

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. Despite exhibiting a high degree of convergence in plot patterns and character configurations, they continue to demonstrate strong market vitality. Addressing this phenomenon, this article approaches the issue from the perspective of affective narration, examining the structural organization of emotion in micro-drama adaptation practices. Through an analysis of representative texts, the study finds that micro-dramas systematically compress the extended temporal structures of their source materials during the process of media transformation. This involves the front-loading of conflict, the concentration of rescue scenarios, and the acceleration of relational confirmation, thereby shifting narrative logic from “story completeness” to “affective efficiency.” At the level of gender structure, masculine power is translated into emotional commitment through a recurring cycle of “threat–rescue–confirmation,” forming a stable mechanism of affect production. Meanwhile, under the influence of platform logics and an accelerated media environment, narrative time is reconfigured into affective time, with emotional gratification becoming the primary criterion for narrative completion. From this perspective, the so-called “homogenization” of micro-dramas should not be understood as a lack of narrative diversity, but rather as the highly standardized operation of affective structures under the conditions of digital audiovisual industrial production.

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

1. INTRODUCTION

Micro-dramas, as an audiovisual form highly dependent on mobile-based distribution, have rapidly risen to prominence and continue to reshape viewers’ patterns of visual consumption and modes of narrative reception. As of July 2025, the number of micro-drama users in China had reached 696 million (China Central Television News, 2025). As Yan and Wan (2024) observe, “the co-evolution of micro-dramas and media technologies, together with the designation of the form as ‘micro,’ clearly underscores its intrinsic connection to the mobile media environment.” Within the current market structure of micro-dramas, the contemporary romance genre is particularly prominent. In early 2026, Hongguo Short Drama, a leading micro-drama streaming platform in China, released its annual list of the “Top 99 Audience-Favorite

Micro-Dramas,” nearly half of which belong to the contemporary romance category (Hongguo Short Drama, 2026). David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (2008) define narrative as “a chain of events linked by cause and effect and occurring in time and space” (p. 72). This definition foregrounds a formal system constituted by time, space, and causal logic, while affect is largely positioned outside the scope of structural analysis. In the contemporary landscape of audiovisual communication, however, narrative no longer relies on the gradual unfolding of complex plots; instead, it is increasingly sustained through the high-frequency activation of affect. The popularity of contemporary romantic micro-dramas precisely highlights the centrality of affect in contemporary narrative practices: whether viewers “continue scrolling” or “unlock the next episode” is often determined not by expectations of narrative

complexity, but by the extent to which affect can be rapidly elicited, continuously sustained, and periodically gratified. In this sense, recurrent affective patterns should not be understood as mere narrative inertia, but rather as a production strategy highly attuned to audience expectations of affective experience.

In the production practices of contemporary romantic micro-dramas, the adaptation of established online literary intellectual properties (IPs) has become a common pathway. Emotional processes that originally relied on extended reading and gradual narrative development are compressed into highly legible affective nodes, transforming affect into the primary driving force of narrative progression. Beneath the surface of highly repetitive narrative forms, what kinds of affective patterns are micro-dramas repeatedly producing? How are these affective structures compressed and reconfigured in the process of media transformation, and how do they continuously activate audience engagement? Addressing these questions, this article approaches the issue from the perspective of affective narration, seeking to reinterpret the structural logic underlying the apparent “homogenization” of contemporary romantic micro-dramas and to consider how affect, within digital media environments, has become a central driving force of contemporary audiovisual narrative.

