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Constructing China in Global Climate Governance: A Corpus-Based Analysis of The *New York Times'* Discourse

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Abstract

This study applies corpus linguistics methods to examine *The New York Times*' coverage of Chinese climate issues from 2023 to 2024. Using LancsBox 6.0, the research conducts a critical discourse analysis at both macro and micro levels. The macro-level analysis identifies the overarching narrative framework and implicit ideological orientations within the reporting, while the micro-level analysis investigates collocational patterns to uncover lexical choices and discursive strategies. The findings show that *The New York Times* not only focuses on China's policy developments and practical actions regarding climate governance but also frequently highlights the reactions of the United States and other countries. The reports demonstrate a dual stance: they acknowledge China's contributions to renewable energy development and global climate governance while simultaneously expressing skepticism toward China's continued reliance on fossil fuels and the effectiveness of its climate policies. High-frequency keywords such as "China," "climate," "energy," and "emissions," together with their salient collocates, construct a multi-layered narrative that reflects complex geopolitical dynamics and evaluative positions. This study contributes to understanding how international media shape global climate governance discourse and offers insights for enhancing China's discursive power and international influence in climate communication.

Keywords: China Climate Issues, *The New York Times*, Discourse Analysis, Corpus Linguistics

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1 Introduction

Against the backdrop of accelerating globalization, climate change has become one of the most pressing and widely discussed issues in the international arena (Painter, 2011). Governments, international organizations, the media, and academic communities worldwide actively participate in global climate dialogue, seeking effective strategies and pathways for collective climate action (Vandenbergh & Gilligan, 2022; UNEP, 2023). Within this process, the media, serving as a key conduit for information dissemination, plays a decisive role in shaping public understanding, influencing policy debates, and framing global climate governance. Its reporting practices, discursive features, and implicit attitudinal stances significantly shape how climate issues are interpreted and negotiated internationally (Vikström et al., 2023; Fukumura, 2024).

As the world's largest developing country, China has undertaken extensive efforts in energy restructuring, environmental policy innovation, and climate change mitigation, thereby drawing sustained global attention (China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations Center for Economic Security Studies, 2005). In recent years, China has issued a series of policies aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions and advancing green, low-carbon development, reaffirming its commitment to acting as a responsible major power in global climate governance (Dong et al., 2024). However, coverage of China's climate actions in certain international media, particularly mainstream U.S. outlets such as *The New York Times*, often reflects selective framing, bias, or misinterpretation. Such representations have the potential to distort international perceptions of China and may adversely affect cooperation in global climate governance (Wang et al., 2023; Liang, 2025).

Although substantial scholarly work has been conducted on environmental discourse, energy narratives, and climate communication (Hajer, 1995; Winther & Wilhite, 2015; Hase et al., 2021; Lam, 2025), research focusing specifically on foreign media discourse about China's climate actions remains limited in both breadth and depth. Existing studies rarely incorporate systematic corpus-based approaches to analyze the linguistic strategies, evaluative tendencies, and power dynamics embedded in Western media portrayals of China (e.g. Geng, 2012; Wang, 2014). Addressing this gap, the present study examines *The New York Times*' contemporary reporting on China's climate issues, aiming to uncover the discursive constructions deployed and the international power relations they implicitly reflect.

Using corpus linguistics methods, this study compiles and analyzes *The New York Times*' climate-related reports on China published between 2023 and 2024. Through both macro- and micro-level discourse analysis, it investigates salient lexical choices, collocational patterns, and thematic structures, with the goal of revealing how China's climate image is constructed and how geopolitical power dynamics are embedded in media discourse. By doing so, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of international media in shaping global climate governance narratives and provides insights for enhancing China's discursive power and international influence in the climate arena.

2 Literature Review

Global climate communication has evolved into a critical arena where national identities and responsibilities are contested. Foundational scholarship grounded in critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010; van Dijk, 2015) underscores the media's power in encoding ideological positions within climate narratives. In this vein, Boykoff (2011) and Painter and Gavin (2016) have extensively documented how Western news outlets systematically frame global climate responsibilities and risks. Against this backdrop, the construction of China's role has attracted significant scholarly attention. Research indicates that China is increasingly utilizing discursive strategies to project a responsible stakeholder identity (Lu, 2018; Huang & Che, 2023), aiming to reshape its national image in global governance.

