

Narrative Strategies in Intercultural Communication of the Grand Canal*

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The Grand Canal was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2014, and its international visibility has grown steadily since then. Yet the externally oriented texts produced around it do not always achieve the cross-cultural resonance that heritage promoters expect. Drawing on corpus analyses of media discourse, comparative discourse studies and audience research, this paper identifies three recurring problems in these texts, the homogenisation of cultural symbols, the fragmentation of narrative meaning across digital platforms, and the superficial treatment of heritage signifiers. To address them, the paper proposes a tripartite framework that integrates cultural memory theory, multimodal discourse analysis and narrative immersion research. The historical dimension situates commemorative space in a dual temporality, the spatial dimension organises meaning through an anchor–path–network configuration, and the emotional dimension structures affective engagement across individual, group and humanity levels. The framework is offered both as an analytical tool and as a practical guide for redesigning externally oriented heritage texts.

Keywords: Grand Canal, external communication, cultural memory, multimodal discourse analysis

Introduction

The Grand Canal, inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2014, is one of the largest and oldest hydraulic engineering systems in human history. Its international visibility has grown through institutional initiatives such as the Beijing–Hangzhou Dialogue and the World Canal Historical and Cultural Cities Cooperation Organization. Visibility, however, does not guarantee resonance. Studies of externally oriented texts about the Canal repeatedly find a gap between what heritage promoters intend to communicate and what international audiences actually receive (Zheng & Gao, 2026; Xu, 2025; Li & Tang, 2025; Zhang, Wu, Wang, et al., 2022). This gap is familiar to translation studies. In Hall’s encoding/decoding model, the message that a sender encodes is never transmitted intact; it is decoded by receivers according to their own cultural frames (Hall, 1980).

The sources of the gap are now well documented. Corpus-based analyses of media discourse show that Chinese outlets frame the Canal through achievement narratives and policy discourse, while foreign coverage

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attends to ecological controversies, local governance and social impacts (Zheng & Gao, 2026; Xu, 2025). Comparative discourse analysis reaches a similar conclusion. Western media assign different narrative agencies and thematic priorities to the Canal, indicating a structural mismatch in narrative logic (Li & Tang, 2025). Audience research further shows that international tourists construct their value perception of the Canal through empathetic understanding and reflexive engagement rather than through the declarative register of conventional promotion (Zhang, Wu, Wang, et al., 2022). Digital heritage experiments suggest that interactive and participatory formats can strengthen engagement, but such approaches remain marginal in mainstream external communication (Yu, Gao, Ji, et al., 2025; Yan, Yang, Mai, et al., 2026).

Taken together, these findings point to three predicaments, homogenization of cultural symbols, fragmentation of narrative meaning, and superficial treatment of heritage signifiers. The present paper analyses these predicaments and proposes a tripartite framework from historical, spatial and emotional perspectives, drawing on cultural memory theory (Assmann, 2011), multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021) and narrative immersion research (Ryan, 2001). The framework serves both as a diagnostic lens and as a strategic guide for redesigning externally oriented texts about the Canal.

Narrative Predicaments in Grand Canal External Communication

The three predicaments are not stylistic flaws in individual texts. They are structural features of the way heritage promotion is produced, and together they hinder the Canal's capacity to function as a site of shared meaning in cross-cultural communication.

Homogenisation of Cultural Symbols

The first predicament is the standardisation of cultural representation. Across official brochures, videos and websites, the Canal is presented through a fixed inventory of signifiers. These markers are accurate, but they are hardly distinctive. The Great Wall, the Forbidden City and the Terracotta Warriors are promoted in much the same register of national pride and civilisational continuity. Xu's analysis shows that Chinese media narratives overwhelmingly adopt official perspectives, with blended or international viewpoints accounting for less than one percent of video content (Xu, 2025). When every site is presented as a "symbol of Chinese civilisation", the specificity of each is diluted. Homogenisation is thus not simply a failure of creativity. It is a failure of audience orientation. Narratives designed for internal consensus are poorly suited to external meaning-making.

Fragmentation of Narrative Meaning

The predicament also arises from the media environment itself. Digital platforms, WeChat, Douyin, YouTube and Instagram, break heritage storytelling into short, self-contained units that circulate without contextual framing. Each piece may be engaging on its own, but the cumulative effect is additive rather than integrative. This matters for heritage because cultural memory, as Assmann observes, depends on the continuity of meaning across time and representation (Assmann, 2011). When narrative is reduced to disconnected fragments, the connective tissue that binds symbols into a coherent cultural world is lost. The Canal becomes a collection of discrete attractions rather than a 1,700-kilometre continuum of hydraulic engineering and social life. Zhang et al. make a related point that international tourists assemble their understanding from scattered encounters, a lock gate here, a temple there, without access to an integrating narrative (Zhang, Wu, Wang, et al.,

2022). Fragmentation is therefore not merely a condition of digital media, but also a problem of narrative architecture.

