

Can Narrative Fragmentation Serve as a Cultural Passport? A Comparison of Coherence Differences and International Communication Efficacy between Micro-dramas and Traditional Long-form Dramas

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Abstract

This article directly confronts the core proposition of whether narrative fragmentation can serve as a cultural pass for cross-cultural communication. Through methods such as semiotic analysis and case comparison, it systematically studies the differences in international communication effectiveness between micro-short dramas and traditional long dramas. By combining cognitive load theory and cultural discount theory, it analyzes the “symbolic condensation - rapid reach” mechanism of fragmented narratives and the “system integrity - deep penetration” logic of coherent narratives. The research finds that narrative fragmentation has the attribute of a “limited pass”: by stripping away redundant information and emphasizing universal emotional symbols, it adapts to the fragmented reception scenarios of the digital age and demonstrates an advantage in efficient reach during the initial cultural contact stage, but it also poses the risk of cultural misinterpretation due to symbol simplification. Coherent narratives, although they raise the communication threshold due to high-context encoding, can carry complex cultural connotations through complete narrative chains and form long-lasting influence across time and space. The two are not in a binary opposition but rather form a collaborative ecosystem of “broad coverage - deep sedimentation”. Through gradient narrative strategies, the optimization of cultural communication effectiveness can be achieved.

Keywords

Fragmentation of Narrative; Cultural Passport; Micro-short Drama; Traditional Long Drama; International Communication Effectiveness.

1. Introduction

Short dramas, with their fragmented narratives and high interactivity, have experienced explosive growth in the domestic market and have also become a new carrier for cultural dissemination. The effectiveness of micro-short dramas as a “cultural passport” is paradoxical. The 4-20 minute duration is conducive to cross-cultural resonance, but it faces problems of content homogeneity (85% being of the “rich family love tragedy” genre) and cultural adaptation difficulties - some episodes were taken off the shelves in the Middle East due to ethical reviews, the “adventurer” theme needed to be adapted to ‘stranded noble’ to be accepted in Europe and America, and its monthly active users accounted for only 1% of the top video platforms [1,2]. This differentiation highlights the research value: fragmented narratives, relying on technological advantages, achieve wide reach but are difficult to carry complex cultures; coherent narratives, although able to penetrate deeply, are constrained by

dissemination efficiency. Exploring the collaborative path of the two is of great significance for constructing an international communication model that balances breadth and depth.

2. Paradigm Shift in Narrative Form: From Cohesion to Fragmentation

2.1. Construction of Cohesive Narrative in Traditional Long-Duration Dramas

Traditional long-duration dramas focus on “completeness” as the core of their narrative. They achieve cultural depth through linear time axes and progressive character arcs. From the perspective of the epic nature of the time structure, “The Story of Zhenhuan” unfolds the power struggle of the Yongzheng Dynasty with 76 episodes, embedding the protagonist’s fate from “Wen Changzai” to “Empress Dowager” into the depth of history, forming an intertextual relationship between individual fate and the rise and fall of the dynasty. The narrative pace is very slow, and through redundant information such as court etiquette and environmental descriptions, it constructs a “high-context cultural field”, allowing viewers to understand the internal logic of feudal ethics through long-term immersion [3].

From the perspective of the logical loop of character growth, in “Lan Yalang”, Mei Changsu’s motivation for revenge is accomplished through the arc design of “gradually replacing personal grievances with a sense of national and family sentiment”. This kind of portrayal relies on the need for the character to go through dozens of episodes of identity disguise, betrayal of allies, and ethical choices, ultimately achieving the transformation from power-mongering revenge to the greater righteousness, echoing the underlying narrative shift in historical dramas of “de-centering the hero” (such as “The Twelve Hours of Chang’an” focusing on the fates of minor characters like Zhang Xiaojing).

Finally, there is the causal rigor of the structure. In “The Ming Dynasty 1566”, the policy of “switching rice to mulberry” triggers political games in the officialdom, forming a causal chain from the water disaster in Zhejiang to the imperial edict submitted by Hai Rui. Each event is a “historical gear” with cause and effect as its predecessors and successors, such as the downfall of the strict faction directly related to the balance of power of Emperor Jiajing, ultimately pointing to the criticism of feudal imperial power. This kind of narrative relies on the dramatic structure of “beginning, continuation, transition, and conclusion”, allowing cultural criticism to naturally settle in the long narrative.

