

# A Corpus-Assisted Critical Discourse Analysis of Wenzhou's International Image in Spanish Mainstream Media

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**Abstract:** As scholarly focus shifts from national image to urban representation, Chinese cities have attracted growing attention in global media coverage. However, critical discourse analysis of the representation of Chinese cities in Spanish-language media remains scarce, particularly when approached through a corpus-assisted methodology. Therefore, this study conducts a corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis of the representation of Wenzhou's international image. Four hundred two news articles were collected from the NOW corpus, and keyword and concordance analyses were conducted to identify the topics of the news articles and the discursive strategies adopted. The findings reveal five main topics within the news articles, namely geography, economy, technology, culture and society, along with a dual logic used to construct the city's image. This study provides insights into how city images are represented in Spanish-language mainstream media.

**Keywords:** Spanish mainstream media; City image; Corpus-assisted approach; Critical discourse analysis

## Introduction

Across Spanish and Latin American media, Chinese cities have begun to appear more frequently. They have become visible as recurring characters in every larger transnational news and global story. Their rise in coverage is largely attributed to the expansion of China-Hispanic economic, political, and cultural relations in recent years. This visibility is consequential, as international audiences often encounter foreign places not through direct experience but through the crafted portrayals constructed and circulated by news discourse (van Dijk, 1997). Wenzhou is a coastal manufacturing center with a longstanding overseas business community, thus this study examines how its image was constructed in Spanish mainstream media between 2012 and 2019.

Existing studies on China's international image have largely remained nation-centered and predominantly conducted by English-speaking scholars (e.g., Lin & Xu, 2020). Much of this research has identified recurring macro-frames such as cooperation versus competition or opportunity versus threat, and investigated how journalistic practices influence portrayals of national policy (Yang & Wang, 2023; Sun, 2025; Li & Zhao, 2025). Comparatively, a smaller body of research considers cities as image-bearing entities, city-level analyses in the Spanish-language media are scarce.

Wenzhou is a salient case study for two primary reasons. First, it is regarded as one of the primary ancestral homes of a significant portion of Chinese people residing in Spain or Hispanic countries (Beltran & Garcia, 2000). This strong transnational connection gives Wenzhou special significance and keeps it in the focus of Spanish-language media. This gives genuine attention that transcends conventional foreign correspondence narratives. Second, Wenzhou exemplifies the traditional model of China's private-sector economy (Strauss, 2010). The city's well-known history of entrepreneur-led development makes it a prominent case of market-driven modernization. For this reason, international journalists frequently highlight Wenzhou when discussing China's economic transformation. Due to this combination, Wenzhou serves as more than just another instance of media visibility; it provides an ideal context for examining how news coverage influences concepts of representation. This study adopts a multi-stage design to reconstruct Wenzhou as a multifaceted discursive object. It combines an examination of media visibility with an analysis of discursive patterns. The first stage compares Wenzhou's representation across Spanish-speaking countries, over time, and in relation to other Chinese cities. The second stage investigates how significant collocates and their semantic environments contribute to the construction of Wenzhou's international image. Through this corpus-assisted

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critical discourse approach, the study links where and how Wenzhou appears in the media to the lexical associations that shape its portrayal. These considerations lead to the following research questions:

- RQ1.** How does the representation of Wenzhou in Spanish-language media compare across different countries, over time, and in relation to other Chinese cities?
- RQ2.** How is the image of Wenzhou discursively constructed through its significant collocates in Spanish-language media?

## From National Image to City Image

The concept of national image has been widely discussed in academic research in various fields, including international relations, political science, communication, and linguistics. It was initially introduced by Boulding (1959) and subsequently refined by Scott (1965). National image can be understood as a set of impressions that shape cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses from other international audiences. It encapsulates the overall evaluation and interpretation of a nation's actions, characteristics, and identity (Xue et al., 2015). From a semiotic perspective, national image functions less as a factual reflection of reality and more as a symbolic construct; an ideological or relational expressive product created through interpretive and strategic practices (Li, 2005). Various factors, including global competitiveness, cultural psychology, and the availability of reliable information, contribute significantly to how a country is perceived in global media (Li et al., 2016). In this sense, the media operate as the primary mechanism through which perceptions of national identity are generated and sustained, influencing both domestic and international viewpoints (Wen, 2022). The cultivation of positive national images is essential for enhancing international reputation, fostering internal cohesion, and creating economic opportunities in modern contexts such as tourism. Consequently, governments worldwide are prompted to actively pursue strategies for constructing such images through negotiation and media representation (Manheim & Albritton, 1984; Sun, 2010).

As research on national image has matured (e.g. Dai & Chen, 2014), attention has gradually shifted from countries to cities. Cities are increasingly recognized not merely as administrative subdivisions of nation-states but as symbolic entities in their own right, actively competing for resources, investment, tourism, and cultural recognition in the global landscape (Anholt, 2007). The concept of city image shares similarities with that of national image, in that it is socially and discursively constructed through media representation, cultural symbols, and public perception. However, the city image also differs by foregrounding local identities and narratives. These narratives can either reinforce or counterbalance the broader national frame (Zhang & Zhao, 2009). Media discourse plays a crucial role here as well, as international coverage of cities may reproduce national stereotypes or, con-

versely, highlight distinctive characteristics that differentiate the city from its nation.