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However, China's self-presentation frequently clashes with the framing strategies of Western mainstream media. Existing studies reveal a persistent pattern of "othering" and politicization. For instance, Liang et al. (2025) identified recurrent evaluative frames in British media that cast China as an environmental antagonist, while Barkemeyer et al. (2017) highlighted structural biases in reporting on major emitters. Specifically concerning *The New York Times*, earlier studies by Geng (2012) and Wang (2014) exposed deep-seated ideological tendencies. These outlets often employ selective framing that emphasizes skepticism toward China's political motivations over its environmental contributions (Painter & Ashe, 2012), thereby distorting international perceptions (Wang et al., 2023).

Furthermore, contemporary climate discourse is inextricably linked to geopolitical dynamics and energy security. Scholars argue that media representations are shaped not merely by environmental concerns but by the logic of securitization (Cherp & Jewell, 2019). Huang and Liu (2025) and Han et al. (2017) demonstrate how political priorities and conceptual metaphors regarding energy transition influence narratives in both Chinese and American media. This dimension is particularly relevant given the dual pressure on China to decarbonize while maintaining energy security.

Synthesizing the existing scholarship, a gap emerges. While previous studies have established the presence of bias in Western reporting, research focusing specifically on the post-2022 era, marked by intensified Sino-U.S. competition and accelerated global energy transitions, remains limited. Most specific analyses of *The New York Times* date back a decade, potentially overlooking newer discursive strategies adapted to current geopolitical realities. Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis approach. By examining coverage from 2023 to 2024, it aims to uncover how *The New York Times* navigates the tension between acknowledging China's renewable progress and maintaining geopolitical skepticism, thereby offering updated insights into the discursive construction of global climate governance.

3 Research Design

3.1 Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

(1)What thematic keywords does *The New York Times* prioritize when reporting on China's climate-related issues?

(2)What collocates frequently co-occur with these thematic keywords, what discursive features do they reveal, and what underlying discourse strategies can be inferred from these patterns?

3.2Corpus Collection and Sample Selection

The New York Times was selected as the object of analysis for two primary reasons. First, as one of the most influential newspapers in the United States, it is widely regarded for its journalistic authority and credibility, and it often serves as a benchmark for mainstream Western media reporting (Meraz, 2009). Second, the newspaper has consistently demonstrated strong interest in China-related topics, making it a valuable source for examining how Western media construct narratives about China's climate governance.

For corpus collection, all relevant news reports published on *The New York Times*' official website between January 2023 and November 2024 were retrieved. A series of keyword combinations: "China + environment," "China + climate," "China + pollution," and "China + energy" were used to filter climate-related articles. Following a manual screening process to remove duplicates, irrelevant items, and non-news content, a final corpus consisting of 30 news articles was compiled. The resulting corpus contains 34,100 tokens and 5,127 types, forming the China Climate and Energy News Corpus used for analysis.

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3.3 Corpus Analysis Methodology

This study utilizes LancsBox 6.0 to conduct critical discourse analysis from both macro and micro perspectives.

At the macro level, keyword analysis was conducted using the Words function in comparison with the Brown Corpus, which serves as the reference corpus due to its balanced representation of American English. This step identifies statistically significant thematic keywords and enables an examination of the overarching narrative structure and reporting tendencies in *The New York Times*' coverage of China's climate issues.

At the micro level, the study employs the GraphColl module to analyze collocation patterns. Mutual dependency between keywords and their collocates is measured using the information score metric. The collocational networks generated through visualization reveal the lexical choices, evaluative patterns, and discursive strategies embedded in the reporting. This micro-level analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of how linguistic patterns construct China's climate image and offers methodological insights for future media discourse studies and cross-cultural communication research.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Key Word Analysis

Scott (2010) defines keywords as lexical items that occur with significantly higher frequency in a target corpus compared with a reference corpus, thereby revealing the thematic focus of the texts under investigation. In this study, the Brown Corpus is used as the reference corpus. As the first comprehensive corpus of American English, containing approximately 1,014,312 words across diverse genres, including newspapers, books, and governmental documents, it serves as a suitable benchmark for examining linguistic salience in *The New York Times* reports (Francis & Ku era, 1982).

