

# Constructing the Image of Tianjin: A Corpus-Based Discourse Analysis

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Urban image is a vital component of a city's cultural soft power, and a positive urban image serves as an intangible asset. Based on the NOW (News On the Web) corpus and employing critical discourse analysis, this paper systematically examines the portrayal of Tianjin in international mainstream media. The findings reveal that, from a spatiotemporal perspective, Tianjin has consistently attracted attention from mainstream English-language media worldwide. Thematic analysis indicates that international coverage predominantly focuses on topics such as "northern coastal municipality", "host of major events", "economic and trade hub", and "healthcare." In terms of reporting tone, overseas mainstream media generally maintain a positive to neutral stance in coverage related to Tianjin. In future communication efforts, Tianjin should strive to narrate its own stories effectively to further enhance its international influence.

*Keywords:* Tianjin, city image, corpus, critical discourse analysis

## Introduction

The concept of "city image" was first proposed by the American urban image theorist Kevin Lynch (1960) in his seminal work *The Image of the City*. Expanding on this, Lewis Mumford (2009), taking into account various factors influencing city image, argued that it is shaped through the interaction of multiple elements such as mass media, personal experience, memory, and environment. In recent years, building a positive city image has become a widely shared consensus. A favorable city image internally enhances citizens' sense of identity and cohesion, thereby improving the effectiveness of social governance; externally, it serves as important soft power, helping to attract international investment and talent while strengthening the city's global competitiveness. Against the backdrop of China's accelerated urbanization and rapid urban transformation, research on city image has garnered increasing attention across multiple academic fields. The construction of city image has sparked extensive interdisciplinary discussions in areas such as journalism and communication, economics, sports, tourism, and urban planning.

Currently, discourse analysis has become a significant approach in investigating the construction of city image. Li Chengming and Ma Yingcai (2023) employed critical discourse analysis to examine overseas media coverage of Chongqing's image, proposing recommendations for further enhancing Chongqing's international profile based on their findings. Liu Chuanjiang (2023), utilizing the NOW (News On the Web) corpus and

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discourse analysis methodology, discovered that overseas English-language media primarily focus on the broad prospects of economic integration in the Greater Bay Area, constructing an image of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area as full of development opportunities.

Situated at the strategic confluence of China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Coordinated Development Strategy, Tianjin has historically served as the gateway to the capital and a pioneering zone for reform and opening-up. In recent years, under the guidance of the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei coordinated development strategy, the Tianjin chapter of Chinese modernization has continuously demonstrated new vitality. The successful hosting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Tianjin has further amplified the city's charm which is encapsulated by the poetic imagery of "sparkling lights along the Haihe River, Tianjin embraces all streams", leading to steadily growing attention from overseas media. This study will utilize the NOW corpus and employ critical discourse analysis to examine the focal points in the construction of Tianjin's city image by mainstream English-language media.

### **Literature Review**

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) aims to address social issues through the examination of linguistic forms, combining critique of discourse with explanations of how discourse functions within existing social realities, thereby establishing a foundation for action to transform reality in specific aspects (Fairclough, 2015). By integrating corpus linguistics with critical discourse analysis, this study investigates the construction of Tianjin's city image through three dimensions: the spatiotemporal distribution of reports, their thematic focus, and their attitudinal positioning. This approach not only expands the scope of corpus-based research on city image but also facilitates a multifaceted exploration of the discursive characteristics inherent in urban image reporting.

### **Research Design**

#### **Data and Research Subjects**

The research data for this study is sourced from the NOW corpus, one of the largest English news corpora globally. This corpus archives English online news published by mainstream media outlets from 20 countries and regions since 2010, serving as a vital platform for understanding focal topics and perspectives in international mainstream English-language media. Currently containing 17.2 billion words, the corpus expands at a rate of 140-160 million words per month (approximately 300,000 news reports), equivalent to an annual increase of 2 billion words. This study selects reports related to "Tianjin" from the NOW corpus between 2010 and 2025 as research subjects, with specific focus on the construction of Tianjin's city image.

