

Realism gives overseas audiences a window on life in contemporary China.

Xu Wei

Television viewers were surprised recently when Su Xiaoding, Lin Jiachuan and four other actors who play villains in the TV series “The Knockout” begged the pardon of fans and said they really weren’t bad guys in real life.

That they seemed so real on screen is testament to some of the grittier fare on television, where series are focusing more on real life, both historical and contemporary, and attracting enthusiastic audiences.

“The Knockout” is rooted in China’s national campaign to crack down on gang crime. Some viewers have even suggested, tongue in cheek, that police “investigate” actor Zhang Songwen, who plays criminal lord Gao Qiqiang in the series so realistically that it seems he’s not acting at all.

Gao’s favorite book in the series, “The Art of War” by ancient Chinese war strategist Sun Tzu, has enjoyed a surge in sales with the overwhelming popularity of the series.

Young people seem drawn to drama that is a stark contrast to the once commonplace boring, insipid TV fare.

“My classmates and I have really enjoyed the new drama, which is a big departure from the normal, mainstream stuff,” said college student Chris Yu. “The storytelling is creative, with its overlapping timelines and flashbacks, and all the characters are multifaceted and interesting.”

The 39-episode “The Knockout” began airing on China Central Television and iQiyi last month. It was simultaneously released overseas in subtitles of eight languages for viewers in North America, Europe and Southeast Asia.

Inspired by true events, the drama centers on two decades of interaction between a gang boss and a police officer that began when the gangster was a humble fishmonger and a friend of the cop. However, they finally become foes, and the drama follows their years of cat-and-mouse struggle.



The production crew film a scene from “New Dawn” — Ti Gong



“The Knockout” was filmed on location in the city of Jiangmen in Guangdong Province. — IC

Through varied timelines, the drama is set against the backdrop of China’s tremendous social transformation and progress in legal reforms.

The series is apparently popular overseas as well. Rickshaw drivers in Thailand have been known to play excerpts of “The Knockout” and its theme song, trying to attract the business of Chinese tourists. On some websites in Japan, the drama is also a trending search topic.

The iQiyi Research Center said the show has broken a two-year popularity record previously held by the comedy costume drama “My Heroic Husband.” “The Knockout” is also the most-watched drama on CCTV Channel 8.

On the leading film and TV review website Douban, more than 600,000 viewers give the series an 8.5 out of 10 rating.

The series is shot on location in the city of Jiangmen in Guangdong

Province, which is also attracting visitors eager to sample local delicacies such as rice rolls and pig’s-foot noodles that are featured in the drama.

Industry professionals are closely watching the success of the drama and contemplating its repercussions, both for television and for spill-over effects such as tourism.

Dai Ying, senior vice president at iQiyi, said that the drama sets the bar higher for production of high-quality contents in the genre.

The production team spent three years on the series. Director and scriptwriter Xu Jizhou said in a media interview that “The Knockout” is not simply a story about fighting crime, but also a reflection of social evolution this century.

“We needed to do a lot of interviews and research to recreate the realism of the era,” director Xu said. “Audience can obviously see the changes of sets, makeup, costumes and props that reflect changing styles over the years.”

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When the Shanghai-produced epic series “New Dawn” was shown to global audiences through YouTube, it evoked emotional feedback with its touching stories behind the liberation of Shanghai in May 1949 and the city’s subsequent reconstruction.

The series was particularly popular among viewers in North America and

Australia, with foreign fans lauding the artistry of production and the heroic sacrifices of the characters. Some posted messages that they were watching the drama while learning about Chinese history.

“I love this genre,” said netizen Sheila McClane. “I learn so much from these historical series.”

Depicting history through drama productions is also an eye-opener for Chinese youngsters too young to remember an era when Party members had to fight bandits and enemy agents, and when People’s Liberation Army soldiers won public respect with their discipline and patriotism.

Scriptwriter Long Pingping said at a recent workshop that it is never easy to depict a sweeping subject like that.

“We are redefining storytelling methods to relate what happened in the past to the emotions of contemporary audiences,” Long said. “We think details are important, and so scenes need to be based on facts and convincing acting.”

In recent years, TV series that resonate with younger audiences include critically acclaimed productions like “A Lifelong Journey,” “Like A Flowing River,” “Minning Town” and “The Age of Awakening.”

TV experts attribute the success of the realism genre to its sincere, simple focus on the lives and emotions of ordinary people and its ability to show how they connect with vicissitudes of the era in which they lived.

Professor Gu Xiaoming, a film and TV scholar at Fudan University, told Shanghai Daily that dramas inspired by real-life events in China will continue to capture and engage audiences, both at home and abroad.

“The key is the degree to which they delve deeper into life, discovering the underlying logic of life and combining that with specific regions, topics and people to create a colorful story,” Gu said. “Many countries hope to draw lessons from the examples of China, and dramas can serve a cultural envoy in that regard.”