

Remediation of Desire: Gendered Fantasies, Class Anxiety, and Emotional Compensation in Chinese Micro-Short Dramas

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Abstract. Micro-short dramas have become an influential form of digital cultural consumption in China, combining short episodes, dense conflict, and rapid emotional payoff with fragmented mobile viewing. Existing research has largely focused on industrial models, platform circulation, and narrative form, while comparative work on how male-oriented and female-oriented micro-short dramas reorganize gendered fantasies remains limited. Drawing on the concept of remediation, this study examines how established narratives from popular fiction and online literature are reshaped in the mobile media environment. To describe this formal shift, it uses narrative compression to explain how character development, conflict, and emotional resolution are condensed into high-density narrative units. The study focuses on Hongguo Short Drama and combines ranking-list analysis, close readings of four representative cases, qualitative analysis of highly liked comments, and an exploratory survey of 99 viewers. The findings suggest that male-oriented narratives more often confirm value through competence and public achievement, whereas female-oriented narratives more often emphasize identity restoration, relational negotiation, and emotional security. Both, however, remain connected to concerns about social mobility, recognition, and relational uncertainty. By linking remediation to narrative compression and emotional compensation, the paper shows how platform form can reorganize the timing of lack and gratification without assuming that entirely new gendered desires have emerged.

Keywords: Micro-short drama, Gendered narrative, Remediation, Narrative compression, Emotional compensation

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

Chinese micro-short dramas have rapidly moved into the mainstream of digital cultural consumption. By December 2024, China had 662 million micro-short drama users, accounting for 59.7% of all internet users [1]. A year later, average daily viewing time had reached 129 minutes per user, pushing micro-short drama past long-form video to become the second most-used audiovisual

format after short video [2]. In the same period, 625 key online micro-short dramas were released, up 30.21% year-on-year [2]. These figures suggest more than casual use—viewing intensity is rising, and the format has become embedded in daily digital routines.

Hongguo Short Drama was selected as the main research object due to its scale and platform structure. QuestMobile reported that Hongguo Free Short Drama had reached about 275 million monthly active users by December 2025 and was significantly larger than the other dedicated short-drama applications in the same dataset [3]. The platform is also convenient for this study, and it has clearly divided the male-oriented and female-oriented content categories, rankings, and user comment functions. The two types of stories can be compared based on their distribution at the same time.

However, the stories spread by these platforms are not entirely new. Motifs such as time-travel upward mobility, identity restoration, revenge, elite romance and idealised intimacy have long been popular in popular fiction, television dramas and online literature. Only the form of adaptation for mobile phones of these familiar stories has changed. Drawing on Bolter and Grusin's concept of remediation [4], this paper investigates how male-oriented and female-oriented micro-short dramas rework established fantasies of gender and class under conditions of fragmented viewing, compressed duration, and high-density emotional feedback.

The two problems are closely related. First, how have the existing male-oriented and female-oriented narrative conventions been reformed in the mobile micro-short drama format? Second, do changing character types and relationship models indicate new structures of desire, or are they mainly repackagings of familiar aspirations for social mobility, recognition, ideal intimacy and relational security?

1.2. Research significance

Most previous research on micro-short dramas has focused on industrial development, business models, platform circulation and narrative forms. In recent years, research has emerged on the gender representation, emotional value and cultural connotations of work, but studies that place male-oriented and female-oriented narratives in the same comparative system are relatively scarce.

Therefore, this study will treat micro-short dramas as both platform-based media forms and cultural texts. Research on how anxieties about social mobility, recognition and relational security are converted into rapid-fire audiovisual fantasies, and how different gendered narratives present imagined solutions to the problems of success, identity, dignity and intimacy. Thus, changes in the form of media can be considered along with continuities in gendered and class-based desire.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. Remediation and narrative compression

Bolter and Grusin's concept of remediation is that new media rebuild old forms and representational logics of media rather than replacing them entirely [4]. This view is suitable for this case because micro-short dramas often use familiar materials from online fiction, television dramas and popular romance, and rearrange them for the time and technology of mobile viewing.