Using the LancsBox Words tool, keywords were statistically identified and ranked according to their keyness values. After removing function words, the ten most thematically salient keywords were retained, and normalized frequencies (per 10,000 words) were calculated. The results are presented in Table 1. These keywords can be categorized into three major semantic groups.

Table 1: Top 10 Key Words in *The New York Times* Corpus

Key Word	Normalized Frequency	Log-Likelihood Value
China	118	2525.61
climate	97	2364.75
United	57	1337.47
states	49	1137.82
energy	46	1117.88
emissions	39	953.07
more	37	844.31
countries	35	845.58
not	35	810.59
Chinese	33	784.04

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4.1.1 Nation-related terms

The first category comprises nation-related keywords, including China, Chinese, United, states, and countries. Among these, China is the highest-frequency keyword, underscoring *The New York Times*' sustained focus on China in its climate-related reporting. The prominence of China and Chinese highlights China's centrality in global climate governance narratives and reveals the newspaper's close attention to China's policy developments, climate actions, and international influence. Example (1), which refers to revisions to China's State Secrets Law, further illustrates the media's sensitivity to China's policy environment and its perceived relevance to broader geopolitical or climate-related concerns.

The frequent co-occurrence of United and states reflects the important role the United States plays in shaping discourses on China's climate governance. By juxtaposing China and the U.S. in areas such as energy transition, as shown in Example (2), the reporting highlights the evolving global energy landscape as well as the interdependent and sometimes contrasting paths of the two major emitters. Meanwhile, the keyword countries indicates a broader contextualization in which the newspaper incorporates the perspectives, actions, or reactions of multiple nations.

Example (1): China passed revisions to an already stringent state secrets law, broadening the scope of the type of information that would be considered a national security risk in the world's second-largest economy.

Example (2): Global capacity to generate power from coal, one of the most polluting fossil fuels, grew in 2023, driven by a wave of new plants coming online in China that coincided with a slowing pace of retirements of older plants in the United States and Europe.

4.1.2 Climate-related terms

The second category comprises core substantive terminology, most notably climate, energy, and emissions. The dominance of climate not only establishes the thematic center of the discourse but also functions as a pivot for geopolitical negotiation. As illustrated in Example (3), the reporting inextricably links China's climate actions to the political landscape of the United States. By citing an environmental policy adviser who connects a potential "Harris presidency" to "continued pressure" on Beijing, *The New York Times* frames China's climate governance not merely as a domestic policy imperative but as a variable responsive to U.S. political leverage. This discursive strategy implicitly positions the U.S. as the "monitor" or "pressure source" and China as the entity acting under external scrutiny.

Furthermore, the high frequency of "energy" and "emissions" signals a discourse of "surveillance" regarding China's developmental trajectory. Energy reflects the media's focus on the structural contradictions in China's transition—specifically the tension between expanding renewables and persisting coal dependency. Meanwhile, emissions serves as a metric of accountability. The prominence of this term suggests that the newspaper prioritizes the consequences of China's growth (i.e., global environmental impact) over the process of its development, thereby constructing a narrative that continuously evaluates whether China is fulfilling its responsibilities as the world's largest emitter.

Example (3): Yao Zhe, the global policy adviser for Greenpeace East Asia, agreed that a Harris presidency would probably mean continued pressure on Chinese leaders to up the ante on climate change.

4.1.3 Degree-related terms

The third category consists of degree-related terms, particularly more and not, which encode evaluative nuances. The keyword more frequently occurs in contexts emphasizing China's progress or expanding efforts in renewable energy development and climate governance. Example (4) demonstrates how such language highlights China's strategic use of coal as a supplementary resource amid rapid renewable energy expansion.

