

## *Original Paper*

# The Construction of Harbin's Image in Chinese and Western Media: A Corpus-Based Critical Discourse Analysis

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### **Abstract**

*With the development of the ice and snow economy, Harbin has received great attention in domestic and international economic cooperation and cultural exchange. This paper conducts a corpus-based critical discourse analysis over the characteristics of Chinese and Western English media reports on Harbin, aiming to quantitatively and qualitatively study the discourse construction of Harbin's city image. The results show that firstly, Harbin is mainly presented as "the city of ice and snow" in both media. Secondly, while domestic media focus more on shaping Harbin's city image around tourism with the purpose of driving economic development, the focus of foreign media is more diverse and comprehensive. Thirdly, limitations exist in both media and need to be reduced.*

### **Keywords**

*Harbin, city image, media discourse, corpus-based studies, critical discourse analysis*

## **1. Introduction**

The notion of "City Image" refers to the intuitive impression of a city form held by the majority of city residents (Lynch, 1960), which manifests the history, geography, and cultural characteristics of a city. Since the 21st century, how to shape a favorable city image and enhance local visibility has become an essential task for most cities all over the globe.

Harbin, located in Heilongjiang Province, China, is a renowned northeastern city that integrates natural beauty with cultural landscapes. Thanks to the rise of regional tourism economy, an increasing number of media outlets have started to pay attention to this city of ice and snow. This study utilizes a corpus-based critical discourse analysis method to comparatively analyze the construction strategies of Harbin's city image in mainstream Western and Chinese media.

## 2. Literature Review

Corpus linguistics is the study of language based on textual materials and is initially applied in fields such as language acquisition, phonology research, and dialectology. After years of development, it has expanded its scope to teaching, translation, vocabulary, semantics, lexicography, and grammar. Researchers home and abroad have conducted various studies based on the above topics, for example, Aline (2023) presented the theoretical basis for corpus linguistics applied to Aeronautical English teaching and assessment followed by practical examples on how to use corpora to develop tasks for both purposes. Besides, Meng Jie (2023) explored the application effectiveness of corpus-based translation methods in translating exhibition materials of the Henan Museum, finding that the corpus-based translation methods provide translators with more abundant translation instances and specialized vocabulary, contributing to the improvement of translation quality and efficiency.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) primarily examines social interaction activities predominantly in linguistic form, and through discourse, reveals their underlying ideological meanings and power relations. As Fairclough (2001) stated, discourse serves as the language of social practice. Discourse constitutes a unified entity composed of the dimensions of “context”, “interaction”, and “text”, such three-dimensional model of discourse holds significant importance in studying the relationships between language, power, and ideology. According to Fairclough and Wodak (1997), CDA primarily serves three purposes: (1) systematically exploring the causal relationships between discourse practices, events, and texts and broader social-cultural structures, relations, and processes; (2) studying the relationships between these practices, events, and texts and power; (3) examining the role of discourse in maintaining power and hegemony in society.

However, limitations still exist in both corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis respectively. Although there are a considerable number of researches on corpus linguistics at home, many of them merely employ corpora to showcase a linguistic phenomenon, providing only objective records of the phenomenon based solely on data. (Song Hongbo & Wang Xueli, 2013) Moreover, corpus linguistics often confines its analysis to the corpus itself, neglecting interpretations from an ideological perspective, and lacks in-depth exploration of the underlying causes, potential influences, and social evaluations of phenomena. As for critical discourse analysis's flaws, Xin Bin (2004, 2008) summarized and discussed some major criticisms and doubts about CDA from aspects such as “clarity and rigor of theoretical concepts,” “systematic and effective analysis methods,” and “truthfulness and reliability of analysis results.” CDA sometimes overlooks the interpretations of speakers and the dynamic changes that occur in the analysis process, and may even make semantic assumptions beyond the intentions of the speakers due to excessive emphasis on ideology or excessive political bias. Therefore, by combining corpus-based analysis with critical discourse analysis, it is possible to effectively address these shortcomings and achieve an objective interpretation of texts.

### 3. Research Design

The study utilizes the NOW (News on the Web) Corpus and a self-built corpus to conduct a sampling analysis of the portrayal of the city image of Harbin in mainstream English-language media from both the West and China over the past two years. The NOW Corpus comprises of a sample of 671 articles from Western media outlets, while the self-built corpus (sourced from China Daily and CGTN) encompasses 100 news reports. Additionally, the corpus analysis software AntConc and LancsBox are utilized for frequency and collocation analysis to address the following research questions:

- (1) What discourse strategies are employed by Western and Chinese media in their news?
- (2) What are the differences in the construction on Harbin's image that Western and Chinese media focus on?
- (3) What city image have Western and Chinese media shaped, and what intentions are reflected behind it?

