

From Emergence to Independence — The Artistic Genesis and Ontological Investigation of Micro-Short Dramas

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Abstract:

The rapid rise of micro-short dramas—a novel visual form—has transformed them from “paratexts” attached to traditional film and television into an independent artistic mode. Adopting a phylogenetic framework, this paper systematically traces the evolutionary trajectory of micro-short dramas from “emergence” to “independence” and analyzes their ontological characteristics and signification network as a self-contained art form. This study argues that the emergence of micro-short dramas is driven by multiple forces: creative agents, social context, media technology, and content originality. By imitating and innovating on established forms such as television dramas, short videos, and online literature, micro-short dramas have gradually developed a unique artistic language, media experience, and industrial ecology that distinguish them from existing literary and artistic forms. Drawing on the concept of “paratext,” this paper further examines how micro-short dramas construct dynamic meaning through genre texts, pre-texts, synchronous texts, and audience commentaries across three dimensions: explicit paratexts, generative paratexts, and interpretive paratexts. The study concludes that micro-short dramas have transcended the aesthetic and industrial boundaries of traditional film and television, establishing themselves as an art form with independent identity and media logic. To sustain their development, micro-short dramas must balance artistic expression and commercial viability to consolidate their unique position in the contemporary artistic landscape.

Keywords:

micro-short dramas; phylogenetic research; paratext; ontology

Introduction

Over the past decade, following box office booms and successive waves of capital investment, China's film and television industry has gradually entered a new developmental stage. Against the backdrop of consumer retrenchment, media transformation, and fragmented audience attention, micro-short dramas have rapidly emerged as a novel visual form. Compared with traditional films and television dramas, micro-short dramas



display new traits in production costs, episode structure, user acquisition and traffic generation models, and audience interaction. In recent years, major video platforms have successively launched dedicated short drama sectors, lifting micro-short dramas from marginal visual experiments to a key component of popular cultural consumption. According to the 2025 China Online Audiovisual Development Research Report released by the China Netcasting Services Association, as of December 2024, China's micro-short drama user base reached 662 million, a year-on-year increase of 14.8%. The average daily usage duration of dedicated short drama apps exceeded 101 minutes. The market size of micro-short dramas surpassed 72 billion yuan in 2024. Chinese platforms claimed 8 spots in the global top 100 by overseas downloads, with platforms such as ReelShort achieving a user penetration rate of 18.7% in North America. [1]

As a new artistic form that has risen rapidly amid media convergence, micro-short dramas have quickly drawn extensive scholarly attention. Existing studies have conducted broad discussions focusing on content production, aesthetic characteristics, industrial ecology, and cultural criticism. In terms of creative practice, some scholars, drawing on social acceleration theory, argue that the rise of micro-short dramas stems from the combined forces of temporal discipline, information overload, compensatory reality, and media memory [2], and that the continuous delivery of "illusory pleasure" partly relieves the real-life anxieties of modern individuals [3]. Meanwhile, the popularization of vertical-screen technology, platform economics, algorithmic recommendation [4], and industrial economic dynamics [5] have collectively fostered a highly prosperous industrial landscape for micro-short dramas. In terms of content, the narrative model of "high-tension plots, frequent twists, and intense emotions" [6] has enabled micro-short dramas to develop distinctive aesthetic features such as "acceleration aesthetics" [7], "database narrative" [8], and "gratification mechanism" [9]. Over time, they have gradually expanded into high-quality content including realistic themes [10] and ethnic memory narration [11].

However, as a nascent form, scholarly evaluative stances toward micro-short dramas have split into two approaches: "critique" and "construction." On the one hand, critical perspectives emphasize its potential risks, viewing micro-short dramas as a form of dreamlike visual culture [12] that, under the triple logic of technological acceleration, life acceleration, and consumption acceleration, easily reduces audiences to achievement subjects trapped in "forced acceleration" [13]. On the other hand, constructive perspectives hold a more positive attitude, advocating the exploration of pathways for the long-term development of micro-short dramas based on the internal logic of Chinese culture [14], realizing value guidance through "cultural empathy" [15], and unlocking its participatory cultural potential as a postmodern medium [16].