Remediation is close to several other ideas, but they address different problems. Adaptation refers to the modification of a specific text in a different medium [5]. Transmedia storytelling is the expansion of a story world across multiple media, and media convergence refers to the broader trend of content, industries and audiences moving across media platforms [6]. Remediation is a more

specific idea that studies how an existing medium form is absorbed and transformed by others. Convergence refers to the large-scale media environment of this study, and remediation explains the formal changes that occur when familiar narrative conventions are applied to the micro-short drama format.

The question is not whether the micro-short drama faithfully adapts the original novel or extends the world of the story through various media. *How Mobile Viewing Alters the Form of Narrative is Being Explored*. Research on Chinese micro-short dramas has identified several recurring formal attributes, including a short duration, dense plot, rapid conflict and repeated emotional feedback [7-9]. The movement from long-form fiction to micro-short drama therefore involves more than textual adaptation; it also changes the rhythm at which characters, conflicts, and desires become legible.

This study uses the term narrative compression to describe that change. Character development, psychological change, relational buildup, and social mobility are condensed into high-density narrative units. The result is not simply a shorter story. This compression shortens the gap between desire and emotional satisfaction. Status, dignity, romance, and security are turned into emotionally legible rewards within accelerated narrative cycles.

2.2. Gendered fantasies and class mobility

Male-oriented and female-oriented categories are genre and platform labels rather than direct labels for male and female viewers. Both categories engage with success, wealth, identity, and relationships, but they organize these concerns differently. This section therefore brings gendered fantasy and class position into the same analytical framework.

For male-oriented narratives, Louie's Wen-Wu framework offers a useful account of Chinese masculinity [10]. Wen emphasizes knowledge, cultural cultivation, and moral capacity, whereas wu is associated more closely with action, force, military capability, and practical competence. The two are not fixed opposites and can be recombined across different social and media contexts.

Changes in male character types do not necessarily remove the pressure to demonstrate masculine success. In many micro-short dramas, male protagonists still prove their worth through visible achievement, with rewards linked to wealth, power, status, or public recognition. The preferred form of masculinity may change, while the expectation that value should be confirmed through achievement remains comparatively stable.

Female-oriented narratives raise a different tension. Wu and Dong argue that feminist practice in post-socialist China cannot be separated from class position and access to social resources [11]. Song's study of the Chinese "overbearing CEO" narrative likewise shows how female agency can coexist with romance, consumption, and class mobility [12]. Even where heroines appear more independent, the imagined relationship may still be organized around a wealthier and more powerful male partner.

This tension also appears in contemporary female-oriented micro-short dramas. Recent heroines more visibly emphasize choice, resistance, personal boundaries, and self-worth, yet their agency may still be constrained by wealth, family, and elite relationship structures. Lou et al. found experimentally that emotional responses to gender-stereotyped urban romantic short dramas on Douyin can shape young viewers' gender-role attitudes [13]. Their findings do not establish the effects of the dramas examined here, but they support treating emotion as part of the relationship between gendered narrative and audience interpretation.

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design centered on textual analysis and supplemented by audience materials. Hongguo Short Drama provides the common platform environment for the comparison. Ranking data, close readings of representative cases, highly liked comments, and an exploratory questionnaire are combined to examine gendered narrative patterns at both textual and audience-response levels.

3.1. Textual analysis

The ranking data were collected on July 18, 2026. The study recorded the top 40 titles displayed in the male-oriented category and the top 40 titles displayed in the female-oriented category of Hongguo's official Zhengguo Ranking. These category labels were defined by the platform rather than constructed by the researcher. The 80 titles were reviewed by genre, character type, and major narrative orientation to identify recurring patterns and provide a broader basis for case selection.

The platform categories, core narrative elements, and analytical roles of the four selected cases are summarized in Table 1. Four representative dramas were then selected for close analysis: Maoxing Langya [Assuming the Langya Surname] and Yipin Buyi [First Rank Commoner] from the male-oriented category, and Shengxia Fendela [Summer Fendela] and Hao Yige Guaiguai Nv [What a Good Girl] from the female-oriented category. They were selected because they represent different recurring narrative models within the ranking sample, not simply because of their popularity.

