# A Study of Leshan's International Image Based on the NOW Corpus (2013-2023)

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**Abstract:** This study utilizes the NOW Corpus to analyze the reporting characteristics of Leshan in international media, exploring the construction process and evolving trends of its international image. The findings reveal that early coverage of Leshan was predominantly led by British and American media, gradually expanding to key Asian countries and regions, and peaking in global attention in 2020. Content-wise, Leshan's international image has long been centered on cultural landmarks such as the Leshan Giant Buddha. In 2020, flooding events significantly increased its visibility as a natural disaster hotspot, though this attention later subsided, with the focus shifting back to its regional tourism image. In recent years, with the promotion of tourism resources—such as the integration of cuisine and cultural elements—Leshan's international image has become richer and more diversified.

**Keywords:** International image; Discourse analysis; NOW Corpus

## 1. Introduction

In the 1950s, economist K.E. Boulding (1959: 120) first introduced the concept of "international image," defining it as a nation's self-perception and the image shaped through its interactions with other nations within the international system. In the 1990s, Joseph Nye (1990: 153) proposed the concept of "soft power," elevating a nation's international image to a dimension of its comprehensive strength. With the acceleration of globalization, international image has become increasingly tied not only to political and economic interactions between nations but also to the cultural output and tourism appeal of local cities. A city's international image, often presented and disseminated through media discourse, serves as a key extension of national soft power at the local level. Thus, analyzing the construction process of a city's international image and its influencing factors holds significant academic value and practical relevance from a theoretical perspective.

Leshan, recognized as an outstanding tourism city and a historical-cultural city in China, boasts abundant natural resources, a profound cultural heritage, and a strong tourism industry. Home to the "Emei Mountain-Leshan Giant Buddha Scenic Area," a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site, Leshan serves as a vital platform for telling China's story and projecting its image globally. This paper conducts a discourse analysis of the linguistic features in overseas media reports about Leshan, aiming to explore the international image of Leshan constructed by these media and provide academic references for optimizing Leshan's international communication strategies.

## 2. Research Background

In recent years, with the rapid development of the internet, big data, and other new-generation information technologies, a growing number of Chinese scholars have begun using large-scale corpora to study the construction

of China's international image, treating discourse as a primary issue (Xu Jiagin, 2019: 37). For instance, Shao Bin and Hui Zhiming (2014: 28) extracted English-language reports on the "Chinese Dream" from the LexisNexis news database, creating a dedicated corpus to empirically investigate Western media's interpretations, evaluations, and discourse construction of the "Chinese Dream" through tools like concordance lines and collocation networks. Hu Kaibao and Tian Xujun (2018: 79) analyzed China's diplomatic image in English translations of its diplomatic discourse, focusing on high-frequency words, keywords, modal verbs, and collocations with "we." Qian Yufang and Dong Yingying (2020: 28) utilized the NOW Corpus, developed by Brigham Young University, to examine the discursive representations and image construction of Yiwu in overseas media over the past decade. Xu Yuyuan and Wei Naixing (2024: 22) built a corpus of reports on the origins of COVID-19, employing techniques such as word indexing, collocation analysis, semantic prosody, and semantic rhyme to explore differences in U.S. and Chinese media coverage under adversarial discourse.

As China's urbanization progresses and international exchanges deepen, awareness of international image dissemination among Chinese cities has steadily increased. A city's image is a microcosmic manifestation of the national image, and a strong national image relies on the construction and enhancement of each city's international image. Studies on urban international image have begun to emerge. For example, Wang Jianqiu (2016) surveyed foreign residents in Jinan to study the construction and dissemination of Jinan's international image, while Bai Jingyuan (2020) analyzed the effectiveness of Chengdu's international image dissemination on Twitter using keyword samples.

In summary, Chinese scholars' corpus-based analyses of China's image have primarily focused on macro-level studies of domestic or diplomatic discourse, employing methods such as word indexing, collocation analysis, semantic tendencies, and semantic prosody to examine discourse features. However, research on the international image of specific Chinese cities using corpus analysis remains limited, and studies on Leshan's international image based on corpora are particularly scarce.

