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# Cultural Symbols and Identity Construction: Navigating Regional Expression and Global Dissemination in Micro Short Drama

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Received: 23 August 2025

Revised: 07 September 2025

Accepted: 23 September 2025

Published: 05 October 2025



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**Abstract:** The spread of micro short drama has become a cross-cultural phenomenon attracting global attention. This paper examines micro-short dramas as an emergent media form, analyzing from the perspectives of cultural semiotics and communication theory how they effectively integrate cultural expression with global dissemination through the translation of regional cultural symbols and identity construction narratives. Employing a multi-case analysis methodology, this study selects internationally influential micro-short drama works to delineate the evolutionary trajectory of their cultural dissemination mechanisms from unconscious to conscious modes. The research reveals that micro-short dramas, via a translational pathway characterized by "cultural symbol purification-narrative internalization-emotional resonance," embed regional cultural elements within a cross-cultural identity negotiation framework. This process constructs a "glocal" inter-embedded identity mechanism, thereby substantially mitigating cultural discount and achieving a compact, emotionalized transmission of cultural soft power. This investigation establishes a theoretical framework and practical paradigm for Chinese cultural international communication in the digital era, while simultaneously offering a novel perspective for global cross-cultural communication research.

**Keywords:** micro short drama; cultural symbols; identity negotiation; global dissemination; soft power; hybrid identity

## 1. Introduction

Micro short dramas are defined as episodic productions with a duration ranging from several tens of seconds to approximately 15 minutes per episode, distinguished by: (a) a focused thematic narrative, (b) coherent plot continuity, and (c) structurally self-contained story arcs. In the contemporary digital media landscape, micro short dramas have emerged as a potent and rapidly proliferating narrative form. Characterized by their brevity, vertical-screen format, and fast-paced plots, these productions have captured the attention of a global audience, primarily through short-video platforms like TikTok. Beyond their entertainment value, micro short dramas represent a significant new frontier for cultural dissemination. They serve as dynamic vehicles for regional cultural expression, navigating the complex terrain between local identity and global appeal. This paper investigates the mechanisms through which these nascent media artifacts achieve this delicate balance, transforming regional cultural specificities into universally resonant narratives.

The central investigation of this study concerns how micro-short dramas transmit cultural symbols and construct identity narratives to enable effective cross-cultural communication. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks from cultural semiotics-which examines the life of signs within society-and identity negotiation theory from communication studies, this paper proposes that the success of these dramas stems from a sophisticated process of cultural encoding and narrative integration. This process has evolved from early, rudimentary approaches to cultural adaptation toward a more deliberate and strategic deployment of cultural elements.

This study comprises three principal sections. The initial section examines the evolutionary trajectory of cultural dissemination mechanisms in micro short dramas, documenting their progression from an unconscious, superficial grafting of cultural symbols to a conscious, systematic strategy of cultural encoding. This analysis culminates in proposing a three-dimensional analytical framework: "Symbol Purification-Narrative Translation-Identity Construction." The subsequent section investigates the core mechanism, analyzing how cultural symbols become internalized within narratives to function as instruments for identity negotiation. This process ultimately generates hybrid identities and establishes an "emotional interface" facilitating cross-cultural resonance. The concluding section evaluates the global implications of this model, contending that micro short dramas pioneer a "lightweight" dissemination paradigm that reconfigures cultural soft power practices and offers a novel framework for digital-age cross-cultural dialogue. Through multi-case analysis of representative works, this research seeks to establish both a theoretical framework and practical guidelines for comprehending and harnessing the cultural efficacy of this emergent media form.

## **2. From Spontaneous to Deliberate: Evolution and Theoretical Framing of Cultural Dissemination Mechanisms**

The cultural dissemination mechanism of micro short dramas has witnessed a notable transformation, evolving from an initial phase characterized by instinctive, superficial cultural grafting towards a more deliberate and systematic strategy of cultural encoding. This progression signifies a deepening comprehension among creators regarding the fundamental principles of cross-cultural communication. The advancement from rudimentary localization to sophisticated cultural encoding represents a significant strategic enhancement, effectively transmuting regional culture from a spectacle passively observed into an experience that can be understood, resonated with, and even actively engaged in.

