

From Plot Time to Affective Time: The Reconfiguration of Emotional Structures in Contemporary Romantic Micro-Dramas

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, contemporary romantic micro-dramas have rapidly developed on mobile platforms in China. Although these works demonstrate a high degree of convergence in plot patterns and character structures, they still display strong market vitality. In view of this phenomenon, this article probes into this issue from the perspective of affective narratology, to examine the structural organization of emotions in the adaptation practice of micro-dramas. Through the analysis of representative texts, this study finds that in the media transformation process, the micro-dramas have systematically compressed the extended temporal structures of their source materials. These changes include the early appearance of conflicts, the concentrated appearance of rescue scenes, and the speeding up of relationship confirmation, thereby shifting the narrative logic from "story integrity" to "emotional efficiency". At the level of gender structure, male power is transformed into emotional commitment through such a repeated cycle of "threat-rescue-confirmation", thereby creating a stable emotional production mechanism. Meanwhile, influenced by the platform logic and the accelerated media environment, narrative time is reconfigured as affective time, and emotional satisfaction becomes the main criterion for the completion of the narrative. From this perspective, the so-called "homogenization" of micro-dramas should not be understood as the absence of narrative diversity, but rather as the highly standardized organization of emotional structures under the production conditions of the digital audiovisual industry.

Keywords: Micro-dramas, Affective time, Emotional structure.

1. INTRODUCTION

As a kind of audiovisual form highly dependent on mobile media, micro-dramas have rapidly come to the forefront and are constantly reshaping viewers' visual consumption patterns and narrative reception methods. By July 2025, the number of micro-drama users in China had reached 696 million (China Central Television News, 2025). As Yan and Wan (2024) have pointed out, the co-evolution of micro-dramas and media technology distinctly highlights the inherent connection between their miniature form and the mobile media environment. In the present market structure of micro-dramas, the contemporary romance genre is quite prominent. At the start of 2026, the top micro-drama streaming platform in China, Hongguo Shorts, issued the annual "Top 99 Most Favorable Micro-shorts by Audiences" list, with nearly half of them belonging to the contemporary romance category according to Hongguo Shorts(2026). David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson(2008) define narrative as a sequence of

events that are connected by cause and effect and that occur in time. This definition emphasizes a formal system consisting of time, space, and causal logic, and emotions are to a large extent outside the scope of structural analysis. In the contemporary audiovisual environment, however, Narratives no longer rely on complex plots that unfold slowly; instead, they increasingly rely on the high-frequency activation of emotions to maintain audience attention. The popularity of contemporary romance micro-dramas highlights the central role of emotion in contemporary narrative practices. Whether audiences swipe on or click on the next episode often depends not on their expectation of complex narratives, but on whether emotions can be quickly aroused, continuously maintained, and regularly satisfied. From this perspective, the repeatedly occurring emotional patterns should not only be regarded as simple narrative inertia but also be seen as a production strategy that very much accords with the audience's expectations for emotional experiences.

In the process of making contemporary romantic micro-dramas, the adaptation of existing online literary intellectual properties (IPs) has become a common method. The emotional process that originally relied on long-form reading and gradual narrative development is compressed into extremely understandable emotional nodes, making emotion the main driving force of narrative progression. Beneath the surface of this highly repetitive narrative form, what kinds of emotional patterns are continuously generated by micro-dramas during the process of media transformation? How are these emotional structures compressed and reconstructed? How do they continuously activate audience participation? In response to these questions, this article probes into this issue from the perspective of affective narratology attempting to reinterpret the structural logic behind the seemingly homogenized appearance of contemporary romantic micro-dramas and pondering how emotion becomes the core driving force of contemporary audiovisual narrative in the digital media environment.

