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Platform-Mediated Narrative Localization of Chinese Micro-Short Dramas in Global Markets: Narrative Functions, Genre Codes, and Cultural Presentation

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Abstract: The global dissemination of Chinese micro-short dramas is deeply embedded in a platform-based audiovisual ecosystem, where platforms do not merely handle distribution but also act as core intermediaries that reconstruct narrative expression, classification systems, and storytelling structures for overseas audiences. This study adopts a comparative case study design, selecting six representative short dramas across three major platforms—ReelShort, DramaBox, and ShortMax—to analyze official series synopses, episode descriptions, and platform-assigned genre tags. The findings identify a highly stable platform-level narrative function chain: relationship formation, status asymmetry, information withholding, external obstruction, conflict eruption, and relational reconfiguration. These functions are realized through transnational genre codes such as billionaire, CEO, contract marriage, arranged marriage, hidden identity, and revenge, which are rooted in differentiated cultural and institutional contexts. The study proposes a three-layer analytical framework of narrative function, transnational genre coding, and cultural realization, and formulates the concept of platform narrative compression to account for how platforms condense serialized long-form narratives into a limited set of textual and visual signals. Cross-platform comparison further reveals distinct presentational logics: ReelShort prioritizes English-localized original production, DramaBox leans into high-conflict condensed narratives, and ShortMax organizes its large drama catalog through granular genre tags.

Keywords: Chinese micro-short dramas, cultural discount, glocalization, platformization, platform narrative compression.

1. Introduction

In recent years, Chinese micro-short dramas have emerged as a high-growth segment in cross-border digital audiovisual communication, with dedicated apps operating across multiple national markets. Platform interfaces now function as the primary media environment where overseas audiences discover, select, and interpret short-form narrative content. According to Sensor Tower's *State of Short Drama Apps 2025*, global in-app purchase (IAP) revenue from short-drama applications nearly quadrupled year-on-year to approximately US$700 million in the first quarter of 2025, with total downloads exceeding 370 million. ReelShort and DramaBox rank as the two leading platforms by global IAP revenue, anchoring the market's overseas expansion [1]. These figures cover only Apple App Store and Google Play IAP and exclude advertising and third-party channel revenue; they are used here as indicators of market scale rather than definitive industry totals.

Yet rapid commercial growth alone does not explain how culturally situated short dramas achieve legibility among heterogeneous overseas audiences. Cross-border audiovisual dissemination involves more than the distribution of finished content: before viewers engage with a full episode, a drama is already framed through platform interface elements including titles, synopses, episode descriptions, genre tags, and character cues. This platform-facing layer of narrative presentation acts as a critical pre-viewing interface, yet its organizing logic remains comparatively underexplored.

Observation of three leading platforms reveals distinct presentational patterns. ReelShort positions *The Double Life of My Billionaire Husband* as an English-language original production and frames *Fated to My Forbidden Alpha* through supernatural genre tropes such as Alpha hierarchy and hidden identity. DramaBox foregrounds relational disruption—marital rejection, infertility, and CEO status in *Ex-Files: Regret Edition*, and leaked footage and arranged marriage in *Kisses Laced with Lies*. ShortMax organizes its catalog through explicit genre taxonomy, categorizing *My Accidental CEO Hubby* under labels such as Modern, Love After Marriage, and Flash Marriage, and framing *The Billionaire's Return* around elite status and narrative twists. These patterns suggest that platforms actively shape how narratives are made recognizable to cross-border audiences.

Cultural discount theory provides a foundational lens for understanding cross-cultural appeal gaps, as differences in values, norms, and institutional contexts can weaken the resonance of audiovisual products in foreign markets [2]. This study frames cultural discount as a problem of legibility rather than a fixed outcome, asking how locally rooted narratives are restructured into readily recognizable signals at the platform interface. Glocalization theory complements this perspective by framing globalization as an interaction of universalizing and localizing dynamics, rather than simple homogenization [3]. Platformization theory further extends the analysis by highlighting how digital platforms structure cultural production, classification, and circulation [4, 5]. Together, these perspectives frame the platform as a mediating layer that shapes cross-cultural narrative legibility.

Accordingly, this study proposes three core research questions:

RQ1: What representable narrative features do Chinese micro-short dramas aimed at overseas markets present on platforms?

RQ2: How can these narrative functions be represented in relation to different cultures, relationships, institutions, and

genre contexts?

