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From Reading to Viewing: Transmedia Narrative Transformations in the Micro-Drama Adaptation of Online Literature IP

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Abstract

The rapid growth of online micro-dramas has brought Chinese online literature intellectual property (IP) into a new phase of transmedia transformation and generated modes of content production that differ from conventional screen adaptation. Whereas long-form adaptations generally allow narrative expansion and fuller character development, micro-drama adaptations are designed for mobile distribution and must reorganize stories, translate verbal narration into audiovisual expression, and reconstruct characters within severe temporal limits. Using transmedia storytelling as its theoretical perspective and combining case analysis with textual analysis, this study examines the transition from textual reading to audiovisual viewing. It finds that micro-dramas adapt long-form narratives through plot compression, temporal-spatial folding, and anticipatory suspense; convert psychological description, setting, and affect into sensory configurations of shots, sound, performance, and space; and reorganize character relations into visually distinctive and readily communicable personas. These strategies increase narrative density and emotional accessibility, but may also produce structural convergence, concentrated affect, and functionalized characters. Micro-drama adaptation is therefore not simple abridgement, but a reconfiguration of narrative logic under the conditions of mobile media.

Keywords

Transmedia Storytelling; Online Literature IP; Online Micro-Drama; Media Transformation; Narrative Expression

1. Introduction

In recent years, the development of mobile internet services, the expansion of short-video platforms, and changes in audiovisual consumption have made online micro-dramas an increasingly important form of networked screen culture in China. According to the DataEye 2025 Micro-Drama Industry Data Report, the number of micro-drama users in China reached 696 million by June 2025, accounting for nearly 70% of the country's internet users; 34 million users were added during the first half of that year (DataEye Research Institute, 2025). With short episodes, intense

plots, and rapid pacing, micro-dramas are closely aligned with mobile distribution and fragmented viewing. They have consequently developed from supplementary platform content into a significant area of growth in the online audiovisual industry.

Online literature has become a major source of stories for this expanding form. Its established genre conventions, accumulated readerships, and mature plotting provide adaptable narrative resources. Story remains the central asset of online literature IP, but the circulation of that asset is now shaped by both fan economies and media convergence. Adaptation must preserve enough of the source to sustain the attachment of existing readers while also offering accessible points of entry for viewers who have not read the original. From this perspective, transmedia derivation involves selecting story elements, reorganizing textual structures, and reconstructing narrative time and space for a different medium (Zhang & Li, 2019).

Existing scholarship can broadly be divided into three areas. The first examines the screen adaptation of online literature, emphasizing the reorganization of narrative structures, character relations, and value expression during media transfer. The second focuses on micro-drama as an emergent audiovisual form and analyzes its platform logic, modes of distribution, and relationship with mobile viewing. The third approaches cross-platform circulation and narrative coordination from the perspectives of media convergence and transmedia communication. Yet these bodies of work have not fully explained what happens at the level of narrative when online literature enters micro-drama production: how verbal experience becomes audiovisual experience, how character images are reconstructed, and how the constraints of mobile media shape the resulting narrative system.

The movement of online literature IP into micro-drama is not a direct transplantation of an existing text. It is a reorganization of rhythm, affect, character presentation, and narrative information within a new communicative environment. Jenkins argues that, in an ideal transmedia narrative, integral elements of a story are distributed across media and each medium makes a distinctive contribution to the whole (Jenkins, 2006/2012). Although an adaptation is not identical to the coordinated expansion of a storyworld across multiple platforms, this insight remains valuable because it directs attention to the specific expressive work performed by each medium. The movement from reading to viewing and from extensive narration to affective concentration therefore creates a new narrative formation rather than a shortened copy of a novel.

This study employs case analysis and textual analysis to examine representative micro-dramas adapted from online literature, including I Became a Stepmother in the 1980s, Empress Works in the Modern World, Provoke, and The Dangerous Love. These cases are used to identify recurrent transformations in narrative structure, audiovisual expression, and character construction. The study asks how micro-drama reorganizes narrative resources under mobile conditions and what limitations emerge when communicative efficiency becomes a dominant principle of

adaptation.

2. Media Adaptation of Narrative Structure

2.1. Temporal-Spatial Reconstruction of Linear Narrative

Online literature generally develops character growth, relational change, and plot progression through extended serialization. Its reading experience is continuous and cumulative. Long-form narration allows writers to expand the storyworld through subsidiary plots, delayed information, and periodic climaxes, so relationships and emotions can emerge gradually. Micro-dramas, by contrast, operate under restrictions imposed by episode length, platform distribution, and mobile viewing. They must establish characters, present a central conflict, and maintain attention within a very short period. The first major transformation is therefore structural. The objective is not mechanical compression but a reorganization of narrative time, space, and event order within limited media capacity.

