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Polyphonic discourses in the Hong Kong press: a diachronic analysis of media attitudes towards the *One Country, Two Systems* policy

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The One Country, Two Systems policy (OCTS), which is the cornerstone for the establishment of the Hong Kong SAR in 1997, has been subjected to varying and changing interpretations and opinions in Hong Kong society. Against this backdrop, this study examines the attitude variations and changes towards OCTS in three major Chinese newspapers in Hong Kong from 1997 to 2020. Utilising the Appraisal system and discourse analysis, the study reveals the complexity of attitudes exhibited by different newspapers in response to social dynamics. *Oriental Daily News* adopted the official voice of the Chinese government, legitimising OCTS and using it as a normative standard for de/legitimising social events and behaviours. *Ming Pao* consistently adopted an impartial stance, representing OCTS as a topic for debate and covering the varying perspectives of different parties. *Apple Daily* acknowledged the framework of OCTS but criticised that it was distorted by the authorities. It normalised the “death” of OCTS and legitimised resistant behaviours as defending its spirit. The study uncovers the deliberate choices of attitudes in news coverage, which reveals the newspapers’ different stances and changing discursive strategies. Situated in the unique context of Hong Kong, the study sheds new light on the complex and diverse trajectories of discursive shift, which together constitute a “polyphony” of media attitudes.

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Introduction

The “One Country, Two Systems” (OCTS) policy has been Hong Kong’s fundamental political framework since its sovereignty transfer to the People’s Republic of China in 1997. This unique constitutional arrangement has endowed Hong Kong with a significant level of autonomy, permitting the retention of a capitalist economic system and lifestyle (Zhu 2012). Nonetheless, the implementation of the OCTS policy has incited intensive debates and social divisions within Hong Kong society. While the Chinese central government has underscored the pivotal role of the OCTS policy, the anti-establishment (or “pro-democracy”) camp in Hong Kong have raised concerns regarding the imbalance between the “One Country” and the “Two Systems” principles. As the efficacious execution of the OCTS policy is vital to Hong Kong and the nation, understanding the complex and evolving attitudes and perspectives of different stakeholders within Hong Kong society towards OCTS is of utmost significance.

News media, as a pivotal conduit for public sentiment, exerts substantial influence in moulding citizens’ understanding and attitudes towards the OCTS policy. Diverse news narratives mirror the political inclinations of the media entities that produce them. However, little existing research has systematically analysed how Hong Kong’s major media outlets have reported and interpreted the OCTS policy over the past two decades, and how attitudes in the coverage have shifted. The majority of existing studies concentrate on the political, economic, or legal dimensions of the OCTS policy, overlooking the pivotal role of the media in shaping views on the policy. This gap underscores the need for a systematic investigation into the complexity of media attitudes towards the OCTS policy in Hong Kong.

Against this background, the present study aims at an in-depth analysis of the coverage of the OCTS policy by three major Chinese newspapers in Hong Kong, namely, *Oriental Daily News* (ODN), *Ming Pao* (MP), and *Apple Daily* (AD), from 1997 to 2020. By adopting a Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) perspective and employing the Appraisal system as an analytical framework, this research endeavours to reveal the complexity of attitudes in Hong Kong’s mainstream media concerning the OCTS policy and to elucidate the underlying ideological propensities. Our analysis is guided by the following four questions: 1) Whose attitude did these newspapers represent at various phases? 2) What attitudes did these newspapers convey at various phases? 3) How did these attitudes evolve at different phases? 4) What discursive strategies and ideologies were reflected in these attitudes? The findings aim to augment new understandings of Hong Kong society’s perceptions and attitudes towards the OCTS policy and provide empirical evidence for further research on the topic.

Background of the study

The OCTS policy. The OCTS framework is a constitutional principle under which Hong Kong and Macau, previous British and Portuguese colonies, could preserve their capitalist economic and legal systems after the transfers of sovereignty to the People’s Republic of China, despite the practice of socialism in the rest of the country (Garrett 2009). Initially conceived of as a strategy for the peaceful reunification with Taiwan, this policy was later adapted as the foundational principle for Hong Kong to be integrated back to China. The policy is underpinned by the principles of “Hong Kong people administering Hong Kong” and “a high degree of autonomy” (Zhu 2012). The former suggests a collaborative governance model between the Hong Kong government and the business sector (Fong 2014), while the latter acknowledges the status of Hong Kong as a quasi-city-state, endowed with authority over judicial, societal, and international

economic matters, all within the purview of Chinese sovereignty (Cheung 2015; Cheung 2015).

The distinctive design of this political system has attracted considerable scholarly interest across various disciplines, notably in economics and politics. In the field of economics, researchers generally agree that the OCTS policy has been instrumental in fostering the development of both the Chinese mainland and Hong Kong. It has ensured the continuity of Hong Kong’s capitalist economy, political autonomy, and legal system, thereby preserving its role as a global financial hub amidst political shifts (Lui 2015). Economic and trade agreements established within this policy framework, such as the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) and the Guangdong-Hong Kong Cooperation Framework Agreement, have bolstered mutual trust and understanding between the cities in the Pearl River Delta and Hong Kong (Cheung 2015; Vogel et al. 2010; OECD 2010).