RQ3: What are the differences in narrative presentation on platforms between ReelShort, DramaBox, and ShortMax?

Building on these questions, this study develops a three-layer analytical framework of global narrative skeleton, transnational genre coding, and cultural realization, and proposes the concept of platform narrative compression to describe the process by which serialized stories are condensed into a compact set of recognizable signals at the platform interface.

2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

2.1. Cultural Discount and the Problem of Cross-Cultural Legibility

Cultural discount provides an established starting point for understanding why audiovisual products do not necessarily retain identical appeal across markets. Hoskins and Mirus [2] emphasize that cultural values, social practices, institutions, and references can shape the international circulation of television programming. The concept is particularly relevant to narrative products whose meanings depend on family structures, social status, interpersonal norms, and institutional arrangements. A dramatic premise that appears self-evident in one setting may carry different implications in another.

At the same time, cultural discount should not be interpreted as a deterministic loss of value. Transnational media circulation routinely involves content originating in unfamiliar cultural environments, and the continued movement of such content suggests that some narrative functions and genre conventions can remain intelligible across markets. The present study therefore uses cultural discount as a conceptual problem of legibility rather than as a dependent variable. The empirical question is narrower: which aspects of a narrative are foregrounded in public-facing platform materials, and how are they framed so that a potentially complex story becomes recognizable before full-text viewing?

2.2. Glocalization and the Separation of Narrative Function from Cultural Realization

Robertson's [3] concept of glocalization emphasizes the interaction between globalizing processes and localizing processes. For narrative analysis, this perspective becomes more precise when a distinction is made between what a narrative element does and the cultural form through which it does so. A relationship may perform the function of creating romantic tension whether it is organized through a contract marriage, arranged marriage, CEO romance, or supernatural mate bond. Likewise, hierarchy may structure conflict through family authority, corporate wealth, or supernatural rank.

This distinction supports two analytical layers. Narrative function refers to the structural role performed by an element in the presented story, whereas cultural realization refers to the social, institutional, linguistic, and symbolic environment through which that function is represented. The study's term global narrative skeleton does not therefore describe a universal narrative formula. It denotes a recurring configuration identified within the selected corpus. The logic is comparable to the function-versus-surface distinction associated with Propp's [7] morphological approach, but the present study does not claim to reproduce or extend Propp's full system of narrative functions.

2.3. Platformization and the Mediation of Cultural Content

Nieborg and Poell [4] conceptualize platformization as a transformation in which digital platforms increasingly shape cultural production and circulation. Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal [5] similarly emphasize the infrastructural role of platforms in organizing social and cultural activity. In the context of micro-short dramas, platformization is visible not only through distribution but also at the interface level. A drama is placed within a category, attached to a title and synopsis, divided into episodes, associated with access conditions, and positioned within a larger catalog.

This suggests an intermediate layer between production and reception: Production → Platform-facing presentation → Audience encounter. The present study concentrates on this middle layer. It does not attempt to infer hidden recommendation algorithms, proprietary editorial decision-making, or actual audience reception. The analytical focus remains on the textual and categorical materials that are publicly observable.

2.4. Platformed Glocalization

Abidin and Lee [8] use the concept of platformed glocalization to describe the accommodation of platform practices to particular cultural and institutional contexts. Their work concerns platform expansion and market-specific adaptation. The present study applies the general insight to a more limited textual question: whether the public-facing presentation of narrative content combines recurring genre conventions with differentiated cultural and institutional realizations. This extension concerns the observable representational layer rather than the internal operation of platform infrastructure.

2.5. Recent Research on Chinese Short-Drama Globalization

Recent scholarship increasingly treats Chinese micro-short dramas as transnational cultural and commercial products. Tang and Wang [6], for example, analyze ReelShort through platformization, glocalization, and localized production practices, combining content analysis with twelve semi-structured interviews. Their study is principally concerned with production and business practices. Dorfman [9] discusses commercial and regulatory risks embedded within Chinese micro-drama global export pipelines. Yin and Lin [10] investigate narrative transcoding and adaptation strategies for short-drama cross-cultural communication. Together, these studies establish that overseas expansion cannot be understood as technological distribution alone. What remains comparatively underexplored is the relationship among recurring narrative functions, portable genre conventions, and the platform-facing presentation through which these elements are publicly organized for transnational circulation.

