The Global Rise of Chinese Short Dramas: Between Emotional Escapism and Cultural Adaptation

Chinese short dramas and the global audiences.

New York City, New York Nov 11, 2025 (Issuewire.com) - From the male lead's initial "utter disdain" to his eventual "deep infatuation," and from the female lead's "passive endurance" to her "independent empowerment," such storylines—complete with the malicious female rival and cunning business conspiracies—have become wildly popular among audiences in Europe, North America, and beyond.

Though frequently criticized for repetitive themes and formulaic plots, there's no denying that short dramas going global remain a booming trend. According to Sensor Tower data, in the first quarter of 2025, global in-app revenue for short drama apps reached approximately $700 million, nearly quadrupling from Q1 2024. Global downloads exceeded 370 million, marking a 6.2-fold year-over-year growth. Market pioneers like **ReelShort** and **DramaBox** continue to lead, while a wave of new entrants launched in late 2024—such as **DramaWave**, **NetShort**, and **FlickReels**—have experienced rapid growth.

However, the sector is still far from reaching its ceiling. **He Zexi**, co-founder and COO of **ShortMax**, told *Xiaguang Society*, "Compared to the domestic market, where short dramas have a 60% penetration rate, the global figure remains only around 5–10%. In terms of user reach, there's still enormous room for growth." The *2024 China Micro-Drama Industry Report* shows that China's micro-drama market reached 50.5 billion yuan in 2024. Many insiders believe that the overseas market will eventually surpass the domestic one several times over, with vast potential ahead.

Yet behind these dazzling numbers, challenges are also surfacing. Homogenized storylines have led to rampant plagiarism—top platform **ReelShort** itself has been embroiled in a “systematic plagiarism” controversy. Content bottlenecks are stalling user growth, and skyrocketing marketing costs mean that nearly all platforms are essentially “paying to stay visible.” Within the narrow confines of the dominant “CEO romance” genre, intense internal competition has become the norm, forcing many smaller platforms to exit early.

According to **Saber_Z**, Creative Director at **Woju Culture**, which focuses on the North American short drama market, “The overseas short drama industry is still in its early, fast-growing stage. Different platforms are in a fierce battle for users. Only by locking users into one platform and boosting engagement and downloads can platforms expect potential returns.”

Meanwhile, **Xin Yue**, former Head of Overseas Operations at **Stardust TV**, noted, “The short drama business overseas is essentially a money-burning game. Many companies enter the market just to test the waters, thinking the sector has long-term potential and wanting to secure an early foothold. At the same time, some platforms are creating an illusion of prosperity—not relying on hit dramas for profit, but rather crafting an attractive narrative to appeal to investors.”

In our traditional perception, the film and television industries of Europe and the United States are characterized by a high level of industrialization and technical sophistication, along with strong global storytelling and cultural export capabilities. The Hollywood blockbusters and Netflix series we’re all familiar with—such as *House of Cards*, *Narcos*, and *Stranger Things*—have achieved immense global influence and emotional resonance, becoming defining cultural symbols for an entire generation.

Therefore, when viewed against this backdrop, the sudden narrative of “Chinese short dramas conquering Europe and America” has sparked a wave of nationalist euphoria. Even a completely fictional short drama like *Trump Falls in Love with Me, a Cleaner in the White House* has been enough to send marketing accounts into collective frenzy.

However, it’s important to recognize that Chinese short dramas represent only a niche segment within the global content consumption market. Their overseas popularity arises largely because certain viewing needs among Western audiences have long gone unmet.

In fact, the crime, suspense, dark, and mystery genres we often associate with Netflix productions don’t truly represent the full spectrum of Western audiences’ tastes. Rather, they reflect the content preferences of the middle class. For some viewers, such shows carry a kind of “elite threshold” — they require a certain level of textual literacy shaped by modern education in order to fully understand and appreciate them. Yet for the middle class themselves, these shows are “accessible enough” — the thrill of crime plots and the satisfaction of intellectual duels perfectly cater to their needs for everyday entertainment and leisure.

But what about the vast lower-tier markets across Europe and America? In the mobile internet era, the small screen in each person’s hand has replaced the once-unifying big screen, making individualized content consumption and aesthetic taste more significant than ever. Even the most silent and overlooked audiences can now be sharply identified by capital and catered to with tailor-made cultural products. Chinese short dramas have emerged precisely to fill this gap.

In a sense, the overseas expansion of Chinese short dramas resembles that of China's low-cost "white-label" consumer goods on a spiritual level. Both rely on the advantages of a highly developed industrial supply chain that enables efficient mass production at relatively low cost. Both draw strength from China's vast and diverse domestic consumer base, which drives segmentation and innovation, resulting in a massive catalog of products (or "SKUs") that meet global consumer needs. Both rely on large-scale advertising campaigns, with substantial monthly marketing spending to rapidly build brand awareness. Even their user demographics show striking similarities — for example, **Temu's** core user base in Europe and the U.S. consists mainly of Millennials and Generation X.