In political studies, a spectrum of concerns has been voiced regarding the OCTS principle. Chen (2014) highlighted the divergent interpretations of the principle between the central government of China and Hong Kong’s anti-establishment camp, particularly concerning the progression towards universal suffrage. This discrepancy has engendered governance challenges, as reconciling these opposing views proves to be a mission impossible. Lecours and Dupré (2020) observed that the cross-boundary integration facilitated by OCTS has sparked apprehensions among Hong Kong’s populace about mainlandisation, which in turn has eroded confidence in the policy. Internationally, the principle is subject to the dynamics of global politics. Chan and Chong’s (2019) analysis indicated that international considerations significantly influence China’s policies towards Hong Kong, given its status as a cosmopolitan city. The Chinese government perceives international influences as unwarranted interference in its domestic affairs, leading to an adversarial stance.

Despite a substantial body of scholarly work examining the OCTS policy from both political and economic standpoints, there remains a notable absence of literature investigating media attitudes towards the policy. Among the limited studies, Liu and Lin (2021) employed corpus-assisted discourse analysis to explore the re-contextualisation of OCTS within the frameworks of Chinese, British, and American newspapers. The study revealed that while Chinese newspapers emphasised the principle and practice of OCTS in a positive manner, British and American newspapers focused more critically on the challenges of the implementation of the policy and its potential failure. Similarly, Zhong and Zhou (2018) applied theoretical models such as “instrumentalisation in mediated conflicts” (Kepplinger et al. 1991) and the “attribution agenda-setting theory” (Kim et al. 2012) to dissect the news discourse surrounding OCTS. The research revealed distinct media narratives on the policy, with left-leaning media showing optimism and right-leaning media expressing criticism. However, there remains a dearth of empirical research that scrutinises attitudes in mainstream Hong Kong media towards the OCTS policy and the evolution of these attitudes over time. Such analysis is instrumental for a nuanced understanding of the historical interplay between the OCTS policy and the sociocultural milieu of Hong Kong.

Hong Kong newspapers and their ideological dissonance. The ideological dissonance within the Hong Kong journalism industry existed long before Hong Kong’s return to Chinese sovereignty. For example, *Ta Kung Pao* espoused a pro-communist stance, *Hong Kong Times* took a pro-Kuomintang stance, and *Ming Pao* held a liberal position during the British colonial era (Ma 2007).

The British colonial government actively promoted democratic and freedom ideals since the 1980s, leading to increased independence and scepticism towards China within the Hong Kong media (Lai 2007). Simultaneously, the People's Republic of China sought to exert influence over Hong Kong media through political and economic tactics (Fung 2007; Frisch et al. 2018). Consequently, the Hong Kong media developed diverse political stances, including pro-Beijing, liberal, and anti-Beijing ones (Lai 2007). The three selected newspapers in this study, chosen based on market share ranking, represent these diverse viewpoints within the Hong Kong media political spectrum.

Media attitudes have also changed alongside social changes in Hong Kong since 1997. Gao and Feng (2023) identified four phases in Hong Kong's social dynamics and media attitudes. The first phase, encompassing the initial six years after the handover, witnessed minimum intervention by the Chinese government, allowing for a significant degree of journalistic independence (Lee 2015). The second phase began with the Anti-Article 23 Legislation March on 1st July 2003, leading to the central government's extensive involvement in the Hong Kong media landscape for the subsequent six years (Lee 2015). During this phase, various techniques were employed to exert control over Hong Kong media. The third phase commenced in 2009, marked by a critical turning point in Hong Kong's national identification, was considered a rebound of sustained intervention in Hong Kong society, which led to "localisation" sentiments (Chan and Lee 2011:89). Throughout this period, Hong Kong media increasingly criticised China. The fourth phase, highlighted by the Occupy Central movement in September 2014, witnessed the escalation of peaceful protests into violent confrontations. The conflict reached its peak in 2019 with the Anti-extradition Amendment Bill Movement, further polarising Hong Kong society and the media.

The four stages capture the characteristics of Hong Kong's social dynamics during different periods, namely non-intervention, active intervention, social resistance, and extreme polarisation. With the evolution of political and social environments, it is inevitable that the depiction of OCTS by Hong Kong media has also undergone changes. This transformation can be considered as a gradual shift from an abstract and idealistic attitude towards OCTS to a concrete and practical one, in response to specific events that have unfolded since the sovereignty transfer, and the aim of this research is to provide empirical evidence and a nuanced understanding of the shift.

