

Constructing Visual Empires: A Comparative Study of National Image and Cultural Soft Power in Asia-Pacific Biennials

—*A Comparative Study of Curatorial Mechanisms and Discursive*

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ABSTRACT

[Background] Post 1990s Asia-Pacific biennials have evolved into geopolitical tools, mediating national image construction, visual sovereignty, and cultural capital through divergent curatorial and institutional strategies.

[Objective] To investigate how biennials serve as visual governance mechanisms within national soft power agendas, shaping identity narratives and mediating postcolonial-modern tensions.

[Method] A triangulated approach combining historical-comparative case studies, critical curatorial discourse analysis, and socio-philosophical frameworks to decode biennials' ideological, aesthetic, and political operations.

[Results] Asia-Pacific biennials function asymmetrically, mediating between artistic innovation and state interests. The four biennials all illustrate the dialectic of cultural emancipation and ideological containment.

[Conclusion] Asia-Pacific biennials expose the paradox of cultural diplomacy, functioning as hegemonic instruments that reproduce national ideologies under cosmopolitan veneers, necessitating deeper inquiry into their evolving techno-political roles.

Keywords: Cultural Soft Power; Visual Sovereignty; Exhibitionary Nationalism; Asia-Pacific Biennials;

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1 Introduction

In the context of contemporary international relations and cultural globalization, biennials have evolved beyond mere spaces for art exhibition to become crucial platforms for nations to showcase cultural identity, promote soft power projection, and reshape international image. Particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, the biennial system has undergone significant development over the past three decades. From extensions of national cultural policy to instruments of local cultural revival and nodes within global art networks, these exhibitions have long transcended the realm of art itself, becoming sites where issues of nationalism, visual sovereignty, and cultural diplomacy converge (Biennale of Sydney, 2025).

Since its inception in 1996, the Shanghai Biennale has become one of China's most influential international contemporary art events. Its trajectory, evolving from an initial state-art-museum-led experiment in modern art to its current operation based on collaboration with global curators, reflects China's expanding power and cultural export ambitions within global cultural networks (Power Station of Art, 2024). In contrast, the Sydney Biennale, as Australia's oldest international art biennial, established in 1973, has undertaken the mission of showcasing the nation's multicultural landscape and challenging colonial narratives. This was particularly evident in the 1986 and 1988 editions, which demonstrated a high level of engagement with Indigenous art and marginal cultures (Murphy, 2011). The interaction between its curatorial logic and national political contexts forms a stark counterpoint.

This study takes the Shanghai Biennale and Sydney Biennale as its core comparative subjects, supplemented by the Yokohama Triennale (Japan) and Busan Biennale (South Korea) as additional cases. It constructs a multidimensional perspective on the cultural soft power display mechanisms across these four Asia-Pacific nations (China, Australia, Japan, South Korea). By analyzing how these exhibitions are curated, how artists are selected, and how discursive structures are built, this paper aims to explore the following core questions:

1. How are biennials incorporated into cultural strategies as mechanisms of national visual governance in Asia-Pacific countries?
2. What are the similarities and differences in artistic methods and cultural logics employed by China and Australia in constructing national image and exporting cultural soft power?
3. Compared to Japan and South Korea, what divergent trends emerge in the ways biennials function in displaying national identity, shaping visual narratives, and employing cultural diplomacy strategies?

Through in-depth analysis of specific editions (e.g., Shanghai Biennale 1996 & 2000; Sydney Biennale 1986 & 1988), this research will demonstrate how biennials have evolved in the post-Cold War era into a complex "nation-culture-exhibition" mechanism, bridging power and culture between art institutions and state ideology. The academic contribution of this paper lies in proposing two analytical concepts: "Visual Imperialism" and "Exhibitionary Nationalism," using them to probe the intersection of contemporary art and international politics.

