

A Comparative Analysis of the Encoding of Cultural Soft Power Communication in Chinese and Australian Film Festivals

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Abstract: The Shanghai International Film Festival (SIFF) and the Sydney Film Festival (SFF), both spearheaded by the Chinese and Australian governments, are of great significance to the national soft power of the respective countries. The findings indicate that SIFF and SFF are policy-driven and market-driven, respectively, and are collectivist and individualistic, respectively. In light of the government's leading position and the "Belt and Road Initiative", SIFF focuses on strengthening the cultural outreach and shaping the image of China. In response to the local diversified culture and social issues, SFF is committed to promoting multiculturalism and advancing the market-oriented operation. The aesthetic style and film language of SIFF center around the modernized expression of traditional culture and collective memory. Meanwhile, SFF highlights social participation and individual expression, with innovative film language and nonlinear narrative. For the dissemination media, SIFF is mainly disseminated via the CCTV Movie Channel and Douyin, enjoying great popularity among the general public. In comparison, SFF has a wider international dissemination via SBS and Instagram, facilitating international communication. In the context of technology reform under the influence of artificial intelligence, the experiences and implications of SIFF and SFF are of great importance to the film culture communication and innovation within and among China, Australia and the whole world.

Keywords: Film Festival, Cultural Soft Power, Communication Innovation

Introduction

Since the 21st century, the world has entered the era of images. Film has not only become an important visual medium and cultural art product, but, owing to its unique communicative advantages, has also become the "visual Esperanto"¹. In recent years, it has played an increasingly important role globally. Film festivals are not only platforms for showcasing cinematic art and technology, but also serve as tools for countries to demonstrate national image and promote values in cultural diplomacy. Through film—a universal language—international film festivals can transcend cultural, linguistic, and geographical barriers, presenting the cultural characteristics of different countries and regions on the world stage. Through screenings, awards, forums, and other activities, film festivals can enhance audiences' understanding of the social, historical, and humanistic values behind films from diverse cultural backgrounds, thereby boosting a nation's cultural influence.

Against this background, film festivals, as an important component of national soft power, rely on Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding process for communication. Unlike the traditional "transmission model" of constructing media texts, Hall posits that the active construction of meaning (rather than passive reception) is a socially structured process. To fully understand its complexity, the communication process must be considered as a whole, with due attention paid to each stage or "moment" of the process (Hall, 2019)². Essentially, Hall believes that media texts are "polysemic"—they can have multiple meanings in different social and cultural contexts. Differences in encoding reflect the diversity of expression, narrative logic, and emotional transmission in different cultural contexts. These differences not only affect the audience's level of acceptance but also determine the depth and breadth of cultural communication.

This study deconstructs the film festival's curatorial mechanism into coding behavior for the first time and establishes a three-level analysis model of "empirical research-deep expression-symbolic coding". Under the context of cultural globalization, film festivals not only are the means of cultural diplomacy intuitively, but also play an important role in the aspect of value formation, cultural identity, international impact etc. This paper conducts a comparative and case study on the Shanghai International Film Festival and Sydney Film Festival to investigate their strategies of cultural communication and values. Meanwhile, the research will focus on the deep-level mechanism of such festivals about how they contribute to international cultural cooperation and identity construction of the nation with innovative methods of communication and integration of different cultures. Ultimately, it aims to provide reference suggestions for promoting film cultural exchanges between China and Australia and promote the prosperity and integration of global film culture.

1. Empirical Research on Chinese and Australian Film Festivals

As the only Category A international film festival in China, the Shanghai International Film Festival (SIFF) has played an important role in promoting Chinese films to the world and promoting cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries in recent years. In contrast, the Sydney Film Festival (SFF), as one of Australia's most prestigious film festivals, is certified by the International Federation of Film Producers Associations (FIAPF) and is known as Australia's leading international film festival, known for its pioneering spirit and in-depth exploration of local culture. The two major

film festivals have taken completely different paths in implementing cultural strategies and brand building, reflecting the strategic choices and priorities of China and Australia in projecting cultural soft power.

