

A Perfect Match? Connecting City and National Image across Scales in Tianjin's Promotional Communication

Jianke Xiao*

Graduate School of Translation and Interpretation, Tianjin Foreign Studies University, Tianjin 300204, China

*Corresponding author: Jianke Xiao, jkxiao@tjfsu.edu.cn

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Abstract: City branding and national-image projection are usually studied at separate representational scales. When the city, not the nation, is the immediate object of communication, their relationship remains poorly understood. This study addresses that gap through a qualitative multimodal analysis of *A Perfect Match*, an official promotional video released ahead of the 2025 Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit in Tianjin. Tianjin's city image is first identified on its own terms through shot- and sequence-level social-semiotic analysis, while a separate reference framework of China's projected national image is built from authoritative official discourse published between 2011 and 2023. The two structures are then compared, after which the multimodal evidence is revisited to trace the representational processes underlying the relationships identified. The analysis constructs Tianjin through four interrelated dimensions: Living Cultural Heritage, Dynamic Metropolis, Innovative City, and Internationally Engaged City. These dimensions correspond selectively with projected national-image narratives concerning civilizational continuity and renewal, modernization and progress, openness and cooperation, and international contribution. Such relationships are selective, asymmetrical, and layered rather than one-to-one. Broader national-image meanings connect to city representation through multimodal realization and place-specific grounding, often taking observable form in represented urban processes and activities. Their selective organization at the city scale yields what the study terms cross-scalar reconfiguration. A city can thus remain the immediate object of representation while serving as a subnational site through which broader national-image meanings are articulated, a finding that contributes a multi-scalar perspective to research on city image and projected national image in international communication.

Keywords: City image; National image; International communication; Multimodality; Multi-scalar representation

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1. Introduction

To gain recognition beyond local and national boundaries, more and more cities use branding to build a

unique image. This trend is particularly evident in China. Many Chinese cities try to build an ideal identity and create their own differentiated business cards through promotional communication, which has received increasing academic attention in many fields such as marketing and urban governance ^[1,2].

The scholarship on city branding mainly focuses on how cities construct distinctive identities and project an ideal image to the target audience from the perspectives of urban governance, place marketing and multimodal representation ^[1,2]. Some studies connect city branding to urban development and multi-level governance, asking how it becomes embedded in governance processes at different levels ^[3]. There are also some studies using multimodal analysis to examine how language and visual resources contribute to the construction of city attributes. For example, Wang and Feng ^[4] found that Xi'an was constructed as a dual image of modernity and historicity on TikTok. Despite these diverse perspectives and methods, the city itself often remains where representational analysis stops.

International communication research has also examined national image construction and much of it focuses on how China projects its national image through public diplomacy and official international communication ^[5]. This research generally operates at a different analytical scale from city-image studies. City-image research takes cities and their representations as its primary object, whereas national-image research tends to examine national actors, official communication texts and national identity.

That city- and nation-image construction occupies different representational scales does not, by itself, render them discrete enterprises. A communication may foreground a city rather than the nation, yet the question lingers: in what ways, if any, do meanings forged at the urban scale intersect with broader national-image narratives? This paper probes that very relationship within city promotional communication.

The study takes as its case *A Perfect Match*, an official Tianjin promotional video released in 2025 in the context of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit. Multimodal analysis first discerns how the video constructs Tianjin's city image. In tandem, official discourse yields a reference framework for China's projected national image. Not until each has been established on its own terms are the two set side by side, so that the representational processes constituting their identified relationship can be examined.

Such a design embeds city- and national-image inquiry within a multi-scalar framework of representation. It does not inspect each image in isolation; it attends to the relationship between meanings generated at different representational scales. Projected national image, then, is treated as a multi-scalar phenomenon, whose meanings may find articulation through communication at the subnational level. The city, nonetheless, remains the direct object of representation. This stance steers clear of two pitfalls: reducing city image to national image and presuming that national-image meanings are merely replicated at the city scale.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. City image and multimodal city branding

City branding scholarship generally treats city image as a selective communicative construction rather than a direct reflection of city characteristics. It thus extends beyond signs and slogans to encompass the relationship between urban experience and its mediated representations ^[1]. From this perspective, city image is less a fixed set of attributes than an outcome of particular representational relations ^[2]. Multimodal studies of Chinese cities have adopted a similar approach. Research on Xi'an and Hangzhou shows how linguistic

and visual resources can be selected and combined to produce particular city-image meanings, including the coexistence of historicity and modernity ^[4,6].

