

Narrative Strategies and Cultural Expression in Chinese and Global Micro-Dramas: A Comparative Textual Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines six representative micro-dramas from major Chinese and international platforms between 2025 and 2026, conducting a comparative textual analysis across three dimensions: narrative temporal structure, character relationship construction, and narrative driving mechanisms. Drawing on transcultural communication theory and Genette's narrative discourse theory, the study analyzes how narrative strategies are shaped within different cultural contexts. The findings suggest that Chinese micro-dramas tend to incorporate social relations and ethical concerns into high-density narrative structures, characterized by temporal extension and emotional accumulation. In contrast, international micro-dramas rely on highly compressed plot progression and typified character relations, emphasizing immediate emotional stimulation and linear task-driven narratives. These differences reflect distinct trade-offs between emotional articulation and communicative efficiency across cultural contexts. The study offers a structured analytical framework for examining micro-dramas in cross-cultural contexts, contributing to ongoing discussions on short-form media and global content circulation.

Keywords

micro-dramas, text analysis, cross-cultural communication, narratology, case study

1. Introduction

As an emerging form of digital cultural production, micro-dramas have experienced rapid global expansion and have become a prominent phenomenon in contemporary media culture. Platforms such as TikTok and ReelShort have facilitated the international circulation of Chinese short-form content, marking a new stage in the globalization of China's digital media ecosystem (Zhang, 2025). At the same time, this development has generated growing scholarly interest in their cross-cultural communication dynamics.

However, existing research has largely focused on industrial models, market data, and macro-level dissemination strategies, with relatively limited attention to the close analysis of textual features. As a result, while the scale and channels of global distribution are well documented, the underlying narrative mechanisms and cultural translation processes embedded in specific works remain insufficiently examined.

This study argues that close textual analysis of representative works is essential for moving beyond market-level observations and understanding underlying narrative and cultural mechanisms. The paper adopts a focused textual analysis approach rather than a large-sample quantitative method, selecting three representative domestic and international micro-series with high market relevance and topicality from 2025 to 2026 as case studies. Theoretically, this approach employs the framework of Transcultural Communication Theory (Cai, 2022) and Genette's Narrative Discourse Theory (Genette, 1980) to address the following core questions:

- 1) What systematic differences exist between Chinese and foreign micro-series in terms of narrative time structure, character relationship construction, and narrative driving mechanisms?
- 2) How do different narrative strategies construct and embed specific cultural symbols and values to align with the target audience's "cultural-psychological" structure (Zhang, 2025)?
- 3) These differences raise a further question: do these narrative strategies prioritize localized meaning-making or standardized emotional appeal?

A close reading approach is adopted to address the current imbalance in short drama research—overemphasizing industrial aspects while neglecting textual analysis—and provides concrete analytical examples to elucidate the cultural influence of micro-series. The finding integrates relatively macro-level theories of cross-cultural communication with classical narratology, applying them to analyze micro-level elements such as narrative time and character relationships in micro-series. The resulting framework provides a practical analytical basis for cross-cultural narrative analysis. Through comparative analysis of leading domestic and international case studies, this research reveals two distinct short-form drama production paradigms. The findings provide theoretical references for creators to adapt and adjust cross-cultural content.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This chapter aims to establish the theoretical foundation of the study by systematically reviewing and synthesizing core literature from three domains: micro-drama studies, cross-cultural communication theory, and narratological analysis, thereby defining the analytical framework of this paper. Existing research provides diverse perspectives for understanding the micro-series phenomenon, yet gaps persist in cross-cultural narrative comparison at the micro-text level. This study aims to address this deficiency.

2.1 Micro-Series Research: From Industrial Ecosystem to Narrative Characteristics

As a globally emerging digital content format, micro-series research is rapidly evolving, with its development trajectory shifting from macro-level industrial descriptions to in-depth textual and reception analysis.

In the international academic community, such discussions are often categorized under the frameworks of 'short-form video' or 'vertical drama.' Early research primarily focused on platform logic and production mechanisms, examining how platforms like TikTok and YouTube Shorts shaped this narrative form through algorithms, interface design, and business models (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). Early measurement studies on platforms like YouTube have revealed unique fundamental characteristics of short-form videos in terms of length distribution, viewing patterns, and social networking dynamics (Cheng et al., 2007). Recent studies have increasingly focused on the unique narrative aesthetics of short-form dramas, analyzing the 'pulsatile' pacing and intense emotional stimulation developed to adapt to mobile platforms, vertical viewing formats, and fragmented consumption patterns. These studies highlight how such aesthetic forms are deeply embedded in the participatory culture and immersive interaction characteristics of social media (Burgess & Green, 2018; Cunningham & Craig, 2019). These findings provide a foundation for understanding the 'standard formula' of overseas short-form dramas in this research.