2 Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

2.1 Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Soft Power Theory

Nye's theory posits that a nation gains international influence through the attractiveness of its culture, political values, and foreign policies, rather than through coercion or payment (Nye, 2004). Biennials, as

vehicles of cultural export, are a manifestation of soft power. This is particularly evident in the Shanghai Biennale, where soft power is realized through city image construction, embedding within international cultural networks, and the shaping of national discourse (Zhao, 2022; Markin, 2016).

2.1.2 The Exhibitionary Complex and State Governance

Bennett's concept argues that museums and exhibitions are not merely sites for displaying knowledge but apparatuses for the state's cultural governance of citizens. Extending this theory to the international biennial mechanism allows for a better understanding of how nations shape their cultural identity and narratives of modernity through curation, spatial construction, and artistic selection (Bennett, 1994).

2.1.3 Imperialism and Visual Sovereignty

Raheja's concept of "visual sovereignty" focuses on how colonized groups reclaim control over their cultural representation. In the development of the Sydney Biennale, the challenge posed by Indigenous art and curators to dominant colonial discourses constitutes a "decentralized practice of visual sovereignty," providing Australia with new political-aesthetic tools for presenting a multicultural national image (Raheja, 2010).

2.1.4 Nationalism and Cultural Strategy

Nationalism in contemporary exhibitions is manifested not only through the selection of artworks but also through linguistic strategies, curatorial structures, and modes of international cooperation, reflecting a nation's position and posture within the global cultural market. Taking China, South Korea, Japan, and Australia as examples, nationalism manifests differently in their biennials – some through reinforcing state-led discourse (e.g., China), others through challenging dominant narratives to showcase cultural openness (e.g., Australia).

Collectively, these theories offer more than parallel lenses; they form an interlinked matrix for understanding how biennials operate as both symbolic spaces and ideological infrastructures. Raheja's notion of "visual sovereignty" complements Bennett's "exhibitionary complex" by illustrating how formerly colonized curatorial voices subvert institutional norms. Simultaneously, Bourdieu's "exhibition capital" explains the aesthetic limits within which such resistance must perform, revealing the embedded tensions between visibility and legitimacy. These theoretical tools allow us to analyze biennials as contested terrains where curatorial agency, state ideology, and symbolic power converge.

2.2 Research Methodology

This study employs qualitative research methods, combining the following three approaches for case analysis.

2.2.1 Case Study Method

In-depth analysis of four representative Asia-Pacific biennials: Shanghai, Sydney, Yokohama, and Busan, with particular focus on historically pivotal editions (e.g., Shanghai Biennale 2000, Sydney Biennale 1986).

2.2.2 Curatorial Discourse Analysis

Textual analysis of exhibition themes, curatorial statements, and narrative structures to deconstruct the underlying national strategies, ideologies, and cultural logics they reflect.

2.2.3 Comparative Analysis

Establishing an analytical matrix across dimensions such as curatorial mechanisms, degree of state involvement, and cultural diplomacy strategies to systematically compare similarities and differences in cultural soft power operations among the four nations.

Through the integration of theory and method, this paper will provide new analytical pathways for understanding how Asia-Pacific biennials become integral components of national cultural strategies, while also offering empirical observations and theoretical reflections on global art exhibition politics from an Asia-Pacific

perspective.

3 Shanghai Biennale: Curatorial Transformation and the Practice of Cultural Soft Power

3.1 Curatorial Transformation and the Path to Legitimization of Chinese Contemporary Art

The inaugural Shanghai Biennale in 1996 opened at the Shanghai Art Museum (now the Power Station of Art) with the theme "Open Space," curated by Van Berselen, Fang Zengxian, and others. Its significance lay not only in being the first state-level exhibition format explicitly labeled "contemporary art" but also in marking the official art system's initial accommodation of experimental art. The 2000 edition, "Shanghai Spirit: Open City," curated by Hou Hanru, Li Xiaoshan, Zhang Qing, and Japanese curator Reiko Tomii, represented a turning point for internationalization. It was the first to introduce an international curatorial team and international artists, bringing Chinese underground art into an institutional context (Lu, 2007; Fang & Xin, 2020). While emphasizing "urban space" transformation, the exhibition's curatorial language strategically blurred the boundaries between official and unofficial art, striving for "legitimacy" and "modernity" as national symbols for contemporary art in China.