2.6. Analytical Framework

The analytical framework connects three levels. The first is the global narrative skeleton, defined as the recurring configuration of dramatic functions observed across the selected cases: relationship formation, status asymmetry,

information withholding, external constraint or conflict, and relational reconfiguration. The second is transnational genre codes, referring to portable conventions such as billionaire, CEO, contract marriage, arranged marriage, Alpha, mate, hidden identity, and revenge. These codes do not constitute universal narrative structures; rather, they provide recognizable genre shorthand through which broader functions are represented. The third is cultural realization, referring to the particular social, institutional, relational, and fictional settings in which those functions appear.

The framework can be summarized as Narrative Function → Genre Code → Cultural Realization → Platform Presentation. The final stage is described here as platform narrative compression. This term refers to the selective condensation of a serialized narrative into a relatively small number of recognizable cues at the platform-facing level, including title wording, synopsis, episode description, genre labels, and selected character or conflict information. Its value is analytical: it identifies a level at which complex narrative material becomes compact, comparable, and categorizable before the audience encounters the complete text.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The study employs a comparative qualitative case-study design combined with structured coding of publicly accessible platform-facing materials. The principal empirical object is not the complete audiovisual text of the selected dramas but the way each title is publicly represented through official series descriptions, episode descriptions, and platform-assigned genre labels. This design allows the study to examine observable narrative presentation while keeping clear boundaries around what cannot be established from public materials alone.

3.2. Case Selection

ReelShort, DramaBox, and ShortMax were selected because they provide publicly accessible English-language platform materials and represent substantial overseas-oriented short-drama circulation. Sensor Tower ranked ReelShort and DramaBox as the two leading short-drama apps by estimated global IAP revenue in the first quarter of 2025 [1]. The three services also provide sufficiently detailed public materials for comparative observation of titles, episode descriptions, and genre classification. The study does not treat the three platforms as exhaustive representatives of the global short-drama market, nor does the small sample permit platform-wide generalization.

Two titles were selected from each platform using purposive sampling. Selection was guided by the availability of detailed official descriptions and the visibility of narrative elements relevant to the research questions. The six cases are *The Double Life of My Billionaire Husband* and *Fated to My Forbidden Alpha* on ReelShort; *Ex-Files: Regret Edition* and *Kisses Laced with Lies* on DramaBox; and *My Accidental CEO Hubby* and *The Billionaire's Return* on ShortMax. The sample is concentrated in romance, elite-status, relationship-conflict, and fantasy-oriented materials. It is therefore intended for analytical comparison rather than statistical representation of all overseas-oriented micro-short drama genres.

Table 1. Selected cases and publicly listed episodes

Platform	Selected title	Publicly listed episodes
ReelShort	*The Double Life of My Billionaire Husband*	60
ReelShort	*Fated to My Forbidden Alpha*	61
DramaBox	*Ex-Files: Regret Edition*	62
DramaBox	*Kisses Laced with Lies*	73
ShortMax	*My Accidental CEO Hubby*	56
ShortMax	*The Billionaire's Return*	30

Note: Public platform metadata for *The Double Life of My Billionaire Husband* contains an inconsistency: the episode index displays 61 items while accompanying FAQ text refers to 60. Because the study does not use episode count as a substantive comparative variable, this discrepancy does not affect the coding results.

3.3. Data Sources

All materials were collected from the official public pages of each platform's English-language website and mobile application.The corpus consists of official series descriptions, publicly accessible episode descriptions, and platform-assigned genre labels collected between March 15 and April 30, 2025. Materials were captured during the collection period because platform pages and metadata can change over time. Episode descriptions are treated as supporting evidence for case-level coding rather than as independent observations. This distinction is important because the number of publicly listed episodes varies across the six cases, and the study does not assume that one episode description is analytically equivalent to another.

For example, ReelShort's materials for *The Double Life of My Billionaire Husband* identify Natalie's mother's medical expenses in the opening material, a marriage condition in the subsequent episode description, and Sebastian's secret in the third episode. *Fated to My Forbidden Alpha* introduces Selene as an orphan and maid within the Bloodmoon pack and foregrounds pack hierarchy, abuse, another pack, and revenge. DramaBox's selected materials foreground marital rejection, infertility, pregnancy, CEO status, leaked video, family betrayal, and arranged marriage. ShortMax combines plot descriptions with genre labels, providing a basis for examining both narrative content cues and catalog-level categorization.