Social semiotics offers a framework for analyzing this meaning-making process. Visual representation does not neutrally reproduce social reality, but foregrounds particular participants, actions, and social relations through representational choices ^[7]. From a multimodal perspective, different semiotic resources work together in meaning-making ^[8]. Appraisal theory further distinguishes explicitly inscribed evaluation from invoked evaluation through represented behaviors, events, and associations ^[9]. These perspectives help explain how multimodal resources construct and evaluate meanings of the city. However, existing multimodal research on Chinese cities generally stops at the city scale, leaving open the question of how meanings constructed at this scale may relate to broader national-image narratives.

2.2. Projected national image

A second lens comes from national-image research. Work in this field separates how external audiences perceive a country from the image a nation seeks to project through international communication ^[5]. The present study addresses the latter: the attributes, identities, values, and international roles through which a nation presents itself to external audiences.

In the Chinese context, digital public diplomacy scholarship shows how official actors use platforms such as Weibo and Twitter in international communication ^[5]. By focusing on projected national image, the studies try to explore what state actors seek to communicate, without assuming such projections determine external audiences' perceptions of China. Much of this research, though, begins with national-level actors and public-diplomacy discourse. How do projected national-image meanings relate to communications when the city is the direct object of representation? That question has yet to receive sufficient discussion.

2.3. Connecting city and national image across representational scales

The study of multi-level governance and multi-scale representation offers a crucial basis for understanding the relationship across scales. Ye and Björner ^[3] demonstrate that city branding in China unfolds within a multi-level governance structure, one in which national, regional, and local strategies all shape city-branding practices. Such institutional connection, however, does not mean that the representations at different scales need total alignment. Raco and Tasan-Kok ^[11] find that policy narratives and representations may diverge across governance scales, with city-level agendas not necessarily aligning with national policies and media discourse.

A number of studies trace how broader narratives are negotiated and concretized locally. Butcher and Sircar ^[12], for example, in their study of Indian smart-city initiatives, describe interactions among transnational, national, and local actors and the role of municipalities in mediating between broader agendas and local needs. Wilmers ^[13] explores directly how local actors connect national narratives in local terms through local symbols, places, and identities. Such local constructions do not necessarily reproduce official nation-building narratives.

Multimodal city-branding research tends to stay at the city scale; national-image studies, by contrast, center on national-level actors and public-diplomacy discourse. Multi-scalar work has shown, as noted above, that broader narratives can assume locally specific forms. What remains unclear is how, when the city itself is the direct object of representation, image meanings constructed at the city scale relate to broader national-

image narratives. This study therefore adopts a multi-scalar perspective to examine the relationship between city- and national-scale representation, with social semiotics supplying the analytical tools for multimodal analysis. No prior alignment between meanings at the two scales is assumed; their relationship is treated as an empirical question. The study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) RQ1: How do the multimodal representational resources of *A Perfect Match* construct Tianjin's city image?
- (2) RQ2: How does the city image constructed in *A Perfect Match* relate to broader narratives of China's national image?
- (3) RQ3: Through what representational processes are the relationships between Tianjin's city image and China's national-image narratives constructed?

3. Data and methods

3.1. Case and data

The case at hand is *A Perfect Match*, a city promotional film released by Tianjin on August 19, 2025, ahead of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit held in Tianjin. Produced by the Tianjin Haihe Media Center under the direction of the Publicity Department of the CPC Tianjin Municipal Committee, it circulated through mainstream and new media platforms in China and abroad ^[14]. The summit furnished an international communication context for promoting Tianjin's city image, which makes the film a useful site for examining how city-image construction relates to broader national-image narratives. In this study, however, the SCO Summit serves as the communicative context of the case, not as an explanatory variable in that relationship.

Threaded through the promotional film is the motif of the 'portal/gateway', and the film is explicitly organized into four chapters: "Portal Through Time: Past and Present"; "Gateway of Convergence: Vitality Within"; "Portal to Myriad Wonders: Essence of Tianjin's Allure"; and "Gateway of Harmony: Embracing the World". These titles only constitute the film's explicit organizational structure, but they were not predetermined categories of Tianjin's city image. The main dimensions of city image were identified through the subsequent multimodal analysis.

The multimodal analysis proceeded at two levels. The first level treated the shot as the smallest evidentiary unit. The six-minute video was segmented at observable boundaries into 270 shots. Analysis at this level centered on observable content and its semiotic realization, including represented participants, actions, settings, and salient visual and linguistic resources. Broader city-image meanings were not assigned on the basis of individual shots alone. At the second level, the sequence was analyzed as the primary explanatory unit, since city-image meanings emerged through combinations of shots rather than from isolated ones. Based on thematic and representational continuity among adjacent shots, the 270 shots were grouped into 17 sequences, which included opening and transition sequences as well as sequences organized around particular places, activities, or themes.