This mechanism demonstrates that the Shanghai Biennale is not merely an art display platform but a site for the reproduction of national image and cultural discourse power. It essentially reflects the state's cultural imagination of modernity, globalization, and urban development (Zhu & Braden, 2022).



Fig 1:The inaugural Shanghai Biennale held in 1996

Image source: From A picture of the inaugural Shanghai Biennale in 1996, by China Daily, 2020, August 14

(<https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202008/14/WS5f35cb8aa310834817260367.html>). Copyright 2020 by China Daily.

3.2 Interaction between Exhibition Themes and Social Context

For instance, the 13th Shanghai Biennale (2020-2021), themed "Bodies of Water," raised questions of "trans-species" and "trans-regional" symbiosis against the backdrop of the global pandemic, border politics, and ecological crisis. This not only responded to the "New Ecological" theories (Posthumanism, Anthropocene) prevalent in the global art world but also extended the cultural translation of China's national "Ecological Civilization" strategy into the realm of contemporary art. Curator Andrés Jaque emphasized "distributed communities" and "blurred boundaries," thereby disrupting cultural units defined by the nation-state and prompting reflection on "Asia-centrism" and "decolonial curation."

This indicates that the Shanghai Biennale possesses strong issue sensitivity and theoretical updating capabilities in its artistic approach, yet it remains situated within a space of tension between national cultural policy and international discourse.



Fig 2:The Grand Opening of the Third Phase of the 13th Shanghai Biennale – "An Exhibition"

Image source:From An Exhibition: The 13th Shanghai Biennale Grand Opening, by Power Station of Art, 2021

(<https://www.powerstationofart.com/whats-on/news/an-exhibition-13th-shanghai-biennale-grand-opening>). Copyright 2021 by Power Station of Art.

3.3 The Role of the Shanghai Biennale in Global Cultural Soft Power

According to research by Hu Yuanyue and Gao Hongyan (2019) on "Belt and Road" cultural industries, cultural festivals like the Silk Road International Film Festival and Beijing Design Week play mediating roles at different levels in China's "going out" cultural strategy. The Shanghai Biennale operates similarly. Since around 2010, it has been incorporated into national cultural export policies and, through interactions with major Western

biennials (e.g., Venice, Documenta), has sought to construct a "Chinese narrative."

Especially after its 2012 relocation to the repurposed power plant now housing the Power Station of Art (PSA), the exhibition underwent not only a spatial transformation into a "post-industrial" site but also symbolically projected a "New China" vision intertwining technology and culture. The exhibition's national identity is determined not only by participating institutions but also co-constructed by its theme, language, audience composition, and media strategy.

Although the Shanghai Biennale emphasizes "cross-cultural exchange," in practice, the participation of international artists often carries a symbolic or "localized" character (Lin, 2019).his asymmetry reflects how "cultural soft power" is not purely about producing global consensus but involves a politics of display (display politics) predominantly framed by the nation-state, closely linked to post-imperial legacies.

Therefore, the Shanghai Biennale functions both as an apparatus for cultural soft power export and as a visual mechanism for national identity construction, constantly negotiating its mode of "being seen" within the global art system.

3.4 Case Study of the 2023 Shanghai Biennial

The 14th edition of the Shanghai Biennale, titled *Cosmos Cinema*, curated by Anselm Franke, marked a significant shift in its conceptual trajectory by introducing themes of posthumanism, cosmology, and non-human agency. The exhibition attempted to weave together multimedia installations, film/video works, and speculative theory to present an interdisciplinary "de-anthropocentric" perspective.