### *2.1. The Nascent Stage: Surface-Level Symbols and Mechanical Translation*

During their embryonic phase, micro-drama series targeting international markets frequently employed mechanical and superficial approaches to cultural translation. A representative case exists within the early iterations of the "Dragon King Son-in-Law" genre. When exported, these productions often relied on rudimentary techniques such as AI-driven face-swapping to substitute actors' facial features with those resembling the target demographics or merely altering on-screen text and place names. This methodology represented an unconscious, instinctual form of cultural grafting. It operated under the flawed premise that cultural adaptation could be achieved solely through the modification of surface-level signifiers. Within these works, cultural symbols were treated as interchangeable decorative elements rather than integral narrative components. Rooted in a logic of "mechanical translation," such an approach failed to engage with the deeper cultural logic and emotional values embedded within the symbols. Consequently, reception among international viewers was often limited and dissonant. The cultural content remained an exotic, and frequently awkward, superficial appendage rather than a conduit for genuine connection. Factors such as shallow themes, repetitive plots, and

similar characters have led to viewer fatigue, seriously restricting the healthy development of online micro-short dramas [1].

### *2.2. The Advanced Stage: Deep Purification and Narrative Translation*

As the industry evolved through accumulated practical experience, a more sophisticated strategy emerged. Content creators are increasingly engaged in a process of "deep purification" of cultural symbols. This involved transcending simple substitution to meticulously select "high-concentration symbols"-elements possessing both deep local cultural roots and significant potential for global resonance. Illustrative examples include the concept of *xia yi* (chivalric righteousness), which resonates with universal ideals of justice and heroism, and the aesthetic principles embodied in intangible cultural heritage (ICH), which appeal to a global appreciation for craftsmanship and beauty.

Critically, this stage is defined by "narrative translation," wherein these purified symbols are organically integrated into globally popular genres such as science fiction, romance, or thriller. The symbol ceases to function as a static exhibit, instead becoming a dynamic narrative force within the story. This process of narrative internalization ensures the cultural element actively contributes to plot development, character motivation, and thematic depth. For instance, the acclaimed micro short drama *Escape from the British Museum* exemplifies this advanced approach. The personified jade teapot transcends its status as a mere cultural artifact; it serves as the protagonist in a narratively rich journey of return. Its quest for home embodies profound themes of national memory, cultural dignity, and belonging. This approach stands in stark contrast to the "Dragon King" model, demonstrating a profound shift from displaying symbols to narrating \*through\* them, thereby creating a pathway for value-based resonance.

### *2.3. Theoretical Framework Synthesis*

Based on the observed evolutionary pattern, this study advances a three-dimensional analytical model-"Symbol Purification-Narrative Translation-Identity Construction"-to systematically elucidate the cultural dissemination mechanism inherent in micro-short dramas. This framework integrates principles derived from cultural semiotics and identity negotiation theory.

**Symbol Purification:** This initial phase entails the selection and abstraction of core cultural symbols from their complex native contexts. As creators develop heightened strategic awareness, this process transitions from superficial extraction to profound purification, prioritizing symbols characterized by high semiotic density and enhanced cross-cultural legibility.

**Narrative Translation:** This stage involves embedding the purified symbol within a narrative framework. The symbol undergoes translation from a cultural signifier into a functional narrative element, manifesting as a catalyst for conflict, a tool for resolution, or a representation of a character's inner state. It is at this juncture that the symbol undergoes creative hybridization with universal narrative conventions.

**Identity Construction:** The ultimate function of this mechanism is to serve an identity-centric narrative. The story's conflicts and resolutions become intrinsically intertwined with the protagonist's trajectory of cultural identity negotiation. The audience, through observing this trajectory, engages with the cultural symbol not as an abstract entity but as a lived experience, thereby facilitating deeper cultural understanding and identification.

## **3. Core Mechanism: Narrative Internalization of Symbols and Identity Construction Path**

The global communicative efficacy of micro-short dramas derives from their capability to systematically align translated cultural symbols with narratives of identity negotiation. This process ensures profound integration of cultural expression within

characters' identity negotiation processes, thereby activating cross-cultural emotional resonance. The operative mechanism transmutes cultural symbols from passive decorative elements into active narrative agents, establishing a potent "emotional interface" for global audiences.

### *3.1. Symbols as Operative Mechanisms: From Decoration to Catalyst*

A key innovation of mature micro short dramas is the transformation of cultural symbols from decorative elements into indispensable "action tools". These narratives construct a dramatic situation that compels the protagonist-and by extension, the viewer-to constantly engage in "cultural positioning". In such contexts, cultural symbols are no longer part of the background; they become the primary means by which characters navigate conflicts, engage in cultural dialogue, and enact creative transformation. For example, a protagonist in a foreign land might strategically invoke the spirit of "xia yi" (chivalry) to resolve a moral dilemma, or the act of making dumplings during the Spring Festival becomes a powerful tool to forge a sense of community and belonging among a diaspora group.