He and Fang (2026) describe this process as the simplification of the primary line of online fiction and a variation of its narrative mechanism. The recognizable core of the story is retained, while the distribution of narrative emphasis is modified according to the short duration of micro-drama. Tension that once depended on accumulated reading must consequently be reorganized into a denser audiovisual rhythm with faster feedback.

This reconstruction first appears in the compression of the central storyline and the advancement of conflict. Online fiction commonly follows gradual progression, using multiple chapters to accumulate affect. Micro-drama instead requires rapid entry into a situation. Character identity, primary contradiction, and viewing motivation often have to be established within the first episode or first several episodes. Background explanation, preparatory characterization, and secondary relationships are therefore combined or removed.

The adaptation of I Became a Stepmother in the 1980s illustrates this transformation. In the source narrative, family structure, identity, and interpersonal conflict unfold over a longer period, and some contradictions emerge only through sustained reading. The micro-drama intensifies the protagonist's relationships with the central family, accelerates her entry into the household, and brings external conflict forward. Everyday incidents and subsidiary experiences involving minor family members are compressed, reducing the number of active relationships and concentrating attention on the heroine's interaction with the core family. Rather than building her identity through extended domestic experience, the adaptation establishes it through a chain of decisions and confrontations.

This alteration does not necessarily destroy narrative completeness. It reallocates narrative resources. Emotional preparation in the source depends on chapter-by-chapter accumulation; the screen version advances key events so

viewers can quickly acquire a reason to continue. A developmental logic based on reading duration is converted into an action logic driven by consecutive events. The emphasis shifts from experiencing a process to receiving visible and affectively legible results.

Compression and folding of time and space are also central to adaptation for mobile viewing. Online literature can use chapter transitions, internal description, and multiple narrative lines to elaborate a storyworld. A micro-drama must increase the amount of information carried per unit of time through montage, flashback, scene transition, and recapitulation. Chinese micro-dramas consequently make frequent use of anachrony and rapid switching to increase plot density and create suspense (Ding & Chen, 2025).

Empress Works in the Modern World offers a clear example. The source uses a transition from an imperial past to contemporary society to develop changes in identity and circumstance. The screen version heightens the temporal collision produced by the heroine's movement into modern life. Differences in knowledge, behavior, and social relations are not explained through extensive exposition; they are communicated through rapid changes of setting and situational contrast. Historical identity, modern space, and affective conflict are compressed into a continuous series of visible incidents, allowing viewers to grasp immediately what would require more extensive preparation in prose.

Temporal-spatial folding should not be confused with narrative fragmentation. Although episodes are short, the adaptation still requires continuity in its primary line and progression in its relationships. Reconstruction is effective when the sequence and density of events are modified while core events remain stable. In this sense, the transformation from linear reading to episodic viewing is a process of recoding dispersed textual information as dense audiovisual events.

2.2. Suspense under Fragmented Distribution

Because mobile viewing is intermittent and easily interrupted by interface switching and user action, micro-drama places particular emphasis on pauses, resumptions, and hooks between narrative nodes (Zhang, 2022). Each episode usually performs two tasks: it releases a limited quantity of affective tension and preserves an unresolved question that motivates continued viewing. A climactic interruption, withheld information, or preview of the next conflict links one episode to the next. This mechanism can be understood as the media-specific reproduction of suspense already familiar from serialized online fiction.

Anticipatory suspense is especially important. Readers of online fiction can enter a storyworld gradually, allowing character identity and motivation to develop through sustained reading. A mobile micro-drama must attract interest almost immediately. It therefore tends to disclose important events earlier and begin with a conflict rather than with extended contextual preparation.

The micro-drama adaptation of The Dangerous Love demonstrates this tendency. The source organizes its long emotional arc around misunderstanding, relational rupture, and the gradual disclosure of truth. Its tension depends on informational asymmetry sustained through reading. The adaptation intensifies the central relationship and advances emotional confrontation and key contradictions. Misunderstanding, opposition, and reversals are placed within shorter cycles, enabling viewers to enter an affective state without extensive preparation. Reading suspense becomes viewing suspense through repeated indications that another confrontation or reversal is imminent.