Superficial Narrative Treatment

Another predicament is the routine failure to go beneath the surface of cultural signifiers. Heritage texts invoke the Canal's historical depth, but they rarely let that depth structure the narrative experience. Terms such as "cultural heritage", "historical value" and "national treasure" recur with predictable frequency, while their referents remain vague. In Zhao's semiotic terms, the symbols are presented rather than interpreted (Zhao, 2011). The movement from denotation to connotation, which he calls symbolic elaboration, is missing. Shan (2010) makes a related observation about cross-cultural communication, heritage values are often assumed to be self-evident and to travel without translation, although "universal significance" must in fact be constructed through narrative work. Where that work is absent, external communication becomes a monologue of assertions.

The three predicaments reinforce one another. Homogenisation flattens distinctiveness, fragmentation disables coherence, and superficiality forecloses depth. The framework proposed below addresses each in turn.

A Tripartite Model for Synergistic Narrative

The three predicaments share a common root. The absence of an organizing narrative logic that can hold cultural symbols together, give them depth, and orient them towards cross-cultural reception. The framework proposed here operates along three interdependent dimensions, each corresponding to a specific narrative function and each designed to counter a specific predicament.

Commemorative Space as Retrospection and Activation

Cultural memory theory, particularly Assmann's formulation, distinguishes between communicative memory and cultural memory, which crystallizes in objectified forms such as texts, monuments, rituals and landscapes (Assmann, 2011). The physical fabric of the Grand Canal, like locks, embankments, sluice gates, towpaths, constitutes a memorial space in which history materialises and becomes available for collective appropriation.

Yet commemorative spaces are not mere repositories of the past. As Liu's reflection on social memory points out, those spaces are active sites of meaning-making that look backward and forward at once (Liu, 2010). A lock gate of Ming-dynasty recalls the hydraulic knowledge but also invites contemporary visitors to imagine futures of conservation, sustainable tourism and cross-cultural dialogue. When historical narratives are purely retrospective, they risk becoming inert. When they activate possible futures, they become resources for identification. Homogenisation fails precisely by reducing the Canal to an undifferentiated emblem of ancient Chinese civilisation. It forecloses the specific, textured histories that might engage international audiences. Zheng and Gao found that foreign media attend to the Canal's local governance and environmental dimensions (Zheng & Gao, 2026), so the mundane histories may carry more cross-cultural traction than the grand civilisational frame.

The Spatial Dimension: Anchor–Path–Network Configuration

If the historical dimension addresses when the Canal matters, the spatial dimension addresses where and how. The Canal is linear heritage and linearity poses distinctive narrative challenges. Linear narratives risk monotony, and linear heritage risks becoming a sequence of disconnected points.

The anchor–path–network model addresses this risk. An anchor is a concentrated site of meaning, such as the Sanwan Water Conservancy Hub, where hydraulic engineering, historical sedimentation and scenic experience converge. Anchors function like Kress and van Leeuwen’s notion of “salience” in visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021), they attract attention, focalise meaning and provide entry points for immersion. The path is the connective line along which anchors are experienced in sequence, transforming discrete sites into a coherent itinerary. The network is the broader field of associations, other canals such as the Danube, the Erie and the Canal du Midi, comparable hydraulic traditions, within which the Canal gains meaning through relation rather than isolation. This configuration addresses fragmentation directly, instead of leaving digital content scattered, it provides an organising schema in which each fragment occupies a position within a larger spatial logic.

The Emotional Dimension: Individual–Group–Humanity Resonance

The third dimension concerns affective engagement. Homogenisation and superficiality both betray a reluctance to engage with the emotional textures of heritage. The specific human experiences that make the Canal not merely historically significant but personally meaningful.

The framework distinguishes three concentric levels of emotional address. The individual level operates through personal stories, the towpath puller’s daily labour, the lock-keeper’s nightly watch, the merchant’s journey along the waterway. Such micro-narratives, as Yan et al.’s adaptation model suggests, invite cross-cultural empathy through recognisable human experience (Yan, Yang, Mai, et al., 2026). The group level encompasses collective formations, the communities of boatmen and riverside dwellers whose practices crystallised around the Canal. The humanity level operates at the broadest scale, recognising the Canal as a collective human achievement whose conservation is a shared responsibility. This tiered structure responds to an insight that the most profound barrier to intercultural understanding is not informational but emotional (Shan, 2010). Individual stories provide perceptual entry points, and group narratives thicken perception into social understanding, and humanity framing transforms understanding into solidarity.