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Example (4): China's government says that much of the coal it uses or plans to use would serve as a fall-back for times when renewable production dips and the grid requires more energy.

Example (5): The agreement does not specify how China will push fossil fuels off its electricity grid.

Conversely, the keyword not often appears in contexts expressing skepticism or criticism regarding China's fossil fuel reduction strategies. As illustrated in Example (5), the negation suggests ambiguity or insufficiency in China's plans to phase out fossil fuels, pointing to a critical undercurrent within the reporting.

Overall, the keyword analysis reveals a multifaceted framing of China's climate governance in *The New York Times*. Nation-related keywords emphasize China's geopolitical positioning and its relationship with major actors such as the United States. Climate-related terms highlight the newspapers focus on China's energy transition and emissions profile. Degree-related terms provide insight into evaluative tendencies—balancing acknowledgment of China's positive contributions with continued skepticism toward its reliance on fossil fuels.

Together, these patterns demonstrate that *The New York Times* constructs both recognition and critique, presenting China as an influential yet contested actor within global climate governance. The interplay of these frames reflects a diverse and layered discourse shaped by environmental, political, and geopolitical considerations.

4.2 Collocation Analysis

Collocations refer to lexical items that co-occur with significantly greater frequency than would be expected by chance within a particular linguistic context (Sinclair, 1991). Such patterns not only reflect habitual language use but also reveal the deeper discursive structures that shape media narratives. Using the GraphColl function in LancsBox, this study identified and visualized collocates associated with the keywords extracted through the Words function. In the resulting graphs, each collocate is represented as a node whose distance from the target keyword indicates the strength of association, with shorter lines denoting tighter collocational relationships. By inputting the thematic keywords listed in Table 1 into GraphColl, three clusters of collocational patterns were identified (Figures 1-3).

4.2.1 Collocations of nation-related terms

The first category (Figure 1) focuses on nation-related terms: "China," "Chinese," "United States," and "countries."

For China, prominent collocates such as Jinping signal the strong association between national leadership and climate policy actions. The frequent reference to President Xi Jinping highlights the political framing of China's climate stance. Example (6), which notes Xi's absence from an international climate conference, suggests media emphasis on China's diplomatic posture and its alignment or divergence from other major actors.

Collocates such as between and states construct China in contrastive or relational terms, often positioning it between competing global interests. Expressions like "between China and the United States" foreground geopolitical dynamics and draw attention to comparative climate responsibilities or actions. Additionally, the phrase "how China" foregrounds China's climate responses, strategies, and ongoing policy transitions, contributing to a discourse of evaluation and scrutiny.

For Chinese, collocates such as government and companies highlight multiple levels of agency, spanning national policy to corporate behavior. These collocates depict a multifaceted portrayal of China's climate actions, encompassing both state-led initiatives and enterprise-level engagement. In Example (7), the reference to China's WTO complaint illustrates its intricate position within global green-technology competition and climate governance.

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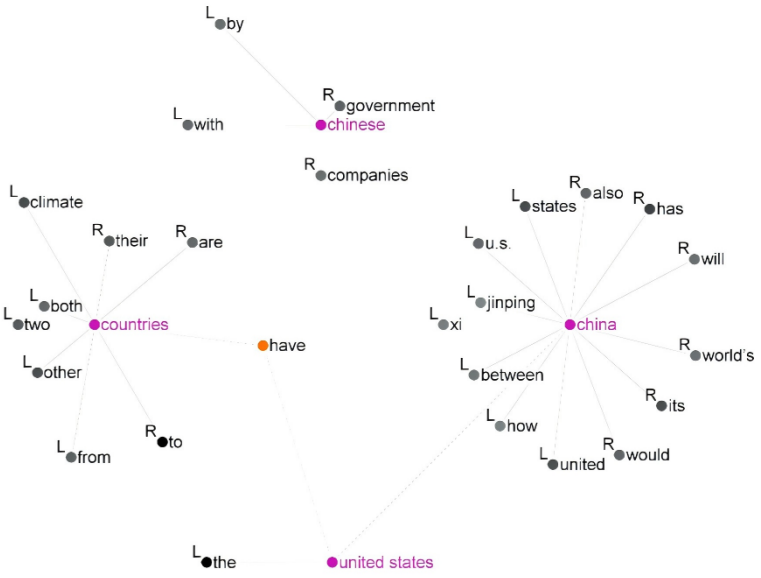