In addition to advancing conflict, the micro-drama relies on staged interruption. An episode commonly ends with an incomplete action, emotional pause, or piece of withheld information. It offers partial satisfaction while sustaining a larger conflict. Its rhythm can therefore be described as local completion combined with continuous attraction: each episode completes an affective node but carries a broader contradiction into the next installment.

The same mechanism appears in I Became a Stepmother in the 1980s. After the heroine enters the family, the series does not explain every relationship at once. New contradictions successively disclose identity, family adjustment, and external pressure. Once one problem reaches provisional resolution, another is introduced, generating a complete emotional fluctuation within the episode while preserving continuity across the series.

The intensification of suspense does not, however, justify incoherent fragmentation. Fragmentation describes the viewing situation, not the destruction of narrative logic. A successful adaptation retains a discernible main line and stable relationships. When hooks serve only retention metrics and no longer advance characters or relationships, suspense deteriorates into mechanical reversal and affective accumulation. Suspense in micro-drama is thus more than a storytelling technique: it is a media mechanism connecting narrative expression with platform circulation.

3. Audiovisual Translation of Narrative Expression

3.1. From Psychological Introspection to Visible Action

Narrative restructuring concerns what is told and how information is arranged. Once an online literary work enters an audiovisual medium, it must also address how meaning becomes perceptible. Online literature activates imagination through language, whereas micro-drama relies on the coordination of shots, sound, performance, and rhythm. Transmedia transformation is therefore also a reorganization of expressive mechanisms.

Online fiction can represent emotion and internal experience through psychological description, interior monologue, and narratorial intervention. Screen narrative cannot present thought in the same manner without extensive voice-over or exposition. Film narration instead constructs psychological states indirectly through

action, performance, visual organization, and sound (Bordwell & Thompson, 2020). Viewers understand characters by rapidly interpreting behavior, expression, and audiovisual cues. The externalization of introspection is consequently a central mechanism of micro-drama adaptation.

In I Became a Stepmother in the 1980s, the heroine's adaptation to a new family, moral judgments, and changing feelings are extensively available through internal discourse in the source. In the micro-drama, these experiences become sequences of action: how she responds to domestic conflict, handles relationships, and physically reacts to emotional change. The spectator does not primarily understand her through narratorial explanation but through her repeated efforts to solve problems and negotiate contradictions. She changes from a person described by a narrator into a person apprehended through viewing.

Camera language intensifies this externalization. A long-form television drama may reserve time for extended emotional preparation, whereas micro-drama frequently uses close-ups and medium close-ups to establish affective connection quickly. Facial movement, the direction and duration of a gaze, and the rhythm of bodily action substitute for verbal explanation. The camera is not merely recording conduct; it organizes emotion and relational position.

Provoke is particularly illustrative. Its source narrative depends heavily on psychological games, concealed identities, and gradual relational change. In the micro-drama, spatial distance, bodily movement, and shot duration carry much of this meaning. Looking, approaching, pausing, and remaining silent become means of advancing emotion. Alternating points of view strengthen relational tension and transform psychology that would be verbally explained in fiction into an immediately perceptible viewing experience.

Sound further contributes to externalization. Speech rate, silence, ambient sound, and the timing of background music influence the spectator's interpretation of emotion. In The Dangerous Love, cumulative psychological suffering in the source is transformed into confrontation, prolonged silence, performance rhythm, and musical cues. The spectator no longer reads the formation of a mental state but is placed within an affective scene constructed through image and sound.

Externalization does not necessarily eliminate complexity; it changes the route through which complexity is produced. Online fiction enters the interior of a character through words. Micro-drama approaches character through action, relationship, camera position, and sound. Psychological space is translated into an audiovisual experience that can be viewed, circulated, and shared. The crucial evaluative question is therefore not whether every interior passage has been retained, but whether the audiovisual configuration creates an equivalent or productively different form of meaning.

3.2. From Textual Signs to Sensory Experience

The settings, identities, and emotional atmospheres of online literature are jointly produced by linguistic cues and the reader's imagination. Readers add environmental detail and emotional color as the narrative proceeds. Micro-drama must recode this information into visual and sonic systems that permit rapid entry into the narrative situation. Meaning shifts from imaginative construction during reading to immediate sensory apprehension during viewing.