2. THE AFFECTIVE FOUNDATIONS OF CONTEMPORARY ROMANTIC MICRO-DRAMAS

Affect, feeling, and emotion are central to the constitution of experiential worlds, shaping how individuals inhabit their environments and engage in forms of relational coexistence (Andersen, 2016). In the contemporary cultural context, the structure of audience affective experience plays a decisive role in shaping modes of narrative reception. Affect and feeling are fundamentally organized in narrative forms (Miall, 2011). In particular, transformations in contemporary urban affective culture, together with the reconfiguration of consumer subjectivity, have endowed affect-driven narratives with enhanced expressive capacity in short-form media. As Wang (2023) observes, successful “magical narratives” are characterized by the production of affective peaks and focal objects of emotional experience. Micro-dramas, through their highly compressed narrative form, carry intensely charged affective content, exhibiting a highly recognizable, repeatable, and reproducible

affective structure—one that functions simultaneously as a textual strategy and as a cultural logic. From the perspective of cultural production, there exists a strong homology between the affective world of contemporary Chinese romantic micro-dramas and the affective demands of their audiences: viewers expect to obtain emotional resonance, psychological compensation, or affective identification within an extremely short time span. This expectation, in turn, shapes the narrative patterns of micro-dramas, orienting them toward highly condensed forms of affective expression. In this sense, affect in micro-dramas is not the outcome of plot development, but rather the precondition for narrative organization.

2.1 The Narrative Matrix of Micro-Dramas: The Generic Logic of Contemporary Romantic Online Literature

Emotion in online literature can be understood as a commodified entity (Wang, 2022). Within the narrative mechanisms of online fiction, affect is not merely an expression of character relations, but also a structural resource that can be preconfigured, orchestrated, and repeatedly reproduced. 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 the “CEO–Cinderella” romance, “contract marriage,” “unrequited love fulfilled,” and the progression from “suffering to sweetness” have, through continual repetition and variation, sedimented into stable affective scripts. Hu and Liu (2024) point out that the cross-media linkage between micro-dramas and web literature enables the former to inherit the production logic of “database writing.” Such a database-driven narrative structure allows story elements to be rapidly retrieved and recombined. As they further argue, “database-oriented production and consumption are precisely the most representative manifestation and exemplar of broader transformations in narrative forms and cultural paradigms.” At the level of genre theory, Bordwell and Thompson (2008) argue that recurring genre conventions establish shared patterns of recognition within a given genre, while certain narrative elements operate in a formulaic manner. Building on this perspective, Neale (2000) further emphasizes that genre operates through both repetition and difference. Formulaic elements are established through repetition, and generic elements, along with the formal, narrative, and thematic

contexts in which they conventionally occur, are continually reproduced. He further notes 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). On this basis, the generic operation of micro-dramas does not simply replicate online literature, but instead involves the compression of narrative rhythm and the intensification of affect. As Liang (2025) notes, “many micro-dramas construct character images and emotional relationships through processes of extremization and typification.” This results in characters that exhibit highly stereotyped traits. Typification does not aim to faithfully reproduce reality; rather, it extracts the prototypical structures of affective experience, enabling audiences to enter the narrative quickly and generate affective projection. Micro-dramas, operating within this generic logic, further push character functions, plot nodes, and affective triggers toward a state of extreme compression and high-frequency deployment.

Within the operation of genre mechanisms, repetition is not only a structural feature at the textual level, but also a production strategy at the industrial level. The stability of genre reduces uncertainty in both creation and consumption, enabling successful patterns to be repeatedly mobilized and tested within the market. It is precisely under this logic that the phenomenon of multiple adaptations from a single source has become particularly prominent in the field of micro-dramas. This practice indicates a deep narrative replicability between micro-dramas and online literature. The same story prototype can be adapted multiple times by different production teams and across different platforms, with variations typically limited to surface-level plot details, character identities, or narrative specifics, while the core affective structure remains stable. In other words, romantic web literature provides micro-dramas with a reusable “narrative matrix,” while market mechanisms continuously test and select among these matrices. Within this cycle, genre is no longer merely a literary or narrative tradition, but becomes an affective structure that can be industrially reproduced.

