



ART FRONTIER

An International Art Journal / Vol.3 No.1 Jan.-Mar. 2025

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To cite this article: Chenchen Wang, “A Comparative Analysis of the Encoding of Cultural Soft Power Communication in Chinese and Australian Film Festivals,” *Art Frontier* 3, no.1 (March 2025): -, <https://doi.org/10.64212/RWXF2593>.

DOI: 10.64212/RWXF2593

ISSN: 2835-5490

EISSN: 2836-841X

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This article has undergone double-blind peer review.

Website: www.artfrontier.org

Email: artfrontier2023@outlook.com

Publishing Frequency: Quarterly (March, June, September, December)



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

Chenchen Wang

Abstract

The Shanghai International Film Festival (SIFF) and the Sydney Film Festival (SFF) are government-led film festivals in China and Australia, each with distinct characteristics in visual style, narrative structure, and modes of communication. SIFF leverages government leadership and national strategies such as the Belt and Road Initiative to strengthen cultural export and the shaping of national image, exhibiting a high degree of policy orientation and collectivist features. SFF, on the other hand, operates mainly through market mechanisms, emphasizes multiculturalism and individual expression, and highlights the diversity of local culture and social issues. SIFF focuses on the modern reinterpretation of traditional culture and the presentation of collective memory, while SFF stands out for its innovative visual language, nonlinear narratives, and social engagement. SIFF achieves wide coverage through platforms like the CCTV Movie Channel and Douyin, whereas SFF enhances international interaction via SBS TV and Instagram. As important vehicles of national soft power, film festivals not only reflect their respective cultural strategies but also, against the backdrop of globalization and artificial intelligence-driven technological change, provide valuable experience and reference for Sino-Australian and global film culture exchange and innovation.

Key Words

Film Festival, cultural soft power, communication innovation

Introduction

Since the beginning of 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 their 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, for the first time, deconstructs the curatorial mechanisms of film festivals as encoding behaviors, establishing a three-level analytical model of empirical research—deep expression—symbolic encoding. Focusing on the Shanghai International Film Festival (SIFF) and the Sydney Film Festival (SFF), and employing comparative and case study methods, it reveals the similarities and differences between the two in cultural communication strategies, value shaping, and international influence. The research not only examines the surface functions of film festivals as tools of cultural diplomacy but also explores the deeper mechanisms by which, amid globalization, innovative communication methods and multicultural integration promote national cultural identity and international cooperation. Ultimately, the study aims to provide recommendations for film cultural exchange between China and Australia, furthering the prosperity and integration of global film culture.

1. Empirical Research on Chinese and Australian Film Festivals

As the only A-category international film festival in China, the SIFF has played a significant role in promoting Chinese cinema globally and facilitating Sino-foreign cultural exchange in recent years. In contrast, the SFF, one of Australia’s most renowned festivals, is accredited by the International Federation of Film Producers Associations (FIAPF) and is celebrated as Australia’s leading international film festival, known for its pioneering spirit and deep exploration of local culture. The two festivals have taken distinctly different paths in implementing cultural strategies and building their brands, 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 SIFF is the only non-specialized competitive international film festival in China recognized by the FIAPF. Its growth and success are inseparable from a robust system of policy support. In November 2015, Shanghai issued the “Implementation Details for Policies to Promote the Development of Shanghai’s Film Industry,” providing special funding that covers almost the entire industry chain. SIFF has



Figure 1. The Sydney Film Festival, June 5-16, 2024.

Figure 2. The 26th Shanghai International Film Festival, June 14-23, 2024.

received backing as part of China's national cultural strategy, making the festival an important component of the country's cultural industry development.³ In 2017, the Shanghai municipal government introduced the "50 Measures for Cultural and Creative Industries in Shanghai," offering comprehensive support to SIFF.⁴ These policies cover all aspects of the festival, from financial subsidies to tax incentives. For example, through special government funding, SIFF can attract more international films and provide a platform for domestic films to be showcased. Such policy support has enhanced the festival's international competitiveness and provided institutional guarantees for the export of China's cultural soft power.

1.1.2 The Funding Mechanism of the Australia Council for the Arts

The Australian federal government, the New South Wales state government, and the Australia Council for the Arts are key institutions supporting the SFF.⁵ The Council primarily provides project-based funding, offering some policy guidance to SFF. However, overall, government intervention is relatively limited and the festival relies more on market-driven operations and corporate sponsorships for sustainable development. This "policy supports model" grants SFF greater freedom and flexibility, allowing it to attract a broader range of international filmmakers and investors. However, it also means the festival must continuously enhance its market competitiveness and brand influence to secure ongoing public attention and financial support.