1.1 Policy Encoding Comparison

1.1.1 Policy Support in Shanghai

Founded in 1993, the Shanghai International Film Festival is China's only non-specialized competitive international film festival recognized by the International Film Producers Association. Its growth and success are inseparable from a sound policy support system. In November 2015, Shanghai issued the "Implementation Rules for Several Policies to Promote the Development of Shanghai's Film Industry", with special funds covering almost the entire film industry chain. The Shanghai International Film Festival is supported as part of the national cultural strategy, making the film festival an important part of the development of the national cultural industry³. In 2017, the Shanghai Municipal Government launched the "Several Opinions on Accelerating the Innovative Development of the City's Cultural and Creative Industries" ("Shanghai Cultural and Creative 50") to provide all-round support for the Shanghai International Film Festival⁴. These policies cover all aspects of the film festival, from financial subsidies to tax incentives. For example, through special government funds, the Shanghai International Film Festival can attract more international films to participate in the exhibition and provide a display platform for domestic films. Such policy support has enhanced the international competitiveness of the film festival and provided institutional guarantee for the export of China's cultural soft power.

1.1.2 The Funding Mechanism of the Australia Council for the Arts

The SFF's major supporting institutions are Australia's federal and New South Wales state governments, and the Australia Council for the Arts⁵. The committee provides SFF with project-specific funding and general policy advice. In general, however, state intervention is limited. The result is that the SFF is highly reliant on market practices and corporate support to secure its future. This limited state intervention has the advantage of allowing the SFF to be more flexible and autonomous, and better able to attract international investors and films, but at the same time, requires it to continually strengthen its brand and market position in order to maintain financial and audience reach.

1.2 Differences in Film Selection Mechanisms

According to Cai Bicheng's (2021) research, since its inception in 1993, the Shanghai International Film Festival has adopted a government-led operating model and has always positioned itself around "Asia, Chinese-language films, and new talents", and its policy orientation is closely related to the "Belt and Road" initiative. For example, at the opening ceremony of the 20th Shanghai International Film Festival, representatives of 15 film institutions from 14 "Belt and Road" countries signed a scroll with distinctive Chinese characteristics. The following year, the 21st Shanghai International Film Festival established the "Belt and Road Film Week" for the first time, including activities such as "Belt and Road Film Screenings" and roundtable forums. In addition, the Shanghai International Film Festival also reflects the rich cultural connotation of Shanghai where China and the West meet and embrace all rivers. The 24th Shanghai International Film Festival has selected films from 113 countries and regions, with more than 4,400 entries. During the ten-day exhibition, 459 exhibitors from 45 countries and regions participated, nearly 60% of which were from overseas, highlighting its international positioning⁶.

In contrast, the Sydney Film Festival originated as a grassroots cinephile movement in the 1960s. Early development relied entirely on box office attendance and the support of small sponsors (such as Singapore Airlines and Park Hyatt Hotels)⁷. In its early days, the festival mainly screened European art films, and later gradually expanded to include Asian and Australian local films, thereby promoting the development of the local film industry. Since the 1980s, the film festival has continued to expand in scale, establishing more international competition units and attracting high-quality films from all over the world. Entering the 21st century, film festivals have become increasingly diversified, paying attention to issues such as indigenous peoples and female directors, and reflecting contemporary social topics. During the 2020 COVID-19 epidemic, the Sydney Film Festival actively tried online screenings, broadening the audience base. At the same time, the film festival promotes the exchange and development of the film industry in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region through industry forums and project venture capital activities. With its professional film selection mechanism and innovative film festival concept, the Sydney Film Festival has become an important platform for global film and cultural exchanges. Although the government indirectly supports film festivals through tax rebates and other means, direct policy intervention is minimal. The Sydney Film Festival's selection committee

is composed of film critics, directors and audience representatives, giving the film festival greater artistic independence (Verhoeven et al., 2015)⁸.