Figure 1: Significant Collocates of Nation-related Terms

Example (6): "It's not just the Americans who are AWOL. Hardly any of the world's most powerful leaders will be making an appearance in Baku, Azerbaijan— yet another year that the annual Conference of the Parties, convened to stem the problem of warming, has been hosted by a petrostate. President Xi Jinping of China won't be there..."

Example (7): "China, for its part, has complained to the World Trade Organization about U.S. green subsidies. Mr. Podesta has called that complaint 'beyond ironic' since the Chinese government has invested heavily in its own manufacturing sector."

Collocations of "United States" with China consistently highlight bilateral interactions and contrasts in climate governance, underscoring the centrality of Sino-U.S. dynamics in global climate discourse. The term countries, often collocated with expressions such as both, other, and from…to, situates China within a broader international landscape, emphasizing the diverse trajectories and responsibilities of different nations in addressing climate change.

4.2.2 Collocations of climate-related terms

For the keyword "climate," change is the most prominent collocate, reaffirming its status as the overarching thematic anchor (Figure 2). The phrase "climate change" repeatedly situates China within global climate governance frameworks, foregrounding its perceived responsibilities and commitments. Collocates such as envoy and talks (as in "climate envoy" and "climate talks") highlight the diplomatic dimension of climate politics, particularly the negotiation dynamics between China and the United States. Example (8) illustrates this by introducing the individuals representing both countries in climate diplomacy.

"Summit" (climate summit) and "targets" (climate targets) reflect China's participation in international climate forums and its policy objectives, including its long-term mitigation goals. These collocates emphasize China's discursive presence and its evolving commitments in global climate governance.

For "energy," collocates such as "clean energy", "renewable energy", and "energy transition" highlight China's rapid progress in the green-energy sector. These expressions frame China as an increasingly significant actor in global energy transformation. At the same time, references to coal or coal-fired power plants reveal persistent challenges and underscore the tension between China's rapid renewable expansion and its continued reliance on fossil fuels. Example (9) captures this dual dynamic.

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The keyword "emissions" frequently co-occurs with cut and reduce, forming expressions like "cut emissions" and "reduce emissions", which project China's commitments and actions toward mitigation. Example (10) demonstrates how such collocations often appear alongside political debates in the United States, further situating China within contested international narratives.