2.2 Affective Suspense and Narrative Compression: The Mechanism of Affective Density in Micro-Dramas

The affective-structural theory proposed by Brewer and Lichtenstein (1982) suggests that the emotional impact of a narrative does not arise from the content of events themselves, but from the way these events are organized within discourse structure. They emphasize a systematic correspondence between narrative organization and affective response, arguing that readers tend to prefer narratives that successfully generate and resolve affective states such as surprise, suspense, and curiosity through their structural arrangement. From this perspective, the adaptation practices of contemporary romantic micro-dramas reveal that their core strategy lies not in the simple compression of plot, but in the reorganization of affective structure. Online novels typically rely on extended narrative development and psychological description, allowing affect to emerge gradually over time; by contrast, micro-dramas employ techniques such as the front-loading of conflict, the deferral of resolution, the high-frequency deployment of reversals, and the shortening of narrative buildup. These strategies compress what would otherwise be a gradual affective rhythm into a continuous chain of stimuli. Episodes are frequently segmented at moments when affect remains unresolved, thereby sustaining suspense and anticipation. Accordingly, the narrative strategy of micro-dramas does not aim at the full development of story, but rather emphasizes the efficiency and density of affective activation. The front-loading of conflict, rapid reversals, and the action-oriented expression of affect are, in essence, highly compressed and intensified configurations of the affective structures of suspense, curiosity, and surprise. Narrative is no longer driven by the step-by-step progression of causal events; instead, it is propelled by the continuous activation and delayed resolution of affect. It is precisely through this structural reorganization that micro-dramas accomplish a shift from plot-driven to affect-driven narrative.

2.3 An Affective Narratological Perspective: The Archetypal Structure of Romantic Narrative

If genre logic explains why contemporary romantic micro-dramas can achieve audience recognition despite a high degree of repetition, and structural-affective theory reveals how affect is

activated at high density through narrative compression, then affective narratology addresses a more fundamental question: from which narrative archetypes do these repeatedly organized and intensified affects originate?

Hogan (2011) argues that affective systems not only govern the formation of characters' goals, but also profoundly shape narrative structure itself. Affect is not merely the psychological content of narrative, but also an organizing principle in the generation of narrative structure: the progression of the story, the configuration of conflict, the trajectory of action, and the criteria for resolution are all regulated by specific affective systems. Narratives typically begin with the disruption of a state of normalcy and, through the organization of affective events, move from imbalance toward the restoration or re-establishment of equilibrium. In this sense, narrative temporality is not simply a matter of causal progression, but a process involving the generation and resolution of affective tension.

In his typology of narrative prototypes, Hogan identifies three cross-culturally recurrent patterns: heroism, romantic love, and sacrifice. Each narrative prototype corresponds to a distinct affective system. Among these, romantic narratives primarily mobilize the mechanisms of attachment and sexual desire, with their core structure revolving around the separation, obstruction, threat, and eventual confirmation of intimate relationships. From this perspective, contemporary romantic micro-dramas are not characterized merely by thematic repetition or character typification, but by the highly compressed operation of the romantic narrative prototype. The front-loading of conflict, the concentration of danger, the intensification of rescue, and the frequent anticipation of emotional confirmation are all organized around the affective matrix of the threat to and restoration of attachment. Episodes are therefore structured not solely according to plot logic, but around affective events, forming cyclical patterns in which "the disruption of normalcy— affective escalation—temporary resolution or deferral" unfolds within a compressed temporal frame.

Thus, in the process of media-specific rewriting, micro-dramas not only inherit the generic motifs of online literature, but also decompose the romantic narrative prototype into high-frequency affective units. Their "short, flat, and fast" formal characteristics do not weaken narrative structure; rather, through the extreme compression and dense

arrangement of affective events, they render affect the central driving force of narrative progression.