## 3. Research Design

### (1) Data source

The data for this study is entirely sourced from the NOW Corpus (News on the Web Corpus), a large-scale English corpus constructed from online news, designed to reflect contemporary English usage. Developed by Professor Mark Davies' team at Brigham Young University, it includes texts from online newspapers and magazines since 2010, currently containing over 9.73 billion words. A distinctive feature of the NOW Corpus is its dynamic updating, with approximately 180–200 million words (around 300,000 new articles) added monthly and about 2 billion words annually, making it a valuable resource for studying modern English vocabulary, phrases, and their evolving trends.

### (2) Research questions and methodology

This study addresses the following key questions:

1) What linguistic features have major international media exhibited in constructing Leshan's international urban image from 2013 to 2023?

2) What kind of image of Leshan have these major international media shaped?

To answer these, the study retrieves and analyzes English-language news reports about Leshan from major overseas media in the NOW Corpus, spanning January 2013 to December 2023. Specifically, the methodology involves:

- First, retrieving the keyword "Leshan" in the "list" and "chart" sections to obtain its total frequency, as well as its temporal and geographical distribution across reporting countries, enabling an analysis of changes in Leshan's

international attention over time and its regional spread.

- Second, retrieving collocation data for "Leshan" in the "collocates" section to identify its primary associated words, using visualization tools such as multiline graphs, stacked area charts, and frequency graphs to interpret the overall impressions and attitudes of mainstream overseas media toward Leshan.

- Finally, synthesizing the findings from the corpus analysis to summarize Leshan's international image and propose suggestions for further enhancing its international image construction.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### (1) Frequency retrieval and analysis of "Leshan"

As shown in Figure 1, the search results for "Leshan" in the NOW Corpus from 2013 to 2023 reveal that it was mentioned 159 times in major international media reports. The relationship between its yearly frequency and reporting countries reflects a complex and dynamic evolution.

| Year | Frequency of Reports | Number of Countries | Key Reporting Countries (Frequency) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2013 | 2 | 1 | UK (2) |
| 2014 | 4 | 3 | USA (1), Canada (1), Australia (2) |
| 2015 | 3 | 3 | USA (1), Canada (1), New Zealand (1) |
| 2016 | 12 | 7 | USA (1), Canada (1), India (1), Pakistan (1), Sri Lanka (5), Singapore (2), Australia (1) |
| 2017 | 13 | 5 | USA (6), Canada (1), Philippines (1), Singapore (1), Malaysia (1) |
| 2018 | 14 | 5 | UK (1), USA (1), Ireland (1), South Africa (1), Sri Lanka (10) |
| 2019 | 19 | 7 | USA (6), Canada (1), Australia (1), Hong Kong. China (1), India (6), Malaysia (3), Philippines (1) |
| 2020 | 47 | 13 | USA (13), Canada (1), UK (2), Ireland (2), Ghana (2), Kenya (2), Nigeria (2), New Zealand (1), Philippines (1), Singapore (9), Malaysia (6), Hong Kong (5), India (1) |
| 2021 | 2 | 1 | Hong Kong. China (2) |
| 2022 | 13 | 4 | UK (7), USA (2), Philippines (3), Malaysia (1) |
| 2023 | 30 | 6 | USA (7), UK (5), India (7), Pakistan (5), Singapore (3), Philippines (3) |

[Figure 1: Total Frequency and Yearly Trends of Leshan in Major International Media, 2013-2023]

From 2013 to 2015, reporting was minimal, with only 2–4 mentions annually (totaling 9), and coverage was limited to 1–3 countries, primarily English-speaking nations like the UK (2), the US (2), and Canada (1). This indicates that Leshan's international exposure during this period relied almost entirely on Western media, with a narrow geographic scope and low global recognition. In 2016, the frequency rose slightly to 12 mentions across 7 countries, including Australia (1), Canada (1), India (1), New Zealand (1), Pakistan (1), Sri Lanka (5), and Singapore (2), signaling the emergence of Asian regional interest. In 2017 and 2018, mentions increased to 13 and 14, respectively, with coverage stabilizing at around 5 countries, including Australia (6), the Philippines (2), and Singapore (3), while Sri Lanka surged to 10 mentions in 2018, and Ireland (1) and South Africa (1) appeared for the first time, reflecting a gradual expansion beyond English-speaking countries to Asia and a few other regions. In 2019, mentions rose to 19 across 6 countries, including Australia (1), India (6), Malaysia (3), the Philippines (1), Singapore (1), and the US (6), with a notable increase in Asian representation.