Theoretical background

This research is underpinned by the theoretical framework of Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), which conceptualises discourse as a form of social practice and highlights the interplay between discourse and societal structures (Fairclough and Wodak 1997). From a CDS perspective, news reporting is not a passive reflection of reality but an active process of re-contextualisation that constructs preferred social realities (Fairclough 1992; Fowler 1991; Van Dijk 1995; Van Leeuwen 1993; Wodak 2009). Scholars have endeavoured to systematically link the structural elements of news discourse to ideological constructs, with framing being a key notion in mass communication research (Scheufele and Iyengar 2012). Framing involves the strategic emphasis on certain aspects of reality to render them more salient in communication, as indicated by the presence or absence of specific keywords, recurrent phrases, stereotypical imagery, sources of information, and constructions that emphasise particular facts or judgements (Entman 1993). Consequently, news reports on the same event can be dramatically different through different framing strategies.

Krzyżanowski's (2020) model of discursive shift further aids in understanding the framing of discourse from a diachronic perspective, detailing the journey from the discourse being introduced into the public sphere to it being accepted as a standard form of public expression. The model identifies three stages: *Enactment*, when discourse is strategically introduced and re-contextualised; *Gradation/Perpetuation*, when discourse elements coalesce and spread across different social domains; and *Normalisation*, when the discourse undergoes a transformation that leads to a change in public expression norms. By using the framework of discursive shift to investigate framing, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how media attitudes towards the OCTS policy were formed and how they were propagated and consolidated through time.

Additionally, a key notion in the analysis of media attitudes is legitimization, which is described as "[a] set of justifications or 'legitimizing myths'... that lead a political or social system and its authorities and institutions to be viewed as normatively or morally appropriate by people within the system" (Tyler 2005:212). Our analysis investigates how media attitudes served as de/legitimation strategies with regard to OCTS.

Methods

Analytical framework. To systematically analyse the evaluative expressions in media discourses on the OCTS policy, this study draws upon the Appraisal system as the analytical framework. Developed by Martin and White (2005), the Appraisal system is a tripartite model that not only allows for the qualitative description of attitudes but also facilitates quantitative analysis. The system is composed of three interconnected subsystems: Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation. The Attitude system is the core one, comprising three components: i.e., Affect, Judgement, and Appreciation. These categories are further divided into 12 sub-categories, as illustrated in Fig. 1, to capture the intricacies of attitudes. Affect is about resources for construing emotional reactions, and it is further categorised into un/happiness, in/security, dis/satisfaction and dis/inclination. Un/happiness is to do with how much or to what extent we feel happy/unhappy. In/security deals with our anxious or assured feelings about the surroundings. Dis/satisfaction refers to our feelings of frustration

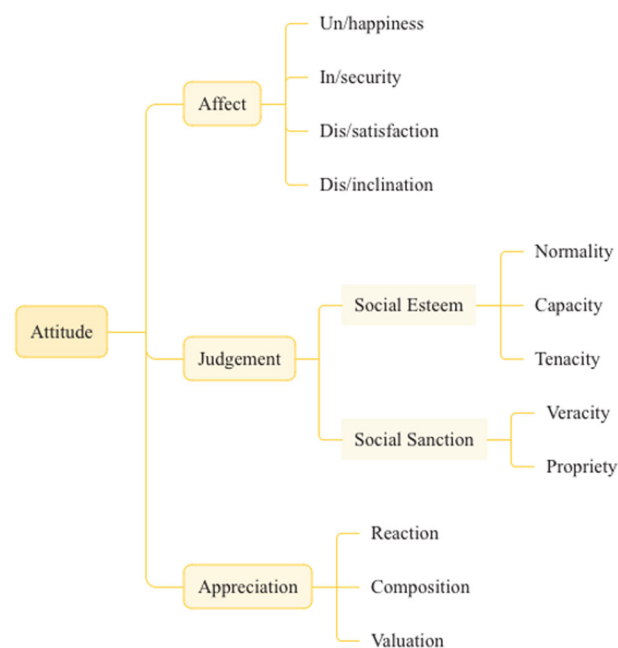


Fig. 1 The framework of attitude (based on Martin and White 2005).

and fulfilment relating to activities or states of events. Dis/inclination is to do with the desire or dislike for the condition of future events. Judgement is concerned with the assessment of human behaviour according to social sanction and social esteem. Judgement of social esteem involves the sub-categories of normality (how special someone is), capacity (how capable someone is) and tenacity (how resolute someone is). Judgement of social sanction is concerned with veracity (how truthful someone is) and propriety (how ethical someone is). Appreciation is the evaluation of things, which can be divided into reaction, composition and valuation. Reaction refers to the degree to which things catch our attention. Composition is concerned with the internal structure of things, such as balance and complexity. Valuation is to do with the value of things, such as how original or authentic things are. The analytical framework allows for the systematic identification, categorisation, and quantification of attitudes, providing a nuanced understanding of how media discourse constructed, framed, reflected, and influenced public opinion on the OCTS policy.

Data processing method. Our data collection process involved retrieving news articles from the WiserOne database that contained the keyword “One Country, Two Systems” in the title or content of three newspapers: *ODN*, *MP*, and *AD*. The data collection period spanned from 1st July 1997 to 31st December 2020, as *AD* ceased publication in June 2021. After collecting the articles, we extracted specific expressions that mentioned OCTS and the corresponding meta-information of the news articles. This allowed us to create a large database for analysis, which consisted of 55,178 expressions with a total of 4,190,912 tokens.