Recently the global visibility of Chinese cities has gained growing academic interest. However, existing research continues to concentrate on first-tier cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Guangzhou (Wang et al., 2015; Jiao, 2016; Li, 2019; Fu & Xu, 2020; Gao, 2023; Huang & Guan, 2024). Studies on second-tier cities are comparatively limited, and investigations into Wenzhou are especially scarce. Existing research in English language contexts shows that Wenzhou is often portrayed in simplified or predominantly negative terms, whether in relation to its private economy, healthcare, environment, or cultural life (Wang, 2022). Some more recent work points to a gradual rise in international attention and highlights the emergence of more positive representations in areas such as diplomacy and economy (Chen, 2023). However, these studies remain confined to the English context. Yet, considering the significant presence of Chinese migrants (particularly from Wenzhou and Qingtian) in Spanish-speaking countries, the lack of research on Wenzhou's image in Spanish media is notable.

## Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has become one of the most prominent interdisciplinary approaches in the study of how language interacts with power and ideology. CDA does not view language as neutral or decorative, but as an active medium through which ideologies and hierarchies are constructed. This paradigm adopts a problem-oriented approach. Scholars adopting this approach are focused on exploring how language reproduces social power. Wodak and Meyer (2016, p. 5) describe CDA as an attempt to “deconstruct ideologies and power through systematic and reproducible analysis of semiotic data”.

Media discourse, constitutes one of the most fertile sites for applying CDA, since mass media remain central in shaping public opinion and defining what counts as a “social issue”. In studies of the media, CDA has also been applied to examine themes such as national identity (Wodak et al., 2009). These studies explore how inclusion and exclusion operate in media texts. It is called how “we-groups” and “out-groups” are positioned, and what ideological borders are established through such positions. Despite its theoretical contributions, CDA has faced a range of methodological criticisms. Widdowson (2004) noted that some CDA studies may lack robust evidence to support their claims by presenting only selective textual examples to sustain certain political beliefs, leading to overly circular analysis (Baker et al., 2008). Within the CDA community, researchers have opted to respond to these concerns by introducing more robust methodologies.

A significant advancement in addressing these methodological concerns is the integration of CDA with Corpus Linguistics (CL), often referred to as Corpus-Assisted Critical Discourse Analysis (CACDA). This method leverages the strengths of each tradition: the quantitative rigor of CL and the interpretative richness of CDA. CL allows researchers to systematically analyze large-scale text collections and identify

linguistic regularities that may otherwise go unnoticed (Baker, 2006; Baker et al., 2008). CDA, by comparison, stays firmly situated in the social context, guarding against the reduction of discourse to mere numbers, what Hardt-Mautner (2009) called “bean counting”. When used together, both methods create a balance: large-scale evidence supports the qualitative insights, and interpretive claims rest on firmer empirical ground.

Typically, CACDA unfolds through a series of stages. Researchers begin by formulating research questions, constructing a corpus, and conducting a situational analysis within a socio-historical context (Baker et al., 2008). The analytical process is typically guided by Fairclough’s (1992) influential three-dimensional model, which conceptualizes discourse at three levels: as text (examining linguistic features such as collocations and syntax), as discourse practice (investigating the production, distribution, and consumption of texts), and as sociocultural practice (analyzing the relationship between discourse and broader social structures, ideologies, and power relations). This model serves as a critical bridge between linguistics, sociology, and politics, enabling researchers to explore the dynamic interplay between language and social institutions (Fairclough, 2010). Given that news reports engage directly with current events and social issues, they remain a primary focus of investigation within this analytical framework (e.g., Baker & McEneaney, 2008).

## Method

This study applied a corpus-assisted discourse analytical approach to examine how Wenzhou’s international image is constructed in Spanish-language media. The analysis combined quantitative and qualitative procedures within the framework of CACDA. The data were collected from the NOW Corpus (<https://www.corpusdelespanol.org/now/>), a sub-corpus of the Corpus del Español. The corpora from Corpus del Español is an academic online database created by Mark Davies, which allows researchers, students, and teachers to gain insight into Spanish in more accessible ways. It is available to all users without any subscription fees or registration restrictions.

The NOW Corpus comprises online news articles collected from January 2012 to July 2019, encompassing content from 21 Spanish-speaking countries. It features articles from prominent publications such as *El País*, *El Mundo*, *ABC*, and *La Vanguardia* in Spain; *La Opinión* and *El Nuevo Herald* in the United States; *El Universal* and *Excélsior* in Mexico; and *Clarín* and *La Nación* in Argentina, among numerous others. With a total of over 7.6 billion words, it represents the largest existing Spanish-language news corpus, offering a valuable resource for linguistic and media studies. The associated online platform facilitates the execution of keyword searches, frequency analysis, extraction of collocations, and examination of concordances, supporting a more in-depth media analysis.

For the purposes of this analysis, all articles referencing “Wenzhou”, “Wen Zhou”, or “WenZhou” were retrieved from the corpus within the specified time frame. These spelling variants were deliberately included to account for potential

inconsistencies in the representation of the name. Subsequently, duplicate entries and irrelevant content were eliminated to ensure the integrity and relevance of the dataset. The resulting collection constitutes a curated set of Spanish language news articles concerning Wenzhou, which serves as the empirical basis for this research.

