CULTURE



Fans pose in front of an installation promoting the TV series *A Better Life* at Shanghai Media Group's exhibition stall at an expo held during the Shanghai TV Festival and Shanghai International Film Festival this year. CHEN YUYU / FOR CHINA DAILY

C-dramas gain global momentum

Producers tailor to overseas tastes as international distributors show growing interest in Chinese series

For Zhou Yu, the question began as a quiet uncertainty: Could a drama set in China's insurance industry possibly find an audience overseas?

Earlier this year, the metropolitan workplace drama *A Better Life* became a major hit in China. Zhou, general manager of SMG Pictures, one of the producers, sent its translated episodes to a few European and American partners — more out of curiosity than confidence.

The reply came sooner than she expected. A British distributor wrote back after watching five episodes: they "loved it". What captivated them were not the policies or corporate procedures, but the two protagonists, a 28-year-old and a 39-year-old, each mired in personal crises, yet gradually becoming mentor and student, helping each other grow.

Zhou realized that the story's theme was deeply Chinese, but the emotional grammar was universal.

Zhou brought the series to the recently held 26th Asia TV Forum and Market in Singapore, one of the region's most significant trading floors for screen content. Buyers from across Southeast Asia stopped to ask Zhou about licensing, with some inquiring about local remake opportunities.

China's presence at the forum this year was more visible than ever. Guided by China's State Council Information Office and National Radio and Television Administration, the China Pavilion expanded to 270 square meters, hosting 24 companies and a slate of projects moving toward concrete deals.

Among the projects was *Swords into Plowshares*, a historical drama produced by Huace Group. Thai broadcaster True Visions announced it would air the series in Thailand simultaneously with China. The team explained that Thai audiences expect to watch the latest C-dramas "almost immediately after they are released in China or even simulcast".

Turkiye has been captivated as well. Selcuk Yavuzkanat, deputy director general of cinema at the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, notes that in recent years, China's production quality has risen markedly, and Turkish audiences have shown a particular fondness for its historical epics.

"Our public broadcaster TRT has aired Chinese series before, and people liked them," he says. "I hope in the coming years we will buy more."

For industry veteran Zhao Yifang, CEO of Huace Group, none of these developments comes as a surprise. She has pursued international outreach since the 1990s and believes the major transformation in recent years has been a shift among audiences toward a global mindset for content. "From the beginning," she says, "we have kept international audiences in mind."





Top: A scene from a promotional event for *Swords into Plowshares*, a historical drama produced by Huace Group, during the 26th Asia TV Forum and Market in Singapore in December. THEN CHIH WEY / XINHUA **Above:** A poster of the workplace drama *A Better Life*. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

For *Swords into Plowshares*, that meant using AI during the script-writing stage to analyze emotional preferences in overseas markets. Later, international trailers were adjusted for regions such as Europe and Southeast Asia, with the same story but different emphases.

Practice has validated this approach. In August, *The Thirsty Thirty*, a Thai remake of Linmon Media's urban hit *Nothing But Thirty*, was released simultaneously on Tencent Video and Disney+. General Manager of Linmon International, Lu Yu, says that as the Thai series gained global momentum, Linmon chose to invest directly and oversee the Thai adaptation, working with local writers and actors to shape the cross-border remake.

"We kept the original framework and character design, along with the iconic scenes audiences remember," Lu says. "But we also searched for what fits the local market best." Still, he adds, complete localization was not the goal — they wanted to preserve the distinct "Thai flavor" that international audiences increasingly appreciate.

Across the industry, such collaborations are becoming a pattern. Data presented at the forum by Liu Anqi, senior analyst at the France-based media research firm Glance, show that from 2020 to 2025, China ranks first in Asia in both intent to collaborate and the number of coproduced projects.

Indonesia's largest mobile operator, Telkomsel, has extensive experience in coproductions with Chinese partners. Lesley Simpson, the company's vice-president of digital lifestyle, says Telkomsel provides local expertise and a strong user base for Chinese collaborators. At the same time, Indonesian industry players require a wide variety of content.

"Local content and Chinese content are very different in style, but Indonesian audiences enjoy both," Simpson says. "Indonesia has many islands and a large population, and audience preferences can vary from one island to another, which is why it's essential to offer a wide variety of content."

For Zhao, who has spent decades leading Huace Group's international outreach, such transformations underscore what she has long observed. "Before, a Chinese episode might sell for a few thousand US dollars," she says. "Now, strong titles can sell for more than $100,000 per episode."

