

A Review of the Dissemination and Cultural Appeal of Chinese Micro-Dramas in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Chinese micro-dramas, also known as duanju, have rapidly emerged as a significant form of platform-based digital entertainment. Supported by mobile-first platforms and algorithm-driven recommendation systems, they have expanded beyond China and gained increasing popularity in Southeast Asia. This study adopts a narrative literature review approach to examine the dissemination mechanisms and cultural appeal of Chinese micro-dramas in the region. Drawing on recent studies from digital media, platform studies, and cross-cultural communication, the review identifies two major analytical dimensions, namely platform-based dissemination and audience-oriented appeal factors. The findings suggest that the popularity of Chinese micro-dramas is shaped by the interaction of platform logic, localization strategies, narrative intensity, and fragmented viewing habits, with algorithmic visibility and mobile consumption patterns playing a crucial role in facilitating cross-border circulation. This study contributes to the understanding of digital media globalization by highlighting how platform-oriented short-form content reshapes transnational cultural flows, and it provides a conceptual basis for future research on digital entertainment and cross-cultural communication in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Chinese Micro-Dramas; Duanju; Southeast Asia; Digital Dissemination; Cultural Appeal

Introduction

The Rise of Chinese Micro-Dramas

In recent years, Chinese micro-dramas have become one of the most rapidly expanding forms of digital entertainment (Li et al., 2025). Unlike traditional television dramas, micro-dramas usually consist of very short episodes, often lasting only one to three minutes, and are primarily distributed through mobile applications and short-video platforms (Meng, 2026). Their concise format, dramatic narratives, and rapid pace have made them particularly attractive to audiences who increasingly consume media in fragmented moments of everyday life. As a result, Chinese micro-dramas have developed quickly not only within China but also in overseas markets.

Chinese micro-dramas can be understood as a hybrid form situated between short-video content and conventional serialized drama. On the one hand, they share with short videos the emphasis on brevity, mobile viewing, and platform circulation (Li, 2024). On the other hand, they retain important features of serialized storytelling, including recurring characters, narrative continuity, emotional development, and episodic suspense (Chen, 2025). This hybrid nature is one of the reasons for their strong market adaptability. They are shorter and more flexible than traditional dramas, yet more structured and emotionally immersive than ordinary short clips (Fu & Wang, 2025). In this sense, micro-dramas represent not merely a shortened version of television drama, but a distinct digital narrative form shaped by platform logic and changing user behavior.

The commercial rise of Chinese micro-dramas is also closely connected with the transformation of the digital entertainment industry (Chen, 2025). As audience attention becomes increasingly fragmented, media producers are under growing pressure to create content that can immediately capture interest and sustain engagement. Micro-dramas fit this demand particularly well (Cao et al., 2026). Their short duration lowers the viewing threshold, while their dramatic intensity encourages audiences to continue watching episode after episode. In addition, the relatively low production cost and fast release cycle of many micro-dramas make them especially suitable for platform-centered content economies. These industrial and technological conditions have helped micro-dramas move from a marginal format to a mainstream digital entertainment product.

Southeast Asia as an Emerging Market

Among overseas markets, Southeast Asia has emerged as an especially important region for the circulation of Chinese micro-dramas. Countries such as Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines have large populations of mobile internet users and high levels of engagement with digital platforms (Suranto et al., 2026). In such an environment, Chinese micro-dramas have found favorable conditions for dissemination. Through social media promotion, platform recommendation, subtitles, dubbing, and localized marketing strategies, these dramas have gradually attracted growing numbers of viewers across the region (Li, 2026). Southeast Asia is an important region not only because of its large digital user base but also because of its diversity. The region includes different languages, religions, and media traditions, yet many of its societies share a high dependence on mobile communication and

social media (Purboningsih et al., 2022). This combination of diversity and platform connectivity makes Southeast Asia an especially interesting space for examining the transnational circulation of digital content. When Chinese micro-dramas gain popularity in this context, they do so not simply by being exported from one country to another, but by moving through a complex regional network of users, platforms, translators, promoters, and advertisers. Another reason Southeast Asia is significant is that it has become a competitive arena for digital entertainment industries from different countries. Korean dramas, Japanese anime, American streaming content, and local television productions all coexist within the regional media environment (Sarkar & Yang, 2025). The increasing visibility of Chinese micro-dramas in this crowded landscape suggests that they possess specific advantages in terms of format, emotional intensity, and platform suitability. Their success therefore deserves closer academic attention, particularly in relation to changing patterns of audience preference and digital media consumption.