#### **Research Questions**

This study aims to address the following three research questions:

1. What are the spatiotemporal distribution patterns of international media coverage on Tianjin?
2. What core thematic foci emerge from international media reports concerning Tianjin?
3. What predominant attitudes characterize international media's portrayal of Tianjin in their coverage?

#### **Research Procedure and Methods**

To answer the above questions, the present study employed a three-stage analytical framework: (1) Spatiotemporal analysis: The researcher examined the distribution of Tianjin-related coverage across time and

geography. After identifying the specific time periods and countries/regions where mainstream English-language media reported on Tianjin, patterns of concentrated coverage emerged, and the underlying reasons for such patterns were explored. (2) Thematic analysis: The predominant themes and focal points in international English-language media coverage of Tianjin were examined. The procedure involved extracting high-frequency collocates associated with Tianjin from the corpus, followed by semantic categorization of these terms to derive central reporting themes. (3) Attitudinal analysis: The reporting stances adopted by international mainstream media toward Tianjin were assessed. This stage involved retrieving high-frequency adjectives collocating with Tianjin, supplemented by contextual analysis through concordance examination to determine media framing and evaluative positioning.

## Results and Discussion

### Spatiotemporal Distribution of Reports

This study first conducted a quantitative analysis based on the NOW corpus to examine the spatiotemporal distribution of reports, aiming to identify the specific time periods and the countries/regions whose mainstream English-language media have reported on Tianjin.

**Temporal distribution of reports.** Analysis of publication timelines reveals the specific periods during which Tianjin garnered attention from international mainstream English-language media. Data retrieved from the NOW corpus indicates that between 2015 and 2025, the term “Tianjin” appeared 23,088 times. Coverage peaked in 2025 both in terms of word count and frequency. Further analysis identified August and September as the months with the highest concentration of reports, attributable to Tianjin hosting the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit—the largest since the organization’s establishment. Figure 1 illustrates the temporal distribution of Tianjin-related reports in international mainstream media and the corresponding trend in reporting volume.

Given variations in total news word volume across different periods, relying solely on raw frequency proves insufficient for accurate comparison; normalized frequency must also be considered. The normalized frequency was calculated using the following formula:  $\text{Normalized Frequency} = (\text{Report Frequency} / \text{Total Word Count}) * 1,000$ . Based on this metric, 2025 recorded a normalized frequency of 1.81 per thousand words, representing the highest value observed to date.

**Spatial distribution of reports.** The spatial distribution of reports reveals which countries’ mainstream English-language media have focused on Tianjin. Search results indicate that from 2015 to 2025, the region with the highest reporting frequency on Tianjin was India (4,015 instances), followed by Singapore (3,768 instances), and the United States in third place (3,720 instances). The United Kingdom and Hong Kong China followed closely behind. The distribution of reporting frequency is shown in Figure 2.

In summary, the temporal distribution of reports demonstrates that Tianjin has consistently attracted international attention since 2010, with both the frequency and volume of coverage showing gradual growth. From a spatial perspective, Tianjin has garnered worldwide media interest, receiving particular attention from outlets in India, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

