

How Images Write a City: A Comparative Study of the Narrative of Civic Life in Along the River During the Qingming Festival and Allegory of Good Government

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Abstract. This paper focuses on the visual representation of civic life in *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* and *Allegory of Good Government*, and explores the different paradigms of Eastern and Western image narration. *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* writes the city as "flowing worldly sentiments"—it lays out the details of urban life through a long scroll with scattered perspective, and later colophons continuously superimpose emotional memories, turning the city into a living world that can be wandered, felt and recollected. *Allegory of Good Government* writes the city as "allegory of order"—it constructs spatial order through linear perspective, and the allegorical structure integrates civic life into the visual expression of political ideals; later interpretations reconstruct its historical meaning around philosophical contexts. It can be seen that images writing a city is never a simple "record", but a kind of "construction"—selection, reorganization and shaping, ultimately creating an "urban text" for later generations to watch, recollect and reflect on. Through a comparative study, this paper demonstrates the different ways in which visual art "enriches historical understanding" and provides an analytical path based on "image-text interaction" for cross-cultural image research.

Keywords: *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*, *Allegory of Good Government*, Narrative of Civic Life, Images as Historical Evidence, Cross-Cultural Comparison

1. Introduction

The visibility of cities relies on diverse media in different eras. Written carriers represented by historical annals, notes and miscellaneous records, poems and chants have long harbored people's imagination and memory of cities. In addition, images provide another way to perceive cities. Images do not rely on conceptual discourse, but appeal to direct visual presentation; they do not pursue the complete record of event processes, but devote themselves to the solidification of instantaneous forms. When a painting turns its perspective of recording to historical scenes, urban spaces and ordinary citizens walking through the streets and alleys, the content it shows and the parts it omits together constitute the core topic of the research, that is, how images write a city.

In the late 20th century, "images as historical evidence" gradually became an important research paradigm in historiography. Peter Burke systematically discussed the important academic value of

images as urban memory in *Images as Historical Evidence* [1], pointing out that images can supplement many dimensions missing in written documents. The detailed presentation of daily life, the specific appearance of material culture and the visual expression of social relations in images (Burke) are beyond the reach of written discourse. However, a core problem in existing research is often ignored: although images have the advantage of intuitive presentation, they do not have the ability to speak independently. The generation of the historical value of images highly depends on the audience's interpretation and explanation, as well as the translation and activation of words. Therefore, to explore the way images write history, we must take into account two aspects of analysis: one is the visual language of images themselves, and the other is how words intervene in images and jointly construct their historical meaning.

This paper selects *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* (early 12th century) by Zhang Zeduan of the Northern Song Dynasty of China and *Allegory of Good Government* (1338-1339) by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in the early Italian Renaissance for a comparative study. These two Eastern and Western urban images, separated by about 200 years, both turn their writing gaze to cities and contain rich scenes of civic life, providing a common thematic basis for comparative research. They respectively represent two typical paradigms of Eastern and Western image narration, with distinct and comparable differences. In addition, both paintings have rich written materials: Chinese colophons and poems inscribed on paintings, and Western interpretive traditions, which can be used to analyze the mechanism of image-text interaction in jointly interpreting urban memory.

Taking "narrative of civic life" as the comparative axis, this paper focuses on the presentation ways of ordinary citizens' daily activities such as labor, consumption, communication and entertainment in *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* and *Allegory of Good Government*. *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* writes the city with flowing worldly sentiments, presenting the extension of time and the continuity of life through scattered perspective and detailed elaboration, and later colophons continuously superimpose emotional memories in the process of interpretation. *Allegory of Good Government* writes the city with allegory of order, presenting spatial order and social ideals through linear perspective and allegorical structure, and later interpretations often reconstruct its historical meaning around political philosophy. These two different paradigms jointly reveal that images writing a city is never a simple record, but a construction, that is, through selection, reorganization and shaping, ultimately creating an urban text for later generations to watch, recollect and reflect on.