3.4. Unit of Analysis

The primary unit is the case-level platform-facing narrative repertoire, operationalized through three kinds of public material: the official series synopsis, publicly accessible episode descriptions, and platform-assigned genre labels. These materials are not treated as interchangeable data points. Instead, episode descriptions are read as evidence supporting a case-level judgment, while genre labels are treated as categorical evidence of platform classification. The study

therefore asks whether a narrative element is explicitly present in the available platform-facing material for a case, not how frequently it occurs across every episode.

This approach addresses the central construct-validity problem of the study. A platform-facing description is a representation of the narrative, not the narrative itself. Statements in the findings are accordingly formulated as claims about what the platform materials foreground or represent rather than claims about the complete audiovisual text.

3.5. Coding Scheme

Seven principal variables were coded using explicit operational definitions. A pilot coding of *The Double Life of My Billionaire Husband* was conducted first, after which ambiguous definitions were clarified before the remaining cases were coded. A code of 1 means that the operational definition is explicitly satisfied by the analyzed platform material; a code of 0 means that sufficient evidence was not identified in the analyzed material. A 0 therefore does not establish the absence of the feature from the complete drama.

Table 2. Coding variables and operational definitions

Variable	Definition
Romance	A romantic or intimate relationship is explicitly central to the presented narrative
Status asymmetry	The presented conflict explicitly involves unequal wealth, authority, rank, or social power
Identity revelation	A concealed identity, background, memory, or secret is explicitly foregrounded
Contract / arranged relationship	An intimate relationship is established through contract, arrangement, substitution, or external obligation
Family conflict	Family or kinship relations directly generate conflict or narrative development
Betrayal / retaliation	Explicit betrayal, revenge, or retaliatory action forms a major element of the presented narrative
Institutionalized power structure	A formal or semi-formal hierarchy explicitly organizes protagonists' access to authority, resources, status, or relational choices.

Transnational genre codes are analyzed qualitatively rather than binary-coded because terms such as billionaire, CEO, contract marriage, Alpha, and mate function as genre resources whose meanings are relational and contextual rather than discrete variables.

3.6. Coding Procedure and Reliability

The study uses a single-researcher coding design. Each case was coded according to the predefined operational definitions and then checked against the original platform material to maintain source traceability. A second pass was conducted after a two-week interval to review consistency. Because no independent second coder participated, the study does not report Cohen's kappa or another intercoder reliability statistic. This limitation is disclosed explicitly rather than replaced by an invented coefficient. The methodological emphasis is therefore on transparent definitions, case-level traceability, and auditability.

Table 3. Case-level coding matrix.

Case	Romance	Status asymmetry	Identity revelation	Contract / arranged	Family conflict	Betrayal / retaliation	Institutionalized power
The Double Life of My Billionaire Husband	1	1	1	1	1	0	1
Fated to My Forbidden Alpha	1	1	1	0	0	1	1
Ex-Files: Regret Edition	1	1	0	0	0	0	1
Kisses Laced with Lies	1	0	0	1	1	1	0
My Accidental CEO Hubby	1	1	1	1	1	0	1
The Billionaire's Return	1	1	1	0	0	0	1

The matrix records only features explicitly supported by the analyzed public materials. A value of 0 means that sufficient evidence was not identified in the corpus, not that the feature is absent from the full drama.

4. Findings

The structured coding analysis reveals a consistent repertoire of recurring narrative functions across all six selected cases, each realized through differentiated cultural, institutional, and genre configurations. This section details each core narrative function and illustrates its cross-case variation through platform-facing materials.

4.1. A Recurring Configuration of Relational Conflict

The coding results suggest that the most stable pattern across the six cases is not a single trope but a configuration of relational functions. Romance is present in all six cases, while five cases also contain explicit status asymmetry and four contain an explicitly foregrounded identity, background, memory, or secret. Contractual or arranged relationships occur in three cases, and family conflict is explicit in three cases. Read together, these features form a recurring sequence in which a relationship is established or disrupted under unequal conditions, information remains partially unavailable, conflict intensifies, and the relationship is placed under pressure to change. The pattern can therefore be summarized as relationship formation → asymmetry or uncertainty → information withholding → conflict or constraint → relational reconfiguration.