Nevertheless, despite the robust industrial development of micro-short dramas, scholarly understanding of their ontological nature and conceptual framework remains exploratory. There is still a lack of systematic and in-depth exploration of the emergence logic and ontological construction of micro-short dramas as a new visual form. The transformation of micro-short dramas from non-art and quasi-art to formal art carries the duality of being both artistic and non-artistic, as well as the transitional nature from immaturity to maturity [17]. This process is closely tied to the imitation of established art forms including literature, theater, film, and television, as well as the support of internet technology, social culture, national policies, and commercial forces.

Against this background, this paper adopts the perspective of genetic epistemology to systematically elaborate the process of emergence, formation, and independence of micro-short dramas. First, it dissects the

origins of their emergence from non-existence, examining how creative agents, social context, and media environments provide the necessary conditions for their rise. Second, it analyzes the developmental trajectory of micro-short dramas “from emergence to independence” and clarifies their distinctive features compared with traditional film and television forms. Third, it explores how micro-short dramas, as an independent artistic mode, realize their own semiosis through the interpretation of their paratexts.

1. The Development and Artistic Genesis of Micro-Short Dramas

China’s micro-short dramas have generally evolved through three developmental stages. The first stage is the initial exploration period, dominated by online sitcoms and sketch dramas. In 2008, Youku released *Hip-Hop Quartet*; works such as *Diaosi Man* (2012) and *Never Expected* (2013) already largely conformed to the current definition of micro-short dramas issued by the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) in terms of structure and form. In 2018, iQIYI collaborated with Kaixin Mahua to launch the vertical-screen micro-short drama *Life Has It Out for Me*, with each episode lasting 3–4 minutes. This marked the formal establishment of vertical-screen micro-short dramas and signaled their entry into the short-video dissemination ecosystem.

The second stage is a period of unchecked growth. In 2020, the NRTA added a “Rapid Registration and Filing Module for Online Micro-Short Dramas” to the “Key Online Film and Television Drama Information Filing System,” which directly fueled explosive industrial expansion. Works including *Grandma's World*, *Nian Nian Wu Ming*, *Please Don't Spoil Me!*, and *The Princess Above* emerged consecutively, covering genres such as romance, historical-themed, and fantasy.

The third stage is marked by quality upgrading. Starting in 2023, the NRTA integrated online micro-short drama regulation into routine administration, removing large volumes of vulgar, violent, and low-quality productions. Quality upgrading became an industrial consensus. Works such as *Home Inside and Out* and *My Way Home Has Wind* have sought to match the production standards and aesthetic quality of traditional long-form dramas, reflecting the broader trend toward higher-quality development of micro-short dramas.

However, merely outlining developmental stages and surface phenomena is insufficient to grasp the generative logic of micro-short dramas as an artistic form. Genetic epistemology, which centers on “genesis” as its core research focus, includes four theoretical paradigms: evolutionary genetic epistemology, epistemological genetic epistemology, genetic epistemology of origins, and methodological genetic epistemology [18]. The emergence of micro-short dramas as a visual form essentially falls within the scope of genetic epistemology of origins, addressing “how” and “why” they arose as an objective phenomenon. As Hu Xiaohui noted: “Among the three traditional questions in the study of origins, I only concern myself with How and Why” [19]. From this perspective, if research on micro-short dramas remains limited to industrial description, it risks adopting a consequentialist approach. More importantly, it is essential to interrogate why and how this outcome emerged. In short, examining the original genesis of micro-short dramas is a prerequisite for understanding their artistic expression and aesthetic traits.