In domestic research, the overseas expansion of micro-series has become a focal point. Scholars generally approach the analysis from the perspectives of industry and communication strategies, examining the ecological competitive advantages of China's micro-series (Yan, 2025), the localized operational models of overseas platforms (such as ReelShort's practice of "local model, overseas content") (Tang & Wang, 2025;

Wang, 2024), as well as the challenges of “Oriental spectacle” and pathways for ecological reconstruction (He & Hu, 2025). Furthermore, systemic challenges in sustainable industry development—such as copyright governance—have revealed complex strategic interactions among multiple stakeholders including platforms, users, rights holders, and regulatory authorities (Zhou & Cao, 2026). While these studies provide profound insights into industrial dynamics, they predominantly rely on market reports and case analyses, lacking in-depth textual examination of the internal narrative mechanisms within successful overseas expansion cases. Although studies have begun to focus on audience reception (Pang & Li, 2025) and cross-cultural narrative strategies (Fan & Chen, 2025; Zhang, 2025), systematic comparative frameworks for Chinese and foreign narratives remain scarce. This constitutes the starting point of this study.

2.2 Cross-cultural Communication Theory: From Cultural Transplantation to Transcultural Symbiosis

To analyze these dynamics, it is necessary to move beyond the simplistic 'culture export/import' dichotomy and leverage more advanced cross-cultural theories.

The early theories of “cultural imperialism” and “cultural proximity” (Straubhaar, 2007) respectively emphasized the imbalance in cultural flows and the preferences of local audiences, providing a foundation for understanding the global distribution of cultural products. Arjun Appadurai's “Global Cultural Landscape” theory categorizes cultural flows into ethnic, media, technological, financial, and ideological dimensions, providing a macro-level framework for analyzing the dispersion and recombination of multidimensional cultural symbols (such as values, lifestyles, and visual aesthetics) embedded in micro-series (Appadurai, 1996).

In the digital era, the theory of transcultural communication has emerged as a more explanatory framework. Shi Anbin (2024) systematically elucidated this concept, emphasizing that under the impetus of digital technology, cultural dissemination is no longer a unidirectional flow but rather a process where multiple cultural elements collide and negotiate, giving rise to new forms of “cultural hybridization” and creative transformation (Cai, 2022). This is in dialogue with the concept of “cultural odor” (Iwabuchi, 2002) proposed by Iwabuchi (2002) argues that when cultural products circulate transnationally, the specific national cultural characteristics (“smell”) contained in them that are difficult to completely erase will have a complex chemical reaction with the local culture (Iwabuchi, 2002). The “going abroad” of micro-short plays is a representative research object of this process: it is not a simple cultural transplant, but through the use of the universal “sense of pleasure” (instant emotional gratification) mechanism, the “cultural smell” (such as family ethics, social relations, aesthetic taste) is strategically added, subtracted and reconciled to achieve cross-contextual resonance. Zhang's (2025) discussion on the 'cultural translation' strategy in short videos further underscores the significance of this process. Therefore, this paper will employ a cross-cultural perspective to analyze how Chinese and foreign short dramas handle the relationship between universal emotions and local “cultural nuances” in their narratives.

2.3 Narrative Analysis Framework: The Aesthetics of “Compression” in Time, Discourse, and Short Plays

Narratology provides precise tools for deconstructing the compressed narrative in micro-dramas. Classical narratology distinguishes between 'story' (the event itself) and 'discourse' (the way events are narrated). This study focuses on the discourse level, particularly on time manipulation (Chatman & Chatman, 1978).

Gerard Genette's narrative discourse theory serves as a core analytical tool. His proposed concepts of temporal sequence, temporal intervals, and frequency are particularly applicable for analyzing how micro-dramas construct plots within extremely short timeframes (Genette, 1980). Temporal sequencing (including flashbacks and foreshadowing) examines how micro-series reconstruct timelines through fragmented flashbacks or suspenseful setups. Temporal distance (scenarios, summaries, and omissions) analyzes how they drastically compress background exposition (summaries) while magnifying conflict and plot twists (scenarios). Frequency (recurring events) explores how genre expectations are reinforced through the replication of similar narrative patterns. Seymour Chatman's clear distinction between 'story' and 'discourse'

helps us separate the highly simplified core plot (story) from the specific narrative techniques that lend it emotional resonance, such as perspective selection and detail focus (Chatman & Chatman, 1978).