The value of this configuration lies in the relationships among elements. In *The Double Life of My Billionaire Husband*, financial pressure and family refusal of assistance precede a marriage condition, while Sebastian's secret adds information asymmetry to the relationship. *My Accidental*

CEO Hubby similarly combines contract marriage with CEO status, family conflict, and secrets. *Kisses Laced with Lies* uses leaked information and family betrayal to destabilize the protagonist's previous relationship and move the story toward an arranged marriage. These cases indicate that the recurring narrative function is better described as constrained intimacy and relational uncertainty than as romance in the abstract.

4.2. Status Asymmetry and the Organization of Conflict

Status asymmetry is represented through different carriers of power. Corporate and economic status appears in the CEO and billionaire cases, while supernatural hierarchy structures *Fated to My Forbidden Alpha* through Alpha authority and pack organization. What remains comparable is not the cultural meaning of wealth, corporate authority, or pack rank, but their narrative function: they establish unequal access to resources, authority, or recognition and thereby provide a basis for conflict and possible repositioning. The same structural role is therefore realized through different institutional or fictional environments.

This distinction is particularly visible when status asymmetry is combined with identity revelation. A concealed identity, secret, or loss of memory can interrupt an apparently stable hierarchy by introducing information that changes how the relationship is understood. The combination of status and hidden information is observable in *The Double Life of My Billionaire Husband*, *My Accidental CEO Hubby*, and *The Billionaire's Return*.

4.3. Contractual and Arranged Intimacy as a Portable Configuration

Contractual or arranged relationships appear in three cases: *The Double Life of My Billionaire Husband*, *Kisses Laced with Lies*, and *My Accidental CEO Hubby*. The significance of the pattern is not the legal or social institution of marriage itself, but the way an external condition organizes intimacy. The relationship is established through an arrangement, substitution, obligation, or contract rather than through an already secure romantic commitment. The trope therefore operates simultaneously as a plot mechanism and as a compact genre signal that communicates a recognizable relational premise in very little textual space.

The three cases also show why contractual intimacy should not be equated with a single cultural context. Financial and family pressure are prominent in *The Double Life of My Billionaire Husband*, an arranged marriage follows family betrayal in *Kisses Laced with Lies*, and a contract marriage is central to *My Accidental CEO Hubby*. The same broad narrative function is therefore attached to different cultural and institutional realizations, which supports the distinction between function and realization proposed in the analytical framework.

4.4. Family Conflict as Relational Infrastructure

Family relations function as a mechanism through which resources, obligations, loyalty, information, and social pressure become narratively consequential. In *The Double Life of My Billionaire Husband*, family decisions shape the protagonist's access to assistance and contribute to the conditions surrounding marriage. In *Kisses Laced with Lies*, sisterly betrayal directly reorganizes the protagonist's relationship trajectory. *My Accidental CEO Hubby* explicitly includes family feuds among its central plot elements. These cases suggest that family is not simply a background setting but a relational infrastructure through which other narrative functions are activated.

At the same time, the corpus does not support the claim that family conflict is specifically Chinese. Family-based conflict is a widely used dramatic resource, and the selected cases show its appearance within transnational platform materials. The empirical finding is therefore about recurrence in the sample, not national cultural uniqueness.

4.5. Fantasy Genre Codes and Transnational Circulation

Fated to My Forbidden Alpha is analytically useful because it makes the distinction between cultural realization and genre portability particularly visible. The platform materials rely on Alpha, pack, mate, and Moon Goddess vocabulary rather than translating the story into an ordinary institutional setting. These terms are recognizable within a specific supernatural-romance genre system and therefore operate as genre codes. The case suggests that transnational circulation may involve not only localization of cultural setting but also the movement of genre conventions that retain their distinctiveness while remaining legible as components of a familiar entertainment category.

5. From Narrative Function to Genre Code

5.1. Billionaire and CEO as Narrative Shorthand

The repeated appearance of billionaire and CEO codes is important because each term condenses several narrative properties into a single recognizable sign. Within the selected materials, billionaire can simultaneously suggest wealth, prestige, unequal access to resources, and the possibility of protection or threat. CEO similarly signals organizational authority, occupational prestige, and decision-making power. The genre code therefore connects an abstract narrative function, such as status asymmetry, to a compact and readily identifiable character type.

This is especially visible in platform-facing presentation. A title such as *The Billionaire's Return* communicates a status-based narrative premise before the synopsis is read, while a synopsis referring to a CEO or tycoon adds a recognizable power relation without requiring a lengthy explanation of the institutional setting.