In these scenarios, the symbols are not isolated. They become the very representation of a character's values and the core instrument for negotiating their identity at the boundaries of "self" and "other," or "tradition" and "modernity." The narrative framework inextricably links the use of these symbols to the character's growth arc, their struggles, their adaptations, and their eventual attainment of a more complex identity. This allows global audiences, while following the character's journey, to not only consume the visual spectacle of the symbol but to deeply experience its underlying cultural logic and emotional weight, facilitating a crucial leap from passive observation to active understanding.

### *3.2. Identity Negotiation and the Formation of Hybrid Identity*

The narrative framework of these dramas is fundamentally structured around processes of identity negotiation. These works dramatize the tensions characters experience within a globalized context, situated between the dialectical poles of self and other, tradition and modernity, and the local versus the global. The individual becomes a hybrid personality covering the qualities of both the self and the other [2]. The deployment of cultural symbols is intrinsically linked to characters' struggles for self-definition and the negotiation of belonging. This journey frequently culminates in the formation of a Hybrid Identity-a fluid, composite construct that creatively synthesizes elements from disparate cultural backgrounds.

Dancing Dunhuang offers a compelling case study. It employs a "body-transmigration" narrative wherein a contemporary dancer's consciousness is displaced into the corporeal form of an ancient Feitian (Flying Apsaras) depicted in the Dunhuang murals. Within this narrative, the Feitian symbol transcends mere aesthetic motif. It becomes the constitutive medium through which the protagonist rediscovers her artistic purpose and cultural roots. By mastering the embodiment of this ancient dance form, she negotiates a new identity, harmonizing modern aspirations with the profound cultural heritage she now carries-achieving a hybrid identity as a contemporary artist imbued with an ancient soul.

Similarly, in Hometown Travel Agency, the cultural symbol of "Qiang Pottery" is elevated from a static artifact to an animated "vessel spirit" (qi ling), actively participating in the narrative. This personified symbol functions as both mentor and companion to the female protagonist as she navigates the complexities of establishing an entrepreneurial venture in her rural hometown. The pottery's journey of rediscovery and appreciation parallels the protagonist's dual narrative of entrepreneurial development and the reconstruction of her cultural belonging. Consequently, this symbol proves central to her

identity formation, binding her modern ambitions to the ancestral traditions of her community.

### *3.3. Establishing an Emotional Universal Interface*

Ultimately, this mechanism proves effective by establishing an "emotional interface" that transcends cultural barriers. By centering on universal human experiences—the search for belonging, the struggle for self-definition, the pain of loss, and the joy of connection—these narratives furnish an accessible entry point for global audiences, irrespective of cultural background. Mini-dramas establish a cultural persuasion path of emotional connection through "similarities in differences" and "heterogeneity in familiarity" [3]. The identity negotiation framework fosters a profound sense of identification among viewers with the protagonist's journey. As audiences follow a character's quest to navigate cultural conflicts and forge a hybrid identity, they implicitly engage in an exercise of cross-cultural understanding. They assimilate not merely visually rendered cultural symbols, but also the underlying emotional and cognitive frameworks that imbue these symbols with meaning. This process fundamentally transforms the viewer's relationship with the depicted culture, shifting them from a passive spectator of an exotic "other" to an active participant capable of comprehending and empathizing with the cultural experience. Thus, micro short dramas accomplish the transition from mere viewership to genuine identification, rendering regional culture a relatable and resonant subject for global audiences.

## **4. Global Paradigmatic Significance: Lightweight Dissemination and the Reconfiguration of Cultural Soft Power**

The synergistic interaction between the intrinsic narrative mechanisms of micro short dramas and the extrinsic distribution strategies employed by their platforms has engendered a highly efficient "lightweight" model for global cultural dissemination. This model not only transcends conventional applications of cultural soft power but also establishes a novel and replicable paradigm for digital-age cross-cultural dialogue. It exemplifies how localized cultural narratives can transform into subjects of global affective resonance, thereby significantly mitigating the "cultural discount."

### *4.1. Platformization and Adaptive Dissemination*

The global dissemination of micro-short dramas is intrinsically linked to their distribution platforms. International short-video platforms, such as TikTok, provide a robust technological infrastructure enabling adaptive content dissemination. The utilization of brief video sequences enables the formation of "weak ties" characterised as equal relationships rather than the hierarchical structures that previously defined interactions [4]. Their algorithmic mechanisms facilitate precise content targeting towards user segments exhibiting cultural affinity, while integrated community features—including commentary sections, duet functionalities, and challenge mechanisms—foster participatory engagement and viral propagation. Furthermore, platform-native localization strategies, particularly the seamless implementation of multi-lingual subtitling, substantially reduce accessibility barriers for international audiences. This integrated technological ecosystem accelerates the cross-cultural transmission of narrative content, expanding its reach beyond niche cultural enclaves into the global mainstream.