3.2. Multimodal analysis of Tianjin's city image

RQ1 was addressed through qualitative multimodal social-semiotic analysis. Social semiotics informed analysis of how meanings were realized through different semiotic resources ^[7,8]. The analysis also drew on the distinction between inscribed and invoked evaluation in Appraisal theory ^[9].

Prior to higher-order interpretation, each shot was documented descriptively, a step that kept denotation apart from evaluative interpretation. The coding procedure captured setting, participants and actions, salient visual resources, on-screen language, sound, evaluation, preliminary attributes, and supporting evidence. Where ambiguity arose, instances were flagged rather than automatically assigned evaluative meaning.

Analysis then moved to sequences, where recurring resources and accumulated evaluations were examined. The analytical progression moved from denotative content, through semiotic and evaluative realization, to broader city-image attributes. Recurring attributes were consolidated into higher-order dimensions. Social semiotics informed how meanings were examined, while substantive city-image attributes were developed inductively.

An analytical firewall separated RQ1 from the national-image analysis. City-image dimensions and the national-image framework were established independently and compared only after both had been established.

3.3. Projected national-image framework and cross-scale comparison

RQ2 used an independent reference framework of China's projected national image, defined as attributes, identities, values, and international roles articulated by authoritative Chinese state actors toward external audiences.

The framework was derived from six central-level official texts published between 2011 and 2023: China's Peaceful Development (2011); a UNESCO speech by the Chinese president (2014); his Belt and Road Forum opening address (2017); his UN General Assembly statement (2020); China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era (2021); and A Global Community of Shared Future (2023). The corpus was restricted to pre-2025 texts combining central institutional authority with international communicative orientation.

Each text was examined independently for passages characterizing China's identity, developmental trajectory, relational stance, or claimed international role. An actor-identity test distinguished these characteristics from policies, actions, or desired outcomes. Cross-text comparison produced four recurrent projected national-image narratives (**Table 1**):

Table 1. Projected National-Image Narratives

Code	Projected national-image narrative	Core representational meaning
N1	An Enduring Civilization Undergoing Contemporary Renewal	Historical and cultural continuity combined with adaptation, innovation, and contemporary renewal
N2	A Developing and Modernizing Country Oriented toward Progress	Continuing development and modernization through socioeconomic transformation, reform, innovation, and technological advancement
N3	A Peaceful, Open and Cooperative International Partner	A relational identity emphasizing peace, openness, cooperation, mutual benefit, dialogue, inclusiveness, and exchange
N4	A Responsible and Constructive Contributor to International Development and Global Governance	An international role expressed through development cooperation, multilateral participation, capacity building, knowledge and resource contribution, and global public goods

For RQ2, each city-image dimension was compared with these narratives. Relationships were classified as strong/direct, partial/secondary, or no meaningful relationship according to representational overlap. Allowing non-correspondence prevented presuming a national-image counterpart for every city-image dimension.

RQ3 returned to the multimodal evidence underlying these relationships. Relevant shots and sequences were re-examined to determine how each relationship was representationally constituted, without assuming national-to-local transmission.

4. Findings

4.1. Constructing Tianjin's city image

The analysis yielded four interrelated dimensions: Living Cultural Heritage, Dynamic Metropolis, Innovative City, and Internationally Engaged City. Each emerged from recurring representational and evaluative patterns across shots and sequences.

Living Cultural Heritage frames Tianjin's historical and cultural resources as actively sustained within contemporary urban life. Historical architecture and cultural institutions establish continuity with the past. Craftsmanship, performance, museum participation, and culinary practices present heritage as continuing activity. The film repeatedly shows cultural resources being made, performed, practiced, and experienced. Historical identity thus emerges through preservation and contemporary activation alike.

Dynamic Metropolis assembles Tianjin around movement, circulation, connectivity, and productive transformation. Railways, transport systems, port infrastructure, cargo movement, and logistics cast the city as an operating urban system. Vehicles travel; cargo circulates; infrastructures link spaces; industrial processes transform resources. Cumulatively, such activities invoke metropolitan vitality through flows and productive movement.

Innovative City takes shape through technological capability, research, and advanced production. Research institutions, advanced manufacturing, marine engineering, automated production, and aerospace activities foreground capacities to research, develop, produce, and create. If Dynamic Metropolis stresses circulation and functioning infrastructure, Innovative City stresses technological expertise, productive capability, and future orientation.