Purpose of the Review

The popularity of Chinese micro-dramas in Southeast Asia should be understood not only as a media phenomenon but also as a cultural one. Their success reflects changing audience preferences in the digital era, the influence of algorithmic platforms, and the increasing cross-border circulation of Chinese popular culture (Huang, 2024). Compared with long-form television series, micro-dramas provide immediate emotional stimulation and rapid narrative progression, both of which correspond well to the media consumption habits of contemporary online audiences (Chen, 2025). At the same time, themes such as romance, family conflict, revenge, and social mobility are relatively accessible and familiar to many viewers in Southeast Asia (Wajdi et al., 2025).

This phenomenon also reflects a changing pattern in regional cultural exchange. In earlier periods, discussions of Chinese media influence abroad often focused on films, television dramas, or official cultural diplomacy (Marsh et al., 2023). By contrast, the popularity of Chinese micro-dramas in Southeast Asia demonstrates how commercial digital content can also become an important carrier of transnational cultural influence (Li, 2026).

Their spread depends less on traditional broadcasting institutions and more on digital platforms, personalized recommendation systems, and cross-border mobile consumption. This shift highlights the need to rethink media globalization from the perspective of platform-based entertainment.

Although existing studies have examined short-video platforms, digital entertainment markets, and the global expansion of Chinese media, limited attention has been paid to the integrated relationship between platform-based dissemination, cultural appeal, and regional reception of Chinese micro-dramas in Southeast Asia. In particular, current research tends to focus on either technological infrastructure or content characteristics, but lacks a systematic framework that connects platform logic, narrative design, and audience engagement within a specific regional context. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by providing a structured review of both dissemination mechanisms and cultural appeal factors, offering a more integrated understanding of the rise of Chinese micro-dramas in Southeast Asia.

Review Methodology

This study adopts a narrative literature review approach to synthesize existing research on the dissemination and cultural appeal of Chinese micro-dramas in Southeast Asia. Relevant literature was collected from commonly used academic databases, including Google Scholar and other online academic resources, using keywords such as “Chinese micro-dramas,” “duanju,” “short-form video,” “platformization,” “cross-cultural communication,” and “Southeast Asia.” The review mainly covers studies published between 2018 and 2026 to reflect the recent development of micro-drama research. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles and relevant recent studies related to digital media and cross-cultural communication. After screening, the selected literature was analyzed through thematic synthesis and organized into two main dimensions: dissemination mechanisms and factors contributing to cultural appeal, providing a structured understanding of how Chinese micro-dramas circulate in Southeast Asia and why they resonate with regional audiences.

Dissemination of Chinese Micro-Dramas in Southeast Asia

Platform-Based Distribution

The spread of Chinese micro-dramas in Southeast Asia is closely linked to the rapid development of mobile media technologies and platform economies. In earlier periods, the international circulation of Chinese audiovisual content mainly depended on television broadcasting, film distribution, or conventional streaming services (Han et al., 2024). However, the rise of mobile platforms has significantly altered this pattern. Chinese micro-dramas are particularly well suited to platform-based dissemination because of their short duration, vertical-screen compatibility, and highly condensed storytelling (Li, 2025). These characteristics make them easy to promote through social media feeds, short-video applications, and specialized drama platforms.