Building upon the aforementioned theories, this study establishes the following analytical framework: Using cross-cultural communication theory as a macro-level perspective to examine the essence of micro-drama texts as products of “cultural hybridization”; employing narratology (particularly Genette's discourse theory) as a micro-level analytical tool to conduct comparative analysis of representative Chinese and foreign texts through three dimensions—narrative temporal structure, character relationship construction, and narrative dynamics mechanisms. This framework aims to reveal how short-form dramas achieve a specific balance between emotional communication and cultural adaptation through differentiated narrative strategies across diverse cultural contexts.

3. Research Methods: Textual Analysis Focus

This study employs text analysis methods from qualitative research, aiming to reveal systematic differences in narrative strategies and cultural expressions between leading micro-series in China and abroad through in-depth reading and comparison of selected cases. The study design encompasses three core components: case selection, analytical units, and operational definitions, to ensure the focus, comparability, and logical rigor of the analysis.

3.1 Case Selection: Criteria and Sources

The case selection adheres to dual principles of 'platform prominence' and 'genre representativeness,' ensuring that the selected samples are not only commercially successful works but also encompass mainstream narrative paradigms within their respective production contexts.

Chinese cases: selected from domestic micro-series core distribution platform TikTok and Tencent Video. The selection criteria are: works that have consistently ranked in the top three of the platform's 'Popular List' or 'Bestseller List' between 2025 and 2026, and those with high social relevance. Three works were ultimately selected: *Fendela in Midsummer* (modern romance), *Inside and Outside the Home* (family ethics), and *A Commoner of First Rank* (historical strategy). They represent the artistic pinnacle and market peak of current domestic high-quality short dramas in three mainstream directions of emotion, reality and legend.

International case study: Selected from ReelShort, a leading global platform for micro-series. The selection criteria are: works that consistently rank among the top in the platform's 'Top Revenue' or 'Most Popular' lists during 2025-2026. Three films were ultimately selected: *Mafia's Tender Torture* (gangster romance), *American Sniper: The Last Roun* (military action), and *The Godfather's Secret Lover* (a tragic love story set in a wealthy family). These works exemplify the market-proven success of the 'local format, overseas content' strategy (Fan & Chen, 2025), vividly showcasing the core characteristics of the most popular genres in international short-form dramas.

3.2 Analytical Units and Operational Procedures

To enable systematic comparison across cases, this study clearly defines analytical units and establishes operational procedures. This approach adopts “key plot scenes” as the fundamental analytical unit. These refer to independent scenes that carry narrative transitions, core conflicts, or emotional climaxes, typically selected from 3–5 key scenes within a single episode (2–5 minutes). The selection aims to ensure analytical depth while covering major narrative structural nodes, thereby balancing representativeness and operational feasibility.

First, 3–5 pivotal plot scenes are identified (e.g., motivational events, core conflicts, major plot twists, or emotional climaxes) that drive the overarching narrative from each sample episode. Subsequently, coding and comparative analysis are conducted based on the following three dimensions: (1) Narrative temporal structure: Applying Genette's narrative discourse theory (Genette, 1980), this study analyzes the temporal sequence within scenes (e.g., use of flashback and prologue) and temporal intervals (e.g., distribution of summaries, scenes, and ellipsis) to explore its rhythm control and time deformation strategies. (2) Character Relationship Types: Drawing on Chatman's (1978) framework for character–plot dynamics, we analyze the core logic underlying interactions among key characters in scenarios. These relationships are categorized as “power dominance types” (e.g., superior-subordinate, control-subordination), “family ethics types” (e.g.,

parent-child, marital, senior-junior dynamics), or “emotional contract types” (e.g., romantic relationships, friendship alliances), thereby revealing the cultural presuppositions underlying their relational construction.(3) Narrative Driving Mechanism: Analyzes the core drivers propelling scene progression and subsequent plot development, categorized into “task/target-driven” (e.g., revenge, promotion, survival) and “emotional/relationship-driven” (e.g., seeking validation, resolving misunderstandings, maintaining bonds), to elucidate the psychological mechanisms underlying audience attraction and retention.