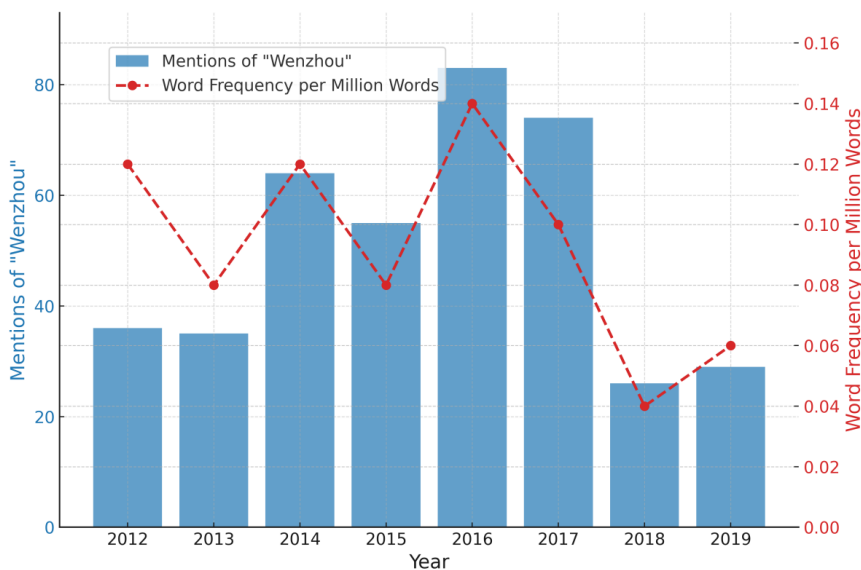
The analysis was structured into two primary components. First, it employed the search and collocation functionalities of the NOW Corpus to conduct quantitative assessments. This stage centered on examining the frequency with which Wenzhou was referenced in news reports across various Spanish-speaking countries and over different periods, thereby providing a comprehensive overview of the city’s prominence in Spanish media discourse. Additionally, the researchers utilized corpus tools to extract the fifty most frequent content words occurring within a four-word window on either side of “Wenzhou”. These lexical items serve to illuminate the recurrent topics, attitudes, and thematic associations that typically co-occur with mentions of Wenzhou in news coverage. Following this, a qualitative analysis was conducted, in which each instance was reviewed in its original context to identify salient patterns, such as prevalent journalistic framings of Wenzhou, nuanced evaluative stances, and broader tendencies in the media portrayal of the city.

The combination of these corpus-based and discourse-analytical procedures ensures both quantitative scope and qualitative depth. The quantitative analysis elucidates overarching patterns, highlighting predominant themes and notable trends. Complementing this, the qualitative analysis delves into specificities, revealing the mechanisms through which Spanish-language media construct, influence, and legitimize narratives concerning Wenzhou. Together, these complementary approaches provide a systematic and empirically grounded account of how the city’s international image has been discursively represented within the Spanish media.

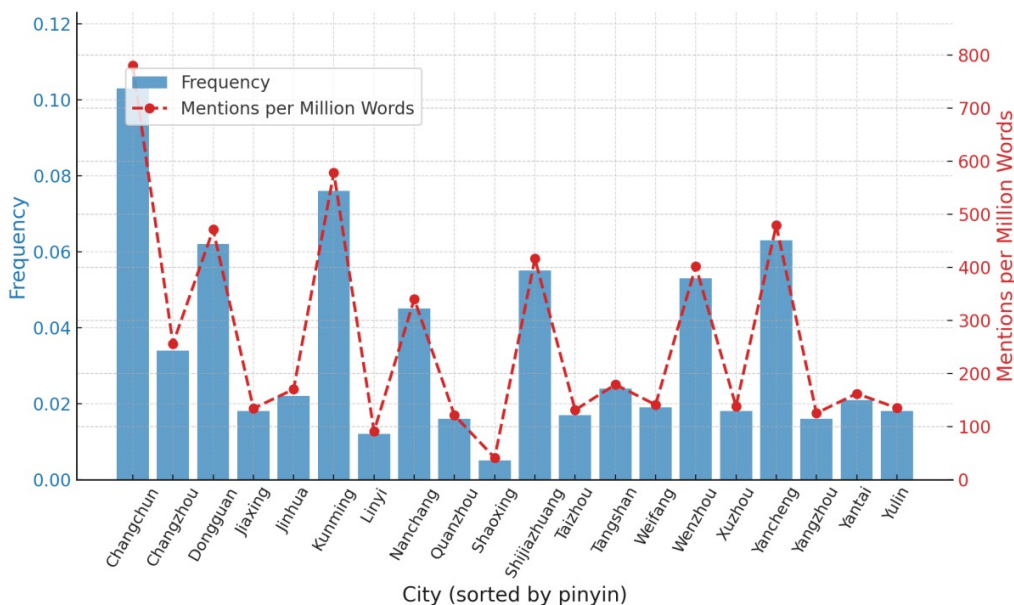
## Results

### Media visibility and distribution of Wenzhou

Between 2012 and 2019, the frequency with which “Wenzhou” appeared in mainstream Spanish-language media demonstrated considerable fluctuation, with a total of 402 occurrences across the corpus during this period. This period was marked by sustained, albeit occasionally inconsistent, international attention directed toward the city. As shown in [Figure 1](#), the most substantial increase occurred in 2016, when mentions reached 0.14 per million words (ppmw). The years 2012 and 2014 also featured prominently, each registering 0.12 ppmw. In contrast, 2013 and 2015 experienced declines to 0.08, with figures dropping further in 2018 (0.04 ppmw) and 2019 (0.06 ppmw). The heightened media focus in 2012 and 2014 corresponded with Wenzhou’s economic reforms and its emerging reputation for a dynamic private sector. During this time, international coverage frequently cited Wenzhou as an exemplary case of China’s private economic development. The city’s pioneering financial reforms — intended to facilitate easier access to credit for private enterprises — were widely regarded as experimental steps to