5.2. Contract Marriage as Genre Shorthand

Contract marriage provides an even clearer example of the relation among function, genre, and platform presentation. At the level of narrative function, the trope creates constrained intimacy: characters are placed in a relationship by an external condition. At the level of genre code, the phrase identifies a familiar romantic scenario. At the level of platform presentation, the scenario can be communicated in only a few words. The same applies, in a different genre system, to Alpha and mate in supernatural romance. These terms function as portable genre resources rather than as direct equivalents of a particular national culture.

The analytical importance of genre codes is therefore their intermediary position. They are neither abstract universal functions nor simple cultural symbols. They are stabilized conventions whose meanings emerge through repeated

circulation within entertainment genres. In the selected cases, genre codes provide a compact bridge between narrative structure and culturally situated presentation.

6. Platform Narrative Compression

The central analytical concept developed in this study is platform narrative compression. A serialized drama may contain dozens of episodes and numerous character relationships, but its public-facing representation is usually much smaller. Titles, synopses, episode descriptions, genre labels, and selected character information condense the narrative into a limited set of signals. The concept therefore refers to an observable representational process: the selective foregrounding of elements that make the basic dramatic premise immediately identifiable at the platform interface.

The Billionaire's Return illustrates the process clearly. Its public presentation combines a New York tycoon, a US$100 billion business empire, memory loss, marriage, an antagonistic former partner, and a struggle for power. These details do not reproduce the complete series; they establish a compact narrative cluster of status, relationship, uncertainty, conflict, and possible reversal. ShortMax's application-level categories perform a similar function at catalog scale by grouping stories under recurring labels such as CEO, werewolf romance, revenge, contract marriage, hidden marriage, and secret identity [11]. The compression therefore occurs at both the title level and the catalog level.

The concept should nevertheless be understood cautiously. The freemium structure of short-drama services provides a relevant commercial context. Platform narrative compression is therefore treated as a textual and classificatory phenomenon whose commercial implications remain an open empirical question.

7. Cross-Platform Comparison

7.1. ReelShort: English-Language Production and Genre Continuity

Among the selected cases, ReelShort provides the clearest direct evidence of English-language original production. Its platform materials state that *The Double Life of My Billionaire Husband* was filmed in English rather than dubbed and identify it as a ReelShort original. At the same time, the title is presented through familiar genre configurations involving marriage, wealth, family pressure, and hidden information. The combination can therefore be described as production-level linguistic localization alongside continuity in recognizable genre grammar.

What they do show is that, within the selected materials, linguistic or production localization can coexist with highly recognizable genre conventions. This coexistence is consistent with the study's broader argument that localization and genre portability are not mutually exclusive processes.

7.2. DramaBox: Conflict-Dense Front-End Presentation

The selected DramaBox materials place considerable emphasis on destabilizing interpersonal events. Ex-Files: Regret Edition foregrounds marital rejection, infertility, pregnancy, and a powerful CEO, while Kisses Laced with Lies foregrounds a leaked video, betrayal within the family, an arranged marriage, and a continuing relationship conflict. The observable feature is therefore not simply the presence of romance but a high density of explicit relational disruptions within relatively compact descriptions.

They do, however, provide a basis for comparing the public-facing narrative surface with the more classification-oriented presentation visible in the ShortMax materials. The relevant conclusion is limited to observable differences in the selected platform-facing texts.

7.3. Genre Classification and Catalog-Scale Presentation

ShortMax makes genre classification especially visible in the selected materials. *My Accidental CEO Hubby* is accompanied by labels including Modern, Love After Marriage, Elite Families, and Flash Marriage, while *The Billionaire's Return* is placed under Modern and Elite Families. At the application level, ShortMax also promotes categories such as CEO, billionaire, werewolf romance, revenge, contract marriage, hidden marriage, and secret identity and describes a multilingual catalog exceeding 50 000 short dramas and movies in 19 languages [11].

These materials indicate that genre taxonomy is an important part of the platform's public-facing content architecture. The evidence supports only the narrower claim that genre classification is highly visible in ShortMax's public presentation and provides a scalable way of organizing narrative categories at catalog level.

7.4. Comparative Table

Table 4. Observable differences in platform-facing narrative presentation.