2. THE AFFECTIVE FOUNDATIONS OF CONTEMPORARY ROMANTIC MICRO-DRAMAS

For constructing the experience world the emotions, the feelings, and the sentiments are of the utmost importance. They are the ones that govern how individuals are to be situated within the surrounding environment and how they are to establish connections with others (Andersen, 2016). In the contemporary cultural context, this affective dimension has become increasingly significant for narrative reception, since emotions and feelings are themselves structured, to a considerable extent, through narrative forms (Miall, 2011). The changes of urban emotional culture and the re- construction of consumers' subjectivity further expand the expression function of emotion-driven narration in short-video media. Just as Wang (2023) has noticed, successful "magic narration" often depends on the creation of emotional peaks and the concentration of emotional experience around specific objects or moments.

The trend is further strengthened by micro-dramas that are compact in form and can convey emotionally-laden content within a restricted time, and also possess emotionally-structured elements that are simple to recognize and can be repeatedly recreated. Such a structure is not only functioning as a textual device but also a part of a more extensive cultural logic. From the perspective of cultural production the emotional world constructed by

contemporary Chinese romantic micro-dramas and the emotional expectations of the audience do have obvious correspondences the audience often seeks resonance psychological compensation or emotional identification in a very short period of time. These expectations, therefore, shape the organization of micro-drama narratives, driving them towards forms of affective expression that are increasingly condensed and intense. Affect, in this way, is not merely produced through the slow-paced development of the plot. It is increasingly becoming one of the conditions that organize the narrative right from the very beginning.

2.1 Romantic Online Fiction as a Narrative Matrix for Micro-Dramas

The emotions in online literature can be seen as a kind of commodified thing (Wang, 2022). Within the narrative mechanism of online novels, the emotions are not only an expression of the relationship between characters but also a structural resource that can be pre - set, carefully arranged and repeatedly replicated. Under this logic of affective commodification, contemporary romantic web fiction in China has, over the past two decades, developed a highly standardized set of genre conventions. Narrative motifs such as "CEO-Cinderella" romances, "contract marriages", "fulfilled unrequited love" and the progression from "pain to sweetness" are continuously repeated and altered, gradually forming stable emotional scripts. Hu and Liu (2024) argue that the cross-media connection between micro-dramas and online literature allows the former inherit to the production logic of "database writing". "Such a narrative structure driven by databases enables the rapid retrieval and recombination of story elements. They also point out that the production and consumption oriented by databases show a broader transformation of narrative forms and cultural paradigms. From the perspective of genre theory, According to Bordwell and Thompson in 2008, those repeatedly occurring genre conventions that set up shared identification frameworks within specific genres and certain narrative elements all operate in line with established routines. From this perspective, Neale(2000) further emphasizes that genre functions through repetition and difference. The formulaic elements are established by repetition, while the formal, narrative, and thematic contexts in which they conventionally appear. He further points out that "repetition also helps generate audience knowledge, allowing viewers to weigh a film's variations against the genre's preordained, value-laden narrative system" (p.196). Within this framework, the general

operation of micro-dramas do more than reproduce online literature but also includes compress narrative rhythm and intensify affective experience. Liang (2025) suggests that a large number of micro-dramas construct character portrayals and emotional connections through exaggeration and typification, which causes characters to have extremely stereotyped features. Typification does not seek to reproduce reality faithfully. Rather, it extracts the recognizable structures of emotional experience so that the audience can quickly enter the narrative and project themselves into the narrative. As for micro-dramas, following genre logic, they further push the character functions, plot nodes and emotional triggers towards a state of extreme compression and deploy emotional triggers with increasing frequency.

Within the genre mechanism, repetition is a structural feature of the text. At the same time, it operates as an industrial production strategy. Genre stability reduces uncertainties in both production and consumption and allows successful models to be repeatedly mobilized and tested in the market. It is precisely under such a logic that the phenomenon of single-source multiple adaptations have become particularly common in the micro-drama industry. This practice shows that there is a high degree of narrative reproducibility between micro-dramas and online literature. The same story prototype may be adapted several times by different production teams on different platforms, usually with only surface-level plot details, character identities or narrative elements changed, while the core emotional structure relatively remains stable. In other words, contemporary romantic online literature provides micro-dramas with reusable narrative matrices, which are continually tested and selected through market mechanisms. Within this cycle, genre functions not only as a literary and narrative tradition but also as an emotional structure that can be reproduced on an industrial scale.