Audiovisual space is not a neutral background for action. Mise-en-scène, framing, editing, and sound participate in the construction of character relations and emotional states (Bordwell & Thompson, 2020). Costume, props, lighting, and spatial arrangement can disclose social identity before dialogue explains it. A restricted domestic space may visualize pressure and hierarchy; a change in costume or camera distance may make a relational change instantly legible. The conversion of textual description into spatial and visual organization increases communicative efficiency because several kinds of information can be presented simultaneously.

Sound and rhythm also reorganize the temporal experience of the source. Online prose determines pace through sentence length, chapter structure, and the reader's control over reading speed. Micro-drama transfers much of that control to editing, performance, and music. Accelerated cutting can condense action, while a pause or musical entrance can isolate an emotional node. The resulting sensory rhythm does not merely illustrate the text; it produces a new temporal and affective arrangement.

This process can enrich the source by making environments and emotions collectively perceptible. It can also narrow interpretive openness. A written scene permits readers to construct different faces, spaces, and tones, while a screen adaptation presents a relatively determinate image. Transmedia translation therefore involves both gain and loss: sensory immediacy and shared visibility increase, but the range of individual visualization may decrease. The significance of adaptation lies in how it uses the resources of the new medium, rather than in whether it reproduces every verbal sign.

4. Media-Specific Distillation of Character

4.1. Simplification of Character Relations and Construction of Visual Persona

Characters are the most immediately visible carriers of transmedia transformation. Online literature develops recognition through continued reading, long developmental arcs, and complex relational networks. Micro-drama asks viewers to identify a character, invest affectively, and remember a persona within a limited duration. Characters are therefore selected, focused, and intensified so that they can operate efficiently in mobile circulation.

Ouyang (2020) argues that the screen adaptation of online literature does not

mechanically preserve the source's character system but functionally reorganizes it while retaining narrative recognizability. In micro-drama, this reorganization often reduces the number of figures, compresses secondary relationships, and concentrates central conflicts. In I Became a Stepmother in the 1980s, some family members and peripheral connections are removed. Narrative resources are concentrated on the heroine's relationships with the core household. The remaining relationships become denser: children function less as components of an extended family system than as key agents in the heroine's identity formation, emotional investment, and value expression.

Relational compression changes function rather than simply reducing expression. Relationships in online literature often expand a storyworld; relationships in micro-drama are more likely to advance affect. Provoke similarly compresses peripheral figures and background information so the central relationship becomes immediately intelligible. Viewers need not know every element of the characters' histories before entering their emotional struggle.

If relational simplification explains how characters are understood, visual persona explains how they are remembered. Costume, make-up, habitual gesture, speech rhythm, camera angle, and screen position quickly establish identity. A protagonist's core characteristics are often disclosed at the first appearance. In I Became a Stepmother in the 1980s, a practical visual style, rapid actions, active responses to conflict, and repeated close-ups establish the heroine's decisiveness without extended psychological explanation. In Provoke, differences in costume, framing, and spatial position continuously reinforce distinctions in identity and power.

The construction of visual persona should not automatically be treated as the destruction of complexity. It reorganizes the mechanism of recognition. A character no longer depends exclusively on accumulated reading time but becomes recognizable through concentrated relationships and recurrent audiovisual features. The danger arises when the visual persona remains static and ceases to support development.

4.2. Intensified Conflict and the Circulation of Character Labels

Conflict determines how a character remains recognizable during circulation. Online fiction can distribute goals, relationships, and developmental stages across hundreds of chapters. Micro-drama often compresses these into a few core contradictions so that identity is demonstrated through repeated action. Conflict is therefore both a plot device and a means of character perception.

The heroine of I Became a Stepmother in the 1980s repeatedly responds to family disputes, emotional relationships, and external pressure. Her agency and capacity for problem solving are communicated through decisions rather than through a comprehensive biography. This produces the highly recognizable label of an empowered female protagonist. The character is not known because every stage of

growth is shown, but because key situations repeatedly confirm a coherent mode of action.

Character labels are an information-compression mechanism suited to mobile circulation. They lower the threshold of comprehension and allow figures to be discussed through short clips, comments, and promotional descriptions. Scolari (2009) notes that transmedia production recodes central character features across media in order to sustain recognition and narrative continuity. In micro-drama, recurrent patterns of conduct, speech, appearance, and conflict perform this recoding.

Provoke uses persistent differences in identity and repeated relational contest to create stable impressions. Even without complete knowledge of the characters' histories, viewers can identify their positions. Yet a label should function as an entrance to characterization rather than its endpoint. If it continues to generate new choices and relational changes, it supports understanding. If a figure remains confined to repeated identity display and emotional output, characterization becomes functionalized.