The year 2020 marked a turning point, with mentions spiking to 47 across 12 countries and regions—the highest recorded—including the US (13), Singapore (9), Malaysia (6), Canada (1), the UK (2), Ghana (2), Ireland (2), India (1), Kenya (2), Nigeria (2), New Zealand (1), and the Philippines (1). This surge, extending to North America, Asia, and—for the first time—Africa, was driven by the flooding event, achieving a breakthrough in global dissemination. However, in 2021, mentions plummeted to just 2, reflecting a sharp decline in attention after the heat of the event subsided. In 2022, mentions rebounded to 13 across 4 countries—UK (7), US (2), Philippines (3), and Malaysia (1)—indicating renewed interest from some Western and Asian nations. By 2023, mentions rose to 30 across 6 countries, including India (7), the US (7), Pakistan (5), the UK (5), Singapore (3), and the Philippines (3), with India and Pakistan's prominence underscoring Asia's growing media influence.

Overall, the frequency of "Leshan" mentions and its geographic distribution evolved from sparse and Western-dominated to broader, more Eastern-focused coverage, peaking globally before contracting regionally. This trend was driven not only by sudden events (e.g., the 2020 floods) but also by China's rising international influence, the expansion of Asian media networks, and the global appeal of local culture (e.g., the Leshan Giant Buddha), reflecting Leshan's dynamic shift from a marginal to a central, then regionally focused international image.

**(2) Retrieval and analysis of collocations with "Leshan"**

Based on NOW Corpus data (2013-2023), the nouns and adjectives collocating with "Leshan" in major global media reports reveal a rich and multifaceted profile, deeply reflecting the formation of its international image and the complex factors behind it.

Regarding noun collocations (Figure 2), the top 30 high-frequency words fall into distinct categories:

- Cultural Landmarks: "statue" (26), and "site" (5) dominate overwhelmingly, underscoring the iconic status of the Leshan Giant Buddha as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

- Geography and Administrative Units: "city" (52), "province" (40), "Sichuan" (34), "county" (4), and "south" (4) appear frequently, reflecting the media's need to provide precise geographic and administrative context for international audiences.

- Nature and Disasters: Words like "water" (10), "flood" (5), "rain" (5), "mountain" (6), "river" (6), "feet" (12), and "toe" (2) emerge, particularly tied to the 2020 floods, with phrases like "feet of the Leshan Giant Buddha" highlighting disaster-related details.

- Tourism and Lifestyle: "tourism" (4), "restaurant" (4), "food" (3), and "University" (3) are increasingly prominent, with "University" referring to institutions like Leshan Normal University, signaling Leshan's growing image as a tourism and lifestyle destination.

| 2013-2023 NOW Corpus: Significant Noun Collocations with "Leshan" in Major Media Reports | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rank | Noun | Frequency | Rank | Noun | Frequency |
| 1 | Buddha | 84 | 16 | tourism | 4 |
| 2 | city | 52 | 17 | county | 4 |
| 3 | province | 40 | 18 | south | 4 |
| 4 | Sichuan | 34 | 19 | restaurant | 4 |
| 5 | statue | 26 | 20 | operation | 3 |
| 6 | China | 18 | 21 | time | 3 |
| 7 | feet | 12 | 22 | world | 3 |
| 8 | water | 10 | 23 | morning | 3 |
| 9 | area | 8 | 24 | day | 3 |
| 10 | stone | 7 | 25 | food | 3 |
| 11 | mountain | 6 | 26 | University | 3 |
| 12 | river | 6 | 27 | people | 3 |
| 13 | flood | 5 | 28 | century | 2 |
| 14 | rain | 5 | 29 | footprint | 2 |
| 15 | site | 5 | 30 | toe | 2 |

[Figure 2: Significant Noun Collocations with "Leshan" in the NOW Corpus, 2013-2023]

For adjective collocations (Figure 3), the top 30 high-frequency words also display diversity:

• Scale and Grandeur: "Giant" (36), "large" (11), and "tall" (5) lead, emphasizing the physical attributes of the Leshan Giant Buddha, as in "71-metre tall Leshan Giant Buddha."