Through this systematic analysis framework, this study will juxtapose and compare six Chinese and international micro-dramas, aiming to go beyond descriptive generalizations and provide a structured explanation of their differences from the theoretical perspectives of narratology and transcultural communication (Appadurai, 1996; Cai, 2022; Iwabuchi, 2002) to answer the research questions. In order to reduce the researcher's subjective interpretation bias, the determination and coding of key plot scenes during the analysis process were based on clear standards, and similar plot structures in different cases were repeatedly compared to ensure the consistency and comparability of the analysis.

4. Text Analysis and Comparison

4.1 Comparison of Narrative Time Manipulation: Taking the “Reunion” Scenario as an Example

As a high-density plot point in emotional narratives, 'reunion' demonstrates markedly different temporal philosophies and narrative preferences when handled in foreign micro-series.

In the overseas short drama *Mafia's Tender Torture*, the reunion scene between the female protagonist and the gang leader's ex-partner features a highly condensed and linear temporal structure. The scene consists of three sequential action units: the heroine's distress, the leader's intervention, and the confrontation with the line announcement. The five-year backstory and emotional entanglements of the characters are entirely omitted, leaving a vast temporal void unaddressed. The scene primarily focuses on intensified actions and dialogue and impactful dialogues of the present moment. According to Genette's narrative theory, this employs a temporal distance treatment that seamlessly integrates ellipsis with scene intensity (Genette, 1980). The line 'It's been five years' serves as a narrative cue, layering a single scene event with recurring symbolic significance. By omitting background elements and emphasizing immediate actions and conflicts, this model establishes a linear narrative dynamic centered on 'events' and triggered by external actions.

In contrast, the narrative time of the reunion scene between the male and female protagonists in China's short drama *Fendela in Midsummer* is prolonged and distorted. The scene begins with a static exhibition setting, where close-ups of the heroine's trembling hands hint at her inner turmoil. This is immediately followed by a 10-second silent montage flashback, presenting fragments of her memories. The past (flashback) and present (art exhibition scene) are juxtaposed and interwoven, with the temporal distance subjectively elongated by the infiltration of psychological time. The narrative timeline here not only advances the 'reunion' event but also serves to reveal the characters' complex inner states and build up emotional layers. This demonstrates a narrative strategy that integrates scenes with pauses and incorporates reverse chronology (Genette, 1980), with its narrative drive deeply rooted in the surging emotions and memories of the characters.

Overall, the analysis suggests that, at the level of narrative temporality, the observations of this study indicate that overseas cases tend to adopt a linear event-driven model characterized by compression and omission, with an emphasis on immediate and intense stimuli; whereas Chinese cases place greater emphasis on a pattern of delayed narration and the interweaving of emotional and psychological elements across different times and spaces, aiming to create a more complex and layered emotional atmosphere as well as an inner narrative. Therefore, at the level of narrative time structure, overseas short dramas exhibit a linear progression model centered on event compression, while China short dramas tend to achieve emotional construction through temporal extension and memory embedding.

4.2 Construction of Character Relationships and Hybridization of Cultural Symbols

Character relationships serve as direct carriers of cultural values. Overseas short dramas rely on highly abstract and power dynamics-driven “typified characters. *The Godfather's Secret Lover* demonstrates highly typified and functional character design, with characters primarily developed to advance the plot and relatively simplified relationship structures. Its conflicts stem purely from individualized possession and betrayal, which are easily understood across cultures but lack depth. This deliberate detachment from specific cultural contexts and adoption of generic role models essentially aims to maximize 'cultural proximity' and reduce comprehension barriers for audiences across different regions (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). This content is described as 'visualized web novels,' which evoke instant emotional resonance in audiences through compelling plot designs (Fan & Chen, 2025).

China's short drama *Inside and Outside the Home* embeds family ethics drama into the short drama format. One of the key conflicts was whether the daughter should sell the house to treat her father's illness. The dispute did not only occur between spouses but also involved the mother, who represents traditional filial piety, and the younger brother, who embodies pragmatism. Character relationships are deeply rooted in Chinese-style family networks and responsibility ethics. Dramatic conflicts arise not only from individual choices but also from generational and role-specific differences in understanding 'family obligations'. This portrayal of individual choices within a collectivist cultural context forms its distinctive indigenous meaning world (Cai, 2022). This reflects the extension of China's short drama export from achieving “going global” to “going deep” (Pang & Li, 2025), attempting to seek a dialogic integration between local culture and regional culture within a commercial framework.