1.1 Four Conditions for the Emergence of Micro-Short Dramas

The emergence of art depends on specific conditions. A creative agent with adequate creative capacity and organized within a certain social structure constitutes the primary prerequisite for artistic emergence [20]. Unlike the centralized structure of the traditional film and television industry, the creative agents of micro-short dramas are highly diverse. To meet demands for “efficient and high-quality content,” micro-short dramas have adopted the efficient and flexible production model of short videos, transforming traditional drama sets into gig-based production sets [21]. This production chain includes not only professional creators such as directors, screenwriters, and actors but also short-video influencers and grassroots amateurs, forming a multi-participatory creative ecosystem.

The participation of non-professional creators has broken the single-creator model of traditional film and television. As these individuals hold dual identities as both creative agents and audience subjects, they can better grasp viewers’ aesthetic preferences and psychological needs, representing a form of self-expression by the audience. Meanwhile, amateur and professional creators maintain a complementary relationship. Amateurs bring bold creativity and authentic performance styles, offering unique themes and expressive approaches that challenge and expand the boundaries of professional creation.

Art is inseparable from social life and human practice. On the one hand, art is rooted in specific social conditions. Social development relies on technological transformation; driven by internet technology, new media forms have emerged to satisfy evolving social needs and cultural practices. The rise of new media has disrupted the linear, fixed-time broadcasting of traditional television dramas, promoting mobile and decentralized viewing. Accordingly, micro-short dramas emerged precisely within this non-linear, on-demand viewing context.

On the other hand, the value of artistic production is realized only through social reception. In an accelerating society, viewers have developed fragmented viewing habits such as speed-watching, skip-watching, and selective viewing. Time has become fragmented and compressed, fundamentally reshaping human mental structure and psychological state. Individuals experience atomization accompanied by anxieties over age, career, and existence. Scrolling through short videos offers temporary escape, with constant visual spectacles providing instant sensory anesthesia.

Micro-short dramas thrive in this social context. Their intense plot twists and high-conflict narratives create a gratification-centered rhythm that immerses viewers and offers brief psychological comfort. Yet this immersion functions as a counterproductive coping mechanism: continuous visual stimulation reshapes perceptual habits and traps viewers in compulsive, uninterrupted viewing patterns [22].

In addition, originality and the objectification of the creative agent constitute two further necessary conditions for artistic genesis. First, originality is a defining feature of art [23]. Historically, the formal paradigms and aesthetic languages of film, television, and animation were imported from the West and adapted locally. In contrast, the emergence and evolution of micro-short dramas represent a distinct form of indigenous innovation. They are not a simple transplant of existing visual forms but an original, culturally significant creation catalyzed by technology, users, and commerce within China’s mobile internet ecosystem, forming a self-contained “Chinese creation.” As a successful cultural export, they have reshaped the global digital content in-

dustry.

Second, artworks are the objectified expression of creators' emotions, thoughts, and aesthetics, combining objectivity and subjectivity. While micro-short dramas are constrained by material viewing conditions, their content demonstrates strong subjectivity, amplifying and reflecting collective social emotions and individual desires. Responding to widespread social anxiety about success and upward mobility, many micro-short dramas feature narratives of grassroots counterattacks, domineering CEO romances, and revenge plots. Though unrealistic, these stories offer an imaginative outlet for grievances and frustrations in real life, allowing repressed emotions to be expressed through the medium of micro-short dramas.

1.2 The Special Significance of Imitation for Micro-Short Dramas

Creation is decisive for art, but it is always intertwined and complementary with imitation [24]. Aristotelian mimesis refers not only to the imitation of nature but also to imitation between art forms, making imitation a bond across artistic categories. Formally, by imitating the episodic structure of television dramas and the format of short videos, micro-short dramas have established a unique artistic media form situated between the two.