2.2 Narrative Compression and Affective Intensity in Romantic Micro-Dramas

Brewer and Lichtenstein's theory of narrative affect (1982) shows that a narrative's affective impact derives not simply from the events themselves but from the manner in which these events are organized in the discourse structure. They emphasize the systematic correspondence between narrative organization and emotional response, and also state that readers often have a preference for narratives that successfully create and resolve emotional states such as surprise, suspense, and curiosity through structural

arrangements. From this perspective, the appropriate practices of contemporary romantic micro-dramas show that their core strategies do not just consist in condensing plots but in the reorganization of emotional structures. Online literature usually relies on a large amount of narrative development and psychological description to make emotions gradually emerge as time passes. Micro-dramas, in contrast use techniques such as bring conflicts forward, delay their resolution, frequently using reversals, and shortening narrative setups. These strategies compress a relatively slow emotional rhythm into a sequence of concentrated affective stimuli. Episodes are often divided at the moment before emotional tension has been resolved, thus maintaining suspense and anticipation. Then the narrative strategy of micro-dramas is not to fully unfold the story but to activate emotion quickly and intensively. The early emergence of conflicts, the rapid reversals, and the action-based expressions of emotion are essentially forms of the highly compressed and intensified affective structures like suspense, curiosity, and surprise. Narrative is no longer propelled by the step-by-step progression of causal events; instead, it is driven by the continuous activation and delayed resolution of emotions. It is exactly through this kind of structural reorganization that the micro-dramas realizes the transformation from plot-driven narrative to emotion-driven narrative.

2.3 Romantic Narrative Prototypes behind Emotion-Driven Micro-Dramas

If genre logic can account for why highly repetitive contemporary romantic micro-dramas continue to attract audiences, and structural theories of narrative emotion show how narrative compression produces high-density emotional activation, then affective narratology explores a more fundamental question: from which narrative prototypes do these repeatedly organized and intensified emotions arise? Hogan (2011) argues that affective systems not only govern the formation of characters' goals, but also profoundly shape narrative structure itself. Emotion is not merely psychological content of narrative. It also serves as an organizing principle in the generation of the narrative structure: the development of the story, the composition of the conflict, the progression of action, and the criteria for resolution are all shaped by particular emotion systems. Stories generally start with the disruption of the normal state, and then through the arrangement of emotional events, they go from the unbalanced state to the state of recovery or re-establishment of balance. In this

sense, the temporality of narration is not merely a matter of causal progression but a process that encompasses the generation and resolution of emotional tensions. In his typology of narrative archetypes, Hogan identifies three recurring cross-cultural patterns: heroism, romantic love, and sacrifice. Each narrative archetype corresponds to a different emotional system. Among these, the romantic stories primarily activate the mechanisms of attachment and sexual desire and their core structure centers around the separation, obstacles, threats of intimate relationship as well as the final confirmation. From this perspective, the contemporary romantic micro-dramas are not merely characterized by repeated themes or stereotyped characters but instead functions through the highly compressed application of romantic narrative prototypes. The early introduction of conflict, the concentration of sources of danger, the continuous intensification of rescue scenes, and the frequent confirmation of expected emotions are all organized around the emotional matrix of threats to attachment and the restoration of attachment. Therefore, the structure of the drama series is not only in line with the plot logic but focuses on emotional events to form a cyclic pattern where "the normal state is broken-emotional escalation- temporary solution or postponement" unfolds within a compact time frame.

In the process of media-specific adaptation, micro-dramas not only inherit the genre themes of online literature but also break romantic narrative prototypes into high- frequency emotional units. Their "short, flat and fast" formal characteristics do not weaken the narrative structure but, instead, through the extreme compression and dense arrangement of emotional events, make emotions the core driving force for narrative advancement.

