

Study on “Ekphrasis” in the Trans-Artistic Narration of the Qiantang River Tidal Bore

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Abstract: The history of Chinese poetry and painting research has deep roots, and the concept of “poetry and painting sharing the same origin” has been present since ancient times. In Western literary studies, the term “ekphrasis” meaning “expressing through words”, has been introduced. By examining the research on ekphrasis in cross-art narration, it is found that ekphrasis serves as a typical form of cross-art narration, using language as a medium of expression while respecting the narrative characteristics of literary art. It simultaneously pursues visual effects and spatial qualities, embodying an aesthetic “Andersstreben”. This makes it a distinctive form of cross-artistic narration. This paper, through the study of the culture and arts of the Tidal Bore of the Qiantang River, reveals the characteristics of cross-art narration in this region. By establishing a self-built corpus of ancient poems related to the Qiantang River Tidal Bore, the paper aims to investigate the phenomenon of ekphrasis in the poetry concerning the Qiantang River Tidal Bore, trying to find a breakthrough for in-depth humanistic research into the cross-art narration of the Qiantang River Tidal Bore. The goal is to display the multidimensional charm of the Qiantang River Tidal Bore culture and provide a new perspective for international communication and dissemination of the Qiantang River Tidal Bore and its culture, thereby assisting in its UNESCO World Heritage application.

Keywords: Ekphrasis; Qiantang River Tidal Bore; Cross-Art Narration; Tidal Bore Poetry Corpus

1. Introduction

1.1 Ekphrasis

Ekphrasis, or describing the picture by words, can be understood as a rhetorical device or writing method with a long history in Western literary, art, and rhetorical studies. It involves vividly describing a particular object (primarily artworks) or a specific place [4]. The essence of ekphrasis is an attempt to achieve an artistic effect akin to language depicting visuals. Interestingly, it resonates with the ancient Chinese aesthetic concept of poetry and painting sharing the same origin, revealing commonalities in cross-art connections and characteristics between literature and painting.

1.2 Ekphrasis in Cross-Media Narrative

Narrative studies are an interdisciplinary field focused on constructing, analyzing, and understanding narratives. Narratives can take various forms, such as text, sound, images, and pictures, serving to convey information, emotions, values, and cultural backgrounds. In contemporary narrative studies, there is an emphasis on the interplay and fusion of narrative media, aiming to outline dynamic cultural landscapes where multiple media collectively unfold narratives around a shared story world [5].

1.3 Cross-art & Cross-Media Narrative

Cross-art and cross-media narratives are two concepts that are interrelated but not entirely the same. Cross-art narrative emphasizes storytelling across different art forms, including literature, painting, music, dance, and other artistic domains. It focuses on the interaction and integration of different artistic forms. Cross-media narrative, on the other hand, emphasizes storytelling across different media platforms, including literature, film,

games, virtual reality, and other forms of media. It emphasizes creative expression on multimedia platforms in the digital age.

Cross-art narrative focuses on the creative expression and interaction of artistic forms, emphasizing how artists creatively convey stories across different art forms. Cross-media narrative emphasizes media convergence in the digital age, highlighting how creators use digital technology and multimedia platforms to create narratives. Both forms attempt to innovate narrative forms across different media by integrating various artistic or media elements to create novel and rich narrative experiences. Cross-media narrative often relies on digital technology, while cross-art narrative can include the application of digital technology in artistic creation. Overall, cross-art and cross-media narratives reflect a desire in contemporary culture to transcend traditional boundaries and narrate in novel ways. The latter focuses more on contemporary research, while the former originates from cross-art studies in ancient poetry and painting. The two concepts mutually influence each other in both theory and practice, driving the development of creative expression and narrative in the digital age.

In this study, we focus on the phenomenon of ekphrasis in ancient poetry, where literary language such as poetry and lyrics describes the imagery of Tidal Bore of the Qiantang River. Considering the connections and differences between cross-art and cross-media narratives, we categorize this research as a study of cross-art narratives. Given the interconnected yet distinct characteristics of cross-art and cross-media, we argue that the phenomenon of ekphrasis in ancient poetry, when studied in contemporary contexts, should focus on literary and painting forms, with cross-art and cross-media approaches being interchangeable. This perspective becomes more evident in the following discussion of the characteristics of ekphrasis across media and art.