2. Deep Expression Modes of Communication Content

2.1 Construction of Cultural Symbol Systems

Cultural identity refers to the recognition and approval of certain practices. These practices can affect people's subjective feelings and behaviors, and are an important cornerstone for the continuation and inheritance of a group. Among them, cultural symbol identity is the bridge between clean cultural elements and individual perception, specifically referring to the recognition and acceptance of a symbol system with specific cultural significance, historical inheritance, values and aesthetic taste by an individual or group⁹. The encoding/decoding theory proposed by Hall points out that the process of symbol communication is divided into encoding (creating meaning) and decoding (receiving meaning)¹⁰. As an important carrier for the dissemination of cultural symbols, film festivals influence the audience's understanding of national culture through the screening of film works.

The Shanghai International Film Festival (SIFF) and the Sydney Film Festival (SFF) reflect different cultural communication strategies in the construction of symbol systems. SIFF showcases films from countries along the Belt and Road through the "Belt and Road" themed unit¹¹, strengthening China's role as a cultural exchange center while highlighting its political intentions and cultural export goals. In contrast, SFF pays more attention to multicultural integration and the uniqueness of Australian Aboriginal culture. During the film festival, the organizers often set up a special screening unit for Aboriginal films to showcase the rich cultural traditions and contemporary life of Australia's Aboriginal people, and to reflect the respect and protection of native culture. In addition, SFF's visual elements, such as promotional logos and poster designs, are often integrated into landmark buildings such as the Sydney Opera House and Sydney Harbor Bridge to highlight Sydney's unique urban image. In comparison, Chinese film festivals are more inclined to shape the country's image and promote international political goals through the depiction of ordinary people, while Australian film festivals are more concerned with the spread of cultural identity and social values.

2.2 Differences in Value Identification Mechanisms

The mechanism for fostering value alignment is a core element of cultural soft power, while cultural soft power itself is a central objective of high-quality cultural development. Through cultural activities, a nation can shape international audiences' recognition of and identification with its cultural values. According to Geertz's theory of cultural symbols, any symbolic system within cultural activities not only transmits the meaning of this society, but also conveys and disseminates the country's values and spiritual content externally. (Geertz, 2014)¹². Film festivals, as the carrier of such dissemination, have a certain influence on the values of the international audience through the content of their own films and dissemination methods. The Belt and Road theme in China and the establishment of the Asian New Talent Award at the Shanghai International Film Festival are all part of the strategic intent of our country's culture, and have had a certain impact on the dissemination of China's image.

Film festivals are a good medium that reflects the values advocated by the government and society. Different countries or regions use different means to expand their cultural influence. In China, the leadership of the state plays a guiding role in value orientation. The film festival can also get policy support and resources from the government, thereby helping to expand cultural influence. The rigorous selection process ensures that the films in the SIFF festival are all in line with Chinese cultural values. The international success of the *Operation Red Sea* helps to spread Chinese culture internationally and also serves the needs of the national strategy. Sydney Film Festival advocates individualism and creative freedom, regards film as a vehicle for personal expression and social reflection, so its program unit contains various themes. For example, "Documentary" and "Short Film Competition" have many works focusing on the themes of human rights, ecological environment, women's rights, etc. The Sydney Film Festival can also attract filmmakers and movie lovers worldwide by advocating diversity of value orientations and respecting individualism and creativity, which highlights the inclusive and diverse characteristics of Australian society.

3. Differences in the Encoding of Film Festival Cultural Symbol Systems

3.1 Overt Encoding

Works such as Liu Qing (2021) and *I Wish You Happiness* (2024) demonstrate the combination of regional culture with national narrative. It has been a trend for Chinese

films, especially since Wanma Tseden's film *The Silent Mani Stone* in 2002 brought the Tibetan topic into common awareness. This trend has been continuously represented by ethnic minority filmmakers in many major festivals.

3.1.1 Subject Distribution: Regional and Female Themes vs. Technological Experimentation

It is found that the major works chosen by SIFF for the past three years have focused on social reality by regional culture identity, with female themes as a new rising trend. The difference in national culture background leads to different aesthetic codes, which are embodied in the choice of film topics, cinematic styles, and narrative strategies. More detailed analysis will be presented below, based on works screened in SIFF and SFF from 2023 to 2024. In addition, films that focus on women's issues also touch more on identity awakening and social controversy. Works such as "Kong Xiu" (2024) and "Barbarian Invasion" (2024) present the growth process of women from family roles to self-realization. Overall, these films still tend to be conservative in style¹³.