The three dimensions are synergistic rather than additive. Spatial anchors carry historical depth, and historical narratives gain traction through emotional resonance. Emotional engagement is sustained by spatial and historical grounding. Each dimension is incomplete without the others, and their integration yields a narrative architecture greater than the sum of its parts.

Table 1
Analytical Framework of the Tripartite Narrative Model

Dimension	Narrative function	Targeted predicament
Historical	Commemorative space in dual temporality (retrospection and activation)	Superficiality
Spatial	Anchor–path–network configuration of linear heritage	Fragmentation
Emotional	Individual–group–humanity levels of affective engagement	Homogenisation

Strategic Pathways for Implementing the Tripartite Framework

Applying the tripartite model requires moving from analytical categories to operational design. Each dimension suggests strategies that address the predicaments identified above while remaining feasible within existing production constraints. The pathways outlined below are illustrative rather than exhaustive.

Historical Synergy: Cross-Media Activation and Digital Twinning

The historical dimension requires commemorative spaces to do more than announce their own significance. One pathway is cross-media activation of memory sites, which is to connect physical locations to narrative layers that visitors access through their own devices. The practice of digital twinning offers a concrete model. In the VR Banhua Zhongzhou project, developed by China Culture Cloud and the Capital Library, printed heritage texts are augmented with QR codes that link to historical scenarios, allowing users to move between textual description and immersive re-enactment. The underlying logic, as Yan et al. observe, is that media plurality amplifies rather than dilutes meaning when the media are coordinated (Yan, Yang, Mai, et al., 2026). The QR code is a small technical intervention, but its effect is structural: it turns a static commemorative object into an entry point for narrative exploration.

Spatial Synergy: Analogue Translation and Virtual Communities

Spatial fragmentation can be addressed through two complementary strategies. Analogue translation places the Grand Canal in explicit dialogue with comparable international cases. The Danube, the Erie Canal and the Canal du Midi each carry their own heritage narratives, and comparative analysis, as Li and Tang demonstrate reveals both shared challenges and culturally specific framing (Li & Tang, 2025). A narrative that acknowledges these parallels does not diminish the Canal's distinctiveness. It locates that distinctiveness within a recognisable global category. Also the construction of virtual geographic communities, digital platforms where users from different cultural backgrounds share their encounters with the Canal and with other waterways. Zhang et al.'s finding that international tourists construct meaning through reflexive engagement suggests that such communities may function less as information repositories than as spaces of narrative co-production (Zhang, Wu, Wang, et al., 2022).

Emotional Synergy: Interactive Quests and Heroic Reconfiguration

The emotional dimension requires attention to generational shifts in narrative consumption. Younger audiences respond less to declarative statements than to participatory formats. Interactive "heritage quests", modelled on location-based games, invite users to discover the Canal through self-guided challenges rather than passive reception. Yu et al.'s VR experiment "Trajectory of Relics" shows the viability of this approach that the game does not simply transmit information but constructs a narrative arc that users inhabit (Yu, Gao, Ji, et al., 2025). Heroic narratives can likewise be reconfigured for cross-cultural resonance. The aim is not to abandon figures such as Li Bing, whose taming of the Min River belongs to Chinese hydraulic lore, but to present them through analogies that travel. As Ryan's theory of narrative immersion suggests, such analogies lower the threshold of entry without flattening cultural specificity: the goal is not to make the foreign familiar in a reductive sense, but to make it accessible enough for its unfamiliar dimensions to be worth engaging (Ryan, 2001).

The pathways are not mutually exclusive. The effectiveness increases when they are combined. An AR-enhanced guide at Sanwan Hub, for instance, simultaneously activates historical memory, reinforces spatial

orientation and invites emotional engagement. The integrative logic of the tripartite model thus finds its practical expression not in separate tracks but in coordinated design.

Conclusion

This paper has identified narrative predicaments in the Grand Canal's external communication, homogenization of cultural symbols, fragmentation of meaning across platforms, and superficial treatment of heritage signifiers. It has proposed a tripartite framework. The historical dimension anchors commemorative space in dual temporality, the spatial dimension organises meaning through an anchor–path–network configuration, and the emotional dimension structures affective engagement across individual, group and humanity levels.

The framework integrates cultural memory theory, multimodal discourse analysis and narrative immersion research into a model tailored to the specific challenges of linear heritage communication. The practical pathways identified—provide concrete entry points for practitioners.

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