LIFE



Insuring a second chance

Hit TV series set in Shanghai is a mature story about resilience and starting over at any age, **Xu Fan** reports.

Actress Sun Li portrays a veteran insurance seller in the popular TV series *A Better Life*. The show maintains a high rating since its release on CCTV-8. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY





Left: A scene features Sun's character preparing to record a short video while actor Dong Zijian, who plays another insurance seller, helps her. **Right:** A scene shows the husband and son of Sun's character.

"If she and I fall into the river at the same time, who will you save first?"

What began as a viral internet dilemma — putting a husband's loyalty to the test by forcing him to choose between saving his wife or his mother — becomes a devastating reality in a pivotal scene from the hit TV series *A Better Life*.

The scene centers on Hu Manli, a top-performing insurance agent whose 20-year career boasts over 390 policies, including a stunning deal worth 8 million yuan ($1.1 million). Just as Hu believes she has reached the peak of success, her life takes a dark turn.

Betrayed by her husband and framed by a rival colleague, she loses her job. In a desperate act, she calls her husband and his mistress to the very stone bridge where he once proposed. There, she grabs the other woman's hand, threatening to jump into the river to force her husband to choose who to save. But the mistress breaks free, and the husband shouts for a park security guard to rescue Hu instead.

Starring A-list actress Sun Li, *A Better Life*, which was filmed using advanced 4K ultra-high-definition technology, maintained an average viewership rating of 2.7 percent per episode, the second-highest rating in the history of CCTV-8, the country's largest TV drama broadcaster, according to entertainment data analyzer Kuyun.

As one of the most popular TV dramas in recent weeks, the show has generated over 2,000 trending topics on major social platforms like Sina Weibo and Douyin. It has also boosted tourism in Shanghai, the metropolis where the story is set and which features 86 iconic locations, ranging from the skyscraper-studded Bund to crowded Shikumen neighborhoods.

Producer Zhang Lingyan, a native of Jiangsu province who has lived in Shanghai for over two decades, tells China Daily that the drama, with some of its dialogues in the Shanghai dialect and several major roles played by Shanghai actors, vividly reflects the temperament of Shanghai, one of the Chinese cities most recognized in the West.

"Shanghai is a city full of inclusiveness and vibrancy. Most locals have a deep passion for life. It's common to see elderly residents dressed in elegant outfits sipping coffee in high-end cafes — yet they'll just as happily wait an hour in line for a bowl of noodles at a tiny alleyway eatery," she says.

Recalling the project's inception, Zhang reveals that she was immediately drawn to screenwriter Fei Huijun's idea when it was first proposed in 2018.

Inspired by the hit South Korean drama *Sky Castle*, Fei envisioned a story about a smart woman in her 30s and an aloof young man — an unlikely duo who form a mentor-protege relationship, helping each other overcome their personal struggles. The woman is 39 while the man is 28 years old.

"After reading the 4,000-character story outline, I found it to be bold, innovative and dynamic for its time. Most stories with such age gaps focus on May-December romances, but this was different," she explains.

After over a year of preparation, the creators decided to set the story — continuing its original ideal about the redemption of two people from different generations — in the insurance industry.

The protagonist, Hu, is portrayed as a seasoned insurance agent, while Xue Xiaozhou, played by actor Dong Zijian, is a capable but stubborn newcomer. After being framed by the jealous colleague, Hu loses her insurance license and is barred from the industry. Facing financial struggles, she persuades Xue to partner with her, offering access to the client resources she had accumulated over two decades in exchange for a share of the commission if they successfully close a deal.

Zhang explains that the protagonist was inspired by one of her closest friends — a highly paid sales director overseeing eastern China for a prestigious brand. When the woman's husband nearly went bankrupt during a financial crisis, her friend, who had quit her decent job to become a full-time homemaker raising two children, was forced to reenter the workforce. However, she soon realized that her age — being in her 40s — had become a barrier in the fiercely competitive job market.

"Eventually, she started from scratch as an insurance agent, which pulled her out of life's hardships. The insurance industry appears to be highly accommodating, with minimal requirements for age or educational background," she adds.

Scriptwriter Fei, who spent over two months conducting interviews and research, gathered a lot of firsthand information. Through this process, Fei has discovered that a successful insurance seller is much like a passionate activist — someone who embodies the spirit of service in every action.

One memorable scene in the drama captures this perfectly: the protagonist, dressed in a high-end suit, doesn't hesitate to put on rubber gloves and help a vendor weigh fish while persuading him to buy insurance. In another instance, she spends an entire week shadowing an elderly woman at the request of her anxious daughter, who fears her mother is being scammed by a young man — not for romance, but for her wealth.

"At the same time, I also want to make the characters as authentic and relatable as possible," says Fei.