Platform-based distribution changes not only the channels through which audiences access content, but also the logic of visibility itself. In traditional broadcasting systems, exposure often depended on scheduled programming, institutional gatekeeping, or subscription-based access (Fischer & Jarren, 2024). In contrast, micro-dramas circulate in a platform environment where visibility is shaped by traffic, engagement, and algorithmic recommendation. This means that content can reach users very quickly if it generates clicks, shares, comments, and sustained watch time (Li et al., 2025). Chinese micro-dramas benefit from this system because they are designed to capture attention rapidly and encourage continuous viewing (Li et al., 2025).

The visual and structural design of micro-dramas further enhances their suitability for platform circulation. Many are produced in vertical format, which matches smartphone use more closely than conventional horizontal-screen television content (Mingti et al., 2022). Their short episodes also reduce the psychological barrier to beginning a series. Audiences do not need to make a large time commitment before deciding whether they are interested. Once users start watching, the use of cliffhangers and repetitive emotional peaks makes it easier to sustain engagement. In this respect, micro-dramas are not only distributed on digital platforms; they

are, in a deeper sense, products shaped by the technical and commercial logic of those platforms (Chen, 2025). This reflects the broader process of platformization, where content production and visibility are increasingly shaped by algorithmic systems and user engagement metrics.

Localization and Market Adaptation

Another important factor in the dissemination of Chinese micro-dramas in Southeast Asia is localization. To enter regional markets more effectively, distributors often provide translated subtitles, dubbed audio, or modified promotional materials (Ma, 2024). These efforts reduce linguistic barriers and make the content more accessible to local audiences. In some cases, even titles, posters, and taglines are adjusted to better match the tastes and expectations of viewers in specific countries.

Localization is not limited to language. It also involves presentation, marketing style, and emotional framing (Okonkwo et al., 2023). Digital advertisements for micro-dramas may highlight particular scenes that resonate with local audience preferences, such as romantic conflict, revenge narratives, or family tension (Zhang et al., 2025). In this sense, market adaptation often requires content distributors to understand which emotional triggers are most likely to attract users in different cultural environments. Even when the original story remains unchanged, the way it is introduced and promoted can significantly shape audience reception.

The importance of localization also reveals that the popularity of Chinese micro-dramas in Southeast Asia cannot be explained simply as a one-way export process. Their regional success depends on active mediation by translators, app operators, advertisers, and local digital marketing systems (Yao, 2025). Such mediation helps transform Chinese micro-dramas from foreign media products into a more approachable form of entertainment. This process is especially important in Southeast Asia, where linguistic diversity means that accessibility cannot be taken for granted.

Transnational Circulation in the Digital Era

The dissemination of Chinese micro-dramas in Southeast Asia also reflects a broader transformation in transnational media circulation. In the past, the cross-border movement of audiovisual content was often associated with large-scale television industries, film festivals, or national media diplomacy (Tomova et al., 2025). Today, however, platform-based media flows have become increasingly decentralized and personalized. Short-form content can move across borders rapidly through mobile devices, social sharing, online advertising, and recommendation systems (García-Canal & Guillén, 2026).

Within this environment, Chinese micro-dramas have become part of a larger transnational entertainment flow shaped by digital infrastructures rather than conventional institutional channels. Viewers may first encounter a short dramatic clip in a social media feed, then follow a link to a specialized app, and later continue watching more episodes through paid or promotional access. This path of circulation differs significantly from older media distribution models. It is more immediate, more personalized, and more dependent on user interaction.

The transnational spread of micro-dramas also shows that digital entertainment no longer travels only through prestigious or high-budget cultural forms. Even highly commercial, rapidly produced, and platform-oriented content can now become influential across borders.

This is an important change in the study of cultural globalization. It suggests that contemporary media influence is not limited to traditional “high visibility” products such as blockbuster films or major television exports (Huang et al., 2025). Instead, mobile-friendly short-form content can also serve as an effective vehicle for regional cultural presence.