**Figure 1 | Diachronic variation of “Wenzhou” coverage in the NOW Corpus (2012–2019)**

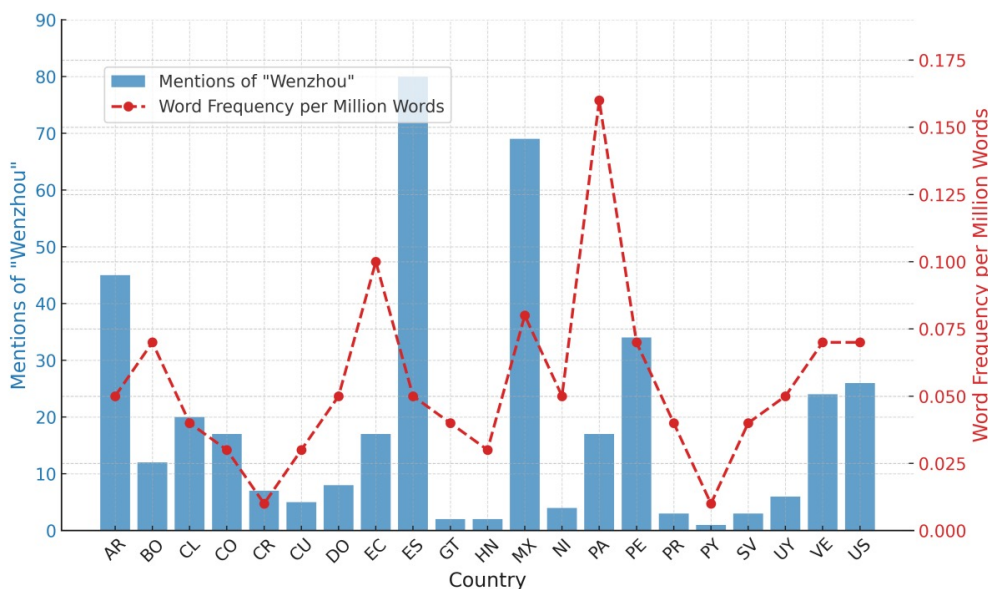


**Figure 2 | Comparison of media visibility among China's second-tier cities in the NOW corpus (2012–2019)**

ward market-oriented transformation. As such, Wenzhou received considerable attention, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the global financial crisis, when foreign media closely monitored local Chinese responses. In 2016, media interest resurged, coinciding with renewed discourse concerning China's local economic management, particularly in the realms of manufacturing and exports. The term “Wenzhou model” began to appear in Spanish-language media as a shorthand reference to the city's distinctive approach to small-scale industrial growth. Following 2017, international media attention diminished, shifting instead toward broader initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and relegating localized case studies like Wenzhou to a lesser prominence.

Viewed in aggregate, the trend reveals a discernible cycle in which mentions of Wenzhou peaked at 83 in 2016 before declining to 26 by 2018.

Figure 2 demonstrates that Wenzhou ranks among the top ten second-tier cities in China within the NOW corpus, with 402 mentions (0.053 ppmw). Within Zhejiang Province, Wenzhou's prominence becomes even more apparent. Its frequency surpasses that of Jinhua (170; 0.022 ppmw), Jiaxing (134; 0.018 ppmw), and Taizhou (131; 0.017 ppmw). These figures reinforce Wenzhou's regional significance. However, a broader national perspective reveals a different pattern. Cities such as Changchun (780; 0.103 ppmw) and Kunming (578; 0.076 ppmw) commanded greater media visibility.



**Figure 3 | Distribution of “Wenzhou” coverage across Spanish-speaking countries in NOW Corpus (2012–2019)**

While Wenzhou’s economic vitality is widely acknowledged, it has not achieved the same level of media attention as these other urban centers.

Figure 3 highlights further disparities on the international stage. The media coverage related to Wenzhou across Spanish-speaking countries varies considerably. Spain records the highest number of mentions (80; 0.05 ppmw), followed by Mexico (69; 0.08 ppmw) and Argentina (45; 0.05 ppmw). Panama (17; 0.16 ppmw) and Ecuador (17; 0.10 ppmw) display particularly elevated relative frequencies. These patterns can largely be attributed to the strength of trade relationships with China or the presence of sizable Chinese communities. Such ties influence the thematic focus of media coverage. In Spain, reporting tends to center on Chinese migration and the role of Wenzhou entrepreneurs in the retail sector. In contrast, Latin American media, especially in Mexico, Peru, and Panama, often frame Wenzhou as emblematic of China’s expanding commercial influence. Coverage typically emphasizes manufacturing exports and foreign investment. The surge in Panamanian reporting, for instance, coincides with the establishment of diplomatic relations with China and the subsequent initiation of Chinese-funded infrastructure projects.

### The discursive construction of Wenzhou

Corpus-based studies show that word meanings are shaped mainly through patterns of co-occurrence rather than through isolated lexical items. In line with Sinclair’s (1991) concept of collocation, where specific words tend to appear near one another, the term “Wenzhou” was examined in the NOW corpus within a span of four words on either side. The analysis produced the fifty most frequent content-word collo-

cates, followed by a systematic review of their concordance lines. This procedure made it possible to identify the thematic associations and connotations activated by these lexical groupings and to observe the ways in which Spanish-language mainstream media has influenced Wenzhou’s global representation in recent years. All fifty collocates reached a mutual information (MI) score of at least 3, a value that indicates a statistically meaningful association with “Wenzhou” (see Table 1). MI scores represent the strength of the link between the node and its collocate, and higher values signal tighter connections. Taken together, these collocates form a detailed and multifaceted picture of Wenzhou’s presence in contemporary discourse, which the representation for Wenzhou may fall into five broad domains: geography, economy, technology, culture and society. Function words and items with very low frequency were excluded to ensure that only high-MI collocates central to each domain were retained.