Dimension	Reelshort	Dramabox	Shortmax
Selected-case emphasis	English-language original production; romance, status, hidden information	Relational conflict; betrayal, rejection, arranged relationship	Contract marriage, elite status, explicit genre labels
Contract / arranged relationship	Present in selected cases	Present in selected cases	Present in selected cases
Status asymmetry	Visible in selected cases	Visible in selected cases	Visible in selected cases
Identity / revelation	Prominent in selected cases	Less prominent in selected cases	Present in selected cases
Fantasy genre code	Present in selected sample	Not prominent in selected sample	Visible at platform level
Direct evidence of English-language original production	Yes, selected reelshort title	Not established	Not established
Observable presentation device	Plot + genre framing	Conflict-dense synopsis	Genre taxonomy + plot framing

Taken together, the comparison suggests that platform-facing narrative presentation is differentiated rather than uniform. ReelShort's selected materials provide direct evidence of English-language original production; DramaBox's selected materials foreground relational disruptions; and ShortMax makes genre taxonomy especially visible.

8. Discussion

8.1. Beyond the Binary of Localization and Non-Localization

The cases suggest that localization is too coarse a binary for describing transnational short-drama circulation. Language, production context, character construction, institutional setting, and platform presentation can all vary, while some genre conventions remain recognizable across cases. The analytical alternative is not to choose between localization and cultural specificity, but to examine how different layers of narrative presentation are combined. In this corpus, some elements are culturally situated while others function as portable genre codes.

8.2. The Global Narrative Skeleton as a Repertoire of Functions

The recurring configuration identified in the findings can be expressed as relationship formation → status asymmetry or uncertainty → information withholding → conflict or constraint → relational reconfiguration. The value of this sequence is not that it predicts every plot, but that it provides a way to compare how different surface elements perform related dramatic work. Contract marriage, family pressure, CEO authority, billionaire status, Alpha rank, and hidden identity do not mean the same thing culturally, yet they can occupy comparable positions within the relational architecture of the selected cases.

This framework also clarifies why the study should not be reduced to trope counting. The analytical object is the relation among tropes. Contract marriage becomes meaningful when connected to constrained intimacy; status becomes narratively consequential when linked to unequal access to resources or recognition; hidden identity matters when it creates information asymmetry that can reorganize an existing relationship. The resulting skeleton is therefore a repertoire of interconnected functions rather than a fixed formula, and its empirical scope is limited to the sampled public materials.

8.3. Transnational Genre Codes as the Intermediate Layer

Between narrative function and cultural realization lies an intermediate layer of genre coding. Billionaire and CEO are compact ways of presenting status asymmetry; contract marriage identifies a constrained form of intimacy; Alpha and mate place hierarchy and relationship within a supernatural-romance vocabulary. This intermediary layer is important because it shows that cross-border circulation need not proceed by replacing every culturally distinctive symbol with a target-market equivalent. Some conventions travel precisely as recognizable genre conventions.

Their analytical importance comes from their observable capacity to connect a broad narrative function with a compact genre signal in the platform interface.

8.4. Platform Narrative Compression as an Intermediate Mediation Process

Platform narrative compression extends the preceding analysis by locating narrative organization within the interface. A complex serial story is represented through a much smaller set of title, synopsis, genre, episode, and character cues. The platform-facing narrative surface thus becomes a standardized representational layer through which different titles can be compared within the same catalog. This is particularly visible when recurring codes such as CEO, contract marriage, revenge, or secret identity are applied across multiple titles.

The concept contributes a specific textual dimension to platformization research. Existing platform scholarship often emphasizes infrastructures, data, recommendation, governance, or production relations [4, 5, 12]. The present study draws attention to a simpler but empirically accessible process: the textual reconstruction of the narrative object for public-facing circulation. Its purpose is to provide a more precise vocabulary for analyzing an observable layer of transnational cultural circulation.

8.5. Standardization and Differentiation

A broader implication is that standardization and differentiation can operate simultaneously. Platforms standardize categories, episode organization, access structures, and the general format of title-level presentation, while individual stories differentiate themselves through characters, family relations, corporate environments, social conflicts, and fictional worlds. In this sense, platform-mediated glocalization can be understood as a layered process: standardization is especially visible in the architecture of presentation, while differentiation remains visible in the cultural realization of the stories being presented.