Internationally Engaged City builds Tianjin through relationships that reach past city and national boundaries. International forums and institutional encounters position it as a site of organized interaction. The Luban Workshop brings technical and vocational knowledge exchange to the fore. Transport and logistics extend the city into cross-border networks. International engagement, then, foregrounds interaction, exchange, and connectivity rather than mere international presence.

Across these dimensions, the video attends to what Tianjin does, not only to what it possesses. Tianjin preserves and renews, moves and transforms, creates and advances, connects and exchanges. The resulting city image joins continuity to ongoing urban activity and transformation.

4.2. Relating Tianjin's city image to projected national-image narratives

Measured against the independently established projected national-image narratives, the relationship proves selective and uneven; one-to-one correspondence does not emerge (**Table 2**).

Living Cultural Heritage corresponds most strongly with N1, An Enduring Civilization Undergoing Contemporary Renewal. Architecture, craftsmanship, institutions, performance, and cultural participation construct heritage as both continuous and actively renewed. A secondary relationship exists with N2 where inherited resources operate within contemporary settings.

Both Dynamic Metropolis and Innovative City correspond strongly with N2, modernization and progress, but through different city-level meanings. Dynamic Metropolis realizes development through circulation, connectivity, and productive transformation. Innovative City emphasizes research, advanced production, and technological capability. Dynamic Metropolis also has a secondary relationship with N3 because outward logistical connectivity supports openness, but not its broader meanings of peace and cooperation.

Internationally Engaged City corresponds most strongly with N3, A Peaceful, Open and Cooperative International Partner. International encounters, knowledge exchange, and cross-border connectivity construct openness and cooperative engagement. Its secondary relationship with N4, international contribution, is clearest in the Luban Workshop, where Tianjin-associated technical capabilities are shared internationally through skills and knowledge exchange.

Table 2. Correspondence between Tianjin’s city-image dimensions and projected national-image narratives

City-image dimension	N1Civilization & renewal	N2Modernization & progress	N3Peace, openness & cooperation	N4International contribution
Living Cultural Heritage	Strong/direct	Partial/secondary	—	—
Dynamic Metropolis	—	Strong/direct	Partial/secondary: openness	—
Innovative City	—	Strong/direct	—	—
Internationally Engaged City	—	—	Strong/direct	Partial/secondary

Note. A dash indicates no meaningful relationship identified.

Read together, these patterns point to a relationship that is selective, asymmetrical, and layered. Particular national narratives surface only within particular city representations. A single national narrative may map onto several city-image dimensions; a primary correspondence can coexist with weaker secondary ties. N2 aligns strongly with two city-image dimensions, whereas N4 finds no strong city-level counterpart.

Such correspondences do not make national-image projection the video’s chief communicative purpose. Tianjin remains its immediate representational object. Yet some city-image meanings do resonate with broader projected national-image narratives, allowing city representation to participate, at the same time, in national-image articulation.

4.3. Representational processes across scales

RQ3 identifies two recurrent processes underlying these relationships: multimodal realization and place-specific grounding.

Multimodal realization concerns how relatively abstract meanings are rendered perceptible through combinations of semiotic resources ^[8,15,16]. Civilizational continuity and renewal surface through historical sites, cultural objects, craftsmanship, performance, and museum participation. Modernization is conveyed through scenes of transport and logistics alongside research, automated production, advanced manufacturing, and aerospace technology. International encounters and skills exchange, together with images of cross-border connectivity, give more concrete expression to openness and cooperation.

Across these representations, valued attributes are repeatedly shown through activities rather than simply presented as qualities the city possesses. Cultural continuity, for example, is enacted through

making, performing, preserving, and experiencing. Movement and circulation are more prominent in the representation of metropolitan development, while research, production, and creation characterize technological progress. International openness is similarly articulated through interaction, exchange, and connection. This recurring emphasis on activity is treated here as a feature of multimodal realization, not an independent cross-scalar process.

Place-specific grounding refers to the way broader meanings take on locally particular substance through identifiable places, practices, institutions, infrastructures, cultural resources, and capabilities. Wilmer documents a comparable pattern: national narratives become anchored in locally significant sites, memories, and symbols ^[13].

Place-specific grounding is most apparent in the representation of Living Cultural Heritage. Yangliuqing Woodblock New Year Prints, local architecture, cultural institutions, and craft practices tie the broader meanings of continuity and renewal to recognizable features of Tianjin. Openness and exchange are localized differently, through international forums, the Luban Workshop, and transport networks. The pattern is weaker in representations of ports, automated manufacturing, and aerospace technology. Here, their connection to Tianjin depends more heavily on geographical or institutional attribution than on visually distinctive local features.