1.2 Differences in Film Selection Mechanisms

According to Cai Bicheng (2021), since its establishment in 1993 SIFF has operated under a government-led model, consistently positioning itself around "Asia, Chinese-language films, and emerging talents," with its policy orientation deeply tied to the Belt and Road Initiative. For instance, at the opening ceremony of the 20th SIFF, representatives from fifteen film organizations and institutions from fourteen Belt and Road participating countries signed their names on a scroll imbued with distinctive Chinese characteristics. The following year, at the 21st SIFF, the Belt and Road Film Week was introduced for the first time, featuring the Belt and Road Film Showcase and roundtable forums, among other events. Additionally, SIFF embodies the rich cultural connotations of Shanghai, where East meets West and all rivers run into the sea. For the 24th SIFF, films from 113 countries and regions were selected, with over 4,400 entries. During the ten-day screening period, 459 exhibitors from forty-five countries and regions

participated, with nearly 60% coming from overseas, underscoring its international orientation.⁶

The SFF, by contrast, originated from grassroots film enthusiast movements in the 1950s. Its early development relied entirely on audience ticket sales and support from small sponsors (such as Singapore Airlines and Park Lane Hotel).⁷ In its initial years, the festival mainly showcased European art films, later expanding to include Asian and Australian works, thereby promoting the development of the local film industry. Since the 1980s, the festival has grown in scale, establishing more international competition sections and attracting high-quality films worldwide. In the 21st century the festival has become increasingly diverse, focusing on issues such as Indigenous peoples and female directors, reflecting contemporary social topics. During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, SFF actively experimented with online screenings, broadening its audience base. At the same time, the festival has promoted the exchange and development of the Australian and Asia-Pacific film industries through industry forums and project pitching events. With its professional film selection mechanism and innovative festival concepts, SFF has become an important platform for global film culture exchange. Although the government indirectly supports the festival through tax rebates, direct policy intervention is minimal. The SFF selection committee comprises film critics, directors, and audience representatives, giving the 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 conventions that can influence people's subjective feelings and behaviors, serving as an important cornerstone for the continuity and inheritance of a group. Cultural symbol identification acts as a bridge between elements of integrity culture and individual perception, especially referring to the recognition and acceptance that individuals or groups have for a symbolic system representing specific cultural meanings, historical heritage, values, and aesthetics.⁹ Hall's encoding/decoding theory points out that the process of symbolic communication is divided into encoding (creating meaning) and decoding (receiving meaning).¹⁰ As important carriers of cultural symbol dissemination, film festivals influence audiences' perceptions of national culture through the display of

cinematic works.

The SIFF and the SFF embody different cultural communication strategies in their construction of symbolic systems. SIFF, through its Belt and Road themed section,¹¹ showcases films from countries along the Belt and Road, reinforcing China's role as a center for cultural exchange while highlighting its political intentions and goals of cultural export. In contrast, SFF places greater emphasis on multicultural integration and the uniqueness of Australian Indigenous culture. During the festival, organizers often arrange special sections for Indigenous films, displaying the rich cultural traditions and contemporary life of Australia's Aboriginal peoples, reflecting a respect for and protection of local culture. Additionally, the visual elements of SFF—such as promotional logos and poster designs—frequently incorporate local features, including iconic landmarks like the Sydney Opera House and Sydney Harbour Bridge, underscoring Sydney's distinctive urban image. By comparison, Chinese film festivals tend to focus more on shaping the national image and advancing international political objectives through depictions of ordinary people, whereas Australian film festivals are more concerned with the dissemination of cultural identity and social values.

2.2 Differences in Value Identification Mechanisms

The value identification mechanism is a core element of cultural soft power, which itself is the central goal of high-quality cultural development. Through cultural activities, a nation can shape international audiences' identification with its cultural values. According to Geertz's theory of cultural symbols, the symbolic systems in cultural activities are not only expressions of social meaning but also important media for the external dissemination of values and spiritual content (Geertz, 2014).¹² As vehicles for cultural communication, film festivals can effectively influence the value identification of international audiences through their choice of content and methods of dissemination. For example, China's SIFF, through the establishment of the Belt and Road themed section and the Asian New Talent Award, clearly reflects the intentions of the national cultural strategy. This symbolic system plays a significant role in shaping China's international cultural image.