The visuality or visibility of ekphrasis as a cross-art form is not inherently derived from visual perception itself. Instead, it brings about a visual effect through auditory senses mediated by language. This effect aligns closely with the aesthetic concept of "Andersstreben" and the narrative concept of cross-media narration. "Andersstreben" in

aesthetics denotes the pursuit of characteristics in artistic works that go beyond their inherent nature or limitations, seeking formal qualities found in other forms of art. In the context of cross-media narration, the term "cross" implies transcending or surpassing the inherent nature or strengths of one's own work and its medium to create a narrative form that incorporates the distinctive traits of other forms of artistic works or media.

From a narrative perspective, language, as a linear medium, is best suited for storytelling that unfolds over time. However, ekphrasis deviates from this norm by attempting to describe the spatial artistic effects of visual art using the medium of language. This aligns with the essence of cross-media narration [2]. Thus, cross-art ekphrasis embodies both cross-art narrative elements and cross-media narrative characteristics, achieving a unity of cross-art and cross-media narratives in the realm of ekphrasis. Furthermore, as the concept of cross-media increasingly becomes a central theme in contemporary comparative art studies, the potential of ekphrasis in theoretical discourse construction is further stimulated. As a linguistic attribute existing for visual art, ekphrasis also serves as a form of cross-media discourse practice.

2. The Cross-Art Study of the Qiantang River Tidal Bore

In June 2014, the Grand Canal of China was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The Qiantang River Tidal Bore (hereinafter referred to as the Tidal Bore), as a unique landscape in Zhejiang Province, holds significant meaning and value for showcasing the regional culture of Zhejiang. The Zhejiang government places increased emphasis on the application for UNESCO World Heritage status for the Qiantang River and its ancient seawalls. To achieve this, it is essential to make the world more acquainted with it. As a form of cross-media discourse, the comprehensive application of ekphrasis to the study of Tidal Bore and its international dissemination can enhance its global influence and contribute to its UNESCO application.

The Qiantang River, formerly known as the Zhejiang River, was first mentioned in "Shan Hai Jing" (a Chinese classic book that is a compilation of mythic geography and mythological accounts) and also referred to as

the Jian River. the name “Qiantang River” first appeared during the Three Kingdoms period [6]. As the mother river of Zhejiang Province, the Qiantang River gained widespread fame for its spectacular tidal bore at the river mouth. This unique natural phenomenon has captured people’s attention and admiration since ancient times. Through different historical periods of understanding and transformation, the Tidal Bore has given rise to a rich variety of artistic expressions, sincerely conveying the close connection between humans and nature.

In ancient times, with limited understanding of nature, the Tidal Bore became a mysterious symbol, giving rise to artistic expressions such as mythological legends about the “Tide God” and ritual arts. the grand Tidal Bore Festival held annually from the sixteenth to the eighteenth day of the eighth lunar month has brought together folk arts and athletic performances, becoming a shared cultural treasure passed down through generations. As people continually explored nature, the world’s oldest tidal-defense fish-scale seawalls emerged in the Tidal Bore region. This architectural marvel is not only an outstanding work of human engineering art but also forms an advantageous condition for UNESCO World Heritage application alongside the Tidal Bore.

The understanding of the Tidal Bore deepened during the Eastern Han Dynasty, with Wang Chong’s work “Lun Heng” becoming the first atheistic scientific analysis of the causes of the Tidal Bore in history. As the Tidal Bore became well-known, various forms of art, including literature, poetry, painting, and folk art, thrived. Scholars and artists expressed their unique insights into the Tidal Bore through “odes to the tide”, using language to convey a deep affection for this natural spectacle.

As a natural wonder, the Tidal Bore appears in various art forms, with interactions and transformations occurring among different art forms around the narrative theme of Tidal Bore. This cross-art characteristic is not only reflected in traditional literature and poetry but also in contemporary forms through various media, such as images and sounds. Therefore, as a narrative subject, the Tidal Bore, through cross-art and cross-media approaches, has formed a rich and diverse artistic expression. This expression not only inherits the ancient mysterious worship of the Tidal Bore but also

incorporates a rational understanding of natural science. This provides a broader space for the international dissemination, discourses analysis and UNESCO application of the Tidal Bore.