Reasons for the Popularity of Chinese Micro-Dramas

Algorithmic Visibility and User Engagement

One major reason for the popularity of Chinese micro-dramas in Southeast Asia is platform-driven visibility. In the digital platform era, content exposure is heavily shaped by recommendation systems that prioritize engagement (Milli et al., 2025). Chinese micro-dramas are particularly compatible with this environment because they are short, emotionally intense, and easy to consume quickly (Li, 2024). Their structure corresponds closely to the logic of digital platforms, which reward content capable of attracting immediate attention and sustaining user retention.

Algorithmic systems tend to amplify content that performs well in the first few moments of exposure (Baumann et al., 2026). For this reason, micro-dramas often begin with emotionally charged situations, dramatic dialogue, or sudden conflict. These openings are designed to prevent users from scrolling away. Once the audience is drawn in, the narrative quickly introduces suspense, reversal, or emotional tension, increasing the likelihood that viewers will continue to the next episode. In this way, the formal design of micro-dramas is closely linked to the mechanics of platform circulation.

User engagement is also strengthened by the episodic structure of micro-dramas. Because each episode is short, viewers can easily watch several episodes in one sitting. Cliffhangers at the end of episodes encourage continuation, while recommendation systems ensure that the next episode is readily available (Lu et al., 2025). This creates a cycle of consumption that benefits both users and platforms. Viewers receive fast and accessible entertainment, while platforms gain higher watch time, more interaction, and increased opportunities for monetization.

Narrative Intensity and Emotional Appeal

Another key factor behind the popularity of Chinese micro-dramas is their distinctive narrative style. Compared with conventional television dramas, micro-dramas usually deliver conflict more quickly and directly (Tang & Wang, 2025). They often avoid long introductions and instead emphasize emotional intensity, romance, betrayal, revenge, misunderstanding, family conflict, and dramatic reversal. This mode of storytelling provides immediate stimulation and emotional gratification, which is especially attractive in fast-paced digital environments.

The appeal of this narrative style lies in its efficiency. Within a very short amount of time, audiences are given recognizable characters, a clear conflict, and a strong emotional hook. The stories may be exaggerated, but they are rarely difficult to follow. This accessibility makes micro-dramas suitable for casual viewing, particularly when users are watching during

commutes, breaks, or other fragmented moments (Chen, 2025). The immediate emotional payoff is one of the format's greatest strengths.

In addition, the emotional design of many Chinese micro-dramas is highly compatible with platform culture. Online users are often drawn to content that provokes strong feelings quickly, whether excitement, sympathy, curiosity, anger, or surprise (Qinghua, 2025). Micro-dramas respond to this demand by compressing emotional highs into short episodes. Their popularity therefore reflects not only audience preference for dramatic storytelling but also a broader shift toward emotionally intensified digital consumption.

Cultural Proximity and Audience Resonance

Cultural proximity also plays an important role in explaining the popularity of Chinese micro-dramas in Southeast Asia. Although Southeast Asia is a diverse region, many societies within it share social values, family structures, emotional expectations, and moral concerns that make Chinese drama narratives relatively accessible (Fu & Wang, 2025). Themes such as love, marriage, class difference, filial obligation, sacrifice, jealousy, and social mobility are widely recognizable and do not require deep cultural familiarity in order to be understood.

This does not mean that Chinese micro-dramas are culturally identical to local Southeast Asian media. Rather, their themes often occupy a middle ground between familiarity and difference. They are foreign enough to appear fresh and interesting, yet familiar enough to remain emotionally understandable. This balance is important for cross-cultural media circulation (Dwivedi et al., 2021). If content is too distant, audiences may find it difficult to relate to; if it is too familiar, it may not feel distinctive. Chinese micro-dramas often succeed because they provide both novelty and relatability at the same time.

Audience resonance is also strengthened by the fact that many Chinese micro-dramas focus on everyday interpersonal tensions rather than highly specialized cultural references (Gu, 2025). Instead of relying on complex historical context or culturally specific humor, they often center on universally understandable emotional situations. This broadens their appeal across national boundaries and makes them easier to localize. In this sense, cultural proximity is not only a matter of shared values, but also a matter of narrative accessibility (Zort et al., 2023).