However, beneath the Latourian "multi-world ontology" lies an unresolved institutional tension. The exhibition operated within a tightly managed cultural infrastructure backed by the state, reflecting a broader strategy of cultural legitimization. Despite its global language, the curatorial practice remained structurally shaped by national institutions, as evident in exhibition space allocation, audience communication materials, and partnership frameworks. While visually cosmopolitan, it ultimately served China's ongoing narrative of being a culturally modern and ideologically sovereign actor in the global art world. This contradiction — between cosmological themes and institutional alignment — reveals a deeper paradox: while the Biennale adopts posthuman and decolonial rhetoric, its operation remains embedded in a state-managed framework. In this sense, *Cosmos Cinema* offers a valuable lens into how China uses global discourses as strategic surfaces for national image reconfiguration under the banner of contemporary cultural soft power.

Audience reception of *Cosmos Cinema* was mixed. While international press praised its speculative ambition (e.g., *ArtAsiaPacific*, 2023), Chinese social media commentary focused on its spatial inaccessibility and intellectual elitism, especially among younger audiences on Xiaohongshu. Despite its Latourian framing, some criticized its distance from local sociopolitical concerns, reinforcing the exhibition's tension between global discourse and domestic legibility.

While the Shanghai Biennale exemplifies a state-integrated model of cultural governance and symbolic diplomacy, the Sydney Biennale reveals an alternative trajectory — less centralized, more pluralistic, and grounded in postcolonial reflection. This contrast is further explored below

4 Curatorial Practice and Cultural Positioning of the Sydney Biennale: A Comparative Perspective

4.1 Curatorial Concepts and National Posture

Since its founding in 1973, the Sydney Biennale has presented a more decentralized and critical exhibition language. For example, the 1986 and 1988 editions curated by Nick Waterlow, titled "Origins, Originality and Beyond" and "From the Southern Cross: A View of World Art c.1940–88" respectively, explicitly rejected cultural divisions based on nation-states, turning instead towards cross-cultural fluidity, the visibility of Indigenous art, and the recontextualization of colonial history.

Waterlow advocated using curation to challenge "Western centrism," emphasizing Australia's self-reflection on its identity as part of the "Global South." In the 1988 exhibition, he insisted that Indigenous art was "not a traditional sign system but a living contemporary expression," thus incorporating it into the main venue and challenging the binary division between "high art" and "marginal art" (Thomas, 1999).