In contrast, the Sydney Film Festival focuses more on films related to Australia's Aboriginal and indigenous cultures, aiming to provide space for works that are marginalized in the commercial market and expand their audience base. In 2015, the festival screened 132 new feature films, including 16 Australian productions and 26 retrospective or restored films. In the short film section, Australian works also performed well, including two projects specifically for Aboriginal filmmakers - "Song Trail on Screen", launched in partnership with the Australian Film Board's Aboriginal Department, and "Pitch Black Shorts". There is also an independent Australian short film competition unit¹⁴.

3.1.2 Visual Style: Reconstruction of Cultural Symbols and Perceptual Disruption

SIFF's visual coding is deeply rooted in the modern reconstruction of traditional cultural symbols. On the one hand, advanced technology is used to create new spatial visual effects for traditional culture; on the other hand, through abstraction, symbolism, collage, appropriation and other techniques, the extracted traditional visual elements are artistically transformed to form unique artistic images¹⁵. For example, "Chang'an 30,000 Miles" uses digital special effects to reconstruct the architectural and costume details of the Tang Dynasty, while using ink and wash techniques to create a poetic atmosphere, forming a dual visual system of "historical textual research + freehand space aesthetics". This style continues the visual legacy of China's fifth-generation

directors—such as the color symbolism system in “Hero” (red represents power, green represents nature)—with contemporary upgrades. At the same time, realist films such as “The Octagon” use high-contrast light and shadow and handheld photography to enhance the roughness of the underlying narrative.

In contrast, SFF tends to deconstruct traditional visual grammar and adopt a unique visual language and symbolic system, which is innovative and breakthrough in both style and cultural expression. For example, “We Are Still Here” adopts a multi-segment structure, integrates animation and live performance, and interweaves multiple perspectives to reshape the narrative of Australian Aboriginal history and culture. Through the reconstruction of visual symbols and multiple perspectives, the film allows the audience to perceive Aboriginal identity, trauma and resilience from a new perspective. Animation and live-action clips complement each other, breaking media boundaries and enhancing the ambiguity of cultural symbols (Slatter, 2022)¹⁶.

3.1.3 Narrative Structure: The Tension Between Collective Memory and Individual Experience

SIFF narratives often employ a strategy of “genre-based mainstream storytelling.” For instance, *The Volunteers: To War* embeds historical events within a three-act structure: the first act depicts the dilemma of decision-making (whether to enter the war), the second focuses on portraying a collective group on the battlefield, and the third elevates the theme of collective self-sacrifice. By fusing this embedded genre structure with mainstream themes, the film bridges audience expectations and mainstream ideology within the realm of contemporary mainstream cinema¹⁷. This form of explicit encoding enables audiences to interpret the film accordingly¹⁸.

SFF narratives emphasize non-linearity and interactivity. The GIO Audience Award-winning feature *The Birdcatcher* utilizes multiple perspectives and a non-linear timeline, allowing for diverse interpretations of causality and thereby enhancing audience agency and engagement. *Strange Colors* unfolds through a non-traditional narrative; the plot advances via the protagonist’s stream of consciousness and memories, requiring the audience to piece together character relationships and emotional threads to experience the allure of an “open” narrative. The 2016 SFF film *The Rehearsal* features a loose structure that employs a “play-within-a-play” technique and interweaves memory with reality, allowing viewers to shift freely between narrative layers and challenging conventional linear storytelling.

3.2 Covert Encoding: Diverse Communication and Promotion

Film festivals utilize innovative communication techniques, which effectively expand their influence and reflect the strength of cultural soft power. In the following, this chapter will analyze and compare the specific promotion methods of SIFF and SFF from three aspects: traditional media, new media, and international cooperation.