### 4. Research Findings

In the NOW corpus, spanning from May 1, 2022, to May 1, 2024, a search for "Harbin" yielded a total of 671 results, while in the self-constructed corpus, a search for "Harbin" produced 493 results within 100 articles. Regarding media sources, News released by Western media are primarily from countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States. In terms of media focus, Western media tended to emphasize individual achievements and international exchange activities while Chinese media reports predominantly centered on Harbin's ice and snow tourism industry. Additionally, a comparison of the frequency of reports on Harbin, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and other cities in the NOW corpus revealed that overall attention to Harbin by Western and Chinese media was relatively low. However, with the emergence of Harbin's ice and snow economy, domestic and international media attention towards Harbin has shown an increasing trend.

#### 4.1 High-Frequency Word Analysis

In the relevant Western and Chinese news reports on Harbin, words such as "ice," "snow," "winter," "tourism," "visitors," and "festival" appeared frequently, reflecting the widespread attention garnered by Harbin's ice and snow tourism industry from home and abroad. Apart from vocabulary related to ice and snow tourism, high-frequency words also include "northeastern," "Heilongjiang," and "China," highlighting Harbin's multifaceted identity and status. As the capital of Heilongjiang Province, Harbin serves as the political, economic, and cultural center of the province, and the usage of these high-frequency words underscores Harbin's significance in the northeastern region and even nationally. Additionally, high-frequency words in the search terms for reports on Harbin also include "international" and "world," indicating Harbin's international influence.

**Table 1. Word Frequency Outlook**

	<b>Word</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
NOW Corpus	China	87
	institute	70
	technology	70
	heilongjiang	42
	ice	32
	province	30
	snow	26
	northeastern	20
	aircraft	14
	polarland	10
Self-Built Corpus	China	410
	ice	353
	snow	289
	winter	270
	tourism	246
	heilongjiang	181
	festival	145
	world	135
	northeast	100
	international	69

#### 4.2 Collocation Analysis

By using LancsBox and employing its GraphColl function to analyze the self-built corpus data from Chinese media, researchers can visualize the association between key words and their collocates more intuitively. As depicted in Figure 1, in the collocation of “ice”, words such as “world” and “international” hold significant positions, indicating domestic media’s emphasis on shaping Harbin’s international image and strengthening its connections with the international community. Results of other collocates such as “festival,” “park,” “activities,” “tourism,” “visitor,” and “sculpture” reveals attention on leveraging Harbin’s cold winter natural environment to prosper and develop its ice and snow tourism industry. Harbin attracts tourists through events and facilities like the Harbin International Ice and Snow Festival and the creation of ice and snow-themed parks. Furthermore, adjectives such as “unique,” “famous,” and “popular” in the collocates suggests that Harbin’s ice and snow tourism industry possesses wide appeal and unique charm, promising favorable prospects for development.



**Table 2. “Harbin” Collocates Outlook**

	<b>Word</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
NOW Corpus	Harbin institute	63
	Harbin ice	13
	Harbin university	7
	Harbin engineering	6
	Harbin aircraft	5
	Harbin city	5
	Harbin bank	3
	Harbin railway	3
	Harbin native	2
	Harbin residents	1
Self-Built Corpus	Harbin ice	126
	Harbin snow	103
	Harbin Heilongjiang	76
	Harbin province	66
	Harbin festival	44
	Harbin northeast	36
	Harbin international	33
	Harbin beer	23
	Harbin penguins	18
	Harbin scene	9

### 4.3 Example Analysis

Example One: *“Bathed in enchanting moonlight, sculptures of the Temple of Heaven and Notre Dame Cathedral are attracting tourists from home and abroad in a celebration of ice and snow in the northern reaches of China.”* (From China Daily)

This sentence introduces the integration of elements from both Chinese and Western architecture, such as the Temple of Heaven and Notre Dame Cathedral, into Harbin’s ice sculptures. While showcasing a tourism strategy that is rich in content and highly distinctive, it demonstrates Harbin’s contribution to promoting cultural exchanges between China and France. The intention behind this media discourse is for Chinese media to construct an image of Harbin as a city that promotes international cultural exchanges. It aims to portray Harbin’s international-friendly image by showcasing the cultural integration designs of various countries in the Harbin International Ice and Snow Festival.