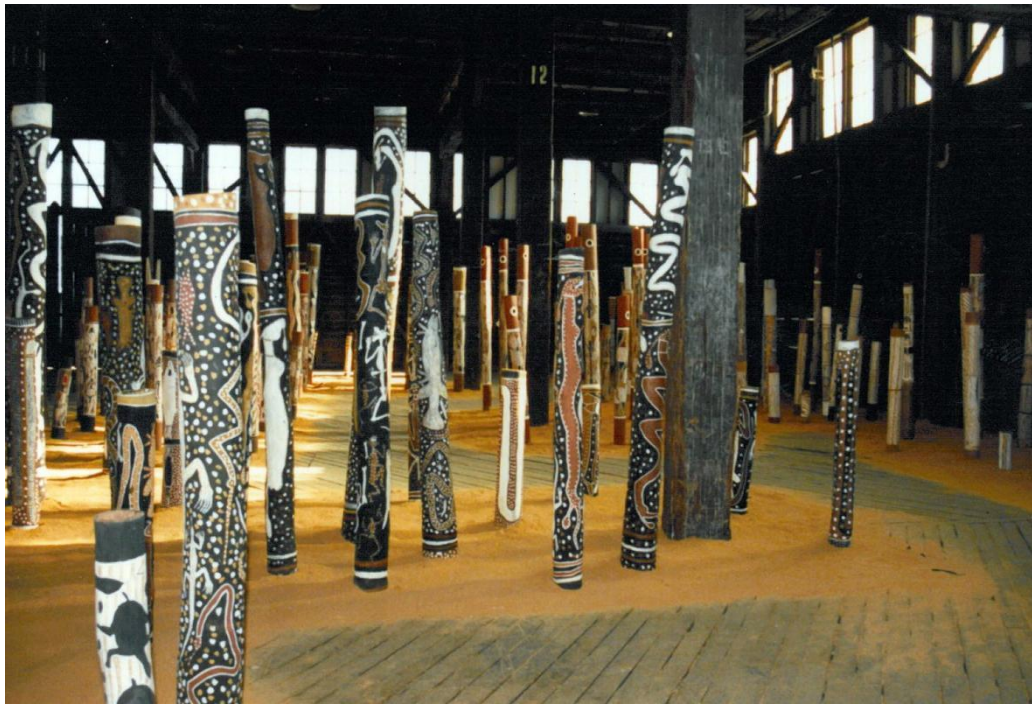


Fig 3: The Aboriginal Memorial at the 1988 Biennale of Sydney

Image source: From *Defining Moments: The Aboriginal Memorial at the Biennale of Sydney with Djon Mundine*, by Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2020

(<https://acca.melbourne/video/defining-moments-the-aboriginal-memorial-at-the-biennale-of-sydney-with-djon-mundine/>). Copyright 2020 by Australian Centre for Contemporary Art.

4.2 Similarities and Differences with the Shanghai Biennale

The Sydney Biennale has historically not been positioned as a core national strategic cultural project; its funding relies more heavily on private sources and foundations, affording it relatively higher curatorial autonomy. In contrast, the Shanghai Biennale has increasingly been integrated into the national "cultural soft power" system over the past decade. Despite diverse themes, the construction of national image behind it is more pronounced.

Furthermore, the Sydney Biennale exhibits distinct strengths in addressing Indigenous issues, gender questions, and postcolonial discussions, while the Shanghai Biennale tends to be more cautious with overtly political discourse, often wrapping social critique within indirect themes like "city," "ecology," or "borders." Their respective paths of cultural output reflect different state systems, ideological mechanisms, and art ecosystem backgrounds.

4.3 Case Study Analysis of the 2024 Sydney Biennale

The 24th Sydney Biennale, *Ten Thousand Suns*, curated by Cosmin Costinas and Inti Guerrero, offers a radical vision of cultural multiplicity and post-national imagination. Using solar multiplicity as metaphor, the exhibition mobilizes Indigenous cosmologies, botanical intelligence, and non-Western knowledge systems to reposition the Southern Hemisphere as an epistemological and aesthetic center.

Decentralized across multiple urban sites and featuring a diverse range of cross-cultural artists, the exhibition challenges the very idea of “nation” as an organizing principle. However, this approach also reveals structural contradictions. While promoting distributed subjectivity and resisting cultural centrism, the curatorial framework risks generating a new normative model—one where “diversity” becomes institutionalized and performative.

Moreover, the Biennale’s visibility strategy—spanning extensive media coverage, immersive spatial design, and trans-Indigenous collaboration—reflected Australia’s ongoing project of reconstructing its cultural legitimacy in a post-colonial era. It aligns with a “critical soft power” model that foregrounds self-reflection, decolonial accountability, and public intellectual engagement. In essence, *Ten Thousand Suns* illustrates how the Sydney Biennale leverages curatorial decentralization as both an ethical and aesthetic practice, yet must continually negotiate its own embeddedness in institutional hierarchies and cultural funding politics.

Beyond the dominant cases of Shanghai and Sydney, the Busan and Yokohama biennials provide auxiliary yet critical insights into alternative models of cultural expression in East Asia. Though not always at the center of geopolitical soft power discourse, they offer divergent curatorial logics that complicate simplistic national narratives

5 Peripheral Visions and Institutional Alternatives: Insights from the Busan and Yokohama Biennales

5.1 Busan Biennale: Cultural Division and Future Visions

The Busan Biennale, initiated in 2002 (transformed from the former Sea Art Festival), emerged amidst fluctuations in inter-Korean relations and South Korea's modernization. It emphasizes the regeneration of the "post-industrial city" and the reimagining of "Asian Modernity." For example, the 2018 theme "Divided We Stand," curated by Christoph Tannert, focused on Cold War, division, and the DMZ, featuring voices including North Korean artists, reflecting South Korea's complex cultural stance towards "national unification" and "regional identity" (Busan Biennale Organizing Committee, 2018). The Busan Biennale’s choice of abandoned warehouses as exhibition venues served to reinforce themes of labor precarity and post-industrial trauma, although many installations were formally refined to meet museum-grade standards, diluting their raw affective charge.

