expand abroad. Amid this shift, studios are rushing to capitalize on the global demand for mobile-optimized, short-form content.*

Werewolves, vampires, zombies, and tales of vengeance in North America; Islamic culture and values in the Middle East and Indonesia; and sappy romances, conflicts within wealthy families, and tragedies in Thailand.

These are among the new themes that China’s ultrashort **drama** industry is now tapping into as it looks to capitalize on the rapidly growing popularity of the genre in international markets.

Unlike traditional TV shows, ultrashort dramas — offering vertical, smartphone-optimized episodes lasting only a few minutes each — are specifically designed for casual viewers who prefer quick, engaging content. The highly successful format is already worth billions of dollars in the domestic market.

So when a Chinese-owned short drama streaming platform approached Huang Mingxiao’s small media firm in the city of Foshan in south China to start producing content for the global market, she jumped at the chance.

“Everyone is now talking about short dramas for overseas viewers,” says the young director, who had only worked on Chinese-produced ultrashorts before the offer. “For many, it’s almost as if it’s the last opportunity to capitalize on the internet era.”

Recalling her surprise at the large turnout for an offline panel on the topic at a December industry conference, Huang says: “I was astonished to see the widespread interest in exploring this field, from individuals in livestreaming to those in cross-border e-commerce.”

Leading the charge abroad is ReelShort, a Chinese short drama app, which outperformed TikTok in downloads across the U.S. last November. The app amassed almost 19 million global downloads across all platforms in 2023 and generated more than $22 million in revenue.

Behind ReelShort is Crazy Maple Studio, supported by COL, a leading Beijing-based digital content provider in China’s online literature sector.

Its runaway success has sparked new optimism among both smaller Chinese creators like Huang and China’s streaming giants, who see this emerging trend as the next big Chinese cultural export after TikTok.

In recent months, other apps offering similar content include DramaBox, GoodShort, FlexTV, and MoboReels, each looking to emulate ReelShort’s formula.

A typical serialized romance drama on ReelShort comprises about 50 to 70 episodes, and costs between $25 to $35 to watch. While the first five to eight episodes are free, accessing additional episodes requires purchasing “coins,” either with cash or by watching advertisements. Production costs for each series hover around $300,000.

Xie Xiangwu, a mini-drama producer at Unreal Imagine, a Los Angeles-based video production firm, believes that a large part of the genre’s popularity is its universal appeal.

“Regardless of education level, people from all walks of life can enjoy these dramas,” says Xie. “The plot twists can give people who may be experiencing some sort of life stressors a kind of release.”

The genre traces its roots back to the early 2000s, when online Chinese literature, also known as web novels, skyrocketed to fame across China. They featured stories about schoolyard romance and swashbuckling adventures. Over the years, web novels have inspired various types of visual content, from films and TV series to the current wave of short dramas.

Short dramas also employ a per-episode payment model, mirroring the micro-payment approach of online literature platforms, which charge just a few cents per installment upon the release of serialized content.

According to iiMedia research data, the ultrashort drama market ballooned by 268% year on year to 37.39 billion yuan ($5.27 billion) in 2023. Approximately 1 billion Chinese online users spent an average of 2.5 hours daily watching short video content last year.

But with the domestic market approaching saturation, producers began looking abroad for new opportunities.

Initially, Chinese video platforms tried to attract Western audiences by simply adding subtitles or dubbing existing shows. This approach, however, failed to resonate with Western viewers, leading to low payment conversion rates and poorer viewer retention.

Then, ReelShort flipped the script. Abandoning conventional approaches, the company instead invested in fusing the storytelling found in Chinese web novels with Western elements: They hired Western casts and collaborated with teams abroad for script adaptations, yet their business models aligned closely with their Chinese counterparts.

Mirroring ReelShort’s method, Huang and her team flew to Romania last August. They chose the country for its rich lore of supernatural legends, a theme they believed would interest international audiences for their new drama, “Pregnant After Rejected by Alpha.”

The plot revolves around Gabriella from the Silver Moon Pack, who finds herself pregnant after a one-night stand with Alpha Nicklaus from a rival pack. Nicklaus, intending to marry Gabriella’s sister Tracy, rejects her, thus forcing Gabriella to navigate the complexities of her status and the fallout from that night, all while concealing her pregnancy.

The twists and turns weren’t confined to the screen: In an example of art imitating life, Huang’s production of the show in Romania encountered its own complexities and unexpected challenges.

Working over 16 hours a day, Huang initially struggled with the slower pace, as local actors frequently took breaks for coffee or rest, in sharp contrast to her experiences in China. This slower rhythm, she recalls, was initially a source of anxiety.