Table 1. Overview of the four selected cases

Drama	Platform category	Core narrative elements	Analytical role
Maoxing Langya[Assuming the Langya Surname]	Male-oriented	Historical setting, time travel, knowledge-based advancement	Knowledge-centered masculinity and external value confirmation
Yipin Buyi[First Rank Commoner]	Male-oriented	Entrepreneurship, survival, resource accumulation, responsibility	Responsibility-centered masculinity and morally legitimized success
Shengxia Fendela[Summer Fendela]	Female-oriented	Elite romance, marital negotiation, emotional restraint	Reworking of elite-romance fantasy through respect and relational security
Hao Yige Guaiguai Nv[What a Good Girl]	Female-oriented	Identity restoration, resistance, inheritance, strategic agency	Female agency within class and resource constraints

As shown in Table 1, the four cases are two recurring models of male-oriented success and two recurring models of female-oriented fantasy. Together, they offer a basis for comparing how different gendered narratives organise value confirmation, class position and relational security. Close reading refers to character creation, conflict resolution and narrative or visual clues. Particular attention is paid to how protagonists gain recognition, recover identity, mobilize resources, negotiate relationships, and reach clearly marked forms of emotional resolution.

3.2. Audience analysis

To supplement the textual analysis, highly liked comments visible on the four case pages were collected on July 24, 2026. Usernames and other identifying information were excluded. The comments were reviewed qualitatively for recurring themes such as competence, responsibility, female resistance, relational security, and intimate interaction. They are used to identify patterns of

audience attention rather than to infer fixed psychological differences between male and female viewers.

An exploratory questionnaire was also conducted through Wenjuanxing, a Chinese online survey platform. A total of 110 responses were collected; 11 respondents reported no micro-short drama viewing experience during the previous six months, leaving 99 valid viewer responses for the auxiliary analysis. The questionnaire covered viewing behavior, content appeal, perceptions of gender representation, emotional experience, and open-ended evaluations. Because the sample was small and based on convenience sampling, the questionnaire is used only as descriptive and exploratory evidence, not for population-level inference or causal claims.

4. Results

4.1. Paths to success: external confirmation and internal restoration

Within the observed top-40 lists, male-oriented works were concentrated in historical time-travel, entrepreneurial advancement, and period narratives centered on wealth accumulation. Female-oriented works were more strongly represented by urban romance, historical romance, and female-centered growth narratives.

Across the ranking lists and the four case studies, male-oriented narratives more frequently present difficulty as an external social order and require the protagonist to change their position through knowledge, action and resource organisation. Female-oriented narratives more frequently start with imbalance in family, identity or intimate relationships and then progress to restored choice, identity affirmation and relational security.

Maoxing Langya replaces the familiar male-oriented "golden finger" trope of extraordinary advantages for rapid promotion with literary, historical and ritual knowledge. Louie's Wen-Wu system [10] is very Wen-oriented, but his knowledge still needs to be turned into reputation, status and so on. The means of success change, but external achievements are still the main path to value recognition. Yipin Buyi has combined the entrepreneurial spirit and organisational capacity to establish a moral foundation for wealth and power acquisition through social responsibility. The two dramas have different strengths, but both ultimately present masculine values of status, influence and public recognition.

The female-oriented cases focus more on identity and relationships. Shengxia Fendela keeps the class resources of the elite male partner but changes the appeal of the traditional domineering CEO to respect, restraint and emotional stability, modifying the fantasy discussed by Song [12]. Hao Yige Guaiguai Nv focuses on the female planning, resistance and identity restoration, but the heroine's goals are still partially determined by the resources controlled by the powerful man. Wu and Dong have pointed out that female subjectivity should be analysed in the context of class position [11]; thus, more agency does not automatically eliminate existing resource and power imbalances.

The two are not in conflict; instead, the male-oriented narrative often shows ability by changing the external world, while the female-oriented narrative frequently restores autonomy through the reconstruction of self-concept, clear relational boundaries, and renewed volition.