In overseas works, the hybrid strategy is particularly evident. *American Sniper: The Last Round* superficially employs quintessential Western military action film tropes: U.S. military standard equipment, Middle Eastern battlefield settings, and a narrative centered on individual heroism. Yet its core narrative—where the protagonist plunges into the sea after betrayal by comrades, is rescued, and returns reborn to exact revenge—follows a classic Eastern framework of chivalry and vendettas. It encapsulates Eastern 'wine' within Western 'bottles,' representing a successful narrative grafting in cross-cultural communication (Cai, 2022). This approach of 'local model with overseas content' differs from the traditional dependent model of 'local content with overseas model' for global expansion, charting a new course for media internationalization (Fan & Chen, 2025). Therefore, in terms of character relationship construction, overseas short dramas present a simplified structure centered on typified relationships, while China short dramas emphasize complex interaction patterns embedded in specific social relationship networks.

4.3 Narrative Dynamics and Ending Treatment

The narrative drive of overseas short dramas follows a linear and overt pattern, propelled by a series of external threats and missions. Each episode of *American Sniper: The Last Round* concludes with a clear mission objective: uncovering traitor leads, seizing critical equipment, or rescuing hostages. Suspense placement directly points to the next action target. This structure heavily relies on pre-set suspense or plot twists at the end of each episode to attract audiences to continue watching through paid subscriptions (Fan & Chen, 2025). Analysis of comments from overseas audiences reveals that 'update-couraging' behaviors (expressing intentions such as 'play next' or 'please share more') are prevalent. High-frequency words like 'Next' and 'Please' demonstrate the effectiveness of this narrative strategy in sustaining user attention (Wang, 2024).

The narrative dynamics of China's short drama *A First-Class Commoner* are more internalized and complex. As a time traveler, the protagonist's core mission extends beyond mere survival and vengeance to harness modern knowledge for altering the course of history. Therefore, the suspense in each episode often revolves around whether the strategies prove effective and how conceptual conflicts are resolved. For instance, at the conclusion of an episode where he demonstrates the 'scientific farming' method to ancient scholars, close-ups capture the audience's expressions shifting from skepticism to astonishment. Suspense is not merely about 'what will happen next,' but also about 'what changes this world will undergo as a result,' encompassing cognitive-level tension. This narrative attempt is related to the trend of “cultural consciousness” in which some China short dramas have begun to consciously integrate traditional cultural elements (such as intangible cultural heritage and China-fashion) into modern stories (Zhang, 2025).

5. Conclusion

Through comparative analysis of six flagship works, this study reveals systematic differences in narrative strategies between leading micro-series from China and abroad, reflecting distinct cultural logics and communication orientations.

Research has found that overseas head micro-short dramas tend to construct a narrative model that is relatively stylized and less context-dependent. Its core feature is its reliance on universal desire formulas (such as power, love, revenge) and high-intensity sensory stimulation. By compressing the background, simplifying character relationships and linear task advancement, it aims to achieve “barrier-free” cross-cultural communication and instant emotional satisfaction. The popularity of this model is closely related to the industrial ecology that relies on global social media platforms for content distribution and user diversion.

In contrast, Chinese short dramas show stronger embeddedness in local social culture. Even under a strong plot framework, its narratives often intentionally incorporate localized social relationship networks, family ethics issues and delicate emotional logic, trying to build a more in-depth world of meaning in the “shuangfe” narrative. However, the study also observed that the current acceptance of Chinese micro-short dramas by international audiences may still focus more on the shallow emotional impact brought by the plot, rather than on in-depth dialogue with its embedded cultural elements, showing a “resonance compensation” feature.

Based on the above findings, the key to the high-quality and international dissemination of Chinese micro-short dramas lies in achieving effective “cultural translation” and “narrative grafting.” This involves not only the adaptation of plot templates, but also the exploration of symbols and narrative strategies that can inspire global emotional resonance. The future development path should be devoted to promoting the deepening of “compensatory resonance” based on shallow stimulation to “connective resonance” based on cultural understanding and emotional connection.

These findings further demonstrate how narrative strategies function as mediating mechanisms in transcultural communication processes. This study still has certain limitations. First, the sample size is limited, with only six flagship works selected, making it challenging to comprehensively represent all genres of micro-series. Secondly, text analysis methods rely on researcher interpretation. Although controlled through structured coding, subjective biases may still persist. Future research could incorporate large-sample quantitative analysis or audience reception studies to further validate the conclusions of this paper.

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Conflicts of Interest

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