To preserve a balanced temporal distribution and the chronological dynamics of the data, a down-sampling method was employed (cf. Lee and Seo 2022). Specifically, for each newspaper, we randomly selected one expression from the initial ten days, one from the subsequent ten days, and one from the final ten days of each month. Given the stable nature of newspaper attitudes towards the policy, this method was tailored to seize the core characteristics and trajectory of media attitudes within a feasible extent of manual annotation. We acknowledge the existence of expressions that did not explicitly mention OCTS but commented on it indirectly, which might not be captured in our corpus. Nonetheless, such implicit commentaries were often also represented by the explicit mentions of OCTS in their vicinity, ensuring that the overall analysis accurately reflects subtle attitudes without bias caused by the indirectness of certain expressions. This is a commonly used method in corpus-based research (e.g. Baker 2011; Baker 2012:17; Baker et al. 2013). Ultimately, this method yielded a sample of 2754 expressions for attitude annotation.

Using Martin and White’s (2005) attitude framework, the two researchers manually annotated the sample data. To ensure the annotation accuracy, any disagreements were resolved through discussions with a third person. The annotated expressions, along with the corresponding news meta-information (such as the newspaper, publication date, and phase) as well as the attitude meta-information (including the appraiser, the appraised, and the attitude lexicon), were compiled into a corpus for further analysis. News meta-information was employed for grouping attitudes for the quantitative analysis, whereas attitude meta-information documented the direction of attitudes, specifically from the appraiser to the appraised.

Analytical method. First, the study focused on variations of attitudes among different newspapers during different phases. We hypothesised that different newspaper stances and/or socio-

political dynamics influenced attitudes towards OCTS. To test this hypothesis, we conducted a two-way ANOVA. Specifically, we categorised attitudes into six items based on their primary type (Aff stands for affect, Jud for judgement, and App for appreciation) and polarity (P stands for positive and N for negative). These six items were Aff-P, Aff-N, Jud-P, Jud-N, App-P, and App-N. We then utilised the Newspaper and the Phase as variables to statistically determine whether there were significant differences in the means of these six items across newspapers and over time. The analysis aimed to explore potential variations in the attitudinal strategies employed by different newspapers during the same stage and by the same newspaper during different stages regarding OCTS.

Subsequently, in the descriptive analysis, we constructed string diagrams based on the source, target, and quantities of attitudes, providing a visual representation of the attitude dynamics. The annualised mean of different types of attitudes was calculated to examine the newspapers’ preferences in the use of attitudes, with the index Polarity representing the proportion of positive attitudes among all expressed attitudes.

Finally, we examined the specific vocabulary items employed by the three newspapers to express different attitudes. Specifically, we utilised the 12 subcategories of attitude from the Appraisal system (i.e., Happy, Security, Satisfaction, Inclination, Normality, Capacity, Tenacity, Veracity, Propriety, Reaction, Composition, and Valuation) as nodes, and with the assistance of the KH Coder software, we constructed attitude-vocabulary co-occurrence networks for each newspaper. These networks could provide insights into the topic preferences and discursive patterns of each newspaper when expressing attitudes towards OCTS.

We acknowledge that the attitudes represented in a newspaper might not be the attitudes of the newspaper. For example, attitudes from an external source might be represented and refuted. The complex interaction between the authorial voice and the voice of external sources can be analysed using the framework of Engagement within the Appraisal system (Martin and White 2005), which is out of the scope of this paper. However, we argue that the focus on the sources, targets and types of attitudes can provide significant insights into the stance of a newspaper, particularly if a large quantity of data is analysed. First, in order to maintain objectivity, newspapers predominantly rely on external sources for expressing attitudes (e.g., Bednarek and Caple 2012). Therefore, the sources that are chosen to a large extent reflect the stance that a newspaper is aligned with. Second, when the attitudes of an external source are not aligned with the stance of the newspaper, the newspaper usually expresses its attitudes (e.g., through rebutting or ridiculing the external attitude), which will be captured by the quantitative analysis of attitudes.

Findings

General features. Figure 2 depicts the frequency and polarity (indicated by the proportion of positive attitudes) of the newspapers’ attitudes towards OCTS from 1997 to 2020. First, the most notable feature is that after a brief time of stability, the Hong Kong media industry’s attitude towards OCTS progressively turned negative. Specifically, the attitudes remained neutral in the first and second phases, with the polarity fluctuating around 0.5 in Fig. 2, indicating an approximately equal proportion of positive and negative attitudes towards OCTS. During this period, OCTS was still new to Hong Kong, and the society held both optimism and scepticism about it. The polarity began to drop dramatically to around 0.3, and the fluctuation became more noticeable after the third phase. Positive attitudes accounted for only around 30% in this period. With the growth of resistance in this phase and the waning optimism, the media sector gradually returned to its