As the first of these five domains, geography domain forms a clear and consistent pattern in Spanish-language coverage of Wenzhou. Between 2012 and 2019, the news maintains a stable geographical narrative. Wenzhou is repeatedly identified as a Chinese city in Zhejiang Province and positioned on the country’s eastern coast. Reports situate it in relation to nearby urban centers, and this pattern appears in recurring collocates such as *ciudad, China, provincia, oriental, Zhejiang, costera, and ubicado*. These words collectively highlight Wenzhou’s identity as a coastal city embedded within Zhejiang and firmly located within the Chinese national context. Concordance evidence confirms this portrayal. One article introduces it as “*la ciudad china de Wenzhou, provincia de Zhejiang, ubicada en la costa este del país*”<sup>1</sup>. Another refers to “*la ciudad*

<sup>1</sup> *La ciudad china de Wenzhou, provincia de Zhejiang, ubicada en la costa este del país, es conocida como la “Jerusalén de China”.* (The Chinese city of Wenzhou, in Zhejiang Province, located on the country’s east coast, is known as the “Jerusalem of China”.) [NoticiaCristiana.com, 14-06-04, 1982343]

**Table 1 | High-frequency collocates of “Wenzhou” in the NOW Corpus (2012–2019)**

No.	Collocate	Freq	MI	No.	Collocate	Freq	MI
1	Ciudad (City)	160	5.95	26	Alejado (City)	5	7.16
2	China (China)	71	7	27	Calcula (Calculates)	5	6.57
3	Provincia (Province)	65	6.3	28	Chinos (Chinese)	5	6.37
4	Oriental(Eastern)	39	8.88	29	Desastres (Disasters)	5	6.35
5	Zhejiang (Zhejiang)	31	14.43	30	Alrededores (Surroundings)	5	6.33
6	LUNES (Monday)	15	3.85	31	Proximas (Next)	5	4.72
7	Shao (Shao)	13	15.02	32	Naturales (Natural)	5	4.56
8	Zhumin (Zhumin)	12	18.46	33	Iglesia (Church)	5	3.97
9	Costera (Costal)	11	8.17	34	Ciudades (Cities)	5	3.84
10	Obispo (Bishop)	11	7.36	35	2011 (2011)	5	3.61
11	Madrugada(Morning)	10	5.31	36	-	5	3.31
12	Diocesis (Diocese)	8	7.94	37	Sanjiang (Sanjiang)	4	17.97
13	CRISTIANA (Christian)	8	7.48	38	Thisa (Thisa)	4	17.78
14	Aeropuerto (Airport)	8	4.87	39	Desmoronaran (Collapsed)	4	17.39
15	Detenido (Detained)	8	4.54	40	Metropolis (Metropolis)	4	9.53
16	Afuera (Outsied)	7	6.92	41	Incrementara (Increase)	4	8.1
17	Industrial (Industrial)	7	5.23	42	Turista (Tourist)	4	6.65
18	Hangzhou (Hangzhou)	6	11.59	43	Convirtiend (Becoming)	4	6.57
19	Prelado (Prelate)	6	9.68	44	Sureste (Southeast)	4	6.08
20	Peter (Peter)	6	6.69	45	Murieron (Died)	4	4.99
21	EDIFICIOS (Buildings)	6	5.6	46	Nego (Denied)	4	4.85
22	Banco (Bank)	6	3.38	47	Choque (Crash)	4	4.64
23	Didi (Didi)	5	11.14	48	Periodico (Newspaper)	4	4.48
24	Suroriental (Southeastern)	5	10.83	49	CONOCIDA (Known)	4	4.35
25	Puerto (Pietro)	5	9.74	50	UBICADO (Located)	4	3.78

*costera de Wenzhou, provincia de Zhejiang*” while describing large-scale evacuations <sup>1</sup>. A further example groups Wenzhou with “*ciudades ricas del este como Hangzhou y Wenzhou*”, reinforcing its place within the prosperous eastern urban belt. Additional collocates such as *afueras, alrededores, sureste, suroriental*, and *rica* broaden the geographical frame, directing attention to surrounding towns and the wider southeastern coastal region. Throughout the corpus, Wenzhou is never portrayed as isolated or inland. Instead, it consistently appears as an integral part of China’s eastern seaboard, with frequent references to the East Coast and to its proximity to Hangzhou, and occasional mentions of Shanghai, Ningbo, Taizhou, or Beijing. In sum, Spanish-language reporting anchors Wenzhou within the country, the province, and the coast, and presents it as part of a dynamic and interconnected coastal region.

As the second domain, economy domain highlights Wenzhou as a dynamic coastal industrial center with a pronounced entrepreneurial base and a strong export orientation. The collocate profile consistently points toward a city shaped by manufacturing capacity and business-driven

growth. Reports on typhoon preparedness—for instance, the suspension of high-speed rail services and the cancellation of twenty-seven flights at “*el aeropuerto de Wenzhou anuló 27 vuelos*” <sup>2</sup>—go beyond the description of emergency measures. These references underline Wenzhou’s role as a significant and active transportation hub, and the repeated appearance of *aeropuerto* reinforces the city’s underlying economic vitality. Public discourse continues to revisit the October 2011 credit shock, a moment repeatedly described as “*ciudad industrial de emprendedores ... con una potente industria exportadora ... que sufrió ... una brutal crisis crediticia*” <sup>3</sup>, which still shapes the perception of Wenzhou as a city dominated by entrepreneurs and small to medium-sized exporters facing intense financial pressure. Wenzhou also appears as an experimental site for national financial reform, captured in the label “*banco de pruebas de la reforma financiera*” <sup>4</sup>, a characterization that situates the city within a broader framework of policy innovation. Collocates such as *industrial, banco*, and *em-*