First, micro-short dramas represent a digitized episodic form. Episodic structure extends narrative through segmented episodes, cultivating sustained viewer anticipation. Its core feature is "segmented continuity": each episode forms a relatively independent narrative unit, while episodes are linked via suspense, character arcs, or plotlines to maintain dramatic tension. This "discontinuous yet continuous" structure sparks curiosity at the end of each episode and delivers instant gratification in the next, fostering viewer retention.

From scheduled broadcasts in the television era to full-series on-demand streaming, micro-short dramas retain this episodic logic while shortening episode length and accelerating distribution. For traditional television, episodic division supported commercialization through per-episode pricing. For micro-short dramas, episodic structure allows creators to set cliffhangers that stimulate payment and drive compulsive binge-watching.

Second, micro-short dramas have grown within the short-video era, entering daily life as episodic short-video content. Short videos are condensed online audiovisual works distinct from long-form videos. Micro-short dramas have adopted their fragmented expression, forming the aesthetic trait of "post-continuity"—a tension between narrative linearity and fragmentation. Their dissemination is endogenous to short-video platforms, relying on algorithms and social mechanisms to achieve high ecological coupling with short-video ecosystems.

In terms of content, micro-short dramas heavily inherit the narrative model of online fiction, centered on gratification and plot twists. They resemble visualized online fiction, targeting internet-native audiences in the attention and traffic economies. Viewers seek rapid emotional catharsis and compensatory satisfaction within fragmented time. Real-life pressures are offset by fantasy narratives of revenge, indulgence, and invincibility.

Many micro-short dramas are directly adapted from online fiction, including *Folded Brows*, *Being a Step-mother in the 1980s*, and *Borrowing Ning'an*. Regardless of subgenres—time-travel, romance, revenge, or CEO themes—these adaptations center on gratification. Online fiction's mature formula for gratification is



widely adopted: protagonists possess surreal abilities to ensure success, while plots are streamlined to focus on emotional stimulation and twists, with minimal backstory or subplots.

2. Micro-Short Dramas as an Independent Artistic Mode

In 2022, the NRTA formally defined micro-short dramas as audiovisual works with episodes ranging from dozens of seconds to 15 minutes, featuring a clear theme, main plot, and relatively complete and continuous narrative [25]. Following the content boom of 2022, the number of micro-short dramas grew rapidly, though quality varied widely. Between 2023 and 2024, the NRTA issued a series of policies to regulate low-quality content, enabling micro-short dramas to shift from marginalized content to the mainstream and from mobile to big screens. By late 2024, more than 30 micro-short dramas had aired on provincial satellite TV channels nationwide.

In market performance, China's micro-short drama market reached 50.5 billion yuan in 2024, exceeding the domestic film box office of 42.5 billion yuan [26]. The user base hit 576 million, accounting for 52.4% of total internet users [27]. Platforms released over 30,000 micro-short dramas, generating approximately 647,000 jobs directly and indirectly [28]. Overseas expansion accelerated, with platforms such as Dramabox and ReelShort launching in North America, Southeast Asia, Japan, South Korea, and Europe, becoming a new "Chinese cultural calling card" after short videos. This multi-dimensional development confirms that micro-short dramas are no longer subordinate to short-video ecosystems but have established independent production systems, aesthetic logic, and narrative paradigms as a self-contained artistic mode.

As micro-short dramas have matured, scholarly and industrial views on their ontology have diverged. Some scholars regard micro-short dramas as a dramatized, televisual extension of short videos [29]. While micro-short dramas emerged from short-video ecosystems and share duration and dissemination traits, short videos are fully fragmented, whereas micro-short dramas balance continuity and fragmentation within dramatic narratives.

Other scholars view micro-short dramas as a derivative of web dramas, emphasizing their lineage with traditional television dramas [30]. Yet reducing micro-short dramas to an abbreviated form of web dramas cannot explain their industrial and cultural success. The launch of dedicated platforms such as Hongguo Short Drama and short drama channels on iQIYI and Tencent Video confirms that micro-short dramas have become an independent paradigm distinct from television and web dramas. Though they draw on the narrative logic of television, web dramas, online fiction, and short videos, their development transcends mere imitation or extension.