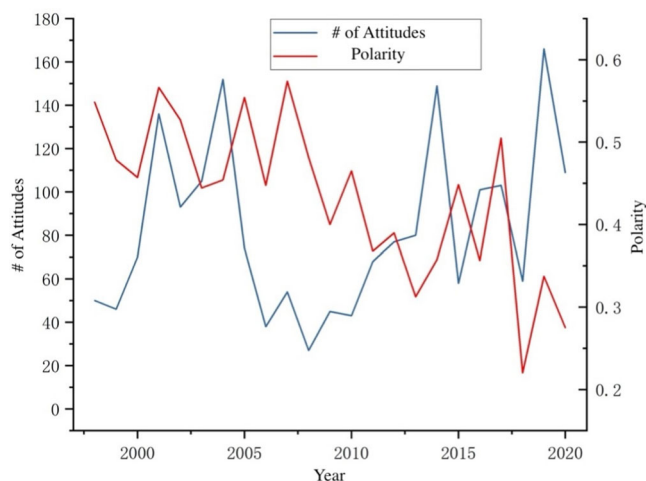


Fig. 2 Numbers of attitudes and polarity towards OCTS in newspapers.

tradition of criticising China's politics (Lai 2007). At the same time, pro-establishment newspapers started to use OCTS to delegitimise protesting behaviours, which also contributed to the negative attitudes.

Second, the variation in the frequency of the media industry's attitudes towards OCTS was shaped by the media environments in different phases (e.g. Lee 2015; Lee and Chan 2011). In the first phase, the media's evaluation of OCTS increased gradually; in the second phase, the central government's active intervention reduced the newspapers' judgemental representations of national policies; in the third phase, with the rise of social resistance, the newspapers resumed evaluating OCTS actively. Further contextual analysis revealed that the level of interest in discussing OCTS was under the influence of several critical social events. Several peaks of attitude in Fig. 2, namely in 2004, 2014, and 2019, correspond to instances of political unrests in Hong Kong—the political unrests caused by the National People's Congress' interpretation of the Basic Law in 2004, the Occupy Central movement in 2014, and the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill protest in 2019 respectively. This suggests that Hong Kong society generally accepted OCTS as the basis for Hong Kong's political structure, and when political unrests occurred, it tended to negotiate the il/legality of the stormy events through the lens of OCTS, as well as that of OCTS itself.

Results of ANOVA. Two-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the more nuanced differences in terms of the quantity of the above-mentioned six attitude items, i.e., Aff-P, Aff-N, Jud-P, Jud-N, App-P, and App-N, in the three newspapers. The results revealed that the quantity of attitudes towards OCTS was significantly different across different phases ($P < 0.05$, $df = 2$). To delve deeper into the temporal dynamics of these attitudinal variations, we examined the influence of the newspapers on the quantity of attitudes during different phases using Cohen's F as a measure. A higher Cohen's F value indicates greater between-group variances (i.e., across newspapers) compared to the within-group ones, implying that the quantity of the attitude varied significantly across newspapers. Conversely, a lower Cohen's F value suggests a less pronounced effect. Figure 3 illustrates the Cohen's F values of the newspapers across various attitudes and periods. It is noteworthy that during the second phase, the Cohen's F values for Affect and Appreciation reached their lowest points, indicating a pronounced convergence in the utilisation of these attitudes among the three newspapers during the period. This convergence could be attributed to the self-censorship of the newspapers in reporting national policies under the central

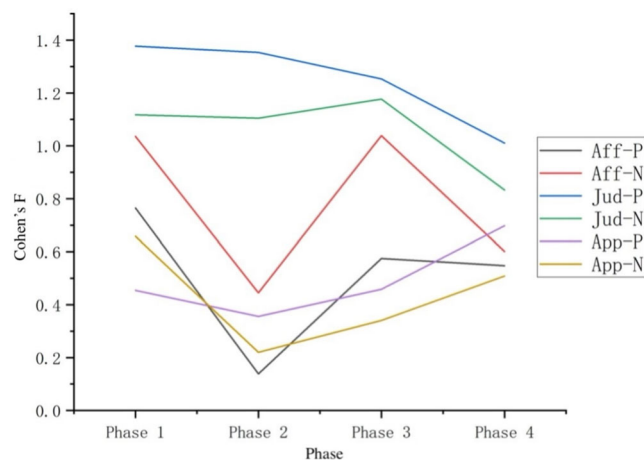


Fig. 3 Cohen's F values of newspapers towards different attitudes in different phases.

government's active intervention strategy. The difference in expressions of Judgement consistently exhibited the greatest variation among newspapers but diminished over time. This also indicates a trend of convergence wherein newspapers initially making heavy use of Judgement stopped doing so, while those initially rarely using it began to do so. This demonstrates, on the one hand, the complexity of the newspapers' use of Judgement, and on the other hand, that within the context of the active intervention strategy, conflicting arguments between newspapers persisted in evaluating different social actors.