3. ADAPTATION STRATEGIES UNDER AN AFFECTIVE DENSITY- ORIENTED LOGIC

3.1 Adaptation Pathways in Micro-Dramas

Micro-dramas such as Zhi Zhi Fu Zhi Zhi, Yao Qing Li, and Ta Guo Fen Ye are all contemporary romantic micro-dramas adapted from online romance novels. They possess a characteristic of repeatedly being adapted from the same origin. Their original intellectual property rights are adapted in diverse platforms and production environments, with the number of versions ranging from six to eleven. This shows the existence of a strong market reproducibility and also a stable narrative pattern.

Although there are certain changes in historical periods or social backgrounds in some versions, the core character relationships and emotional structures mostly stay unchanged which further underscores the stability of their underlying emotional prototypes. In terms of genre, these works fall into one of those narrative types within contemporary romantic micro-dramas that are the most able to be industrialized and produced on a large scale. Their character setups and emotional structures show a high degree of consistency: the male lead usually is in a position of economic or social power, and the female lead is faced with structural difficulties like family conflicts, economic pressures, social inequalities or reputation risks. This gendered emotional configuration is not an occasional feature of individual texts, but a recurring pattern repeatedly mobilized in contemporary romantic micro-dramas, giving it considerable analytical value. Although the specific plot lines and character situations of these works are different, they have similar organizational logic at the emotional structure level: emotional relationships are embedded in goal-oriented actions, and the intervention of power, resources or symbolic protection will accelerate the emotional activation and plot development. The co-existence of the consistency between the surface-level changes and the deep-seated structure offers the foundation for comparative analysis and sets these texts as representative cases for exploring the emotional mechanisms of contemporary romantic micro-dramas. Among the three cases, Zhi Zhi Fu Zhi Zhi shows the most extensive degree of adaptation. Although this micro-dramas keeps the overall narrative themes of the original work, such as "a car-accident opening," "a reunion with a former lover," and "class difference," it systematically rearranges the roles of key characters and the sources of conflicts. A prominent feature of this adaptation is the intensification of emotional triggers. In the original work, the mother of the female protagonist, who originally played an important yet mostly background role, is now reset as a narrative device to promote the development of the plot. She is directly placed into an antagonistic control structure to create continuous tension at the narrative points that were not originally driven by conflicts. Meanwhile, much of the psychological description and relational development is compressed, considerably accelerating the narrative rhythm. Ending the transitions from a ceremonial wedding to a private confirmation of the relationship, shifting the romantic imagination from power display to the satisfaction of emotional expectations. In general, such an adaptation strategy can be understood as the functional reconfiguration of the key narrative nodes

within the retained structural framework, thereby increasing the emotional density.

In contrast, Yao Qing Li's adaptation does not erase the themes of sex and power that exist in the original work but rather reorganizes sources of danger through structural compression and character integration. The scattered threats and dispersed power structures are concentrated in a few limited opposing characters while the power of the male protagonist is transformed from a complicated institutional and family network into an emotional resource that can be directly mobilized for rescue. A compressed relation trajectory transforms into an efficient "dilemma - intervention - confirmation" cycle, and the stages of blurring and testing are indeed greatly shortened. At the parsing level, the original work extends emotions by depicting daily life and future development, whereas the micro - drama synchronizes emotion confirmation and risk resolution, making the emotional outcome coincide with the restoration of order. This reflects a structural strategy of "danger consolidation and rescue concentration", which reduces the complexity of power and at the same time enhances the efficiency of emotion recognition. In contrast, the adaptation strategy of *Ta Guo Fen Ye* is characterized by bringing forward both the emotional entry point and the rhythm of relationship development. The original work begins with everyday interactions that develop slowly and devotes considerable narrative space to the concealed development of the relationship. By contrast, the micro-drama begins with public humiliation and moral conflict, immediately placing the female protagonist in a high-intensity emotional field. The stage of the concealed relationship is noticeably compressed, while both emotional confirmation and public recognition are brought forward. Narrative elements originally used to deepen emotional development, such as daily interactions and the resolution of misunderstandings, are mostly omitted. Career-related storylines are also reworked into a mechanism that facilitates emotional progression. This strategy can be summed up as compressing the intermediate stage of relationship development and bringing conflict forward, which accelerates emotional activation and advances the timing of emotional confirmation.