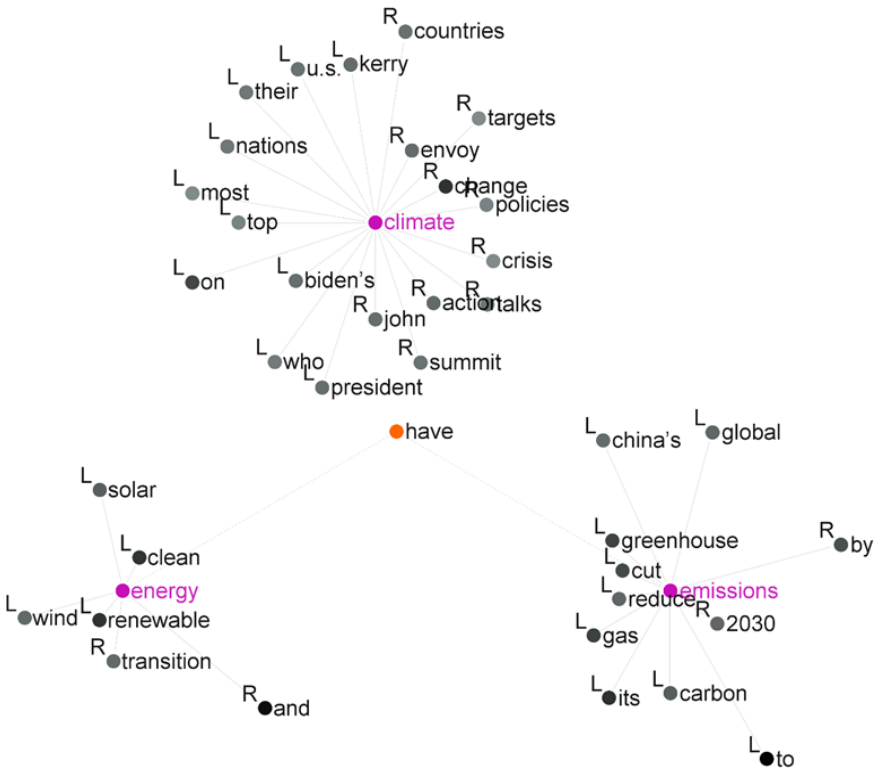


Figure 2: Significant Collocates of Climate-related Terms

Example (8): "Both men are new to their current jobs, but hardly novices. Mr. Podesta was in charge of the climate-law rollout before he took on the global role, following the retirement of John F. Kerry. Mr. Liu is a longtime diplomat who served as a United Nations official before becoming President Xi Jinping's top climate envoy."

Example (9): Part of that may be connected to China's slowing economy, but also the breakneck speed at which it is replacing coal, the dirtiest fossil fuel, with wind and solar energy.

Example (10): In a contentious hearing before a House Committee on Foreign Affairs panel, Republicans attacked Mr. Kerry for not doing enough to persuade China to cut its greenhouse gas emissions. At the same time, several also sought to portray Mr. Kerry as putting Chinese interests above those of the United States by negotiating with America's top economic rival.

Collocates such as "greenhouse gas emissions", "carbon emissions", and "peak emissions" further highlight China's pivotal role in global mitigation efforts and underscore the international attention directed toward China's progress and policy implementation.

4.2.3 Collocations of degree-related terms

For the keyword "more," common collocates include than, do, solar, and fossil (Figure 3). These structures contribute comparative, intensifying, or evaluative meanings. Example (11), which links more with fossil, illustrates how the reporting foregrounds joint Sino-U.S. commitments to reducing fossil-fuel pollution while implicitly acknowledging the scale of the challenge.

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For the keyword "not," the collocation network (Figure 3) reveals a discourse centered on evaluation and scope. Unlike the substantive collocates associated with "energy," the terms surrounding not are largely functional and evaluative, with enough, just, and only being the most salient.

First, the strong collocation with enough (often in the structure "not doing enough" or "not fast enough") points to a pervasive narrative of insufficiency. This pattern constructs a critical stance where China's climate actions, despite their scale, are frequently framed as falling short of international expectations or scientific necessity.