3. ADAPTATION STRATEGIES UNDER AN AFFECTIVE DENSITY-ORIENTED LOGIC

3.1 Adaptation Pathways in Micro-Dramas

The micro-dramas *Zhi Zhi Fu Zhi Zhi*, *Yao Qing Li*, and *Ta Guo fen Ye* are all contemporary romantic micro-dramas adapted from online romance novels and exhibit a pronounced pattern of multiple adaptations from a single source. Their underlying intellectual properties (IPs) have been repeatedly adapted across different platforms and production contexts, with the number of versions ranging from six to eleven, indicating strong market replicability and the stability of their narrative models. Although some versions involve shifts in temporal or social settings, the core character relationships and affective structures remain largely unchanged, further underscoring the robustness of their underlying affective archetypes. At the level of genre, these works belong to one of the most industrially scalable narrative types within contemporary romantic micro-dramas. Their character configurations and affective structures display a high degree of consistency: male protagonists typically occupy positions of economic or social power, while female protagonists are situated within structural predicaments such as familial disorder, economic pressure, unequal social status, or reputational risk. This gendered affective configuration is not an incidental feature of individual texts, but rather a recurrent generic combination that is repeatedly mobilized in contemporary romantic micro-dramas and thus holds significant analytical value. Despite variations in specific plotlines and character circumstances, these works share a similar organizational logic at the level of affective narration: affective relationships are embedded within concrete, action-oriented goals, and the intervention of power, resources, or symbolic protection serves to accelerate affective activation and narrative progression. It is precisely this coexistence of surface variation and deep structural consistency that provides a basis for comparative analysis and establishes these texts as representative cases for examining the affective mechanisms of contemporary romantic micro-dramas. Among the three cases, *Zhi Zhi Fu Zhi Zhi* exhibits the most substantial degree of adaptation. While the micro-drama retains the overall narrative

motifs of the original—such as the “car accident opening,” “reunion with a former lover,” and “class disparity”—it systematically reorganizes key character functions and sources of conflict. A defining feature of this adaptation is the intensification of the “affective trigger”: a character who serves a largely background function in the original text, namely the female protagonist’s mother, is reconfigured as a narrative device driving plot progression and is incorporated directly into the antagonistic control structure. This generates sustained tension at narrative points where no conflict originally existed. At the same time, extensive psychological description and relational buildup are compressed, significantly accelerating narrative pacing. The ending is also transformed from a ceremonial wedding into a privatized confirmation of affect, shifting romantic imagination from displays of power to the fulfillment of affective expectation. Overall, this adaptation strategy can be summarized as a functional reallocation of key narrative nodes within an otherwise preserved structural framework, resulting in a marked increase in affective density.

By contrast, the adaptation of Yao Qing Li does not avoid the themes of sexuality and power present in the original, but instead reorganizes sources of danger through structural compression and character consolidation. Dispersed threats and diffuse power structures are concentrated into a limited number of antagonistic figures, while the male protagonist’s power is transformed from a complex institutional and familial network into an affective resource that can be directly mobilized for rescue. The relational trajectory is compressed into an efficient cycle of “predicament–intervention–confirmation,” with stages of ambiguity and testing significantly shortened. At the level of resolution, whereas the original extends affective completion through depictions of everyday life and future development, the micro-drama synchronizes affective confirmation with the resolution of risk, aligning emotional closure with the restoration of order. This reflects a structural strategy of “danger consolidation and rescue concentration,” reducing the complexity of power while enhancing the efficiency of affective recognition. The adaptation strategy of Ta Guofen Ye, by contrast, is characterized by the forward-shifting of both the entry point of affect and the rhythm of relational development. The original begins with everyday events and gradual interaction, devoting considerable narrative space to the development of a concealed relationship; the micro-drama instead

opens with public humiliation and ethical conflict, immediately placing the female protagonist within a high-intensity affective field. The concealed relationship phase is significantly compressed, and both affective confirmation and public acknowledgment are advanced. Narrative elements that originally served to deepen affect—such as everyday interactions and the resolution of misunderstandings—are largely omitted. The professional storyline is likewise reconfigured into a mechanism that serves affective progression. This strategy can be summarized as compressing the middle phase of relational development while front-loading conflict, thereby accelerating affective activation and advancing the timing of affective confirmation.