2.2. Fragmentation Characteristics of Micro-Short Dramas

Micro-short dramas adhere to the narrative principles of “compression” and “fast pace”, achieving the rapid dissemination of cultural symbols through segmented storytelling and intense stimulus design. This is first manifested in the atomization of narrative units. For instance, in “Escape from the British Museum”, each episode lasts for three minutes, with “anthropomorphization of cultural relics” (Yuhu’s journey back home) forming independent narrative nodes, and the connections between units are only implicitly linked through the “root-seeking” motif. This design aligns with the “point-like time” theory, where modern people’s time is deconstructed into powder-like gaps by information, and micro-short dramas fill fragmented scenes (such as commuting, queuing) with single episodes as independent units.

Secondly, it enables the dopamine-driven plot mechanism, such as presenting a slap conflict (class symbol) in the first 10 seconds of “Destined Forbidden Alpha” and triggering a werewolf transformation (supernatural symbol) in 45 seconds. “The 18-Year-Old Great-Aunt Arrives to Restore Family Honor” uses “rebirth explosion narrative” to stimulate the audience’s enjoyment during viewing and achieve immediate emotional compensation.

Finally, it has global adaptability for low-context symbols. For example, “Trapped in the Billionaire’s Golden Cage” adopts a universal template of “contract marriage + family feud” and deletes cultural background redundancies. Similar to the Chinese “vassal” transforming into an

“adventurous noble” in Europe, through “de-territorialization” encoding, the threshold for cross-cultural understanding is reduced, and the overseas revenue of Chinese micro-short dramas in 2024 reached 170 million US dollars, confirming the universality of its symbols.

2.3. Comparison of Narrative Grammar Differences

From the core dimension of coherence differences, at the information density level, traditional long-form dramas adopt a progressive release strategy, gradually unfolding the storylines through multiple episodes; while micro-short dramas are characterized by an explosive presentation, densely transmitting key information within a short period. In terms of context dependence, traditional long-form dramas tend to have a high-context embedding, relying on complex background settings and character relationship networks to construct the narrative; micro-short dramas pursue a low-context adaptation, simplifying background information to enhance the universality of the content. In the dimension of emotional construction, traditional long-form dramas are good at long-term laying the groundwork, using detailed plots to shape the characters' emotions; micro-short dramas focus on immediate resonance, using strong conflicts and fast-paced elements to trigger the current emotional response of the audience.

The essence of the two narratives is the opposition of the paradigms of “time depth” and “spatial fragments” (table 1):

Table 1. The essence of the two narratives is the opposition of the paradigms of “time depth” and “spatial fragments”

Comparison dimension	Traditional long-form drama (coherence)	Micro-dramas (fragmentation)	Theoretical Foundation
Narrative logic	Linear timeline (historical dimension)	Node-style connection (Spatial Jumping “I Was an Adoptive Mother in the 1980s”)	The “point-like time” theory
Emotional mechanism	Long-term empathy (40-year family changes in “Parental Love”)	Evenness of resonance (unconventional plot in “Marriage by Marriage”)	Cognitive load theory
Cultural transmission	Complex value system (clan ethics/social order - “White Deer Plain”)	Visual symbols (clothing/scenes/rituals)	Roland Barthes semiotics
Acceptance Scene	Dark enclosed space (cinema / home theater)	Mobile Fragmented Scenes (Subway / Queuing)	Media Situationalism
International communication effectiveness	Deep cultural penetration (Court etiquette in “The Queen of Zhao”)	Wide reach (ReelShort topped the US iOS chart)	Cultural discount gradient model

3. Cross-cultural Adaptability of Fragmented Narrative

Fragmented narrative, leveraging the “low-context encoding - high emotional stimulation” characteristic [4], has become the initial passport for breaking through cultural barriers. Its adaptability is reflected in:

3.1. Adaptation Foundation: Dual Optimization of Media Ecology and Cognitive Load

3.1.1. Natural Fit in Mobile Scenarios

According to the latest released "China Online Audio-Visual Development Research Report (2025)" [5], by the end of 2024, the scale of short-video users in China had reached 1.04 billion. On average, out of every 10 Chinese people, 7 are watching short videos, and the average daily usage duration is as high as 156 minutes. That is to say, the average daily usage time for short videos per person is 2.6 hours. Data shows that 72% of viewing behaviors in the US occur in mobile scenarios such as commuting and queuing, and the "instant viewing" feature significantly lowers the practical threshold for international audiences.

3.1.2. Theoretical Verification of Cognitive Load

Non-native audiences face the "information overload risk" when dealing with unfamiliar narrative systems. Micro-dramas compress the amount of lexical information through strategies such as "reducing redundancy" (for example, "Trapped in the Billionaire's Golden Cage" simplifies the background using the "contract marriage" template), and the audience's greatest impression is that they no longer need to remember complex character relationships. Each episode brings new stimuli.