The 2022 Busan Biennale, *We, On the Rising Wave*, curated by Kim Hyojin and a Malaysian team, marked a distinct shift toward politically sensitive and socially engaged curatorial narratives. The exhibition focused on the historical traumas of Korea and broader East Asia, especially issues of labor exploitation, forced migration, and the silencing of working-class experiences under modern capitalist regimes.

By foregrounding marginalized voices—particularly those beyond nation-state boundaries—the Biennale constructed a cultural response space to South Korea's compressed modernity and its socio-economic dislocations. The curatorial approach emphasized locality and geopolitics through site-specific works and

collaborative practices with grassroots communities.

However, despite its critical ambitions, the exhibition revealed the limits of institutional tolerance. Many works, while potent in content, were presented within visually aestheticized forms that aligned with dominant norms of what Bourdieu terms “exhibition capital.” This tension between message and medium indicates a structural constraint: the institutional framework still mediates and shapes what forms of suffering are deemed “acceptable” for public display. In this sense, the Busan Biennale articulates a form of affective subjectivity—art as therapeutic narrative—but one entangled in aesthetic regimes that risk depoliticizing the very critiques they attempt to make visible.

5.2 Yokohama Triennale: Cultural Redefinition in the Post-Bubble Economy

Launched in 2001, the Yokohama Triennale is a key event in Japan's internal economic stagnation and external cultural image reshaping. Its curation often intersects with literature, philosophy, and technology. For instance, the 2011 edition "OUR MAGIC HOUR" (curated by artist-curator Mami Kataoka) was driven by philosophical questions to engage audiences (Yokohama Triennale Organizing Committee, 2011).

Compared to the Shanghai Biennale's reinforcement of national narratives, the Yokohama Triennale emphasizes individual experience, future imaginaries, and anti-war sentiments. Its exhibition language is more liberal and closely linked to deep-seated Japanese cultural logics like "aesthetics of detail" and "non-verbal expression."

Furthermore, The 2024 Yokohama Triennale, *Wild Grass: Our Lives*, curated by Raqs Media Collective, drew inspiration from Lu Xun's poetic prose to explore themes of ecology, memory, and the microscopic life-worlds of humans and non-humans. Its visual strategy favored abstract installations, literary references, and contemplative atmospheres that lacked a clear narrative center, encouraging viewers to linger in states of introspection and temporal suspension.

As an extension of Yokohama's long-standing curatorial identity, this edition reinforced a distinctly Japanese sensibility—marked by philosophical abstraction, formal subtlety, and emotional restraint. The exhibition reflects a collective post-bubble cultural psychology that prioritizes aesthetic healing over confrontational critique. Art here becomes a space of mediated emotional recovery, aligning with Japan's broader preference for “low-conflict, high-introspection” cultural forms.

Yet, this stylistic elegance comes at a cost. Critics argue that the Triennale's avoidance of explicit engagement with structural issues—such as colonialism, gender inequity, or class exploitation—results in what can be termed post-aesthetic evasiveness. The high aesthetic quality masks an underlying political retreat, raising questions about the ethical responsibilities of large-scale exhibitions in times of socio-political crisis. In essence, *Wild Grass: Our Lives* offers poetic resonance and emotional depth, yet it simultaneously illustrates the limits of contemplation as a mode of cultural critique within institutional art frameworks

6 Quadripartite Comparison in the Contemporary Context:

Art-Philosophical and Sociological Perspectives

6.1 Biennials as Cultural Mirrors: The Interweaving of Power, Aesthetics, and Social Structure

Through a comparative lens encompassing the Shanghai Biennale, Sydney Biennale, Busan Biennale, and Yokohama Triennale, this study uncovers the complex and often contradictory roles Asia-Pacific biennials play in shaping contemporary cultural geopolitics. Far from being neutral artistic platforms, these exhibitions function as cultural mirrors—reflecting, refracting, and at times distorting national soft power ambitions, aesthetic ideologies, and sociopolitical anxieties.