Director **Zhang Zihan**, who has produced and released several short dramas in the North American market, told *Xia Guang She* that the main audience in North America consists of housewives aged 40–60, as well as Mexican and Latina women. "Short dramas do have some influence in North America, but it's limited to a specific demographic. Platforms like Netflix or Hulu offer content that's too refined or too artistic for them. TikTok, on the other hand, provides everyday short-form videos, but not the kind of storylines that fulfill these viewers' fantasies. Short dramas, as a functional entertainment product, deliver emotional value and an outlet for life's stresses — naturally becoming a satisfying cultural product for this group."

Malik Naibi from the social media marketing agency **Duke 65** noted that in China, most short drama viewers are blue-collar workers who often end up spending the equivalent of a movie ticket to watch an entire series. **ReelShort** has brought this concept — along with some of its storylines — to its target audience in the U.S.: middle-aged women.

Globally, among content consumers dominated by middle-aged women, the most popular genre of short dramas is the "dominant CEO" trope.

Compared to the diversity of short dramas in China — ranging from domineering CEO romances, revenge and rebirth plots, time-travel palace intrigues, to female empowerment, workplace romance, and family sagas — overseas short dramas are significantly limited and lack variety.

The overwhelming focus on the CEO trope is a rational choice by short drama platforms to minimize risk and maximize returns. For this audience — women who may be emotionally unfulfilled or living in conservative, repressed environments — these formulaic CEO dramas offer a seemingly endless source of emotional comfort.

As explored in the cultural study *Reading the Romance*, which analyzed the phenomenon of white middle-class American housewives in the latter half of the 20th century being obsessed with romantic fiction featuring dominant male protagonists: "Reading romance novels compensates women in two distinct ways. First, by triggering identification with a fictional heroine (whose feminine identity is consistently affirmed through the desire and attention of an idealized man), the novel provides a substitute form of emotional care. The second form of compensation lies in the novel's ability to fill the woman's inner world with the rich detail of an imaginary journey, allowing her to engage in hypothetical conversations with adults within a broader social space."

In the mobile internet era, cultural products targeting this demographic also need to evolve with changing media formats. Chinese short drama platforms have seized the opportunity to go global, using vertical-screen short dramas to replace romance novels and soap operas, continuously fulfilling women's emotional needs and desire for self-recognition.

However, an overly narrow range of genres inevitably leads to a loss of novelty and stagnation in user growth.

What many platforms are now doing is refining and intensifying competition within the dominant CEO genre itself — for example, incorporating elements familiar to Western audiences such as werewolves, or experimenting with hybrid plots that combine rebirth, face-slapping revenge, and other popular tropes with the CEO narrative. Localizing storylines is also a key challenge — such as reducing the use of distinctly East Asian plot elements like “dysfunctional families” or “preference for male heirs.” But altering too much risks undermining the very factors that made the show a hit in the first place. Ultimately, this is not an industry that encourages innovation — unless you can prove that innovation drives real revenue.

The popularity of werewolf stories in the Western world, for example, can be traced back to the sexual liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. These movements left a lasting legacy — respect for individual autonomy and diverse sexual orientations — that deeply shaped modern Western attitudes toward sexuality and gender. When class barriers, traditional values, and social taboos are no longer obstacles to love, "species difference" becomes a new symbolic barrier. In crossing that line, people once again find themselves weeping over the myth of true love. In this sense, the werewolf is essentially a culturally Western variation of the dominant CEO romance — steeped in emotional intensity and romantic suffering.

According to **Xing Yue**, former head of international content at **Stardust TV**, the lack of genre diversity in overseas short dramas is also closely tied to the creative teams' unfamiliarity with local news, social issues, and cultural dynamics.

For instance, many Chinese short dramas are adapted from real-life headlines — such as cases involving wife-murder-for-insurance, cross-border fraud, exorbitant dowries, or abusive caregivers — all of which directly tap into viewers’ pain points. In contrast, because short drama platforms going abroad lack a deep understanding of the North American market, they struggle to create similarly “synchronous” storylines and can’t accurately pinpoint the emotional triggers of overseas audiences. As a result, their creative choices default to the universally familiar — the dominant CEO trope.

Xing Yue gave an example, saying that she believes the issue of **racial discrimination** could be a powerful topic and emotional trigger for *face-slapping revenge* short dramas. However, race remains a sensitive and largely untouchable subject in North American content creation. “North American audiences are extremely sensitive to this issue. In one of my shows, the male lead is a big celebrity, and the actor playing his agent happened to be Black — not intentionally cast for that reason, but simply because he was available. After the show was released, we immediately received comments questioning why a Black actor was chosen to play the agent — was it implying that Black people are destined to serve white people?”