### *4.2. Constructing a "Glocal" Inter-Embedded Identity*

Through the narrative construction examined in this study, micro short dramas effectively reconfigure the perception of local culture. Localization has a greater impact on the international dissemination effect of the micro-skit, and the probability value of a strong dissemination effect when the micro-skit contains localized creation is 38.7% [5]. They transform it from an object of the "othering gaze"—a distantly observed spectacle—into



a subject of "emotional identification" that invites participation and resonance among global audiences. This process establishes a "glocal" (global-local) inter-embedded identity, wherein local specificities are preserved rather than erased, rendered relatable through the prism of universal human experience. This fusion effectively mitigates the "cultural discount"-the devaluation tendency of cultural products traversing cultural boundaries-by anchoring cultural symbols within a shared affective and narrative framework.

The Sino-Thai co-production *Sawasdee-A Thai Romance* serves as an exemplary case of this mechanism. By organically integrating Chinese and Thai cultural elements (e.g., festivals, cuisine, and social etiquette) within a narrative centered on a "community of shared destiny," the drama cultivates a sense of reciprocal cultural valuation. It eschews hierarchical cultural representations, instead constructing a hybrid space wherein characters from both cultural backgrounds navigate intercultural dynamics to co-construct a shared future. This exemplifies a model of regional cultural exchange characterized by mutual agency in forging emergent, shared identities.

#### *4.3. Paradigmatic Promotion and Its Implications*

The micro short drama format pioneered a "lightweight dissemination" model possessing considerable paradigmatic significance. Its "lightweight" nature derives from characteristic short-form, visually-driven, and emotionally-focused storytelling, which circumvents the necessity for dense historical or textual exposition-a frequent burden hindering traditional cultural exports. This approach encapsulates cultural meaning into readily accessible "cultural capsules" delivered through compelling, rapid-paced narratives. This "emotion-driven narrative for symbolic dissemination" constitutes a highly efficient pathway for cultivating cultural soft power within the 21st-century context.

The case study of *The War for a Stolen Tradition*, a drama centered on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, exemplifies this potential. By constructing its narrative around a universally comprehensible theme-preserving tradition against commercial exploitation-the series elicited profound resonance among audiences on international platforms. It demonstrated participation of a Chinese narrative within global discourse, evidencing that culturally specific issues can attain international recognition when anchored in shared human values. This model's success furnishes a valuable and adaptable paradigm for other nations and cultures confronting analogous challenges in global communication, thereby illuminating novel possibilities for substantive cultural exchange in the digital era.

### **5. Conclusion**

This study has examined the sophisticated mechanisms by which micro short dramas navigate the complex interplay between regional cultural expression and global dissemination. Our analysis reveals a distinct evolutionary trajectory transitioning from unconscious, mechanical adaptation toward a conscious, strategic mode of cultural encoding. Central to this efficacy is the proposed "Symbol Purification-Narrative Translation-Identity Construction" model. Through internalizing purified cultural symbols as active instruments within narratives of identity negotiation, these productions transform symbols from exotic spectacles into subjects eliciting empathetic engagement. This process culminates in hybrid identity formation and establishes a potent affective interface, enabling global audiences to connect with specific cultural values through universal human experiences.

The push of new media and globalization has led cultural appropriation and hybridization to become mundane and routinized in the global context, which induces asymmetry in intercultural interaction [6]. Nevertheless, the resultant "lightweight" micro-drama dissemination paradigm, amplified by global short-video platform

architectures, constitutes a significant innovation in cultural soft power praxis that is helping to bridge this very asymmetry. It substantially mitigates cultural discount by anchoring local specificities within shared emotional frameworks, thereby fostering a "glocal" identification. Case analyses-including *Escape from the British Museum* and *Dancing Dunhuang*-demonstrate this mechanism's operationalization, transmuting cultural artifacts and concepts into dynamic narrative agents. The micro short drama paradigm offers not merely an effective strategy for Chinese cultural internationalization, but also a replicable model for cultures seeking global audibility within saturated mediascapes. As this form evolves, future research should investigate cross-cultural audience reception dynamics and the longitudinal impact of this "lightweight" model on cultural perceptions. Nevertheless, micro short dramas demonstrably expand possibilities for cross-cultural dialogue, affirming that digital-era cultural connections can be profoundly forged through concise, emotionally resonant narratives.

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