2. *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*: flowing worldly sentiments and accumulated memories

Along the River During the Qingming Festival is a long scroll genre painting created by Zhang Zeduan of the Northern Song Dynasty, 24.8 centimeters wide and 528.7 centimeters long. It depicts the urban scenes of Bianjing (present-day Kaifeng, Henan), the capital of the Northern Song Dynasty, during the Qingming Festival with scattered perspective. The scroll unfolds from right to left, successively presenting suburban scenery, both banks of the Bianhe River, up and down the Rainbow Bridge, inside and outside the city tower, and finally ends in the prosperous urban area. The long scroll format itself implies a temporal way of viewing: the viewer cannot take in the whole picture at a glance, but needs to slowly unfold it by hand, just like walking in the scroll in the flow of time.

2.1. Visual narrative of the scroll: the city in time

Civic life is presented in a laid-out manner in *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*. On the Rainbow Bridge, boatmen pole hard, crowds on the bridge stop to watch, and vendors shout incessantly; on both banks of the Bianhe River, cargo ships shuttle back and forth, and dock workers carry and load goods; between streets and alleys, tea houses and restaurants stand in great numbers, storytellers attract audiences, and various vendors selling flowers, medicines and repairing vehicles occupy their own corners. These scenes are not isolated fragments, but organized into an organic living whole through continuous spatial transition. Every corner of the picture is full of details: some people lean against the window chatting, some play chess facing the street, some carry loads on the road, and some lead donkeys into the city. This dense detailed elaboration creates a sense of flow in urban life, which is not the condensation of a decisive moment, but the continuity of life itself.

Notably, the eyes of the figures in the painting often do not turn to the viewer, but to each other: vendors greet customers, boatmen shout for cooperation, passers-by chat and communicate, and children chase and play. This closed way of viewing creates a self-sufficient world, and the viewer is like a voyeur, gaining an immersive sense of presence in an undetected position. This way of viewing also strengthens the documentary meaning of the image, as if telling the viewer that this is Bianjing, the real life of people in that era.

2.2. Intervention of colophons: words superimposing emotional memories

The historical significance of *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* goes far beyond the visual content it records. After the scroll, colophons left by literati of successive dynasties constitute another dimension of meaning. Colophons by Zhang Zhu, Zhang Gongyao, Li Qi of the Jin Dynasty, Wu Kuan, Li Dongyang, Lu Wan of the Ming Dynasty and others on the trailing part transform the present tense of the image into the past tense, turning a painting into a container carrying historical emotions.

The earliest existing colophon was written by Zhang Zhu, a literatus of the Jin Dynasty in 1186, about 60 years after the completion of the painting. At that time, the Northern Song Dynasty had perished, and Bianjing had become a territory of the Jin Dynasty. Zhang Zhu's colophon briefly records Zhang Zeduan's life and quotes the evaluation from *Xiang's Commentary on Paintings*: "The conception of *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* is exquisite, making viewers feel like in a dream." [2] Zhang Zhu quotes the evaluation of *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* from *Xiang's Commentary on Paintings* of the Northern Song Dynasty here. The original book of *Xiang's Commentary on Paintings* has been lost, and only fragments remain in the painting and calligraphy records of successive dynasties. The comment "viewers feel like in a dream" succinctly summarizes the artistic appeal of *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*: the vividness of the picture and the richness of details make viewers feel immersive, as if walking in the streets and alleys of Bianjing. Zhang Zhu's colophon initiated the tradition of later colophons for *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*, and since then, literati of successive dynasties have left their own words on the scroll.

The long colophon by Li Dongyang of the Ming Dynasty (1515) is one of the most important colophons of *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*. Li Dongyang details the details in the painting: "Figures, boats and carts, city walls and towers, bridges and roads are all complete." Then he turns to express his emotion with "Alas!":

Alas! This painting was made during the Xuanhe reign. At that time, the emperor and his ministers boasted of peace and prosperity, unaware that the seeds of chaos and disaster had been

sown in secret. When the Jin troops invaded Bianjing, thousands of people were displaced, yet this painting alone survived. Therefore, those who view this painting cannot help but feel moved [3].