Saber_Z, the Creative Director at **WoJu Culture**, also believes that a lack of screenwriting talent is currently the biggest bottleneck for short drama teams expanding overseas. “Some international film students actively participate in local events and communicate with locals — they might have the potential to become the kind of writers we need. But many international students tend to only hang out with other Chinese, or are more introverted — some barely speak any English. Their understanding of local culture is minimal, and their real overseas life experience is close to zero. So, writers who can actually create content that hits the emotional sweet spots of Western audiences are extremely rare.”

On the other hand, Chinese short dramas originate from more than two decades of web literature, which has developed into a wide array of genres such as fantasy, time travel, and alternate realities. Many niche web novels have become mainstream through screen adaptations, and Chinese audiences have, to varying degrees, been immersed in this content. As a result, they can more easily accept and engage with the complex fictional worlds constructed by short dramas.

The term *"setting"* originally comes from Japanese anime and was later adopted by Chinese web fiction, where its meaning has been expanded. It refers to the deliberate construction of background environments, character types, and story details based on the core plot and creative intent — essentially forming a coherent fictional universe. Readers are expected to naturally accept these "settings" and use them as a foundation to understand and interpret the story.

However, for overseas audiences, narrative concepts like "systems," "strategy guides," or "time travel" come with a cognitive barrier. When creative teams shoot short dramas involving these ideas, they first need to explain them through exposition and buildup — which requires time and effort to educate the market. But that kind of long-term investment doesn't appeal to most short drama companies, who are primarily looking to make quick money and lack the patience to nurture a new audience.

"Some platforms have tried genres like *spirit-swapping*, *rebirth*, or even era dramas like *'Being a Stepmother in the 1980s'*, but the performance data wasn't great. Audience comprehension barriers are a significant factor that impacts engagement," Xing Yue explained.

In her view, the **"pay-per-episode" monetization model** used by most overseas short drama platforms is also poorly aligned with the payment habits of North American consumers. Long-form platforms like Netflix operate on a **subscription model**, where users pay a monthly or quarterly fee to access all content. In contrast, most short drama apps still rely on unlocking episodes one at a time. "We've seen many user comments in the app backends — lots of viewers complain about how frustrating it is to keep getting prompted to pay just to continue watching."

However, there is still room to explore other types of stories.

Recently, short drama genres known as "regret stream", which have performed well in markets such as Europe, the U.S., and Japan, have been gaining traction. The so-called "regret stream" refers to stories where the female protagonist, after being misunderstood by her lover or family, either enters a cryogenic freeze or dies and is later reborn. Her lover and family, in their endless remorse, realize their mistakes, but by then, the woman is gone, or time has passed, and the opportunity for reconciliation has vanished. Or, the female protagonist is reborn, while the male protagonist grows old and withers. Representative works of this genre include *Three Brothers Turn White for Me After Long Sleep* and *Eternal Unforgettable*.

Xue Jing, a scholar from the School of Humanities at Tsinghua University, believes this narrative model is akin to the "chasing wife to the crematorium" trope. The emotional payoff for female viewers lies in the idea that they can find emotional release and closure for the injustices they've suffered in relationships. Through imaginative self-soothing and fulfillment, women's sacrifices in love are compensated.

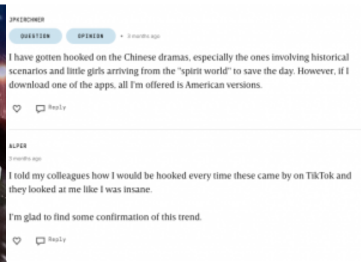
In addition to the "regret stream," short dramas catering to the overseas senior demographic, known as *Silver-Haired* dramas, have also seen good performance. The short drama app *FlickReels* from Hangzhou's *Zhangwan Network*, which focuses on "middle-aged and senior Mary Sue sweet romance" themes, has become a dark horse since its launch in July 2024.

Another key market for short dramas going abroad is Japan, where there is also significant potential in the middle-aged and elderly demographic. The success of short dramas catering to this demographic further proves the point.

Apart from female-targeted short dramas, overseas male-targeted short dramas are also in an exploratory stage.

As for the potential for short dramas to diversify their genres in international markets, how far can they go? As the bestselling Silicon Valley book *Hooked* points out, in today's world, product sales are all about capturing the consumer's mindshare. A product that touches the user's emotions captures their attention and establishes an ongoing connection.

In today's age, where emotional consumption has become a necessity, Chinese short dramas are striving to become global products that resonate emotionally with audiences worldwide.



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