Despite divergent curatorial strategies and institutional frameworks, all four biennials reveal a shared condition: their entanglement with broader state narratives, postcolonial tensions, and global cultural competition. Each case illustrates how curatorial practice has evolved into a form of visual governance, operating not only through artistic choices but also through spatial politics, institutional alliances, and public discourse shaping.

For instance, both the Yokohama Triennale and Sydney Biennale attempt to challenge dominant Western-centric art histories—but through contrasting strategies. The former embraces contemplative abstraction, relying on indirect emotional resonance, while the latter deploys overtly political curation centered on Indigenous epistemologies. These divergent logics reveal differing levels of institutional risk tolerance and public engagement cultures. Similarly, while both Busan and Shanghai embed state narratives, Busan tends to aestheticize class trauma, whereas Shanghai enacts symbolic cosmopolitanism. Thus, meaningful comparisons lie not merely in structural contrasts, but in how each biennial negotiates the cultural legibility of dissent under different ideological regimes.

Specifically, the four biennials embody distinctive strategies of cultural expression and soft power projection. The Shanghai Biennale functions as a state-led apparatus of institutionalized cultural diplomacy, employing contemporary aesthetics to reconstruct China's national image as cosmopolitan, progressive, and globally engaged. In contrast, the Sydney Biennale exemplifies a model of critical soft power, challenging colonial legacies through decolonial curatorial practice, Indigenous visibility, and distributed authorship—strategies that aim to repair cultural legitimacy through epistemic pluralism. The Busan Biennale foregrounds affective rupture, responding to South Korea's uneven modernization and historical trauma. Its socially engaged artworks cultivate civic subjectivities while re-politicizing collective memory. Meanwhile, the Yokohama Triennale adopts an introspective curatorial mode, drawing on poetic abstraction and non-narrative structures to express Japan's post-bubble cultural melancholia; yet, this formal refinement often resists direct engagement with structural political issues. At a meta-level, these divergent trajectories reflect broader models of cultural diplomacy: China pursues world-making through institutional frameworks; Australia emphasizes cultural repair via reflexive diversity; South Korea processes structural wounds through affective curation; and Japan engages in post-traumatic introspection through aesthetic restraint.

6.2 Critical Comparative Summary (Art-Philosophical and Sociological Framework)

To further systematize the comparative analysis of the four biennales discussed, this section introduces a matrix that juxtaposes their respective cultural mechanisms, curatorial logics, and sociological dimensions. The comparative table is structured around three interlocking frameworks:

Cultural Mechanism: Drawing on Nye's (2004) model of soft power—culture, political values, and foreign policy—this dimension captures how biennales are deployed within national or post-national strategies.

Art-Philosophical Logic: Reflecting on concepts like Deleuzian multiplicity, Latourian ontologies, and Raheja's visual sovereignty, this category highlights the aesthetic and epistemological foundations that inform each biennale's curatorial discourse.

Sociological Focus: Informed by Bourdieu’s theory of “exhibition capital” (1993) and Bennett’s “exhibitionary complex” (1994), this dimension examines how biennales mediate social identities, class representations, and institutional critique.

By organizing the comparison along these axes, the table transcends surface-level contrasts and articulates a more nuanced view of how biennales operate at the intersection of art, ideology, and soft power. This comparative matrix enables the identification of core differences not only in visual discourse but also in institutional function, audience engagement, and national image production.