Multimodal realization and place-specific grounding together point to what is described here as cross-scalar reconfiguration. The term denotes the selective organization of broader meanings in relation to city-level representation. Broader meanings do not simply reappear at the city scale in their original form. Instead, certain elements become more prominent and are given locally specific expression, while others recede from view. This finding aligns with scholarship showing that representations can vary across scales and take context-specific forms ^[11,12].

N2 makes this pattern particularly visible. At the city scale, its broader modernization narratives take two different forms. In Dynamic Metropolis, modernization is associated with circulation, infrastructure, and metropolitan vitality. Innovative City gives it a different emphasis, centering on research, advanced production, and technological capability. The correspondence becomes more limited in the other categories. Only the openness component of N3 is clearly represented, mainly through logistical connectivity. N4, by contrast, is expressed chiefly through outward exchanges of knowledge and skills. These differences suggest that broader national-image meanings are not carried into city-level representation uniformly; their prominence and specific form vary across the four dimensions of Tianjin's city image.

The findings point to a relational rather than reproductive understanding of multi-scalar representation. *A Perfect Match* remains a representation of Tianjin. Still, some city-image meanings simultaneously articulate broader projected national-image meanings. Multimodal realization renders those meanings perceptible; place-specific grounding lends them locally particular substance. Their selective organization produces cross-scalar reconfiguration, not straightforward reproduction.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The study set out to examine how city-oriented promotion may relate to national-image construction when the city itself remains the immediate representational object. Tianjin's four city-image dimensions correspond selectively with broader projected national-image narratives. Selective, asymmetrical, and layered, these

relationships are not reproductive.

The first contribution bears on the relationship between city image and national image in international communication. City-branding scholarship has largely asked how cities forge distinctive identities and desirable external images ^[1,2]. Work on Chinese city promotion likewise shows how historical, cultural, modern, and innovative resources contribute to city image construction ^[4,6]. Such approaches generally take the city as representation's principal endpoint. The present findings indicate that city promotion can build a distinctive city image while, at the same time, articulating broader projected national-image narratives.

The argument extends scholarship on the locally situated construction of national meanings. Wilmers shows how national narratives acquire local substance through actors, symbols, sites, and memories ^[13]. This study addresses a different communicative configuration: its immediate represented object is the city, not the nation. The analysis thus established the city image on its own terms before probing its relationships with broader national-image narratives. This approach identifies national-image articulation without reducing city promotion to an instrument of national-image projection.

A second contribution lies in a multi-scalar understanding of projected national image. Representations across national and local scales need not be equivalent or synchronized ^[11,12]. Tianjin illustrates this non-equivalence. Modernization and progress correspond with two distinct city-image dimensions. Dynamic Metropolis organizes these meanings around circulation, infrastructure, and metropolitan vitality. Innovative City organizes them around research, technological production, and future-oriented capability. Cross-scalar relationships, then, involve selective correspondence and divergent city-level configurations rather than replication of a national framework.

The analysis terms this pattern cross-scalar reconfiguration. Multimodal realization makes relatively abstract meanings perceptible through concrete representational resources ^[11,12]. Place-specific grounding gives these meanings particular urban substance. Broader meanings can thereby attach to distinctive places, institutions, practices, infrastructures, and capabilities. Cross-scalar reconfiguration describes this observed representational relationship rather than transmission from national discourse or deliberate transformation by the video's producers.

The evidence supports a representational claim, not a causal one. A city can remain the immediate object of representation while functioning as a subnational representational site for broader national-image meanings. This does not mean that Tianjin substitutes for China or that national-image projection was the producers' primary intention. City- and national-image construction can intersect, in other words, while remaining analytically distinct.

Several limitations temper these conclusions. A single promotional video cannot establish whether this pattern extends to other Tianjin communication or to other cities. The six-text official corpus offers a selective, not exhaustive, framework for projected national image. Representational correspondence cannot establish producer intention; nor, absent reception data, can it support conclusions about audience interpretation or image transfer. Future work might compare cities, promotional genres, and communicative contexts; production and reception studies could then examine intention and interpretation.

What *A Perfect Match* demonstrates is how city-image construction can intersect with broader national-image articulation without being reducible to it. Multimodal realization and place-specific grounding give these relationships concrete city-level forms, while their selective organization constitutes cross-scalar reconfiguration. Projected national image can thus be examined through representational relationships

between national and subnational scales of international communication.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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