Along the River During the Qingming Festival was painted during the Xuanhe reign, when the emperor and his ministers boasted of a peaceful scene, unaware that the crisis of chaos had been secretly brewing. It was not until the Jin troops captured Bianjing that people were displaced, leaving only this painting intact. Placing *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* in the historical context of dynastic rise and fall, although the picture presents the peace and prosperity of the late Northern Song Dynasty, it hides the social reality of social unrest and people's displacement. Therefore, when Li Dongyang viewed the painting, he sighed at the fragile society behind the prosperous Bianjing. His colophon shows that this painting is not just an ordinary work recording urban life in the Northern Song Dynasty, but also a carrier for later generations to express emotions and sigh at history.

On the basis of predecessors' emotional expressions, the colophons of *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* in the Qing Dynasty integrated content about the collection history and appraisal history of the work. Each new colophon is equivalent to adding a new historical memory to the painting. Through the colophons of literati of successive dynasties, *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* has long been more than an ordinary painting, but a carrier gathering many historical memories. Later literati continuously endowed *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* with new meanings through continuous dialogue between words and images.

2.3. Poems inscribed on paintings: intertextual dialogue between poetry and painting

In addition to prose colophons, poems inscribed on paintings are also an important form of image-text interaction in the tradition of Chinese painting and calligraphy. Literati of successive dynasties created a large number of poems inscribed on paintings around *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*. These verses not only meticulously depict the scenes on the painting, but also sublimate the urban memory in the painting.

Zhang Gongyao of the Jin Dynasty was one of the earlier literati who inscribed poems on *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*. His inscribed poem reads:

*The carriages and horses on the main road are noisy,
It was just a year of the Xuanhe reign.
The imperial academy presented the painting at that time,
The peaceful scenery is truly worth passing down [3].*

The poem depicts the last peaceful days of the Northern Song Dynasty during the Xuanhe reign, vividly describing the liveliness of the urban area at that time. The author ends with "the peaceful scenery is truly worth passing down", praising the painting for recording the last peaceful scene, but also sighing at the historical changes of the Northern Song Dynasty between the lines. As a poet of the Jin Dynasty, Zhang Gongyao felt the vicissitudes of time when facing this painting depicting the former capital of the Northern Song Dynasty.

The poem inscribed by Wang Shizhen of the Ming Dynasty reflects a more complex feeling of viewing the painting. The poem reads:

*The Emperor Xuanhe loved painting and calligraphy,
Zhang's brushwork is truly precious.
People thought it was ordinary at that time,
Today, unfolding the painting, tears wet my chest [4].*

The line "People thought it was ordinary at that time" is heartbreaking when combined with the history of the Northern Song Dynasty. The urban life shown in the painting was just ordinary daily

life at that time, but with historical changes, this former ordinary has become the past frequently recalled by later generations. The line "Today, unfolding the painting, tears wet my chest" integrates personal emotions into the grand narrative of history, turning cold history into a regret that resonates with viewers.

Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty also inscribed a poem on *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*. Although it has an imperial perspective, his attention to the civic life in the painting is also obvious. The poem says:

*Mounted with Shu brocade, the colors are bright,
The Xuanhe seal is still intact.
The crowds of people are as dense as weaving,
Who among them was Mi Dian back then? [5]*

"The crowds of people are as dense as weaving" describes the lively scene of people coming and going in the urban area in the painting. "Mi Dian" mentioned in the poem refers to Mi Fu, a famous painter and calligrapher of the Song Dynasty. Qianlong juxtaposed the ordinary people in the painting with historical celebrities, reflecting his thinking on the connection between images and history.

Along the River During the Qingming Festival writes the city with flowing worldly sentiments. It creates a living world that can be wandered, watched and felt through visual narration, making viewers feel as if they are in the streets and alleys of Bianjing. The superposition of written expressions such as colophons and poems inscribed on paintings by Chinese literati of successive dynasties turns this painted world into a memory place carrying historical emotions. Colophons inject personal feelings into historical narration, and poems inscribed on paintings sublimate visual images into poetic artistic conception. From Zhang Gongyao's "The carriages and horses on the main road are noisy" to Wang Shizhen's "People thought it was ordinary at that time", from Lu Wan's "The peace in the painting is praiseworthy" to Li Qi's "The Bianhe River flows east never to return", they jointly form a network of meaning verified by images and texts. Here, the city is written as a continuum of life and an accumulator of memory.