It can be said that the value identification mechanism of Chinese film festivals is centered on government leadership, strengthening the function of cultural export through policy support and resource allocation. For instance, SIFF ensures that the films selected for screening conform to China's cultural values through a rigorous selection process. The success of films like

Operation Red Sea at international film festivals not only demonstrates the communicative power of Chinese culture but also reinforces the intentions of the national cultural strategy. In contrast, the SFF is more inclined toward the expression of individualism and pluralistic values. The festival emphasizes film as a vehicle for individual expression and social reflection, encouraging filmmakers' creative freedom and focusing on individual life experiences and diverse social issues. For example, sections such as the Documentary Unit and Short Film Competition often focus on social topics like human rights, environmental protection, and gender equality, demonstrating the festival's advocacy for individual expression and diverse values. By promoting individualism and pluralistic values, the SFF attracts filmmakers and audiences from various cultural backgrounds worldwide, forming a unique mechanism of cultural identification and highlighting the openness and diversity of Australian society.

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

3.1 Overt Encoding

By comparing the films screened at the SIFF and the SFF in 2023–2024, we can observe explicit encoding differences between the two countries in terms of subject matter selection, visual style, and narrative structure. These differences reflect divergent aesthetic expressions shaped by distinct cultural backgrounds.

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

In the past three years, films featured at SIFF have focused on social realities, mainly showcasing two characteristics: first, a strong emphasis on regional cultural color; second, a flourishing of female-centered themes. Since Wanma Caidan's *The Silent Holy Stones* in 2002 introduced Tibetan subjects to a broad audience, ethnic narratives have frequently appeared at major film festivals. Recent years have seen films such as *Liu Qing* (2021) and *May All Be Well* (2024), which highlight the integration of national narratives and regional culture. In addition, films addressing women's issues increasingly explore themes of identity awakening and contentious social topics. Works like *Kong Xiu* (2024) and *Barbaric Invasion* (2024) depict the growth of women from family roles to self-realization. Overall, these films tend to maintain a stylistically conservative approach.¹³

In contrast, the SFF places greater emphasis on films related to Australian Indigenous and local cultures,

aiming to provide space for works that are marginalized in the commercial market and to expand their audience base. In 2015, the festival screened 132 new feature films, including sixteen Australian productions and twenty-six retrospective or restored films. In the short film segment, Australian works were also prominent, including two programs specifically for Indigenous filmmakers—*Songlines on Screen*, in collaboration with Screen Australia's Indigenous Department, and *Pitch Black Shorts*—as well as a separate Australian short film competition.¹⁴

3.1.2 Visual Style: Reconstruction of Cultural Symbols and Perceptual Disruption

SIFF's visual encoding is deeply rooted in the modern reinterpretation of traditional cultural symbols. On one hand, advanced technology is used to create new spatial visual effects for traditional culture; on the other, techniques such as abstraction, symbolism, collage, and appropriation are employed to artistically transform extracted traditional visual elements, resulting in unique artistic imagery.¹⁵ For example, *Three Thousand Miles of Chang'an* uses digital effects to reconstruct Tang Dynasty architecture and costume details, while employing ink wash techniques to evoke poetic atmospheres, forming a dual visual system of historical research plus impressionistic spatial aesthetics. This style continues the visual legacy of China's Fifth Generation directors—such as the color symbolism system in *Hero* (red for power, green for nature)—with contemporary upgrades. Meanwhile, realist films like *Never Say Never* use high-contrast lighting and handheld cinematography to intensify the rawness of grassroots narratives.

The SFF, by contrast, tends to deconstruct traditional visual grammar, employing distinctive visual language and symbolic systems that are innovative and groundbreaking in both style and cultural expression. For instance, *We Are Still Here* uses a multi-segment structure, blending animation and live-action, and interweaving multiple perspectives to reshape the narrative of Australian Indigenous history and culture. Through the reconstruction of visual symbols and diverse viewpoints, the film allows audiences to perceive Indigenous identity, trauma, and resilience from new angles. Animated and live-action segments complement each other, breaking the boundaries of media and enhancing the polysemy of cultural symbols (Slatter, 2022).¹⁶

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

SIFF narratives often adopt a main melody typification strategy. For example, *The Volunteers: To the War* embeds historical events within a three-act structure: the first act depicts decision-making dilemmas (whether to enter the war), the second focuses on group portrayals on the battlefield, and the third elevates the spirit of collective sacrifice. Through the integration of embedded genre structures and main melody themes, the film connects audience expectations with mainstream ideology in the new main melody cinema.¹⁷ This explicit encoding enables audiences to interpret the film accordingly.¹⁸

The SFF narratives emphasize non-linearity and interactivity. The GIO Audience Award-winning feature *Birdeater* employs multiple perspectives and a non-linear timeline, allowing for various interpretations of causality and enhancing viewer agency and engagement. *Strange Colours* unfolds through a non-traditional linear narrative, with the plot propelled by the protagonist's psychology and memory flow, requiring viewers to piece together character relationships and emotional threads, thus experiencing the allure of open-ended storytelling. The 2016 SFF film *The Rehearsal* features a loose structure, using play-within-a-play techniques and interweaving memory and reality, enabling audiences to freely switch between narrative layers and challenging traditional linear storytelling.