4.2. The core of fantasy: two solutions to class anxiety

Viewed through the circulation of resources, the two narrative categories follow different routes but can both be read as responses to insecurity about position and control. Male-oriented fantasy moves the protagonist from being subject to rules toward controlling resources or influencing the rules

themselves. Female-oriented fantasy treats class more indirectly, often through recovering a legitimate identity or resource position, securing safety within an elite relationship, or reclaiming property and recognition.

In this article, class anxiety is not treated as a measured psychological condition among viewers. It refers more narrowly to narrative situations in which access to status, resources, and social legitimacy becomes unstable and is later restored or confirmed. This limits the scope of the claim to textual organisation. Cases of men often involve mobility problems related to resource control; cases of women are more likely to be exclusion, dispossession or unequal dependency. Although their plots are different, both have made the social position visible and can be lost, recovered or secured.

The main problems in these stories are often not poverty or unrequited love, but rather the loss of status, wealth and power, and a sense of powerlessness. Male-oriented narratives respond to this threat with ability, extended resources and public recognition. Narratives for women often address this by reconstructing identity, building reliable relationships and protecting against further dispossession.

Although there are the above differences, both narrative systems repeatedly reach the same conclusion: effort is rewarded, identity is recognized, betrayal is punished, and trustworthy relationships are established. Micro-short dramas in the sample texts condense the process of resource competition and relational negotiation that would otherwise take longer and be less predictable.

4.3. Form as content: high-density emotional payoff

The appeal of these fantasies is closely tied to the rhythm of micro-short drama. Hu and Liu identify dense narration, vertical-screen viewing, short duration, and fragmented experience as central features of the form [7], while Yan and Wan describe high plot density and low time cost as part of its efficiency paradigm [9]. Micro-short drama therefore does more than shorten a conventional story; it condenses identity change, class mobility, and relational confirmation into successive emotional nodes.

Highly liked comments on the four cases broadly follow the same pattern. Comments on the male-oriented cases more often refer to knowledge, competence, responsibility, and character growth, while comments on the female-oriented cases more often emphasize respect, stability, female resistance, and intimate relationships. This pattern need not indicate fixed psychological differences between male and female audiences. It instead shows that different narrative types invite different evaluative vocabularies and emotional concerns.

Form is part of how desire is organized. Micro-short dramas do not invent desires for wealth, status, dignity, love, and security, but narrative compression shortens the distance between lack and gratification. Male-oriented narratives repeatedly stage the confirmation of competence and power through reversal, while female-oriented narratives deliver payoff through identity revelation and relational confirmation. Narrative compression is not only a formal change; it also functions as a mechanism through which familiar gendered fantasies are adapted to mobile viewing.

5. Discussion

5.1. Substitute gratification under real-life pressure

The exploratory questionnaire offers limited audience-side evidence for an emotional-compensation interpretation. Among the 99 respondents with prior micro-short drama viewing experience, the

statement that micro-short dramas can "compensate for pressures or regrets in real life" received the highest mean score ($M = 3.66$). Several open-ended responses, however, also criticized exaggerated protagonist abilities, overly rapid romantic development, and stereotyped villains.

These responses suggest that realism is not necessarily a condition for emotional engagement. A viewer may recognize exaggeration while still responding to clear reversals, rewards, and relational resolutions. Emotional compensation, as used here, refers to temporary substitute gratification rather than the resolution of real-life problems. The questionnaire is consistent with this reading, but the sample is too limited to support broader claims about population-level attitudes or social anxiety.

The distinction also helps connect the survey back to the textual analysis. Male-oriented stories repeatedly provide visible confirmation of competence, status, and achievement, while female-oriented stories more often provide identity restoration, relational recognition, and emotional security. In both cases, narrative compression makes these forms of gratification available within a short and comparatively predictable dramatic cycle.

5.2. Narrative inertia in the algorithmic era

The persistence of familiar fantasies also needs to be considered in relation to platform distribution. Recommendation systems generally respond to signals such as viewing time, retention, and interaction, while creators have incentives to repeat narrative structures that have already generated reliable audience responses. A systematic review by Lou et al. shows that social-media algorithms can reproduce or amplify established gendered patterns in the data and content on which they operate [14]. This evidence does not reveal Hongguo's proprietary recommendation logic, but it provides a basis for considering how platform selection may interact with narrative repetition.