3.2.1 Traditional Media Matrix

(i) CCTV-6's Promotional Advantage

In China, the CCTV Movie Channel (CCTV-6) is an important platform for promoting SIFF. CCTV-6 has vast domestic media coverage and can carry out live broadcasts worldwide. SIFF will make use of CCTV-6's promotional resources, such as special programs on the SIFF, interviews with directors, and live broadcasts of the red carpet. In the 2023 SIFF, CCTV-6 will broadcast the special program for a week. Such concentrated promotion will enhance SIFF's popularity in China and expand SIFF's international influence through CCTV-6's international broadcasts.

(ii) SBS's Multicultural Communication

In Australia, the traditional media platform for promoting the Sydney Film Festival is the SBS. SBS has a much smaller audience than CCTV. However, the target audiences are well aligned with the international positioning of SFF. The promotion of SBS places more emphasis on its multicultural features. SBS provides special programs, documentaries, interviews with the directors, and uses multiple languages for subtitles to attract audiences of different cultural backgrounds. Such promotions create an open and inclusive atmosphere for SFF.

3.2.2 New Media Penetration

(i) The Communication Effect of Douyin Film Topics

In terms of dissemination methods, in the new media era, SIFF uses short video platforms such as Douyin to accurately target young audiences. SIFF's Douyin account usually posts celebrity interviews, movie recommendations and behind-the-scenes materials, which can quickly catch a buzz. In terms of the release channels, topics related to SIFF have been watched hundreds of millions of times during the 2023 edition on Douyin. Through the platform's algorithmic recommendations, SIFF-related content will be pushed to potential audiences, greatly expanding SIFF's communication scope.

(ii) Interactive Communication via Instagram

The Sydney Film Festival excels on visual and social platforms such as Instagram. By posting high-quality posters, red carpet photos, and festival highlights, SFF has

attracted a large international following. Collaborations with directors, actors, and critics to share interactive content have continuously boosted engagement on Instagram. For instance, during the 2022 festival, a single red carpet post on the official account garnered over 100,000 likes and thousands of comments. This visually driven and socially interactive approach not only enhances the festival's brand image but also strengthens its emotional connection with global audiences.

The deeper differences in cultural symbol systems are reflected in the film festivals' traditional and online communications. These covert encoding strategies have become important carriers for the dissemination of film festival ideologies and values.

Conclusion

This article systematically compares the Shanghai International Film Festival and the Sydney International Film Festival in terms of policy support, film selection mechanisms, cultural symbols, and value identification. By deconstructing the curatorial mechanisms of film festivals as encoding behaviors, it expands the research paradigm of cross-cultural communication and comparative film studies. The study finds that film festivals, as important carriers of national soft power, not only display unique approaches and strategies at the explicit level—such as policy support, film selection mechanisms, and the construction of cultural symbols—but also embody deeper cultural logic in covert communication, audience interaction, and the guidance of social issues. The comparison between Chinese and Australian film festivals within the context of globalization not only enriches the theoretical framework of cross-cultural communication and film festival studies, but also provides practical references for the implementation of national cultural strategies and the deepening of international cultural exchange.

In conclusion, film festivals should explore the integration of the new technology with films, for example, virtual reality and avant-garde art, which can be a powerful approach to enhance audiences' involvement. In the context of globalization, festivals can make use of Artificial Intelligence to promote their influence in the film industry. For instance, by employing AI-generated commentary and providing continuous translation services for foreign viewers, film festivals can improve cultural understanding and communication. By promoting cutting-edge communication technology and innovation, film festivals can exert a significant influence and can

effectively enhance the soft power of national culture on a global scale. It is also essential for Chinese and Australian film festivals to learn from each other and cooperate closely. They should pay more attention to social issues associated with the films. This enables film festivals to be more socially responsible, making the festivals increasingly globalized and internationalized. However, the impact of globalization and the implementation of AI also pose a severe challenge for film festivals. To avoid cultural homogenization, festivals need to pay attention to retaining their local and regional characteristics. By promoting international cultural exchange and communication, policymakers and organizers of film festivals should balance policy and market operation, which is of great importance in the sustainable development of festivals.

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