3.2 Narrative Simplification and Affective Efficiency

The comparative analysis of these three cases shows that the main feature of the adaptation of micro-dramas is that extended narrative structures

inherited from the source texts are systematically weakened. The elements beneficial to the character development arc and life trajectory, like detailed psychological descriptions, career development, complex family dynamics and post-marriage extensions, are usually compressed, deferred or directly completely removed. Correspondingly, supporting-character networks and multithreaded emotional narratives are substantially reduced. The subplots only keeps the parts that directly contribute to the core relationship and removes the other things. This focuses the narrative on the relationships among the protagonists, making the character functions become more and more linear and utilitarian, and also makes the narrative structure more closely match the high-intensity emotional nodes. Events like humiliation, betrayal, rescue, and reversal are systematically pre-placed and concentrated in the early stage of the narration, and are strengthened in their emotional impact through repetition. Plots are usually structured around a single emotional event and also interrupted when the emotion reaches its peak, thus prompting people to keep watching. Under this structure, plot-based suspense gives way to emotional suspense and the psychological transformation is replaced by the emotional climax. From this perspective, all these three works achieve the transformation from narrative integrity to emotional efficiency: the complex narrative structure is divided into high-intensity emotional units and then reorganized according to the viewing rhythm, forming a narrative mechanism fundamentally driven by emotions. The main goal of the micro-dramas is not to tell a complete life story but to transmit high-density emotional experiences as quickly and stably as possible.

3.3 The Structural Function of the Rescue Mechanism

In terms of character setup and gender structure, the present romantic micro-dramas show a very standardized pattern: the male lead is usually shaped into an "executive- like" or resource-controlling elite, while the female lead is in an interwoven structural dilemma. The turning points in their emotional trajectories often have to depend on the intervention of male power.

Within the cyclic structure of "threat-rescue-confirmation", male power is emotionally mediated and transformed into a core narrative device which drives the progress of the narrative and the consolidation of relationships. Just as Xue (2024) points out, the "CEO" image not only reflects the re-

evaluation of personal values in contemporary society but also embodies the transformation in the aspect of desire investment of female viewers. Through such mechanisms as "key objects" and "key scenarios", wealth and power are transformed into those that are emotionally invested. The allure of this figure does not reside in wealth itself but in its becoming a safeguard of being chosen and valued. Within this kind of logic, "rescue" has a structural emotional function. Every intervention action, whether it is of an economic nature, symbolic in meaning or involves taking risks, will simultaneously resolve narrative conflicts and satisfy emotional commitments. Thus, power becomes a concrete means for achieving emotional confirmation.

The adaptation of micro-dramas does not alter this structure; instead, through the compression in rhythm and the concentration in emotion, they make the path of "being threatened-being rescued-being confirmed" more direct and more observable. What is reproduced is not merely a character template but a stable emotional structure centered on male power and revolving around female recognition. So then the so-called "homogenization" actually reflects not the lack in narration but the standardized operation of a power-emotion mechanism under industrial production conditions.

4. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that under the appearance of the highly typical and convergent narrative forms in contemporary romance micro-dramas, there is an established emotional structure that takes the "threat - rescue - confirmation" circular mechanism as the core. The gradually accumulated emotional tension in these source texts are reconstructed into high-intensity event nodes, and then through reorganization can be quickly activated and continuously carried on. The organization of narration no longer unfolds around the development of the whole life course but shifts to a direction of creating and confirming emotional peaks. In this process, the complicated social structures and character developments are simplified and the gendered power relations are presented in a more direct and understandable form so the "completeness" that micro-dramas pursue are mostly emotional a sense of being loved chosen and saved that one feels.

From a more extensive perspective, this emotion-oriented narrative logic reflects a structural change in contemporary short video media: the narrative time is compressed into emotional time and at the same time the viewing rhythm increasingly matches the

emotional rhythm. To work out the mechanism of this emotional time can not only make clear the production logic of micro-dramas but also offer a new perspective to rethink the formation and reception of romantic narratives in contemporary audio visual culture.

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