3. Ekphrasis in the Cross-Art Narrative of the Qiantang River Tidal Bore—A Corpus-Based Approach

3.1 Qiantang River Tidal Bore Ancient Poetry Corpus

The Qiantang River Tidal Bore Ancient Poetry Corpus integrates relevant ancient poetry materials from both online and offline sources. Offline written materials mainly come from the compilation of Professor Yan Yan and Mr. Zhu Mingyao’s [7] “Collection of Qiantang River Tidal Bore Poetry”. This poetry collection spans over 1500 years of history, containing poems praising the Tidal Bore from various dynasties, as well as poems describing the scenery of the Qiantang River and Emperor Qianlong’s inspection of the Qiantang River. Online materials are mainly integrated through the China National Digital Library Song and Tang Poetry Analysis Systems, compiling Qiantang River Tidal Bore ancient poetry. In order to comprehensively collect relevant materials, web scraping tools like ParseHub were used to gather information from the entire internet, forming the Qiantang River Tidal Bore Ancient Poetry Corpus.

Using the Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK), a Python library for natural language processing with rich tools and resources, including vocabulary, stop words, taggers, etc., the collected text underwent cleaning and preprocessing. Stop words were removed, and the text was segmented to break the poems into words for subsequent language processing and analysis, eliminating irrelevant information, punctuation, special characters, etc.

For analysis and retrieval needs, the corpus was structured with information such as ancient poetry titles, era, authors, author information, poetry genres, poem content, and commentary. A MySQL database was created to import the cleaned and segmented ancient poetry data, and a command-line search interface was established for content retrieval by entering keywords.

Currently, the corpus has collected a total of 450 ancient poems with 835 lines from the

Tang Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty, spanning from Wang Changling to Emperor Qianlong, including various poetic forms such as Seven-Character Quatrains, Five-Character Regulated Verses, Seven-Character Regulated Verses, Yuefu, etc.

3.2 Ekphrasis in Tidal Bore Poetry and Cross-Art Narratives

Ekphrasis is a phenomenon study, making it challenging to conduct quantitation research. For qualitative research on ekphrasis, its concepts and characteristics should definitely be referred to. As previously mentioned, the definition of ekphrasis implies a rhetorical process from image to language. In fact, aside from individual ekphrasis works, examining ekphrasis as a whole may allow us to better scrutinize the development of visual representation. Ekphrasis itself combines visual and linguistic representation, rooted in ancient rhetorical traditions [1]. Thus, rhetorical devices forms an insightful perspective.

Regarding the characteristics of ekphrasis, the multisensory expression of visual experience is a crucial trait. When depicting artworks, ekphrasis vividly narrates the aesthetic experience, originally conveyed only through visual perception, to other senses. This not only embodies the literary significance of ekphrasis but also enriches readers' avenues for appreciating beauty, deepening emotional engagement [3].

Considering ekphrasis' origin of artistic rhetoric and the expression of multiple senses, in the classification of rhetorical techniques in the corpus, it was found that 63 lines of poetry involve synesthetic rhetoric. It refers to the use of synesthesia in rhetoric, particularly in language and communication. Synesthesia is a neurological phenomenon where stimulation of one sensory or cognitive pathway leads to involuntary experiences in a second pathway. In the context of rhetoric, synesthetic elements are incorporated into language to evoke a multi-sensory experience or to convey complex ideas more vividly. In synesthetic rhetoric, words or expressions from one sensory domain may be used to describe experiences from another domain. For example, a writer might use terms related to taste or smell to describe visual or auditory sensations. This technique aims to enhance the impact of

communication by appealing to multiple senses simultaneously, creating a more immersive and holistic experience for the audience. Considering the nature of synesthetic rhetoric, it echoes with the definition and features of ekphrasis.

In the poem "Roaring Tide Striking the Rocks, Waves Rushing to the Horizon" (by Yang Wanli in "Spring Rain Clears in Lin'an"), synesthetic rhetoric is employed to compare the magnificent spectacle of the Qiantang River Tidal Bore with other sensory experiences. the phrase "Roaring Tide Striking the Rocks" depicts the intense movement of the river, as if the tidal bore is striking against the rocks, splashing waves hitting the clouds and the embankment, creating a sense of intense sound and power. the metaphor "Waves Rushing to the Horizon" describes the surging waves rushing and surging towards the distant horizon, portraying the grand and vast scenery of the Tidal Bore, evoking a sense of boundlessness. Through the use of synesthetic rhetoric, the poet vividly describes the majestic and vigorous imagery of the Qiantang River tidal bore. Thus, through the synesthetic figure of speech ekphrasis works. By using the language/ lines, the poetry depicts for readers a visual and auditory feast, enhancing the artistic expression of the poetry