<sup>1</sup> Un total de 37.521 personas han sido trasladadas en la ciudad costera de Wenzhou, provincia de Zhejiang. (A total of 37,521 people have been relocated in the coastal city of Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province.) [La Demajagua, 16-07- 08, 13844353]

<sup>2</sup> Ante la inminente llegada del tifón, el tráfico de los trenes de alta velocidad fue suspendido el domingo en las provincias de Zhejiang, Fujian y Jiangxi. El aeropuerto de Wenzhou anuló 27 vuelos, detalló la agencia. (With the imminent arrival of the typhoon, high-speed rail traffic was suspended on Sunday in the provinces of Zhejiang, Fujian, and Jiangxi. Wenzhou’s airport canceled 27 flights, the agency reported.) [La Nación Costa Rica, 13-10-06, 8103320]

<sup>3</sup> Wenzhou es considerada ciudad industrial de emprendedores y con una potente industria exportadora de pequeñas y medianas empresas, que sufrió en octubre de 2011 una brutal crisis crediticia... (Wenzhou is considered a city industrial of entrepreneurs with a strong export-oriented small- and medium-sized enterprise sector, which suffered a severe credit crisis in October 2011... [Urgente 24, 12-04-04, 9211062]

<sup>4</sup> BEIJING ENSAYA UN NUEVO MODELO Wenzhou, banco de pruebas de la reforma financiera china... (BEIJING TRIES OUT A NEW MODEL—Wenzhou, a testing ground for China’s financial reform...) [Urgente 24, 12-04-04, 9211062]

*presa* further substantiate this economic profile, which points to a locality deeply engaged in manufacturing, financial experimentation, and large-scale economic operations, all embedded within the wider coastal economy of Zhejiang and the eastern region.

As the third domain, technology domain introduces a more focused but consistently positive portrayal of Wenzhou within the Spanish-language corpus. Media reports depict the city as an early adopter of urban digital systems, often emphasizing municipal initiatives to extend facial-recognition applications across different areas of the city, as reflected in formulations such as “*incrementará el uso de la técnica de reconocimiento facial en otras áreas de la ciudad*”<sup>1</sup>. Coverage also highlights the introduction of a facial-recognition payment system on Wuma commercial street —“*un sistema de pagos por reconocimiento facial... en la ciudad de Wenzhou*”<sup>2</sup>—which places the city at the forefront of smart-retail experimentation. These accounts combine to construct an image of a coastal metropolis where entrepreneurial energy converges with applied digitalization. The collocate profile reinforces this reading. Items such as *ciudad*, *metrópolis*, and *incrementará* align with a narrative of urban scale, planned technological rollout, and ongoing digital transformation. Although this technological facet is less prominent than economic or event-driven coverage, it nonetheless contributes a distinct layer to Wenzhou’s overall media representation.

As the fourth domain, culture domain is shaped overwhelmingly by religious themes, which Spanish-language coverage presents through a markedly conflict-oriented lens. Reports repeatedly invoke the label *la Jerusalén de China* to describe Wenzhou’s dense Christian community (“*la comunidad cristiana de Wenzhou... se ganó el apodo de la Jerusalén China*”<sup>3</sup>), yet this initial recognition of devotion shifts toward episodes of confrontation. High-salience collocates such as *obispo*, *diócesis*, *cristiana*, and *prelado* bring clerical leadership and ecclesial structures to the foreground, while terms like *detenido*, *negó*, and *periódico* appear in narratives centered on police detentions and official statements, as seen in the account of the detained “*obispo de la diócesis china de Wenzhou*”<sup>4</sup>. Additional items such as *iglesia* and *desmoronaran* anchor stories of church demolitions, including references to Wenzhou as “*la más afectada... por el número de igle-*

*sias demolidas*”<sup>5</sup>. These lexical patterns link Wenzhou’s cultural portrayal to Christian institutions, episcopal authority, and tension with state policy. Positive or neutral representations of religious life do not appear in the data. As a result, religion becomes the dominant and largely contentious prism through which Spanish-language media frames Wenzhou’s cultural identity.

As the fifth domain, society domain is constructed through two contrasting strands of coverage. The first revolves around high-impact events, where Spanish-language reports foreground accidents and structural failures in Wenzhou. Accounts of the 2011 train collision (“*40 personas murieron en un choque de trenes en Wenzhou*”<sup>6</sup>) and the deaths caused by collapsing (“*edificios rudimentarios ... 20 personas murieron... tras el derrumbe de unos edificios*”<sup>7</sup>), described an image of urban risk and vulnerability. Alongside these portrayals, migration introduces a markedly different social dimension. Spain hosts a substantial Chinese diaspora, and more than 80% of this population originates from the *sureste* of China, especially Qingtian and Wenzhou. Media outlets often highlight their long-standing reputation for commercial expertise, captured in the description of these groups as “*los fenicios de China por su habilidad comercial*”<sup>8</sup>. Together, these elements produce a dual social profile: one that associates Wenzhou with fatal incidents and precarious urban conditions, and another that positions the city as a principal point of origin for a successful diaspora linked to transnational trade networks and an entrepreneurial identity.