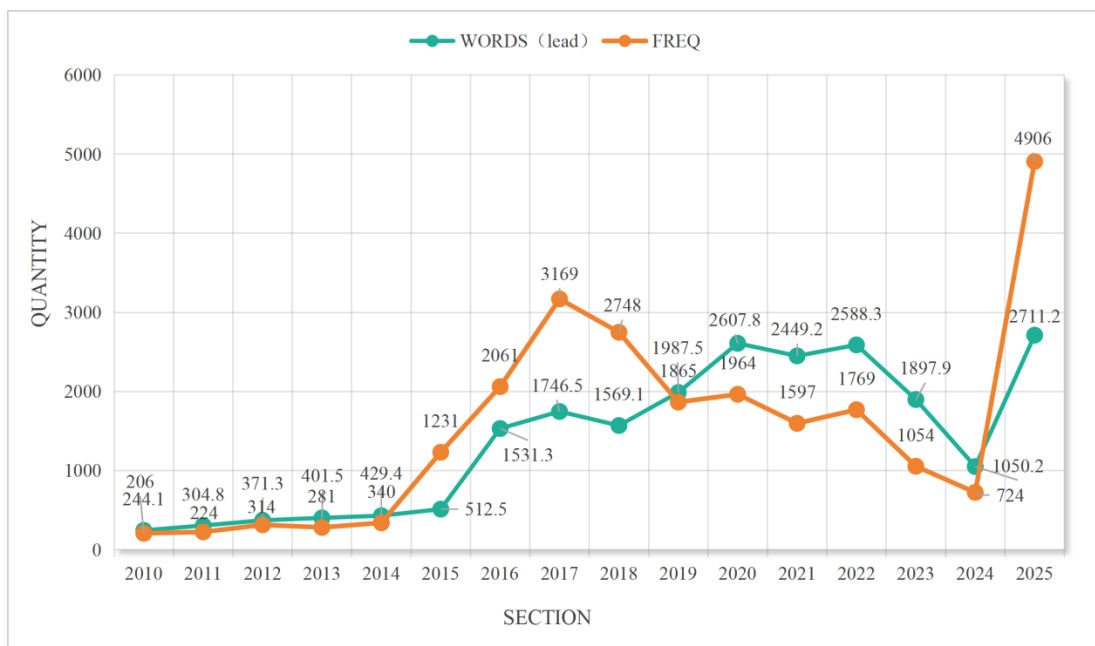


Figure 1. Distribution of reporting dates and article word count.

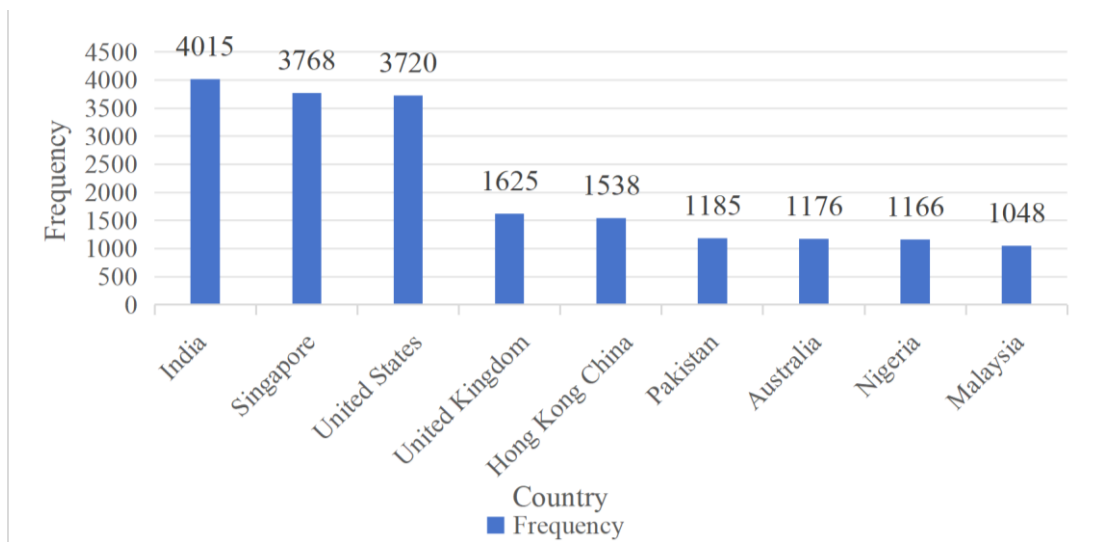


Figure 2. Regional frequency distribution of reports.

**Thematic Analysis**

The specific themes focused on by international media in their coverage of Tianjin can be identified by analyzing high-frequency collocates of “Tianjin” in the reports. Using “Tianjin” as the node word and applying the collocate function in the NOW corpus with a span set to five words to the left and right, the most frequent collocates of “Tianjin” were statistically analyzed. As shown in Figure 3, high-frequency collocates include China, city, northern, port, summit, new, international, economic, medical, open, etc. In terms of part-of-speech distribution, these collocates are predominantly nouns and adjectives, with a small number of locative and positional adjectives.