3.2 Covert Encoding: Diverse Communication and Promotion

As crucial platforms for cultural dissemination, film festivals rely on innovative communication methods to enhance their influence and appeal, directly impacting the effectiveness of cultural soft power export. The following explores the diverse communication and promotional strategies of SIFF and SFF from the perspectives of traditional media matrices, new media penetration, and international cooperation.

3.2.1 Traditional Media Matrix

(i) CCTV-6's Promotional Advantage

In China, the CCTV Movie Channel (CCTV-6) is a key promotional platform for SIFF. As a national-level broadcaster, CCTV-6 provides robust publicity through various program formats (such as festival specials, director interviews, and red-carpet live broadcasts). For example, during the 2023 SIFF, CCTV-6 aired related special programs for an entire week, delivering festival updates to a vast audience via its nationwide network. This concentrated traditional media coverage not only boosted the festival's domestic visibility but also expanded its overseas influence through simultaneous

international broadcasts.

(ii) SBS's Multicultural Communication

The SFF primarily relies on Australia's SBS television network as its traditional media platform. Known for its multicultural content, SBS's reach may not be as extensive as CCTV's, but its targeted strategies for diverse ethnic groups align closely with SFF's international positioning.¹⁹ Through documentaries, director interviews, and multilingual subtitles, SBS effectively attracts audiences from various cultural backgrounds, creating an open and diverse communication atmosphere for SFF.

3.2.2 New Media Penetration

(i) The Communication Effect of Douyin Film Topics

In the new media era, SIFF leverages short video platforms like Douyin to target young audiences with precision. For example, the festival's official Douyin account regularly posts behind-the-scenes footage, celebrity interviews, and film recommendations, quickly generating substantial buzz. During the 2023 festival, related topics on Douyin amassed hundreds of millions of views, demonstrating the platform's powerful reach in content dissemination. Douyin's algorithmic recommendations further extend the festival's content to potential audiences, broadening its communication scope.

(ii) Interactive Communication via Instagram

The SFF 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.

4. Conclusion

This article systematically compares the SIFF and

the SFF 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.

Looking ahead, as the global film industry continues to develop and technology advances, film festivals will play an increasingly important role in areas such as the adoption of artificial intelligence (AI), multicultural integration, international cooperation, and the promotion of social values. By deeply integrating Virtual reality (VR) and avant-garde artists to attract audiences and enhancing the viewing experience of international audiences through the comprehensive application of AI explanations and real-time translation throughout the festival process, film festivals can further strengthen national cultural soft power and expand their influence. It is hoped that this research can offer theoretical insights and practical references for the innovative development and cultural exchange of film festivals in China, Australia, and around the world. At the same time, it is recommended to promote in-depth cooperation and mutual learning between Chinese and Australian film festivals, actively innovate communication technologies and audience interaction mechanisms, strengthen connections with social issues, and enhance the social responsibility and global influence of film festivals. In the face of the homogenizing risks brought by globalization and AI, film festivals should focus on preserving local and regional characteristics, explore a balance between policy support and market-oriented operations, optimize content and communication strategies, expand international communication capabilities, and promote film festivals as an important force for advancing global cultural exchange and social progress.

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中澳兩國電影節中文化軟實力傳播的編碼比較

王忱忱

摘要: 上海國際電影節 (SIFF) 與悉尼國際電影節 (SFF) 是中澳政府主導的電影節, 二者在視覺風格、敘事結構及傳播方式上也各具特色。SIFF 依託政府主導和“一帶一路”等國家戰略, 強化文化輸出和國家形象塑造, 展現出高度政策導向和集體主義色彩; SFF 則以市場化運作為主, 強調多元文化與個體表達, 突出本土文化與社會議題的多樣性。SIFF 注重傳統文化的現代轉譯和集體記憶的呈現, SFF 則以創新性的視覺語言、非線性敘事和社會參與為亮點; SIFF 依靠央視電影頻道和抖音等平台實現廣泛覆蓋, SFF 則通過 SBS 電視台和 Instagram 強化國際互動。電影節作為國家軟實力的重要承載體, 不僅反映各自文化戰略, 還在全球化與 AI 技術變革背景下, 為中澳及全球電影文化交流與創新提供了重要經驗和參考。

關鍵詞: 電影節; 文化軟實力; 傳播創新