Across the five domains, the corpus presents a coherent set of patterns that shape Wenzhou’s representation in Spanish-language media. Geographical references consistently situate the city on China’s eastern coast and within Zhejiang Province, often in relation to surrounding metropolitan areas. Economic coverage highlights its profile as an industrial center with a strong entrepreneurial and export-oriented base, as well as its association with financial reform initiatives. Technological reports depict a city experimenting with facial-recognition systems and other digital applications in urban and commercial settings. Cultural references focus predominantly on Christianity, with recurrent attention to ecclesial figures, church administration and episodes involving religious institutions. Social reporting combines accounts of major accidents and infrastructure failures with references to Wenzhou’s role as a key point of origin for the Chinese diaspora in Spain. Together, these clusters outline the principal

<sup>1</sup> *El Gobierno de Wenzhou anunció que incrementará el uso de la técnica de reconocimiento facial en otras áreas de la ciudad.* (The Wenzhou government announced that it will increase the use of facial recognition technology in other areas of the city.) [Contacto Hoy, 19-01-18, 72654590]

<sup>2</sup> *China ha puesto en marcha un sistema de pagos por reconocimiento facial en la calle comercial de Wuma, en la ciudad de Wenzhou...* (China has launched a facial-recognition payment system on Wuma commercial street in the city of Wenzhou...) [El Tiempo, 19-01-18, 52570374]

<sup>3</sup> *La comunidad cristiana de Wenzhou y su entorno se ganó el apodo de la Jerusalén China por su devoción...* (The Christian community of Wenzhou and its surroundings earned the nickname the Chinese Jerusalem for its devotion...) [El Mundo, 16-06-18, 13444610]

<sup>4</sup> *Pietro Shao Zhumin, obispo de la diócesis china de Wenzhou, detenido el pasado mes de mayo por la policía...* (Pietro Shao Zhumin, bishop of the Chinese diocese of Wenzhou, detained by the police last May...) [ACI Prensa, 17-06-26, 21436780]

<sup>5</sup> *La ciudad de Wenzhou...es la más afectada por el número de iglesias demolidas.* (The city of Wenzhou... is the most affected in terms of the number of churches demolished.) [Entre Cristianos, 14-05-26, 2007933]

<sup>6</sup> *El 23 de julio de 2011, 40 personas murieron en un choque de trenes en Wenzhou...* (On July 23, 2011, 40 people died in a train collision in Wenzhou...) [El País, 13-07-30, 7041507]

<sup>7</sup> *En 2016, 20 personas murieron en Wenzhou tras el derrumbe de unos edificios rudimentarios...* (In 2016, 20 people died in Wenzhou after the collapse of some makeshift buildings...) [El Comercio, 19-05-16, 63084003]

<sup>8</sup> *... más del 80% de este colectivo vienen de Qingtian y Wenzhou, situados al sureste de China. Históricamente se conocían los habitantes de estas comarcas como los fenicios de China por su habilidad comercial.* (...more than 80% of this group come from Qingtian and Wenzhou, located in southeast China. Historically, the inhabitants of these regions were known as the Phoenicians of China for their commercial skill.) [El Mundo, 15-08-14, 668413]

thematic contours through which Wenzhou appears in the Spanish-Language media.

## Discussion

Regarding RQ1, the temporal and cross-national patterns surrounding Wenzhou's media visibility reveal a structure shaped far more by global interpretive needs than by the city's own actions. The pronounced peaks in 2012, 2014 and especially 2016 coincide with moments when international observers were reassessing the direction of China's economic governance. At those times, foreign media searched for emblematic localities that could crystallize debates on credit reform, private-sector resilience and post-crisis restructuring. Wenzhou met this need because its reputation as a hub of entrepreneurial risk-taking and informal finance allowed it to stand in for broader anxieties concerning China's transition toward a more market-oriented economy. This tendency mirrors findings in English-language contexts, where Wenzhou is frequently reduced to simplified or critical narratives regarding its private economy (Wang, 2022). The amplified attention in 2016 reflects renewed scrutiny of manufacturing performance, local indebtedness and the future of small-scale industry under the "new normal," and Wenzhou's symbolic value increased accordingly. Once global narratives shifted toward larger geopolitical themes after 2017, the city's interpretive usefulness waned, which produced a marked decline in visibility. The contrast between Spain and Latin American countries reinforces this relational pattern. Spanish outlets tended to reference Wenzhou when discussing everyday commerce and the activities of Chinese migrants, while Latin American outlets treated the city as evidence of China's expanding commercial footprint. These differences demonstrate that the international meaning of Wenzhou depends on the kind of relationship each country maintains with China. Migrant-receiving contexts draw on Wenzhou to explain social and economic changes in local neighborhoods, while trade-focused contexts rely on it to explain shifts in regional economic dependence. Comparisons with other second-tier Chinese cities support this interpretation, as Wenzhou appears prominent within Zhejiang yet does not achieve the same symbolic weight nationally. The city occupies an intermediate position in the international imagination. It is familiar enough to be mobilized as an example when a story requires a case of private-sector dynamism or credit volatility, but not distinctive enough to command sustained attention on its own. This aligns with Chen's (2023) observation that although international attention toward Wenzhou is emerging, it remains contingent upon specific functional domains rather than forming a comprehensive city brand. This pattern also aligns with research on the uneven diffusion of subnational images, which shows that cities without major cultural or political capital tend to surface only when they can be attached to wider themes that already interest foreign audiences. Wenzhou's international presence therefore reflects a contingent alignment between external agendas and the city's perceived economic identity rather than any deliberate or continuous projection.