3.2. Adaptation and Presentation; Symbol Simplification and Strategic Communication of Universal Emotions

3.2.1. Anchoring Effect of Cultural Symbols

Micro-dramas extract highly recognizable visual symbols to establish "cognitive shortcuts". In "Escape from the British Museum", the symbol anchor point is "the personification of the jade vase" (emphasizing patterns and the identity of the artifact), and the overseas broadcast volume exceeded one billion in the first week. Although these symbols simplify cultural connotations, they become the "decoding keys" for cross-cultural understanding [6,7].

3.2.2. The Enhancement of the Universality of Universal Emotions

Most of the overseas micro-dramas focus on common themes such as love, revenge, and comeback. For instance, the Indonesian hit drama "The Contract Sweetheart of the Tyrant Prince" resonated with audiences due to its portrayal of "emotional struggle in the context of wealth disparity"; the Middle Eastern version "The Waste Husband" removed scenes of drinking but retained the core of "grassroots comeback", resulting in a higher rating.

3.3. Limitations in Adaptation: Structural Dilemmas Arising from Cultural Depth and Regional Differences

3.3.1. The Surface-Level Trap of Cultural Bearing Capacity

Firstly, there is a misinterpretation of symbols. European and American audiences, due to the dense presentation of court etiquette symbols, wrongly interpret Chinese culture as "rigid hierarchy" and "feudalism". Secondly, there is a narrative break. After deleting the drinking scenes in the Middle Eastern version "The Waste Husband", the anti-hero's motivation became flattened, leading to a sharp decline in ratings. Finally, there is a lack of depth. The drama "The Puppet Show" compressed the intangible cultural heritage ritual into a 15-second puppet face dance, which was wrongly interpreted by European and American audiences as "Eastern horror elements"[8].

3.3.2. Challenges in Adaptation to Regional Cultures

Due to religious and ethical constraints in the Middle East, many micro-dramas were taken down for violating the "intimate scenes" and "drinking" taboos. For example, a scene of the female lead's drunken kiss was banned. After being adapted as "Coffee Negotiation" and limiting

physical contact, the Saudi version of “The Waste Husband” regained popularity, confirming the priority of religious compliance; the Japanese emotional rhythm conflict, with Japanese narrative preference for detailed psychological preparation (such as “Winter Tokyo”), led to significantly lower retention rates for Chinese micro-dramas compared to local dramas. By increasing the duration and enhancing audience acceptance; in the European market, labels such as “Asian” have sparked boycotts, criticized as reinforcing colonial narratives. The production team weakened racial symbols in various micro-dramas and shifted to “individual predicaments” narration, resulting in improved public opinion.

4. Analysis of the International Communication Effectiveness of Coherent Narrative: The Game of Deep Penetration and Cultural Discount

The coherent narrative of traditional long-form dramas achieves an indispensable deep penetration model through temporal and spatial continuity and the integrity of cultural texture in international communication. Its core effectiveness lies in the dual mechanism of “slow penetration - deep rooting”, while being constrained by the inherent dilemma of high-context cultural adaptation.

4.1. The Irreplaceability of Deep Cultural Penetration

4.1.1. Output of Systematic Cultural Logic

The Netflix version of “Empress Zhenhuan” weaves a network of Qing Dynasty court rituals with 76 episodes: from the class-based selection process of “selection process” to the power metaphor of “Yi ZhangHong”(In “Empress Zhen Huan”, the imperial harem employed harsh punishments, such as striking the thighs of those of lower ranks as a form of discipline.) punishment, it elevates fragmented cultural symbols into a symbiotic system of “power-ethics”. Western viewers, through progressive immersion, not only discuss surface symbols such as clothing and tea ceremony, but also trigger long-term thinking about the essence of the Eastern “humanistic society” - the cultural topics of this drama have an active cycle on social platforms that is much longer than the short-term traffic of micro-novels. This “narrative depth sense” makes long-form dramas the decoder of high-context culture.

4.1.2. Gradual Empathy Construction of Cultural Identity

Long dramas cultivate cross-cultural understanding through the “motivation-action-result” closed loop: “The Ming Dynasty 1566” presents the integration logic of Confucian “people-oriented thought” and Legalist “monarchical tactics” through the game between Hai Rui and Jia Ming, triggering much reflection. “Parents’ Love” uses the 40-year marital transformation to expound the core of Chinese family responsibility, and when broadcast in Ghana, it elicited audience’s value resonance with “Chinese-style patience”. This kind of identity based on emotional accumulation is more culturally stable than the instantaneous stimulation of short dramas.