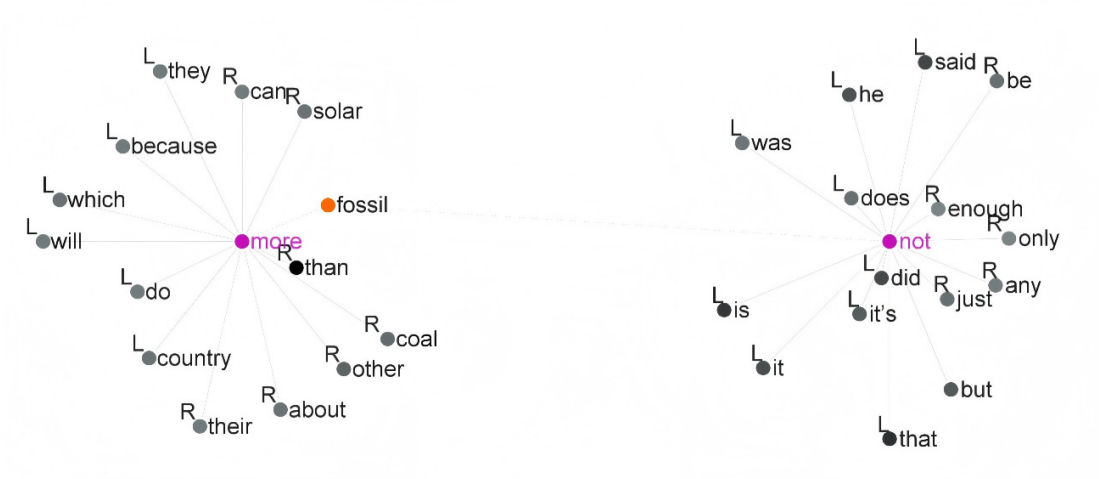


Figure 3: Significant Collocates of Degree-related Terms

Second, the collocates just and only (e.g., "not just," "not only") function as rhetorical devices for scope expansion. As illustrated in Example (12), the phrase "not just coal" is used to widen the mitigation requirement to include "all fossil fuels." Here, the negation does not simply deny a fact; rather, it serves to raise the bar for compliance. By asserting that targeting coal is necessary but insufficient, the discourse strategically pushes the boundary of China's responsibilities from specific sectors to a systemic decarbonization.

Example (11): In an unexpected development, the United States and China on Wednesday announced in a joint statement that they will both do more to cut fossil fuel pollution this decade.

Example (12): One silver lining is that new coal plants are generally less polluting than older ones, but scientists, climate researchers and activists agree that moving away from not just coal, but all fossil fuels, has to happen as soon as possible to avoid the most dire consequences of global warming.

Together, these collocational patterns show that *The New York Times* constructs a multi-dimensional narrative surrounding China's climate role—one that emphasizes both the controversy surrounding fossil fuels and the importance of international cooperation. The use of collocates such as "not fossil" and "more fossil" contributes to a layered evaluative stance, potentially shaping readers' perceptions of China's climate policies and global responsibilities.

5 Conclusion

This study employed corpus linguistics methods to analyze *The New York Times*' coverage of Chinese climate issues between January 2023 and October 2024, aiming to uncover its discourse characteristics, attitudinal tendencies, and embedded representations of international climate governance. The main findings are summarized as follows.

Firstly, in terms of discourse characteristics, the analysis shows that *The New York Times* frequently uses core lexical items such as "China," "climate," "energy," and "emissions" when reporting on China's cli-

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mate-related developments. These keywords and their collocational patterns—such as "China's climate policy," "energy transition," and "emissions reduction"—highlight China's central role in global climate governance and reflect the newspaper's sustained attention to China's policy directions, practical actions, and international influence. Collocation analysis further reveals that *The New York Times* constructs a nuanced image of China: on the one hand emphasizing China's active contributions to climate governance, and on the other expressing skepticism or critical reflection on specific policies and implementation practices. This dual portrayal demonstrates a diversified reporting stance.

Secondly, regarding attitudinal tendencies, the study finds that while *The New York Times* acknowledges China's notable progress in renewable energy deployment, climate policy development, and participation in international climate cooperation, it simultaneously voices concerns and critiques regarding China's continued reliance on coal and the growth of its greenhouse gas emissions. This ambivalent stance reflects the dual expectations placed on China by the international community: expectations for China to continue playing a constructive and leading role in global climate governance, alongside ongoing scrutiny and skepticism over the adequacy and effectiveness of its emission-reduction measures.

Finally, with respect to international power dynamics, the study reveals how *The New York Times* employs specific discursive strategies to construct China's image within global climate governance and how such portrayals may influence international perceptions of China and the trajectory of climate cooperation. The coverage not only focuses on China's policy actions and domestic transitions but also extensively references the positions and reactions of the United States, other countries, and international organizations. This reporting pattern highlights a multifaceted structure of global power relations embedded in climate discourse. Such discourse construction may shape, intentionally or unintentionally, the international community's attitudes toward China and exert potential influence on the direction of global climate negotiations and cooperation.

In conclusion, this study fills a gap in research on foreign media discourse, particularly mainstream U.S. media, regarding Chinese climate issues. It provides a new perspective for understanding how international media contributes to shaping global climate governance narratives. Moreover, the findings offer meaningful insights for China as it seeks to enhance its voice, narrative power, and international influence in global climate governance.

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