The Dangerous Love illustrates this boundary. Misunderstanding, injury, and regret rapidly establish the emotional positions of the central figures. When they recur without producing growth, however, the relationship becomes a loop of affective stimulation. Intensified conflict raises communicative efficiency but cannot substitute for development. Character distillation is therefore productive only when recognizability remains connected to change.

5. Narrative Limitations of Online Literature IP Micro-Dramas

5.1. Structural Convergence under Narrative Compression

The communicative advantages of micro-drama rest on rapid entry, frequent feedback, and sustained viewing. Narrative resources are therefore concentrated on core events and strong conflict. This increases the speed at which a story becomes intelligible, but it may also generate structural convergence. Identity reversal, relational escalation, periodic twists, and episode-ending hooks recur across genres. Growth narratives, world-building, and gradual relational evolution that possess greater differentiation in online literature are placed within increasingly similar rhythms.

This convergence does not necessarily result from a shortage of stories. It reflects the continuous shaping of narrative pace by the distribution environment. When viewing depends on immediate feedback, adaptation prioritizes entry speed over development. Events continue to move forward while characters may remain narratively stationary. The result is a predictable trajectory in which narrative motion is mistaken for transformation.

5.2. Concentrated Affect under Audiovisual Intensification

Shots, music, performance, and rhythm make character states and relational changes quickly perceptible. Yet audiovisual intensification may concentrate affect into a restricted set of paths. In reading, affect can develop through inference, hesitation, and extended participation. Micro-drama often advances emotional nodes and uses frequent stimuli to maintain attention.

Many adaptations draw on established patterns of revenge, rebirth, romantic suffering, and upward mobility. Differences in identity, interpersonal conflict, and emotional reversal reduce comprehension costs and create viewing pleasure. Repetition, however, can cause emotional organization to become uniform. When emotional release replaces emotional formation, narrative layers and experiential complexity are compressed. The problem is not strong emotion itself, but whether affect continues to serve character relations and narrative development.

5.3. Functionalized Characters after Distillation

Simplified relations, visual personas, and intensified labels help characters become identifiable and shareable. When characterization remains governed primarily by circulation, however, figures may be reduced to functions such as the empowered heroine, the avenger, or the regretful pursuer. Their behavior delivers plot movement and affective payoff but offers little complex experience or sustained transformation.

Character thickness in online literature is often supported by reading time. Micro-drama must find alternative ways to organize complexity within a smaller capacity. A vivid label may attract immediate attention, but without relational development it produces figures that are memorable in the moment and difficult to retain afterward. Communicative efficiency and narrative depth are not inherently opposed. The challenge is to preserve space for emotional formation, changing relationships, and character growth while adapting to mobile distribution.

6. Conclusion

The entry of online literature IP into micro-drama is not a simple movement of content from one container to another. It reorganizes narrative resources, adjusts expressive mechanisms, and reconstructs character presentation under new media conditions. Compared with conventional long-form screen adaptation, micro-drama does not retain the gradual narrative logic associated with extended reading. It develops a media-specific system shaped by mobile circulation.

At the structural level, plot compression, temporal-spatial folding, conflict advancement, and episodic hooks convert accumulated reading into dense and continuous viewing. At the expressive level, camera work, sound, performance, and spatial arrangement translate verbal and psychological experience into sensory experience. At the level of characterization, the reorganization of relations, construction of visual persona, and intensification of labels produce figures with

greater immediate communicative efficiency.

These findings show that micro-drama adaptation is not merely content shortening but a reconfiguration of narrative logic. Media transformation alters both the form in which a story appears and the process through which meaning is generated. Character understanding, emotional accumulation, and storyworld construction that originally depended on reading time are reorganized as mechanisms of immediate entry, rapid perception, and continuous feedback. High narrative density, strong affective motivation, and recognizable characters constitute a distinctive transmedia path.

The advantages of media adaptation do not automatically improve narrative quality. Compression may produce structural convergence, audiovisual intensification may concentrate affect, and character distillation may lead to functionalization. Future development therefore depends on maintaining complexity and relational progression within limited duration. As the micro-drama sector moves from traffic expansion toward competition over content quality, the central question is shifting from whether an IP can be adapted to how it should be adapted. Further research should examine adaptation awareness during literary production, the role of user feedback in narrative production, and the ways platform distribution may influence the upstream creation of online literature.

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