Analysis of ODN. The most prominent feature of ODN's portrayal of OCTS is that it often highlighted official voices and aligned its perspective with that of the central Chinese government. Figure 4 illustrates the direction of attitudes of ODN. Nearly half of the attitudes came from the official side, with 35.45% from the central government (red colour) and 12.09% from the Hong Kong government (green colour). The attitudes of Hong Kong's local forces, the Hong Kong Democrats, only accounted for 17.01%. From a chronological perspective, authoritative attitudes were consistently in the majority and continued to increase. In particular, the proportion of attitudes from the central government increased from 30.97% (48 instances) in the first phase to 34.48% (50 instances) in the fourth phase. In contrast, the proportion of attitudes from the democratic or anti-establishment camp experienced a significant decline, plummeting from 27.10% (42 instances) in the initial phase, where it was almost on a par with that of the central government, to 14.48% (21 instances) in the fourth phase. This demonstrates that, in the early stages following Hong Kong's sovereignty transfer, ODN did not deny the democrats' evaluations of OCTS; instead, it conveyed the attitudes of many parties in an effort to improve Hong Kong's democratic system. However, as the "pro-democracy" camp became more antagonistic towards the establishment, ODN increasingly abandoned its voices, and the authoritative voices of the central government and the pro-establishment camp became predominant.

The second prominent feature is the progressive transformation of OCTS from being a target of evaluation to a metric for evaluating other issues. Figure 4 demonstrates that overall, only 43.85% of attitudes were directed towards OCTS, while the majority targeted various forces. Taking the attitudes of the Chinese central government as an example, out of the total of 173 attitudes, only 58 evaluated OCTS, such as statements like "OCTS is successful". The remaining attitudes primarily evaluated the agents involved, such as assessing their determination in

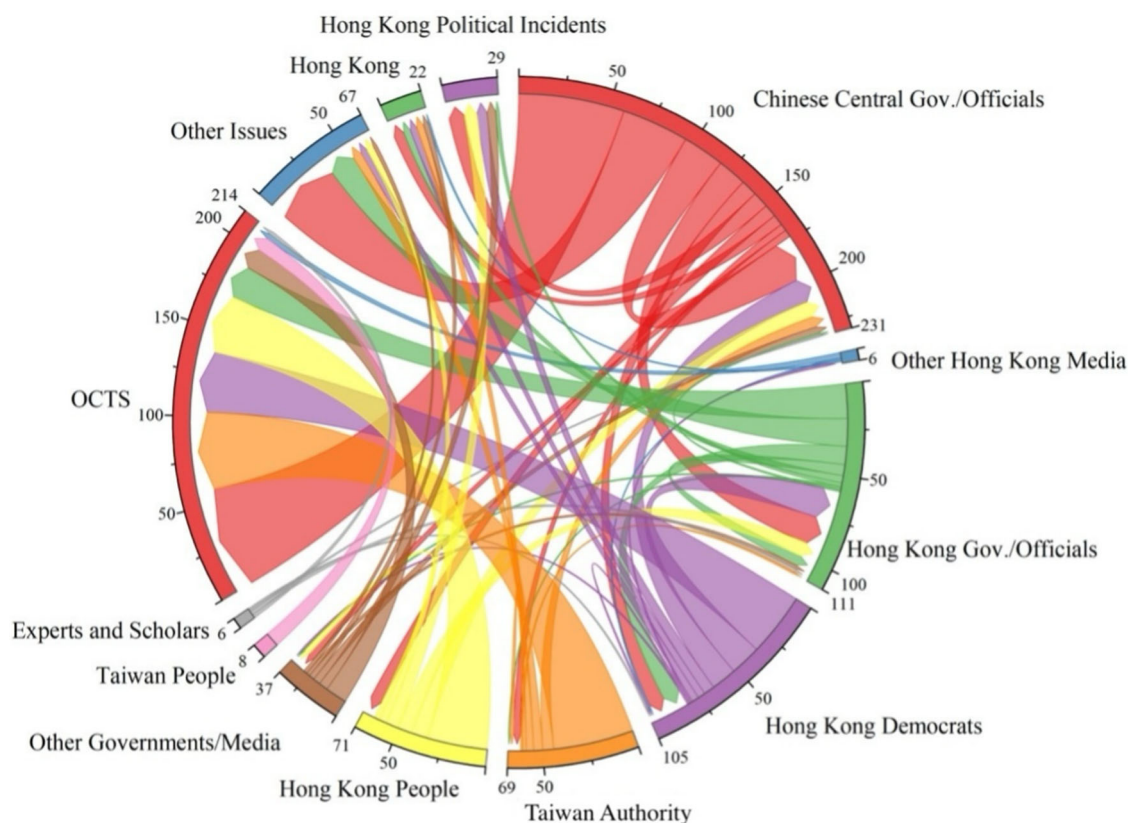


Fig. 4 Attitude direction of ODN.

implementing OCTS (Text 1) and commenting on the behaviour of other forces that might distort OCTS (Text 2). From a chronological perspective, this transformation occurred gradually. In the first phase, OCTS remained the primary target of evaluation, accounting for 59.90% of the attitudes. However, by the fourth phase, the proportion dropped to 24.62%. This may indicate that OCTS was gradually normalised as a “given” and indisputable fact that did not need to be legitimised. It should also be noted that the examples in the reports might be quoted from other sources. For example, Text 1 was preceded by the lead-in “As Xia Baolong, Director of Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office, stated,” which indicates that the reporter’s attitude aligned with the reported attitude.