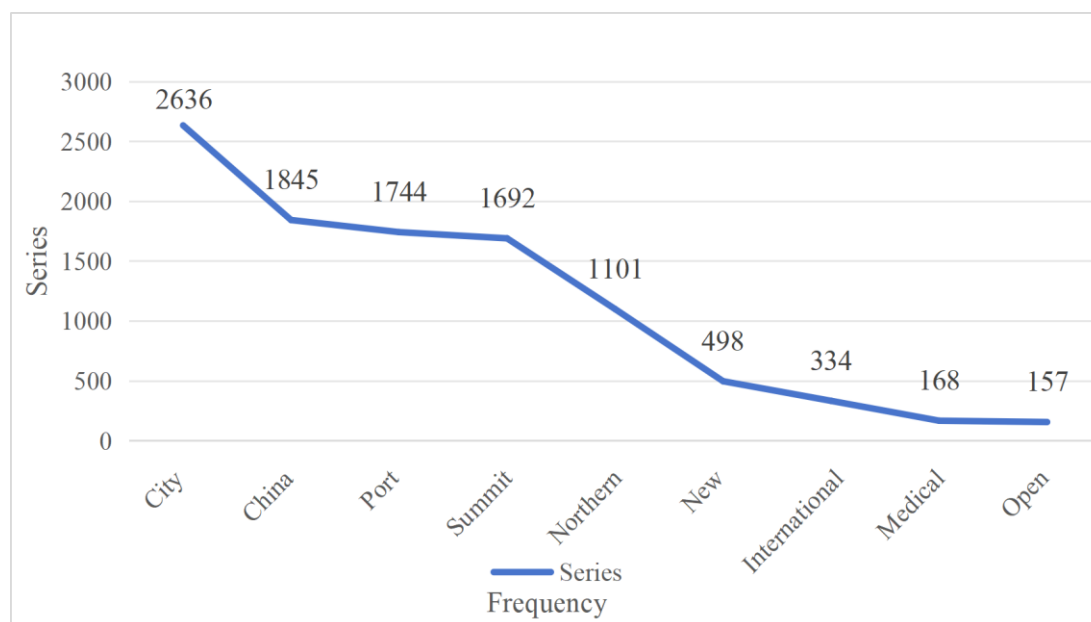


Figure 3. Frequency of high-frequency collocates.

Firth's (1957) renowned assertion, "You shall know a word by the company it keeps", posits that a word's semantic characteristics can be observed through its collocational behavior. Consequently, after obtaining these high-frequency collocates, the author categorized them according to their semantic preferences, resulting in the following semantic categories.

Table 1

*Semantic Categorization of Collocates*

Category	Descriptive vocabulary
Geographical location	China, city, northern, northeastern, coastal, municipality, Bohai Sea
Major events & competitions	Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit, World Economic Forum Annual Meeting of the New Champions, Summer Davos, Chinese Super League, Meijiang Convention and Exhibition Center, Tianjin Olympic Center
Economic & trade hub	Port, trade, export, logistics, shipping, Binhai New Area, Tianjin Port
Healthcare	Tianjin Medical University, Tianjin Darentang Pharmaceutical, Tianjin Pharmaceutical Group

Based on the semantic categorization of collocates presented above, it is evident that international mainstream media primarily focus on the following four themes when reporting on Tianjin.

First, Tianjin's status as a "northern coastal municipality directly under the Central Government" represents the most frequently referenced label. This thematic category incorporates vocabulary related to geographical location and orientation, such as China, northern, northeastern, coastal, located, and municipality.

Second, the theme of Tianjin as a "host of major events" attracts significant attention from international mainstream English-language media. Through concordance analysis and contextual examination of the corpus, this study identifies a prominent discursive cluster centered around a series of high-level international summits and sporting events hosted in Tianjin. These specifically include the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit, the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting of the New Champions (Summer Davos), the Chinese Super League, and the Tianjin City Football League. Particularly noteworthy is the successful hosting of this year's Shanghai

Cooperation Organization Summit in Tianjin, which evolved into a cross-regional media event, triggering concentrated coverage from media outlets across multiple global regions and thereby enhancing Tianjin's international profile.