3.2 The Shared Mechanism of Adaptation: From Narrative Completeness to Affective Efficiency

A comparative analysis of the three cases indicates that the adaptation of micro-dramas is primarily characterized by the systematic attenuation of long-duration narrative structures found in the original texts. Elements that contribute to character arcs and life trajectories—such as psychological elaboration, career development, complex family dynamics, and post-marital extensions—are commonly compressed, deferred, or removed altogether. Correspondingly, supporting character networks and multi-stranded affective narratives are significantly reduced. Subplots are retained only insofar as they directly facilitate the central relationship, while others are omitted. This concentrates narrative focus on the protagonists’ relationship, rendering character functions increasingly linear and instrumental, and aligning narrative structure more tightly with high-intensity affective nodes. Events such as humiliation, betrayal, rescue, and reversal are systematically front-loaded and clustered in the early stages of the narrative, with their affective impact amplified through repetition. Episodes are typically organized around a single affective event and interrupted at peak intensity, thereby encouraging continued viewing. Under this structure, plot-based suspense gives way to affective suspense, and psychological transitions are replaced by affective climaxes. The primary objective of micro-dramas is not to tell a complete life story, but to deliver a high-density affective experience as rapidly and consistently as possible. In this sense, all three works enact a shift from narrative completeness to affective efficiency: complex narrative structures are segmented into

high-intensity affective units and reorganized according to viewing rhythms, forming a narrative mechanism fundamentally driven by affect.

3.3 Gendered Power and Affective Dynamics: The Structural Function of the Rescue Mechanism

In terms of character configuration and gender structure, contemporary romantic micro-dramas exhibit a highly standardized pattern: male protagonists are typically portrayed as the “CEO” figure or resource-controlling elites, while female protagonists are situated within intersecting structural predicaments. Turning points in their affective trajectories often depend on the intervention of male power.

Within the cyclical structure of “threat–rescue–commitment,” male power is affectively mediated and transformed into a central narrative device that drives both narrative progression and relational consolidation. As Xue (2024) notes, the “CEO” figure reflects both the revaluation of individual worth in contemporary society and a shift in female audiences’ engagement with desire. Through mechanisms such as “key objects” and “key scenes,” wealth and power are translated into affective commitment. The appeal of this figure lies not in wealth itself, but in its transformation into an assurance of being chosen and valued. Within this logic, “rescue” acquires a structural affective function. Each intervention—whether economic, symbolic, or risk-bearing—simultaneously resolves narrative conflict and fulfills affective commitment. Power thus becomes the concrete means through which affective confirmation is enacted.

Micro-drama adaptations do not alter this structure; rather, through rhythmic compression and affective concentration, they render the pathway of “being threatened–being rescued–being confirmed” more immediate and perceptible. What is reproduced is not merely character templates, but a stable affective structure centered on male power and female recognition. Thus, so-called “homogenization” reflects not narrative poverty, but the standardized operation of a power–affect mechanism under industrial production conditions.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that beneath the surface of highly typified and convergent narrative forms in contemporary romantic micro-dramas lies a stable affective structure centered on the cyclical

mechanism of “threat–rescue–confirmation”. Affective tension that accumulates gradually in source texts is reconfigured into high-intensity event nodes, reorganized to enable rapid activation and sustained realization. Narrative organization is no longer oriented toward the unfolding of a complete life trajectory, but toward the production and confirmation of affective peaks. In this process, complex social structures and character development are simplified, while gendered power relations are rendered in more direct and visually legible forms. Narrative “completion” thus shifts from institutional life outcomes to affective certainty—being loved, being chosen, and being rescued.

From a broader perspective, this affect-first narrative logic reflects a structural transformation in contemporary short-form media: narrative time is compressed into affective time, and viewing rhythm increasingly converges with affective rhythm. Understanding this mechanism of affective temporality not only clarifies the production logic of micro-dramas, but also offers a new perspective for rethinking the formation and reception of romantic narratives in contemporary audiovisual culture.

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