3. Allegory of Good Government: Allegory of order and ideal city

Allegory of Good Government by Ambrogio Lorenzetti is a series of murals in the Sala dei Nove of the Town Hall of Siena, Italy, created between 1338 and 1339. The murals occupy three walls and are divided into four parts: *Allegory of Good Government*, *Effects of Good Government (Urban Part)*, *Effects of Good Government (Rural Part)* and *Allegory of Bad Government*. This paper focuses on the urban scenes depicted in *Allegory of Good Government* to study the memory mechanism of cities in Western paintings.

3.1. Visual narrative of the mural: the city in space

Different from *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*, *Allegory of Good Government* is a static mural occupying an entire wall. The picture adopts linear perspective, with neatly arranged buildings and clear streets, and the entire urban space is arranged in perfect order. The foreground shows the streets and squares of the city, the middle ground shows dense buildings, and the distant view shows the city walls and rural scenery. The daily life of citizens is placed in such a regular spatial framework: craftsmen work hard in workshops on the left, merchants are busy trading in shops on the right, a group of gorgeously dressed women dance hand in hand in the center, and some people ride horses or stroll along the streets in the distance.

Notably, the author conveys specific allegories through these citizen activities. In the upper left corner of the mural sits a goddess holding a balance, the allegorical image of Justice. Above the picture hover allegorical figures such as Wisdom and Peace. These profound allegorical figures are juxtaposed with the urban life scenes below, forming a corresponding structure of idea and reality, and conveying the message that under the shelter of justice and peace, the city should present an orderly, prosperous and harmonious appearance.

In addition to the mural images, the Latin inscriptions carved on the mural reveal the ideas to be conveyed by the mural. There is an inscription on the mural—*Iustitia concordiam parit* (Justice begets harmony), expressing the creator's desire for fairness, which is highlighted by the combination of images and words.

3.2. Construction of later interpretations: from allegory to history

In the 15th to 16th centuries, the Renaissance, many humanist scholars highly recognized this painting. In *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* [6], Giorgio Vasari evaluated Allegory of Good Government as a rare secular political mural in the world from the perspective of political philosophy, believing that this painting perfectly visualized abstract political ideas. Giorgio Vasari linked *Allegory of Good Government* with the political thoughts of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, emphasizing that the painting interprets "Common Good", "governance by virtue", justice and peace.

In the 20th century, Erwin Panofsky, a master of iconology, conducted a more in-depth study of *Allegory of Good Government*. He used the layered interpretation method of iconology to analyze the mural from three dimensions. At the pre-iconographic level, the mural depicts good and bad governments, cities and countryside, and peace and war; at the iconographic level, the mural personifies justice, prudence, temperance, generosity, peace, security, tyranny, greed and so on; at the iconological level, the mural shows a political system integrating social philosophy and civic humanism.

Allegory of Good Government is a milestone work in the transition from the late Middle Ages to the Renaissance. It visualizes virtues such as justice and peace through allegory, and shows the prosperity of urban and rural areas brought by good government and the chaos and decline caused by bad government through contrast. The visualized city depicted endows the life structure of ordinary citizens with the meaning of political philosophy. It is a famous work highlighting humanism, and also the earliest and most complete political and moral mural with high artistic value in the West.

4. Comparison and dialogue: two paradigms of "images writing a city"

4.1. Comparison of narrative strategies

Along the River During the Qingming Festival and *Allegory of Good Government* belong to two kinds of narration. The former is a diachronic narration: the viewer needs to follow the rhythm of the picture and walk slowly in the flow of time to traverse every corner of the city. This narrative way focuses on highlighting the continuity of life, presenting a vivid and lively city full of earthly atmosphere. The latter is a synchronic narration: the viewer can take in the whole appearance of the city at a glance while standing still. This narrative way emphasizes the integrity of space, presenting a perfect and ideal city. The detailed comparison is shown in the table below:

Table 1. Comparison of narrative strategies

Visual Images	<i>Along the River During the Qingming Festival</i>	<i>Allegory of Good Government</i>
Spatial Organization	Scattered perspective	Linear perspective
Time Consciousness	Diachronic	Synchronic
Life Presentation	Detailed depiction of earthly atmosphere	Order and political nature
Viewing Mode	Gradual traversal	Overall observation

4.2. Comparison of text intervention

The interpretation modes of the two works correspond to different traditions in China and the West respectively. The core of the Chinese model is the superposition of colophons of successive dynasties, and later literati continuously inject their emotions and thoughts into the paintings. Each colophon is a new dialogue between later generations and the painting, and the meaning of the image accumulates continuously with the flow of time. Therefore, *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* becomes a "field of accumulated memories": each new layer of memory does not replace the previous one, but coexists with it, finally forming a complex containing multiple meanings.

The Western model is the academic reconstruction of interpretation. Inscriptions, philosophical texts and later academic research together constitute an anchoring mechanism for fixing the meaning of images. The core goal of this interpretation is to return to the original context of the painting's creation and reveal the meaning the image originally intended to express. Different from the Chinese model, the Western model pays more attention to the stability and traceability of meaning, striving to make each interpretation fit the original connotation of the image.

4.3. Generation of historical understanding

People's understanding of the history depicted in *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* is full of strong emotional color. Later literati project their personal emotions onto the image through colophons, and dialogue with history in the process of recalling the past. When appreciating the painting, viewers are guided to feel Bianjing, experience the once prosperous scene, taste the impermanence of the world hidden behind the prosperity, and generate a cross-temporal emotional resonance.

The historical understanding formed through *Allegory of Good Government* is more idealized. Scholars incorporate images into the context of intellectual history through various interpretations, and grasp the historical connotation behind them in the process of in-depth understanding. Viewers are invited to think about the city of Siena, ponder the connection between justice and peace, explore the political ideals of the city-republic, and figure out how visual art carries and expresses ideas.

The differences between the above two interpretation modes and historical understanding stem from the deep structures in the Eastern and Western cultural traditions. Chinese culture emphasizes feeling things and expressing aspirations, and the understanding of history is often closely integrated with personal emotional experience. The meaning of a painting lies not only in what it specifically depicts, but also in what emotional touch, past recollection and mood expression it can arouse in the viewer. Western culture pays more attention to essence and universality, and the understanding of history is often closely connected with philosophical thinking. The meaning of a painting requires people to dig out the ideas and internal principles behind it through rational analysis.

In summary, through the comparative study of *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* and *Allegory of Good Government*, it can be seen that images writing a city is never a mirror-like reflection, but a constructive practice. Images select scenes worthy of presentation, decide how to organize these scenes, and endow them with what meaning. In this process, images create an "urban text" that can be watched—it is not a copy of the city, but a translation of the city.

Along the River During the Qingming Festival writes the city as flowing worldly sentiments. The long scroll lays out the continuity of life, and details create the earthly atmosphere of the urban area. The superposition of poems and colophons of later generations turns this city into an object of emotional projection and a container of memory. Here, historical understanding is "felt"—through the interaction between images and words, viewers seem to be able to touch the life pulse of that era. *Allegory of Good Government* writes the city as an idea of order. Linear perspective constructs the order of space, and allegorical structure conveys political ideals. The reconstruction of later interpretations turns this city into a specimen of ideological analysis. Here, historical understanding is "thought out"—through images, viewers can grasp the political philosophy of that era.

This is the way visual art "enriches historical understanding": it does not provide objective records, but creates urban texts for watching, recollecting and reflecting. Historical understanding thus becomes diverse: one can "feel" the earthly atmosphere of Bianjing, or "think" about the political ideals of Siena. Both ways of understanding are the result of images "writing". At the same time, beyond visual images, the interpretation of poems inscribed on paintings and colophons, and the explanation of literary texts provide a unique perspective for interdisciplinary research. In the differences between the East and the West represented by the two paintings, we can find the characteristics of respective cultures and expand the boundaries of understanding in dialogue.

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