As a Shanghai native, Fei notes that some fellow creators hold stereotypical views of Shanghai women — portraying them either as housewives unfamiliar with the workplace or as elite professionals in expensive suits and high heels, working in glitzy high-rise office buildings.

"As a mother, wife, and daughter myself, I juggle life and work daily. Sometimes, I'd be on a script discussion call while cooking soup in the kitchen. On days when I'm writing, I still help my child with homework at night. Through Hu's character, I hope the audience sees a Shanghai woman doing her best to balance everything — like an octopus (handling multiple tasks at once)," Fei explains.

Actress Sun shares that through her role as Hu, she has gained profound insight into the poignant struggles facing modern women. During the 120 days of filming while portraying Hu — the resilient woman battling life's hardships — Sun says she has learned from her character's unwavering strength. Describing Hu as "wild grass surviving in the cracks", Sun explains how the protagonist's journey taught her to confront life's difficulties and uncertainties with courage.

Li Jingsheng, vice-president of the China Federation of Radio and Television Associations, says that the drama not only helps spread awareness about the insurance industry but also thoughtfully explores pressing social issues like parenting and elderly care.

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Dialogues bloom as Orchid Awards near grand finale in July

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Celebrating exchange, friendship and collaboration, an award in the country honors those who build cultural bridges between China and the rest of the world, serving as living proof that dialogue can transcend borders and break down barriers, experts say.

Three short-listed nominees for the Lifetime Honorary Award for the second edition of the Orchid Awards this year were announced before the event's final jury meeting in Beijing on May 23. They are Marcelo Munoz, chairman of the Catedra China Foundation in Spain, Irina Bokova, former Director-General of UNESCO, and Francis Gurry, former Director General of the United Nations World Intellectual Property Organization.

At the meeting, jury members recommended 10 recipients for this year's awards and discussed the event's role in exchange of ideas.

Launched by China International Communications Group in 2022, the Orchid Awards are presented to non-Chinese individuals or organizations that have made outstanding contributions to cultural exchanges and mutual learning, as well as the promotion of Chinese culture.

According to CICG, the Orchid Awards seek to implement the Global Civilization Initiative, promote the common values of humanity, consolidate the cultural foundation for building a global community of shared future, and facilitate exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations.

This year, the awards received nearly 300 submissions from around 80 countries, which resulted in 30 finalists after a multi-round selection process. The awards comprise one Lifetime Honorary Award, three Outstanding Achievement Awards, and six Friendship Envoy Awards.

The final list of laureates is scheduled to be announced at the award ceremony in July.

Du Zhanyuan, chair of the awards' expert committee and director of the CICG, says that mutual learning among civilizations plays a vital role in building consensus and addressing common challenges facing humanity.



Members of the expert committee participate in the final jury meeting for the second Orchid Awards in Beijing on May 23. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

The modern-day importance of the Orchid Awards therefore lies in three aspects — to promote intercultural exchange, enhance people-to-people bonds, and build a platform to facilitate collaboration.

"CICG will take the nomination, selection and awarding process of the Orchid Awards as an opportunity to encourage countries to gain wisdom and nourishment from other civilizations and to promote common development and prosperity," Du says.

"Through exchange among civilizations, CICG will help strengthen the foundation for global peace, prosperity and mutual understanding, contributing to the building of a community with a shared future for mankind."

The expert committee for selection this year has 23 members, consisting of a chairperson, three deputy chairpersons, a secretary-general and 18 expert members.

According to Zhou Shuchun, deputy chair of the expert committee and executive vice-president of China Foundation for Human Rights Development, the jury demonstrates global representation with international experts from nine countries across five continents and Chinese experts comprising scholars, media professionals, artists and cultural entrepreneurs.

These experts cover diverse fields such as Sinology, international cultural exchange, media and communication, cultural heritage preservation, arts and music, publishing, as well as education and research.

Following the selection process, members of the expert committee engaged in a dialogue themed on the awards' values in bridging divides through exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations.

Franco Amadei, Italian Sinologist and former cultural counselor of the Italian embassy in China, had served as an international jury member for the awards' both editions.

At the dialogue session, he said that the individuals and organizations honored by the Orchid Awards serve as compelling evidence that it is possible to overcome barriers and transcend national, geographic and cultural boundaries.

"The contemporary relevance of the Orchid Awards lies, on the one hand, in the ancient and universal humanistic spirit it embodies — the belief that no matter how different the 'other' may seem, we should always see them as part of humanity, as our brothers and sisters, not as outsiders, let alone enemies," he said.

"On the other hand, its relevance also stems from a pressing reality. In today's world, now more than ever before, we need such a civilizational initiative that speaks to the globe and to the shared future of humankind."