Yet, she adds, economic value is only part of the story. The more profound significance lies in culture. "Good storytelling ultimately depends on understanding the spiritual core of Chinese people and embedding it in the narrative." *Swords into Plowshares* centers on the longing for national stability and everyday peace, desires that cross eras and borders.

"A thousand years ago or today, people yearn for a world without war," Zhao says. "It is a Chinese story, but also a human one."

XINHUA

Film raises empathy and awareness for youths with virus

When two brothers long separated by time and circumstance finally reunited, they uncovered a family secret buried for years: their mother had died of AIDS. The older brother was born with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, while the younger one, born after the introduction of preventive measures, was born healthy.

The older brother, who had once been given just three years to live, defied expectations and now lives a life many believed was impossible for someone with HIV, and even attended university. He is currently supported by the AIDS Prevention Education Project for Chinese Youth, a nonprofit organization launched in 2006, through which he regularly receives free medicine.

The brothers' personal story is the core narrative of *Love Youth*, a film that breaks decades of silence, boldly bringing youth-oriented HIV education and sexual health awareness to the big screen, aiming to change public perception and foster a better understanding of the disease.

China reported its first case of AIDS in 1985. As of December 2025, nearly 1.4 million people are living with HIV in China, with young people accounting for a rising proportion of cases.

Premiering nationwide just ahead of this year's World AIDS Day on Dec 1, the film tells how China has been supporting young people living with HIV through national public welfare programs like APEPCY.

The theme of China's World AIDS Day this year calls for united societal efforts to prevent HIV, urging innovation in preventive measures and public awareness.

The film itself marks a pioneering effort in China's AIDS awareness campaign, with its entire cast and crew volunteering their time.

Among the many projects supported by APEPCY is the Linfen Red Ribbon School in North China's Shanxi province — the only institution in China dedicated to children living with HIV.

The film draws inspiration from a real-life story that unfolded at the school.

Reflecting on a time when AIDS loomed like a terrifying specter and was barely spoken of, Wang Xia, the school's principal, says, "The mere mention of the word 'AIDS' made people recoil.

"But today, with medical breakthroughs and a more understanding and accepting society, China has made a remarkable jump forward," Wang observes.

The overall prevalence of AIDS is kept at a low level in China, with transmission through blood transfusion largely curbed, and mother-to-child and needle-syringe transmission effectively controlled, according to the National Disease Control and Prevention Administration.

Over the past two decades, the school has cared for 127 HIV-positive children from 14 provinces nationwide.

Today, 65 of its former students are employed, and some have even started families. Through advances in the prevention of mother-to-child transmission, young women have had healthy children, ending the generational cycle of HIV.

Guo Xiaoping, the school's founder, called its success a miracle.

"Throughout these years, not a single child has died," he says. "Now, the only difference between these children and others is that they take a pill every day."

Guo, now 62, retired as the school's principal in 2023, but continues to serve as guardian to every child under his care.

"I dream of the day when this school no longer has to exist," Guo says. "When every child with HIV can attend a regular school, and the next generation is born free of the virus, I'll know I've done all I can, and I will finally be able to retire in peace."

The film's closing words echo Guo's motto: "To protect our own children, we must also protect all children."

In 2004, China initiated support policies for people living with HIV/AIDS, as well as their families, including the provision of medications and living assistance. Orphans of deceased AIDS patients also receive free education under these policies.

According to the National Disease Control and Prevention Administration, over 95 percent of people diagnosed with HIV in China are currently receiving antiretroviral therapy, and over 95 percent of those on treatment have reached viral load suppression.

Han Mengjie, chief expert in AIDS prevention at the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, notes that without an effective HIV vaccine available, education remains the "social vaccine" in the battle against the virus.

Zhang Yinjun, the film's chief production planner, explains that the real challenge in HIV education for young people today isn't that the topic is untouched, but the deep structural silence surrounding it.

"Sexual health and HIV prevention have long been overlooked in families, schools and society. People tend not to talk about these things directly," Zhang says.

She notes that this avoidance makes it more challenging to share vital knowledge effectively; thus, young people are less likely to fully develop the understanding and habits they need to protect themselves.

"Ending HIV/AIDS isn't just about medicine and testing; it's about creating a culture of understanding, acceptance, and love," Zhang adds.

XINHUA





Above: Directors and actors of the AIDS-themed film *Love Youth* pose at its premiere in Shenyang, Liaoning province, in November. CHEN HONGBO / FOR CHINA DAILY **Left:** Students hold a red ribbon, the symbol of AIDS support, during an event to raise awareness about the virus at the University of South China in Hengyang, Hunan province, in November. CAO ZHENGPING / XINHUA