For micro-short drama, the issue is not only which stories circulate. Algorithmic selection on platforms may also favor particular narrative rhythms. Early conflict, rapid reversals, recognizable character archetypes, and frequent emotional payoffs are well suited to environments where audience attention is constantly tracked and quantified. Algorithms may therefore shape not only the circulation of familiar fantasies, but also the tempo at which those fantasies are delivered and satisfied.

This helps explain why upward mobility, revenge, elite romance, identity restoration, and idealized intimacy remain visible even as character labels and surface values change. Their persistence need not be read simply as a lack of creative innovation. Familiar narrative structures lower interpretive costs and offer relatively predictable emotional returns, allowing new character types to coexist with older fantasy structures.

This uneven pace of change can be understood as narrative inertia. Surface-level character and plot elements may change rapidly. But the underlying desires that drive emotional satisfaction, such as social recognition, status, security, personal control, and stable relationships, evolve much more gradually. Remediation and platform selection can therefore work together: older fantasies are not merely repeated, but compressed, accelerated, and reorganized for mobile attention.

Seen from this perspective, narrative inertia does not mean simple repetition. A familiar fantasy can be made to feel new through changes in setting, profession, character language, or production technology while its reward structure remains recognizable. This distinction is important for remediation: novelty may occur at the level of expression even when the sequence of lack, reversal, and confirmation changes less. For platform producers, this combination balances recognizability with variation. For viewers, it reduces the time needed to understand the stakes while preserving anticipation. Repetition may therefore emerge from the interaction of genre memory, compressed storytelling, and platform feedback rather than from a single fixed audience preference.

The rapid adoption of generative AI may add another layer to this process. The Research Report on the Development of China's Online Audiovisual Industry (2026) states that more than 2 billion AI-generated audiovisual items were produced in China in 2025, over fourteen times the 2024 level, and that 25.6% of surveyed users regularly watched AI-generated micro-short dramas [2]. AI production is outside the empirical scope of this study, so these figures do not show that generative systems cause narrative homogenization. They do, however, make template reuse and recombination a more relevant question for future research. As production becomes faster and more automated, established character types, conflict structures, and payoff patterns may become easier to reproduce in new combinations.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined how male-oriented and female-oriented micro-short dramas reorganize familiar fantasies of gender, class, and intimate relationships within the mobile media environment. The findings suggest that the two categories follow different routes of value confirmation. Male-oriented dramas more often emphasize competence, achievement, and recognition in the external social world, whereas female-oriented dramas more often focus on identity restoration, relational negotiation, and emotional security. Despite these differences, both continue to revolve around concerns about status, recognition, resource security, and control over one's life.

The main change lies less in the emergence of entirely new desires than in the way familiar desires are reformulated. Through remediation and narrative compression, processes that would normally unfold over a longer period—social advancement, identity recovery, revenge, romantic negotiation, or the confirmation of personal worth—are condensed into rapid narrative cycles with frequent moments of resolution. Established gendered and class fantasies can therefore remain recognizable while being adapted to the temporal demands of mobile viewing.

The discussion also points to a wider cultural implication. When attention, retention, and interaction become important signals of circulation, narrative structures with clear conflict and reliable emotional payoff gain practical advantages. In the texts examined here, uncertainty is repeatedly handled through compressed and repeatable forms of resolution: recognition arrives, reversals are completed, betrayal is punished, and relationships are confirmed. The significance of micro-short drama lies partly in this shift in scale and tempo, through which complex questions of mobility and intimacy are recast as quickly consumable emotional sequences.

Several limitations remain. The analysis focuses on a single platform, a limited number of high-profile cases, and an exploratory questionnaire that cannot support population-level inference. The study also has no access to Hongguo's internal recommendation data, so the discussion of algorithmic selection is interpretive rather than causal. Future research could extend the comparison across platforms and cultural contexts, particularly as Chinese micro-short dramas circulate internationally. It could also examine whether generative AI and increasingly automated content production reinforce established genre templates or create new combinations of gendered and class narratives.

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