4.2. The Divergent Logic of Regional Market Effectiveness

4.2.1. Kinship Advantage of High Context Cultural Circles

In markets such as Japan and South Korea in Southeast Asia, long dramas break through cognitive barriers by sharing cultural genetic commonalities. For instance, many Japanese viewers praised the well-produced long drama “Lan Yaling”, and even expressed their intention to learn Chinese.

4.2.2. Breakthrough Strategies for Low Context Markets

For audiences in Europe and America, auxiliary cultural explanations become crucial. For example, “The Grand Mansion” launched on YouTube embedded a “family lineage chart” and “Chinese medicine terminology dictionary”, making the clan culture visualized. Although the

initial subscription rates were relatively low for short dramas, the completion rates were relatively high. The youth version of "The Peony Pavilion" used the empathy framework of "Chinese and Western love tragedies" to "dominate" overseas markets. Bai Xianyong called it "a sincere admiration for the culture of the Chinese nation" [9].

4.3. Structural Root Causes of the Efficiency Dilemma

4.3.1. Time and Space Costs and the Generation Gap with the Audience

Coherent narratives require the audience to bear the burden of "cultural context decoding". For instance, in regions like Europe and America, due to cultural differences, translation challenges, and the lengthy duration of the work, the dissemination and reception of "Dream of the Red Chamber" face more difficulties. When British sinologist David Hawkes translated "Dream of the Red Chamber", he faced a dilemma: one option was to adhere to literal translation, which might make it confusing for Western readers; the other was to adopt interpretive translation, which might lose the original flavor. At the same time, the lengthy plot conflicts with the fragmented consumption habits of the Z-generation.

4.3.2. The Paradox of Completeness in Cultural Adaptation

The American version of "Empress Zhen Huan" condensed 76 episodes into a 6-episode film version, deleting key plots such as "Shen Meizhuang's False Pregnancy Case", resulting in the disruption of the logic of power checks and balances - scholars criticized it for "replacing the cultural core with Eastern spectacles". This "simplification leads to distortion" predicament exposes the dilemma of long-form dramas in cross-cultural communication: complete narratives require high-cost localization (such as the deletion of drinking scenes in the East version of "The Twelve Hours of Chang'an" to weaken the depth of power politics), while low adaptability exacerbates cultural discount.

Traditional long-form dramas like "Deep Well" - they need to penetrate the cultural rock layers to have "underground river-like" value infiltration. The current breakthrough requires leveraging the "front-end attraction - back-end accumulation" collaborative model: such as the micro-short drama "Nu Yao" attracting attention with 15-second Nu Yao face dance, guiding the non-heritage long-form drama "One Dream in the Starry Sky" to provide a complete interpretation of the "demon expulsion and evil elimination" ritual, proving that only when deep wells and channel networks coexist can the "breadth - depth" paradox of cultural communication be resolved.

5. Conclusion

When we ask whether "fragmented narratives can serve as a cultural passport", we are essentially exploring the narrative codes for China's cultural "going global" in the digital age. The fragmented narratives of micro-dramas are like cultural envoys' "business cards", opening the door to foreign lands with concentrated symbols such as cheongsam and kung fu, just like the "open and inclusive" external expression in the Chinese path; the coherent narratives of traditional long dramas are like thick "documents", using the complete framework of clan ethics and national sentiments to interpret the "harmony and coexistence" of the civilized core.

The dialectical relationship between the two reflects the strategic wisdom of China's international cultural dissemination: it is necessary to achieve "gradual and subtle" widespread reach through fragmented storytelling, enabling the world to quickly perceive the vitality of contemporary China; and it is also necessary to complete "powerful and resonant" deep penetration through coherent narration, so that concepts such as the "community of shared future for mankind" can gain value resonance. This is not an either-or choice, but a symbiosis of "instrument" and "principle" - fragmentation is the "instrument", carrying the form of culture; coherence is the "principle", transmitting the soul of civilization.

Under the unprecedented major changes of the past century, this kind of narrative synergy precisely serves as a metaphor for the international expression of the Chinese path: embracing diversity with an open attitude and establishing a firm footing with profound heritage. When the “fast pace” of micro-dramas and the “slow skills” of long dramas combine forces, Chinese culture can not only “go abroad” but also “enter the hearts of people”, and write the narrative philosophy of the East in the process of cultural exchanges and mutual learning.

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