Time Efficiency and Fragmented Viewing Habits

The short duration of Chinese micro-dramas makes them especially compatible with contemporary viewing habits in Southeast Asia. In the mobile internet era, media consumption increasingly takes place in fragmented moments rather than in long, uninterrupted sessions (Hu, 2023). Audiences watch content while commuting, waiting, resting, or multitasking. Under these conditions, long-form television dramas may appear too demanding, whereas short episodes are more convenient and flexible.

Micro-dramas correspond closely to this rhythm of everyday life. A viewer can complete one episode in a few minutes and still feel that they have consumed a coherent piece of entertainment. This sense of narrative completion, even in a short period, is one of the major attractions of the format. At the same time, viewers who wish to continue can easily watch multiple episodes in succession. The format therefore accommodates both brief and extended viewing sessions.

Time efficiency also reduces the entry barrier for new audiences. When a drama requires only a few minutes of attention, viewers are more willing to try it. This is particularly important in highly competitive digital environments, where users are constantly faced with abundant entertainment choices. Chinese micro-dramas gain an advantage by asking for relatively little initial commitment while still providing emotional intensity and story progression (Tang & Wang, 2025). Their popularity in Southeast Asia can therefore be linked not only to content quality or cultural appeal, but also to their practical suitability for everyday digital life.

Conclusion

Summary of Main Findings

Chinese micro-dramas have rapidly developed into an influential form of digital entertainment, and their growing popularity in Southeast Asia deserves greater academic attention. This review has shown that their dissemination in the region is closely associated with mobile media platforms, localization strategies, and the digital viewing habits of Southeast Asian audiences. Platform-based distribution has enabled these productions to circulate quickly, while subtitles, dubbing, and adapted marketing materials have improved their accessibility across different linguistic and cultural contexts.

This review has also identified several major factors that explain why Chinese micro-dramas have become popular in Southeast Asia. These include algorithmic visibility, strong user engagement, fast-paced storytelling, emotional intensity, cultural proximity, and the convenience of short-form viewing. Their success is therefore not the result of a single factor. Rather, it emerges from the interaction of platform technology, narrative design, market adaptation, and audience behavior.

In a broader sense, the regional growth of Chinese micro-dramas reflects changing patterns of cultural circulation in the digital age. Cross-border media influence is no longer driven only by traditional television exports, cinema, or official cultural channels. Instead, short-form, mobile-oriented, and commercially agile content has become an increasingly important medium of regional cultural presence. Chinese micro-dramas clearly illustrate this transformation.

Implications for Cross-Cultural Digital Communication

The popularity of Chinese micro-dramas in Southeast Asia has several implications for the study of cross-cultural digital communication. First, it suggests that the globalization of media should be examined not only through major cultural products, but also through smaller, more mobile, and more platform-dependent forms of entertainment. Digital media flows today are shaped less by centralized broadcasting institutions and more by apps, algorithms, and user interaction. This requires scholars to pay closer attention to the relationship between content form and platform structure.

Second, the case of Chinese micro-dramas demonstrates that cultural influence in the digital era often operates through emotional accessibility rather than explicit ideological messaging. Their regional popularity is closely linked to narrative simplicity, emotional

resonance, and the ability to fit everyday viewing habits. This suggests that cross-cultural communication may increasingly depend on media products that are easy to circulate, easy to understand, and easy to consume in fragmented contexts.

Finally, the rise of Chinese micro-dramas in Southeast Asia opens up important possibilities for future research. Scholars may further explore audience reception in specific countries, differences in platform strategies, localization practices, genre preferences, and the relationship between micro-drama consumption and broader perceptions of Chinese popular culture. As these productions continue to expand internationally, they are likely to become an increasingly important topic in research on digital entertainment, media globalization, and cross-cultural communication.

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