Furthermore, the use of rhetorical techniques such as metaphor, personification, and exaggeration also reflects ekphrasis in the Qiantang River Tidal Bore poetry, illustrating the phenomenon of cross-artistic narrative through language. For example, the line "Clouds and trees surround the embankment sand, furious waves roll up frost and snow, the sky trench is boundless" employs metaphor, personification and exaggeration. It describes clouds and trees around the embankment sand as rolling clouds and massive waves during the tidal bore, emphasizing the rising tide and its majestic momentum. the comparison of the tidal waves to rolling up frost and snow intensifies the perception of its power and grandeur, while likening the tidal bore to a sky trench conveys a sense of vastness and boundlessness, highlighting the insignificance and powerlessness of people in the face of the tidal waters. In the continuous use of ekphrasis, the poet vividly depicts the vastness of the tidal waters, allowing readers to visualize a

scene of surging tides and hear the roaring sounds of the tidal surge.

According to statistics of corpus search, poetic lines that involve metaphor, exaggeration, and personification or their combinations in the transformation of cross-artistic narratives account for 91.1% of all the corpus texts. In other words, rhetorical research constitutes a significant portion of the study on ekphrasis in Qiantang River Tidal Bore poetry. The rhetorical features reflected in ekphrasis, with its multi-sensory cross-characteristics in cross-artistic narratives, are clearly evident. For instance, in the line “Tidal roars in the curved islets, sails fill the shores” (by Yang Wanli in “Spring Rain Clears in Li’an”), the use of the term “tidal roars” employs personification to give the tidal waters a vivid auditory image, enriching the entire scene. All the lines related to “tidal bore” in the poetry collection are evidently expressions of emotions related to objects. This aligns with the essence of poetry and the role of ekphrasis in deepening emotions. Through the classification of poetic lines in the corpus, this paper summarizes the following symbolic meanings of cross-artistic narrative in Qiantang River Tidal Bore poetry: Adherence to the forces of nature—The tidal bore symbolizes the powerful forces and vigorous vitality in the natural world. In the culture of the Chinese nation, the tidal bore is considered a normal phenomenon of natural changes, symbolizing the constant flow of life and the vitality of development.

Symbol of change and transformation—The ebb and flow of the tidal bore integrates natural changes into human life. In the long history of the Chinese nation, the tidal bore has often been regarded as a symbol of change and transformation, encompassing changes and progress in various aspects such as politics, society, and economy.

Symbol of unity and strength—The tidal bore, with its surging and turbulent momentum, demonstrates immense strength. Simultaneously, numerous water currents converge into a massive tide, symbolizing the strength of unity. Over the millennia of development and evolution, the Chinese nation has formed a national consciousness full of cohesion and unity.

Symbol of pursuit and passion—The grandeur and magnificence of the tidal bore often evoke people's yearning for freedom, pursuit, and

ideals. With the brave, enterprising, and hardworking spirit of the Chinese nation, the tidal bore portrays the magnificent ideals and individual pursuits it symbolizes.

In summary, the study of Qiantang River tidal bore poetry as cross-artistic narrative with artistic rhetoric reveals various symbolic meanings, including alignment with natural forces, representation of change and transformation, portrayal of unity and strength, and expression of pursuit and passion. The study of ekphrasis, through the analysis of rhetorical techniques, contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the rich artistic expressions in the poetry collection related to the Qiantang River Tidal Bore.

4. Conclusion

Through the systematic organization of the corpus, ekphrasis in the artistic narrative of ancient poems about the Qiantang River reflects a shared cultural intentionality. Specifically, the imagery of surging tides in the context of Chinese culture symbolizes not only the forces and changes in nature but also embodies the spirit of unity and strength. Moreover, it signifies an admiration for the pursuit of passion and grandeur. This symbolic significance has gradually deepened in the hearts of the Chinese people over time, becoming an integral part of the national spirit. In the process of analyzing and organizing the poems, particular attention has been given to the origin of ekphrasis rhetoric and the representation of multiple senses. It is noteworthy that the ekphrasis in these artistic expressions goes beyond “depicting scenes in words” to also include the “producing sound in words”. In other words, these poems not only evoke visual experiences through language to create vivid imagery but also employ language to recreate the auditory aspects, thereby exemplifying the characteristic of “poetry and painting sharing origins, and poetry and music resonating together” in the cross-artistic narration.

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