9. Theoretical Contributions

The study makes three analytical contributions. First, it distinguishes narrative function from cultural realization in the analysis of transnational micro-short dramas. This distinction makes it possible to compare recurring dramatic structures without assuming that similar functions carry identical cultural meanings. It also provides a more precise basis for asking which aspects of a narrative remain structurally comparable when their social and institutional realizations differ.

Second, the study identifies transnational genre codes as an intermediate analytical category. These codes are neither universal narrative abstractions nor simple national cultural symbols. They are genre conventions that can travel across platform environments and connect an underlying function to a compact, recognizable form. The category therefore helps explain why transnational circulation can involve both cultural differentiation and genre continuity.

Third, the study proposes platform narrative compression as an analytical lens for examining the textual reconstruction of narratives at the platform interface. The concept directs attention to how titles, synopses, episode descriptions, and genre labels condense serial stories into comparable public-facing signals. Its purpose is to provide a more precise vocabulary for analyzing an observable layer of transnational cultural circulation.

10. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations define the scope of the findings. First, the sample contains only six titles across three platforms and is concentrated in romance, elite-status, relationship-conflict, and fantasy-oriented materials. The recurring functions identified here should therefore not be generalized to historical drama, comedy, reality-based content, or other underrepresented genres without additional evidence. A larger corpus could test whether the same configuration recurs across a broader range of genres and markets.

Second, the coding is based on a single researcher. The pilot procedure, explicit operational definitions, and second-pass review improve transparency, but they do not provide the statistical evidence that an independent second coder would make possible. Future studies should employ multiple coders and report intercoder reliability statistics where the design requires them.

Third, the analysis is restricted to public platform-facing materials. It does not examine the complete audiovisual text, actual audience reception, or internal platform decision-making. The study can therefore identify what is publicly foregrounded, but it cannot establish whether the same narrative features receive equal emphasis within the full episodes or how audiences interpret them. A future study could compare synopsis-level presentation with scene-level coding of complete dramas and supplement textual analysis with audience or industry interviews.

Fourth, the cross-platform comparison includes only two titles per service. The observed differences may partly reflect title-level characteristics rather than stable platform-wide strategies. Larger samples within each platform, combined with consistent collection dates and case-selection criteria, would allow a stronger comparison of platform-level patterns.

Finally, the study does not test the relationship between narrative presentation and commercial performance. The commercial context of freemium short-drama platforms motivates interest in narrative compression, but no causal connection between synopsis structure, user engagement, or paid conversion is established here. Future research could combine content coding with performance indicators, audience experiments, or platform interviews to examine whether particular forms of narrative compression correspond to measurable behavioral outcomes.

11. Conclusion

The international circulation of Chinese micro-short dramas takes place within a platform-based audiovisual environment in which narratives are not only distributed but also publicly represented through titles, descriptions, episode information, and genre categories. Market data indicate the scale of this environment, but the present study shifts attention from market size to the observable representational layer through which narrative content is introduced to overseas audiences.

Through a comparative analysis of six publicly accessible cases across ReelShort, DramaBox, and ShortMax, the study identifies a recurring repertoire involving relationship formation, status asymmetry, information withholding, external constraint or conflict, and relational reconfiguration. These functions are not presented as uniquely Chinese narrative structures. Rather, they recur across the selected materials while being realized through different social, institutional, and fictional settings. Billionaire and CEO codes organize status through wealth and corporate authority; contract and arranged marriage codes organize constrained intimacy; Alpha, pack, and mate organize hierarchy and relationship within a supernatural genre system.

The study therefore proposes a layered framework of global narrative skeleton, transnational genre codes, and cultural realization, with platform narrative compression identifying the additional process through which these elements are condensed into compact platform-facing signals. The framework helps move analysis beyond the binary of localization versus non-localization. In the sampled materials, standardization is visible in the recurring architecture of platform presentation, while differentiation remains visible in the specific realization of characters, relationships, institutions, and fictional worlds.

The findings should be interpreted within the limits of the research design. The study does not establish effects on audience response, does not measure cultural discount as an outcome, and does not demonstrate a causal relationship between narrative presentation and commercial performance. Its contribution is narrower but more observable: it shows how narrative functions, genre codes, and culturally situated elements are publicly reorganized at the platform interface as Chinese-origin and China-linked micro-short dramas circulate in global markets. This representational layer provides a useful basis for future research that connects platform-facing presentation with complete audiovisual texts, audience reception, and commercial data.

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