Text 1: As Xia Baolong, Director of Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office, stated, the Central Authorities are prepared to resist intervention by external forces, and the determination to implement OCTS and the Hong Kong version of the National Security Law will not be shaken even if situation further worsens.

正如港澳辦主任夏寶龍所說，中央已準備好抗擊外部勢力的干預，出現更壞情況也不會動搖落實「一國兩制」和「港版國安法」的決心。

(ODN, 2020-5-30, Phase 4).

Text 2: Those pro-independence activists provocatively challenge history, reality, and common sense, and are the largest threat that could distort OCTS.

港獨挑釁歷史、現實和常識，是可能導致一國兩制變形走樣的最大禍患。

(ODN, 2017-3-11, Phase 4).

The third feature relates to the evolution of the annualised means and overall polarity of the six attitudes represented in

ODN, as shown in Fig. 5. It is clear that negative attitudes were progressively becoming more pronounced in the expressions, particularly in the context of escalating social conflicts. During the first and second phases, there was minimal variation among the five attitudes, with the exception of App-P, which exhibited a higher value. However, the situation changed in the third phase when negative attitudes began to increase significantly, while positive ones remained at a lower level. The change in polarity was evident, fluctuating around 0.5 in Phases 1 and 2, and subsequently dropping to 0.4 and 0.3 in Phases 3 and 4 respectively. A closer examination reveals that the positive attitudes were government officials’ positive evaluation of OCTS, while the increased negative attitudes were their accusation of the anti-establishment camp and their destruction of OCTS. This trend echoes the finding above that ODN shifted the target of appraisal from OCTS to related parties, particularly the anti-establishment forces.

We finally looked at the most frequently occurring attitudinal vocabulary items, which can give us a more detailed picture of the attitudes. Figure 6 depicts the attitude-vocabulary co-occurrence network in ODN. Regarding Affect, Inclination was strongly associated with OCTS, primarily focusing on the *Taiwan* question, i.e., the Chinese central government’s *hope* that *Taiwan* would *accept* OCTS and achieve *peaceful reunification* with the country. Security highlighted the *confidence* of *Hong Kong people* in OCTS and the *Hong Kong government*, while Happiness and Satisfaction were positive emotions stemming from the *successful implementation* of OCTS. In terms of negative attitudes, negative Affect focused primarily on the category of Satisfaction, emphasising the Chinese government’s dissatisfaction and *criticism* against the behaviour of the local forces. In terms of Judgement, Tenacity and Capacity occurred in the central government’s positive self-evaluation of its determination,

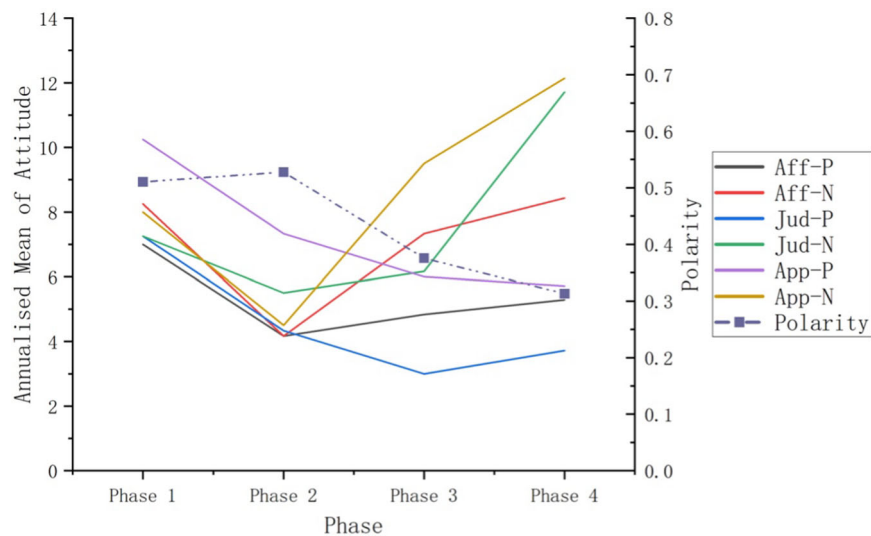


Fig. 5 Annualised means and overall polarity of attitudes across phases in ODN.