• Nature and Disasters: "heavy" (8), "murky" (2), and "high" (2) tie closely to the flooding event.

• Geography and Location: "southwestern" (5), "southern" (2), and "mountainous" (2) describe Leshan's geographic features, meeting the need for precise regional context in international reporting.

• Culture and Tourism: "famous" (4), "hidden" (3), "popular" (2), "ancient" (3), and "scenic" (3) highlight Leshan's tourism value and historical depth, while "small" (6) often describes smaller counties like Muchuan, and "bold" (2) reflects local culinary traits, showing thematic diversification.

These collocations collectively sketch Leshan's multidimensional image in international media—from a cultural landmark to a natural disaster hotspot, and now an emerging tourism destination. Themes evolved over time: early reports focused on cultural landmarks (e.g., "Buddha," "ancient"), disaster-related terms surged in 2020 (e.g., "flood," "heavy"), and tourism-related vocabulary rose in 2022–2023 (e.g., "food," "popular").

| 2013-2023 NOW Corpus: Significant Adjective Collocations with "Leshan" in Major Media Reports | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rank | Adjective | Frequency | Rank | Adjective | Frequency |
| 1 | Giant | 36 | 16 | carved | 2 |
| 2 | large | 11 | 17 | complete | 2 |
| 3 | heavy | 8 | 18 | cultural | 2 |
| 4 | small | 6 | 19 | high | 2 |
| 5 | southwest | 5 | 20 | iconic | 2 |
| 6 | tall | 5 | 21 | local | 2 |
| 7 | big | 4 | 22 | mountain | 2 |
| 8 | famous | 4 | 23 | murky | 2 |
| 9 | hidden | 3 | 24 | new | 2 |
| 10 | ancient | 3 | 25 | popular | 2 |
| 11 | first | 3 | 26 | precious | 2 |
| 12 | old | 3 | 27 | rural | 2 |
| 13 | scenic | 3 | 28 | southern | 2 |
| 14 | beautiful | 2 | 29 | strong | 2 |
| 15 | bold | 2 | 30 | virtual | 2 |

[Figure 3: Significant Adjective Collocations with "Leshan" in the NOW Corpus, 2013-2023]

The underlying reasons are multifaceted:

• The global cultural appeal of the Leshan Giant Buddha, with its "Giant" and "large" traits as a UNESCO heritage site, drives sustained media attention, amplified during the floods as a visual focal point.

• The 2020 Sichuan floods' sudden news value spiked coverage, with terms like "flood," "water," and "heavy" surging, and details like "feet" and "toe" magnifying the event's impact.

• International media's need to contextualize for global audiences standardizes geographic terms like "city," "Sichuan," and "southwestern."

• Recent efforts by Chinese local governments and the national tourism bureau, via initiatives like the Belt and Road and international tourism campaigns, promote local culture, reflected in terms like "tourism," "food," and "famous"—e.g., "hidden foodie paradise" likely stems from targeted media collaborations.

In sum, Leshan's international media image is dynamic and diverse, likely to evolve further under the dual influences of natural disasters and cultural-tourism promotion.

## 5. Conclusion

"Leshan" in international media presents a multilayered and dynamically evolving international image, reflecting its cultural, natural, and tourism attributes. First, anchored by the UNESCO-listed Leshan Giant Buddha, it showcases a strong cultural landmark identity, emphasizing its unique status as a global cultural symbol. Second, natural disaster events like floods highlight its environmental and disaster-hotspot image, significantly boosting its international visibility. Third, geographic positioning forms a key component, providing clear regional context for international audiences. Additionally, recent tourism promotion has enriched its image, transforming Leshan into an emerging destination for cuisine and culture, broadening its local cultural appeal.

Overall, Leshan's international image has evolved from a Western media-dominated cultural symbol in its early stages to a natural and cultural hotspot drawing Asian attention, peaking globally in 2020 due to the floods, then refocusing on a regional tourism image. This evolution underscores a fusion of cultural landmarks, disaster-driven visibility, and tourism promotion, reflecting Leshan's dynamic positioning and multifaceted appeal in international media.

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