As Zhong Dianfei argued in 1980 regarding cinema's independence from theater: "Any art form reaches a stable formal identity only when it is sufficiently distinguishable from neighboring forms" [31]. To establish micro-short dramas as an independent artistic mode, we must clarify their differences from traditional film and television.

In artistic language, micro-short dramas neither construct a complete life picture like television dramas nor adopt fully fragmented narratives like short videos. Instead, they exhibit a condensed "continuity" real-

ized through temporal and spatial compression. Temporally, 45-minute traditional episodes are compressed to minutes, using direct narrative that eliminates exposition and retains only climaxes, twists, and dramatic peaks. This produces “post-continuity,” extending traditional continuity to maximize tension [32]. Spatially, vertical-screen (9:16) framing dominates, focusing on close-ups and medium close-ups of characters, with physical settings reduced to blurred backgrounds.

In media experience, micro-short dramas redefine digital-age viewing as a fundamental mode of human existence rather than merely passive entertainment [33]. Vertical-screen mobile viewing creates a private, personalized experience that dissolves the ritual of cinema or family TV viewing, integrating seamlessly into daily life. The “swipe for next episode” and “long-press to speed up” interfaces construct a tactile visuality that shifts viewing from traditional “gazing” to dynamic browsing and chasing. This creates high-intensity immersive pleasure, though it differs from the deep engagement of long dramas. Micro-short dramas act as affect-generating machines; viewers’ emotional responses become a form of “labor” that generates commercial value. Dense twists and suspense drive compulsive viewing.

In production ecology, micro-short dramas have restructured the film and television industry by establishing a B2B-to-B2C model. Traditional film and television production follows a centralized B2B model, while micro-short dramas decentralize creation and shorten the distance between creators and audiences. Centered on user needs, this B2C chain prioritizes “user-first” and “rapid iteration.”

Content choices, character archetypes, and plots rely on user data and real-time feedback. Producers capture preferences via comments, bullet screens, and shares, adopting real-time iterative creation to adjust plots dynamically. With short production cycles, light content, and high release frequency, micro-short dramas function as a micro-culture that can be embedded within grand narratives. This flexibility supports numerous “micro-short drama+” integrated business models across cultural and economic industries.

3. The Signification Network and Textual Composition of Micro-Short Dramas

Within the Husserl–Piaget epistemological framework, Husserl held that knowledge of an object arises from cognitive construction, an ideational achievement formed through the subject’s “transcendental categorical” intuition [35]. Piaget divided transcendental categories into logico-mathematical and physical categories: the former coordinates the subject’s internal world, while the latter mediates the subject–object relationship. Cognition emerges from subject–object interaction, with physical categories absorbing external material and logico-mathematical categories structuring it internally [37].

If genetic epistemology explains the internal “genesis” of micro-short dramas, then their maturation into industrialized, genre-based forms requires a theoretical framework to analyze their external meaning construction. Meaning is constructed through signs. As Zhao Yiheng argues in *Principles and Deductions of Semiotics*, all semiotic texts consist of a text and its paratexts. Paratexts exist beside, outside, or at the margins of the text yet actively shape its meaning [38]. The unlimited semiosis of paratexts means genesis has no absolute beginning; every endpoint becomes a new starting point after qualitative transformation.



Through explicit, generative, and interpretive paratexts, micro-short drama texts are embedded in a vast meaning network, achieving a “second genesis” through rich paratextual interpretation.

3.1 *Explicit Paratexts*

Explicit paratexts are surface-level paratextual elements, mainly including peritexts and genre texts. Peritexts are frame elements directly attached to the text, such as titles, illustrations, and covers. Titles often use high-impact terms such as “CEO,” “Madam,” “War God,” “reincarnation,” and “bitter love” to attract traffic, forming a unique industrial aesthetic of micro-short dramas.