Example Two: *“The hosting of the 9th Asian Winter Games is consistent with Harbin’s urban development plan and sustainable development goals. We will fully cooperate with the Olympic*

*Council of Asia, the Chinese Olympic Committee and sports organizations from around the world, including Asia, and provide well-equipped urban facilities and sports venues for a dynamic, open and civilized Asian Winter Games.” (From China Daily)*

This sentence, extracted from the speech of the Mayor of Harbin, reflects Harbin’s responsibility and confidence as the host city of the 9th Asian Winter Games. This implies that domestic media intend to leverage this opportunity of the East Asian Games to showcase Harbin’s international status and influence to the world, attracting global attention to the city. Media report will increase Harbin’s visibility, attract more tourists, and bring about significant economic opportunities, thereby promoting the development of related industries such as tourism, catering, hotels, and infrastructure. Therefore, it is evident that domestic media coverage of Harbin serves certain economic purposes, aiming to inject new vitality into economic development through shaping a favorable city image.

*Example Three: “Thanks to the extremely low temperatures which produce ice and snow for these attractions, the city is able to turn what used to be an energy and manufacturing economy to a money-spinning tourist economy.” (From CGTN)*

This sentence illustrates the development prospects of Harbin’s transformation from manufacturing to tourism, affirming the strong future development potential of the city in the eyes of this media outlet. It demonstrates the media’s focus on Harbin’s industrial structure when shaping its city image, showcasing Harbin’s coordinated and diversified industrial development and thriving economy through a sound industrial structure.

*Example Four: “BEIJING, China Mar 18 – A Sino-Russian joint research laboratory for Siberian tiger conservation will better implement the international cooperation strategy between China and Russia on cross-border tiger and leopard protection, experts said at the facility’s unveiling ceremony held on Thursday at Northeast Forestry University in Harbin, Heilongjiang province.” (From The Capital)*

This sentence showcases Harbin’s image of actively protecting wild animals in the eyes of this media outlet, highlighting Harbin’s role in ecological civilization construction, which helps enhance the city’s image and attract more international attention and cooperation. Additionally, the report mentions that the opening ceremony of the Sino-Russian joint Northeast Tiger Protection Base was held at Northeast Forestry University in Harbin, which reflects Western media’s emphasis on the role of universities in promoting international cooperation.

*Example Five: “In Heilongjiang’s capital of Harbin, more than 53,000 people had to be evacuated as multiple reservoirs and rivers exceeded safety levels while some 41,600 hectares (103,000 acres) of crops were damaged. In northeastern Heilongjiang province, which is known as China’s “great northern granary,” rain inundated farms and flooded streets, leading to the evacuation of thousands.” (From Associated Press)*

This sentence reports on the evacuation work in response to floods in Harbin, reflecting Western media’s concern for city emergency facilities and livelihoods. The report mentions that Harbin is the

capital city of Heilongjiang Province, implying the city's importance and status. Meanwhile, the large-scale evacuation and crop damage mentioned in the report also indicate that Harbin is a city actively responding to the challenges of natural disasters. This description reflects Western media's attention to Harbin's ability to cope with sudden natural disasters, shaping an image of a resilient and disaster-resistant city, overall affirming Harbin's emergency facilities.

Example Six: *"In a move that could help to reboot China's winter sports and recreation industry following Covid-related disruptions, the northeastern city of Harbin has won the right to host the 9th Asian Winter Games in 2025."* (From Forbes)

This sentence reports on Harbin hosting the Asian Winter Games, an international sports event that can attract global attention and bring economic income to Harbin. This report reflects the media's intention to make more people aware of Harbin and link it to hosting important international sports events, which helps enhance Harbin's international reputation and status. Additionally, the media emphasizes the promotion effect of hosting the East Asian Games on Harbin's economy, reflecting the media's attention to the role of sports and tourism industries in the city's economic potential and vitality.

## 5. Conclusion

Through the above analysis, it can be concluded that both Chinese and Western media tend to portray a positive image of Harbin, paying special attention to its regional identities of Heilongjiang Province and China. Moreover, both media are more concerned about the status quo and prospects of Harbin's ice and snow tourism industry. While domestic media focus more on shaping Harbin's city image around tourism with the purpose of driving economic development, Western media focus on the comprehensive development of Harbin as a city, covering a wider range of areas including education, livelihood, infrastructure, and emergency systems. However, it can be also found that these two focal points have their flaws, for instance, the emphasis on tourism reflects a singular reporting angle and limited reporting content, thus not conducive to presenting a comprehensive and multifaceted city image. Meanwhile, focusing too much on a broad perspective but not analyzing each topic with enough precision and depth may lead to insufficient information and even discourse bias. Therefore, to realize a sustainable development in Harbin's city image construction in the future, media reporters should cover as many aspects of Harbin as possible, so as to present a more comprehensive city image to the rest of the world and attract more people to come and visit this place.

## Project Number

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