Table 1 Comparative Framework of Four Major Asia-Pacific Biennales and Triennales

Category	Shanghai Biennale	Sydney Biennale	Busan Biennale	Yokohama Triennale
Cultural Mechanism	National Cultural Strategy Platform	Public & Critical Art Platform	Geopolitical Response Mechanism	Aesthetic Contemplation & Cultural Healing
Art-Philosophical Logic	Multi-World Ontology (Posthuman)	Distributed Subjectivity & Decolonial Philosophy	Affective Subjectivity & Modernity Critique	Heterotopic Poetics (Lu Xun + Ecology)
Sociological Focus	Institutional Legitimization & Cultural Export	Decolonization, Interculturality, Indigenous Sovereignty	Class Conflict & Cultural Trauma	Social Melancholy & Aesthetic Healing
Key Problematic	National Performance in Global Context	Centering the Marginal	Repairing North-South Cultural Divide	Japanese Cultural Silence & Non-Radical Reflection
Critical Risk	Institutional appropriation of "global" discourse to reinforce national image	New normativity of anti-cultural centrism	Aesthetic normalization of visual suffering	Aesthetic evasion of social conflict's root causes

Note. Table summarizes curatorial mechanisms and thematic logics based on interpretive analysis of biennale discourses (1990s–2020s).

These comparative insights, while illuminating structural commonalities and critical divergences, also underscore the need for further interrogation of biennials’ evolving roles amid global crises and techno-political transformations—a discussion that frames the concluding reflections below.

7 Conclusion and Future Outlook

This study, taking four representative Asia-Pacific biennials – Shanghai, Sydney, Busan, and Yokohama – as comparative subjects, dissects their unique roles in contemporary art development and cultural soft power construction. Through in-depth analysis of curatorial concepts, exhibition themes, artist composition, and social contexts, the paper reveals that biennials are not only platforms for art presentation but also arenas for national identity, ideology, and the interplay of global cultural capital.

In the Shanghai Biennale, we observe the state's high-level integration of contemporary art as a cultural strategic resource. Its globalized visual language embeds mechanisms for the reproduction of nationalism, showcasing China's ambition and pathways in reconstructing a global art center (Power Station of Art, n.d.; Biennial Foundation, n.d.). The Sydney Biennale, through decentralized curation, the foregrounding of Indigenous art, and the introduction of ecologically critical discourse, forms a reflective and structurally critical mode of cultural diplomacy, highlighting Australia's efforts to reconstruct its cultural legitimacy in the post-colonial era (UNSW Newsroom, 2022). In contrast, the Busan Biennale and Yokohama Triennale respectively embody South Korea's mechanism of artistic healing for the ruptures of modernity and the continuation of Japan's tradition of contemplative aesthetics, both demonstrating distinct introspective and philosophical qualities in their responses to global issues (ArtReview, 2024; Yokohama Triennale, n.d.).

Collectively, these biennials constitute a microcosm of the internal cultural structures within the Asia-Pacific region. Different nations, through exhibition strategies and artistic narrative forms, showcase their respective responses to modernity, identity politics, global discursive power, and cultural competitiveness. The artistic discourses they construct convey not only specific nations' cultural self-positioning but also reflect how curation becomes part of institutional power, intervening in multiple layers such as national image shaping, city branding, and social ideology guidance.

Looking ahead, with the deepening of emerging global issues like Artificial Intelligence, climate change, and digital capitalism, the function of biennials will further transcend mere art exhibition, becoming increasingly complex platforms for knowledge, power, and social experimentation. The effectiveness and criticality of these platforms will depend on their ability to break through the dual frameworks of cultural industry logic and institutional norms, genuinely stimulating public participation, intellectual dialogue, and cross-cultural reflection. Therefore, this study not only provides a theoretical framework for understanding the cultural politics of Asia-Pacific biennials but also offers critical perspectives and practical references for how art exhibitions can play an active role in global transformation in the future.

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