Genre texts refer to categorical frameworks that shape audience expectations and signification. Micro-short dramas are classified by platform: long-video platforms (Tencent Video, iQIYI, Youku), short-video platforms (Douyin, Kuaishou), mini-programs, and dedicated apps (Hongguo Short Drama, Hippo Theater). By screen format, they include vertical-screen micro-short dramas (emphasizing compact narrative and character portraiture) [39][40] and horizontal-screen micro-short dramas (favored for formal composition, increasingly used for mainstream cultural expression) [41]. By theme, they cover contemporary, costume, mystery, and romance; by audience, they include male-oriented, female-oriented, and senior-focused micro-short dramas.

3.2 *Generative Paratexts*

Generative paratexts are traces left during textual production, including pre-texts and synchronous texts. Pre-texts encompass the entire cultural history preceding a text [42]. Many micro-short dramas are redeveloped from existing film and television IPs as spin-offs, prequels, or sequels, extending the IP lifecycle. Examples include Dawn Rising (spin-off of The Bad Kids), My Way Home Has Wind, Go Beyond! Ah Juan, and A New Version of A Chinese Odyssey.

In adaptation, micro-short dramas maintain a distance from the “real world” represented in traditional film and television, which bears the educational function of literature [43], thus expanding the expressive boundaries of pre-texts. For instance, Dawn Rising retains only the protagonist Zhu Chaoyang, aging him into an adult salesman entangled in a murder case, departing entirely from the original narrative to create an independent story.

Texts also have dynamic generativity. Synchronous texts produced alongside a text often deconstruct the original. In response to early CEO-themed micro-short dramas, grassroots creators released works such as Reincarnated: Being a Nanny in a CEO Short Drama (Douyin @Seven Chimpanzees). Centered on the nanny “Wang Ma,” it uses sharp humor to mock unrealistic CEO drama plots, becoming a representative synchronous text that deconstructs traditional formulas and opens innovative narrative paths.

3.3 *Interpretive Paratexts*

Interpretive paratexts are post-dissemination interpretations produced by audiences, critics, and scholars, including reviews, analyses, adaptations, and translations. They perform secondary decoding and expand textual meaning.

On the one hand, interpretive paratexts shape audience perception of the original text. Viewers integrate

personal experience with authoritative reviews, word-of-mouth, and influencer opinions to form evaluations. The hit micro-short drama *Escape from the British Museum* sparked widespread social media discussion. Weibo topics went viral; video accounts shared highlights; official media published in-depth analyses; and CCTV praised it for inspiring youth interest in history and culture, amplifying its social influence.

On the other hand, texts achieve unlimited semiosis through intertextual reference in interpretive paratexts. Viewer comments link current micro-short dramas to other works, forming an open intertextual network. For example, comments on *Qinggong Ci* connect cast members to other micro-short dramas and compare plots to *Story of Yanxi Palace* and *The Legend of Zhen Huan*. Viewers do not engage with texts in isolation but excavate intertextual connections to generate multiple layers of meaning.

4. Conclusion

Micro-short dramas emerged from television dramas, web dramas, and short videos. Through continuous imitation and creation, they evolved from paratexts of existing audiovisual forms into an independent structure, supported by policy, capital, and audience demand [44]. Like any art form, the signification network of micro-short dramas innovates and iterates with market creativity.

As an independent visual form, micro-short dramas have carved out a distinct space in the traditional film and television landscape. Their landmark market performance demands serious recognition of their cultural and industrial influence. Reaffirming their identity as an independent artistic mode is vital for both theoretical understanding and creative direction.

Going forward, as more works emerge and research deepens, accurately capturing the ontological characteristics and artistic language of micro-short dramas will be a core question for academia and industry. Only by returning to their media and cultural attributes can micro-short dramas achieve artistic self-awareness and attain true independence through innovation.

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