Regarding RQ2, the distribution of significant collocates converges around five recurrent domains, namely geography, economy, technology, culture and society, and each domain adds a distinct layer to the ways in which Wenzhou is discursively constructed in Spanish-language media. The semantic environment surrounding the term "Wenzhou" shows a layered discursive structure shaped by competing impulses to stabilize meaning and to dramatize local tension, and this structure becomes visible through the dual movements of anchoring and intensification. Spatial and economic collocates anchor the city within China's eastern coastal corridor and within a narrative of private-sector agency. This encourages readers to view Wenzhou as a functional urban hub where entrepreneurship, manufacturing and digital experimentation converge, forming one side of a dual framing pattern. Foreign coverage repeatedly positions the city as a site of economic ingenuity, applied technologies and reform-minded initiative. This configuration that aligns with long-standing portrayals of China as a country whose localities serve as proving grounds for national policy innovation.

The other side of the framing pattern emerges from the prominence of religious, accident-related and conflict-oriented vocabulary. This vocabulary draws Wenzhou into a storyline centered on confrontation, vulnerability and contestation. These two strands coexist despite their tension, creating a paradoxical identity in which Wenzhou is imagined as both a place of experimentation and a terrain marked by instability. This duality echoes observations on China's national image where opportunity and threat appear simultaneously, a mechanism that reappears here at the subnational level. Indeed, such contradictory framing is not unique to Wenzhou but has been broadly observed in studies regarding the international images of other Chinese cities (e.g., Wang et al., 2015; Jiao, 2016; Li, 2019; Fu & Xu, 2020; Gao, 2023; Huang & Guan, 2024). The coexistence of these frames supports the view that city images can amplify or moderate broader national narratives rather than simply mirror them. Their interaction becomes especially visible in the evaluative tone of many concordance lines, where favorable descriptions often appear within restrictive environments that dampen or condition their positivity. The resulting semantic prosody produces a form of guarded recognition in which economic progress or technological ambition is acknowledged yet immediately re-framed through hedging or qualification.

In general terms, this discursive construction aligns with findings on Wenzhou's image in English-language media (Wang, 2022; Chen, 2023). However, a distinct divergence emerges in the cultural domain. Religious stories intensify this tendency in Spanish media because they foreground socially charged events that foreign outlets associate with ideological sensitivity. This prominence is reinforced by two overlapping dynamics: first, Wenzhou's long history of overseas migration, which facilitated earlier and more extensive contact with Christianity and resulted in larger congregations than in many other Chinese cities; and second, the cultural sensibilities of Spanish-speaking societies, which are predominantly Catholic and therefore more responsive to news involving belief, worship or religious regulation. Accident-re-

lated events strengthen a narrative centre on fragility, while diaspora-oriented references highlight commercial capability, and technology-related stories add a forward-looking element that remains overshadowed by more dramatic motifs. As a result, the city's mediated identity does not settle into a single coherent profile but instead resembles an assemblage produced by selective emphasis. Here, economic and technological competence forms one pole and conflict-driven or risk-oriented episodes form the other. This configuration illustrates how international media construct meaning through recurrent framing practices that elevate certain associations while constraining others. Ultimately, it demonstrates that the discursive life of a city is shaped jointly by inherited national narratives, local historical characteristics and the thematic priorities of external observers.

## Conclusion

This study employed a corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis to examine how Wenzhou's international image is constructed in Spanish-language mainstream media. It explored how the city's representation varies across countries, over time and in relation to other Chinese cities, and how its image is discursively assembled through significant collocates. By integrating temporal and cross-national visibility patterns with collocational and thematic analysis, the study shows that Wenzhou enters Spanish-language news in an event-driven and highly selective manner. It occupies an intermediate symbolic position among second-tier Chinese cities and is framed through a dual configuration in which economic and technological capability coexists with narratives of religious tension, crisis and risk. Economic competitiveness, diaspora connections and high-impact events provide the main entry points through which the city is made meaningful, while more routine cultural and everyday urban dimensions remain peripheral. Furthermore, the evaluative tone surrounding positive descriptions is frequently cautious and hedged. Taken together, these patterns indicate that Wenzhou's image is not a stable brand but a contingent, composite construct shaped by the interpretive needs of different Spanish-speaking contexts, by agenda access and by the specific histories that link Wenzhou to trade and migration. At a broader level, the findings refine existing research on China's international image by showing how macro-frames of opportunity and threat are recalibrated at the subnational level. They also demonstrate the value of a CACDA workflow for tracing how non-metropolitan Chinese cities become discursive objects in transnational media and how their images are negotiated across linguistic and regional settings.

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. The corpus includes only explicit mentions of "Wenzhou" and does not capture indirect references that may invoke the city without naming it. The temporal window (2012–2019) reflects a specific media climate shaped by post-crisis economic concerns and pre-pandemic configurations of China–Hispanic relations; subsequent developments may have introduced new frames. Although the dataset is large, not all marginal or counter-hegemonic narratives could be examined in detail,

and interpretive steps remain necessary despite the corpus-based grounding. Finally, this study focuses on media production rather than audience reception, so it cannot determine how Spanish-speaking readers internalize, negotiate or resist these images.

Future research could extend this work in several directions. Cross-linguistic comparisons with English-, French- or Portuguese-language media would help to clarify which aspects of Wenzhou's dual framing are specific to the Spanish-speaking world and which reflect broader Western discourses about Chinese cities. Audience-focused studies, including surveys, interviews and focus groups, would shed light on how media frames interact with everyday perceptions of China at the city level. Methodologically, combining corpus analysis with multimodal and ethnographic approaches—for example, interviews with journalists and members of the Wenzhou diaspora—would deepen our understanding of how urban images are produced, circulated and contested in practice.

Taken together, the study shows that Wenzhou's image in Spanish-language mainstream media is neither accidental nor neutral, but the outcome of structured discursive choices that reveal how non-metropolitan Chinese cities are drawn into wider debates about economy, religion, risk and global interdependence.

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