“The shoot location was like a party house,” recalls Huang, describing how the set buzzed with actors enjoying coffee, desserts, and socializing, sometimes even inviting friends to join in. Eventually, Huang adapted to this new rhythm, finding that the atmosphere even helped rekindle Huang’s passion for filmmaking.

“I guess for European actors, playing an American character gives them a kind of enjoyment born out of competition, and extra motivation to nail the part,” she says. “They may have been a little confused as to what our Chinese film team was attempting to do, but they found it interesting enough to stick around,” she laughed.

According to Xie, while domestic short drama projects typically wrap up in two to four weeks, those aimed at overseas audiences can take up to one and a half months or longer. She attributed these longer production times to slower logistics and the additional time needed to secure shooting licenses abroad.

Another significant challenge is script development. “Many scripts adapted from online Chinese literature are overly imaginative, making them impractical for filming, or lack logical storylines,” says Xie, highlighting the extensive effort required to refine these scripts for international audiences.

This process often involves immersing in the culture or cultures where the content is billed to stream, understanding local lifestyles, and incorporating slang and diverse character representations to enhance the script’s appeal.

Meanwhile, the genre’s overseas expansion coincides with increasing regulation in China. In response to content deemed too sexual, vulgar, violent, or of “low taste,” Chinese regulators have recently introduced a series of stringent policies.

Last November, the National Radio and Television Administration implemented seven key measures to regulate the sector, including a one-month campaign targeting “illegal dramas.” This was part of a broader effort that began in November 2022 and continued until February 2023, during which more than 25,000 dramas were removed from circulation.

Responding to these regulatory changes, major Chinese video platforms, such as WeChat, ByteDance, and Kuaishou, quickly adapted, introducing various policies ranging from removing dramas to restrictions on advertising.

But while the global expansion of ultrashort dramas has been largely successful, it has not been without its critics. Some have raised concerns about the quality and cultural representation of these dramas.

Huang, however, disagrees with these critiques. “If it’s only about exporting low-quality content to a new market, no one’s going to pay for it,” she counters. Huang emphasizes that the success of her firm’s productions, and others like it, hinges on their ability to offer compelling, high-quality content that resonates with diverse international audiences.

She underscores that foreign audiences, accustomed to high-quality productions from platforms like Netflix, have higher expectations regarding plotlines and production standards. “American audiences are more inclined to pay, but only for premium content,” she says.

This awareness has led video platforms to put quality over factors like production speed when catering to the global market. Huang adds that these platforms are increasingly prioritizing high-caliber content to meet international standards.

She draws a parallel between the evolution of short dramas and the trajectory of online literature a decade ago. “The growth of a paying audience fuels continuous improvement in both content and quality.”

Huang also points out a key difference in viewer preferences: Chinese audiences tend to tolerate advertisements and enjoy fast-paced content, adapting to the fragmented nature of online consumption. “However, this approach can be confusing for overseas viewers.”

Huang sees a brighter outlook in international markets. “The profit margins for overseas dramas are higher. Plus, it’s an emerging market, offering opportunities for smaller teams like ours,” she says. Huang and her team, who bring expertise from their international studies, believe they have a competitive edge in this niche market.

Amid the optimism, however, she also acknowledges the challenges that emerging creators like her face in the domestic market. Increasingly fierce competition now makes it difficult for new players like Huang to stand out, which often means reduced profit margins.

“Even though some of our productions have done quite well, revenue remains modest due to high operational costs,” says Huang, based on her initial two years of experience making mini dramas for the domestic audience.

She notes that the market has become increasingly challenging for smaller firms, which often struggle with substantial production and marketing expenses. “In our dealings with major streaming platforms, who ultimately control the content, we often feel at a disadvantage,” she adds.

Meanwhile, Xie, the mini-drama producer, anticipates growth in the sector. “Short vertical dramas tailored for mobile experiences are still novel in America, where viewers prefer watching content on televisions and computers,” she says. “As mobile phones become ubiquitous, it is inevitable that more products tailored for mobile consumption will emerge.

Although romantic melodramas currently dominate the market, Xie has observed the emergence of new genres like suspense and thrillers. Currently working on her fourth short drama project, set against the backdrop of American politics, Xie is exploring these new territories.

Huang remains optimistic about the future and the potential for cross-cultural collaboration. “Maybe American producers will feel that their Chinese counterparts are also strong, and would like to join us to make up for the shortcomings in our content,” she says.

（By Li Xin and Ye Zhanhang SIXTH TONE Jan 24, 2024）