Third, as a crucial port city in northern China, Tianjin's construction in international media consistently emphasizes its role as an "economic and trade hub". Corpus analysis reveals that high-frequency terms such as "Tianjin Port", "trade", "export", "logistics", and "shipping" systematically highlight Tianjin's functional positioning as an international shipping hub and regional trade center. Similarly, the "Binhai New Area" is framed as a gateway for northern China's opening-up policy—not merely an industrial or port zone, but a comprehensive functional area integrating advanced manufacturing, international shipping, financial innovation, and reform and opening-up. It is portrayed as the core area bearing Tianjin's urban functions and competitiveness, and a significant window for China's engagement with Northeast Asia and integration into globalization.

Fourth, aspects related to healthcare and medicine are frequently referenced in media reports. Utilizing the collocate function within the NOW corpus, relevant terms such as "Tianjin Medical University" and "Tianjin Darentang Pharmaceutical" were retrieved, indicating that the healthcare sector constitutes an important dimension of Tianjin's city image. The high-frequency appearance of "Tianjin Medical University" as a medical education institution reflects the city's emphasis on medical research and professional talent cultivation. Notably, media coverage of pharmaceutical enterprises concurrently addresses their shareholding structures and operational conditions. This not only reflects the market-oriented and scaled development characteristics of Tianjin's healthcare industry but also implies international media recognition of the city's capabilities within the health sector. This healthcare image resonates with Tianjin's positioning as a modern metropolis, thereby enriching the connotation of its international identity.

### **International Media's Attitude Towards Tianjin**

Beyond examining the spatiotemporal distribution and thematic focus of reports by international mainstream English-language media, it is equally important to analyze their attitudinal positioning towards Tianjin. This can be achieved by retrieving adjectives that demonstrate high collocational frequency with "Tianjin", as adjectives serve as primary lexical resources for conveying evaluation (Martin & White, 2005). Subsequent concordance analysis of these keywords enables the dissection of characteristic features in attitudinal discourse construction. Employing the collocate function within the NOW corpus, adjectives occurring within a five-word span to the left and right of the node word "Tianjin" were extracted to observe the reporting attitude. The results indicate that the relevant adjectives are exclusively positive or neutral, with no negative vocabulary present. Consequently, it can be concluded that the reporting attitude of international mainstream English-language media towards Tianjin is predominantly positive.

Table 2

#### *High-Frequency Adjective Collocates of "Tianjin"*

Emotional connotation	High-frequency adjective collocates
Positive vocabulary	Open, international, new, super
Neutral vocabulary	Chinese, northern, industrial, economic
Negative vocabulary	None

## Conclusion

Based on the large-scale NOW (News on the Web) corpus, this study analyzes international mainstream English-language media reports concerning “Tianjin” from three perspectives: spatiotemporal distribution, reporting themes, and media attitude. The spatiotemporal analysis reveals that Tianjin has consistently attracted attention from major international mainstream media. Thematically, Tianjin’s international image is closely associated with various summits and international events, particularly highlighted by this year’s successfully hosting of SCO Summit which generated substantial media coverage. As the poetic expression goes, “transcending mountains and seas to discuss harmony and unity, Tianjin opens its arms to the world, awaiting guests from all directions”—the ancient Jinmen ferry has witnessed another pivotal moment for the SCO. Media coverage also concentrates on Tianjin’s economic and healthcare sectors, which collectively form a dual narrative of its modern urban development. Economically, media construct Tianjin’s functional identity as a northern gateway for international engagement through symbolic references like “port”, “trade hub”, and “Binhai New Area”. In the healthcare domain, institutions such as “Tianjin Medical University” and “Darentang Pharmaceutical” contribute to building a professional image that blends traditional medicine heritage with modern medical innovation. In terms of reporting attitude, international mainstream English-language media maintain a positive to neutral stance toward Tianjin. Meanwhile, continued efforts should be made to effectively narrate Tianjin’s unique stories, amplify Tianjin’s voice, guide international media to maintain sustained focus on the city, showcase its historical and cultural charm, and enhance its global influence.

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