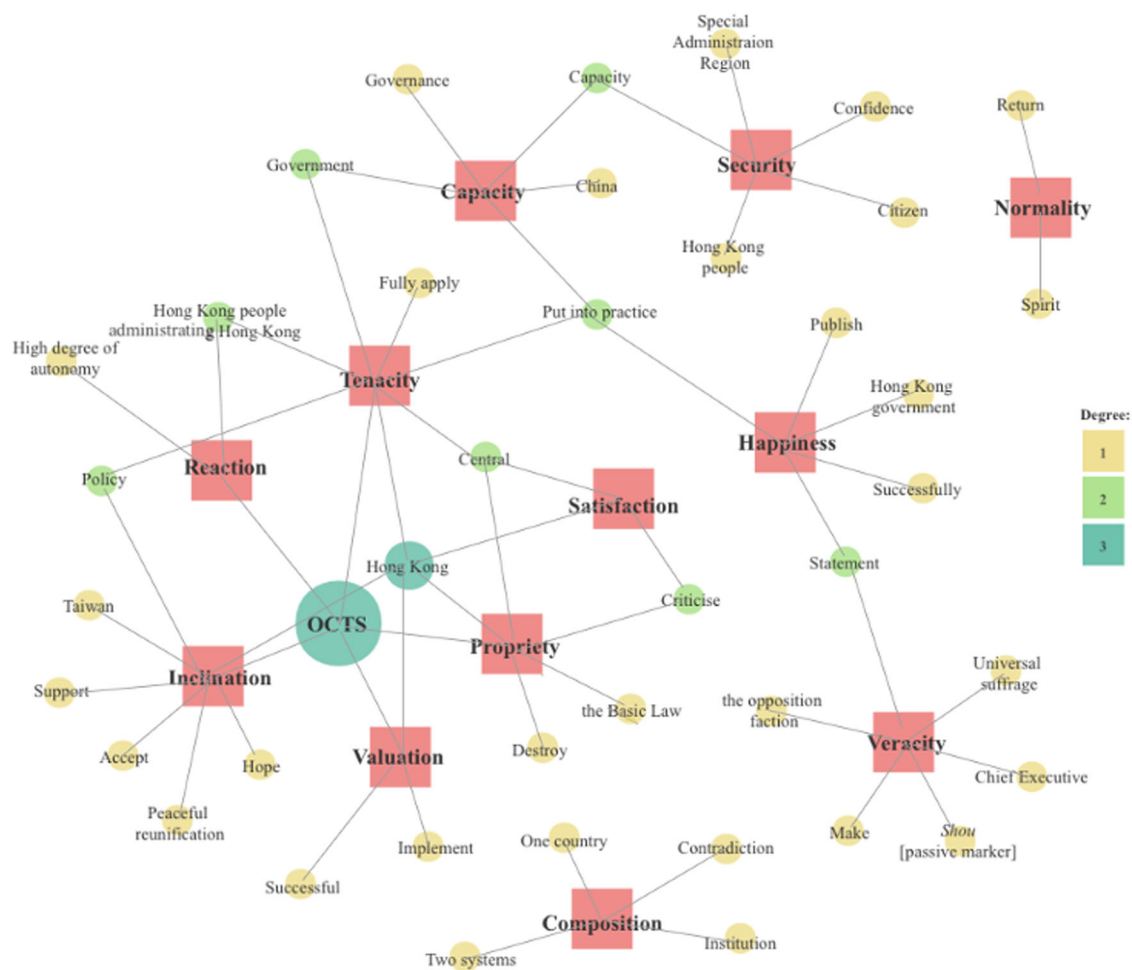


Fig. 6 Attitude-vocabulary co-occurrence network of ODN.

courage, and *ability* to *implement* OCTS and the “*Hong Kong people administering Hong Kong*” policy. Conversely, Propriety was the primary strategy to negatively judge the local forces, denouncing their actions of *destroying* OCTS and the *Basic Law*. In terms of Appreciation, the attitudes of Reaction and Valuation demonstrated ODN’s allegiance to OCTS. During the third and

fourth phases, negative attitudes towards OCTS in ODN’s reports were primarily Reactions, which highlighted that OCTS was distorted and trampled by the anti-establishment forces. Conversely, positive attitudes indicated Valuation, where OCTS was commended for its significance and *success*. Composition focused on the balance between “*One Country*” and “*Two Systems*”. The

newspaper contended that “OCTS in Hong Kong has prioritised Two Systems over One Country” (ODN, 2020-5-4) and that the emphasis on Two Systems foregrounded the differences between Hong Kong and the mainland, leading to the rise of local forces and subsequent division of Hong Kong society.

Analysis of MP. As illustrated in Fig. 7, MP adopted an impartial stance in its selection of attitudes and targets, presenting a broad range of perspectives from the democratic camp, the Hong Kong populace, and other government entities, although the Chinese central government still supplied the most attitudes. The balanced selection of attitude sources reflected the newspaper’s objective journalistic style. However, a closer look reveals that MP adopted contrasting stances on the national issue of reunification (referring to Taiwan particularly) and the local issue of OCTS in Hong Kong. Concerning national reunification, MP highlighted the central government’s attitude and took its side, as depicted in Text 3. This also explains the high proportion of attitudes from the central government during the initial phase, which was 42.37%, compared to less than 23% in the other phases. As the then leader of Taiwan Li Teng-hui’s “two-state theory” escalated cross-strait relations during this period, the central government repeatedly voiced its hope for peaceful reunification with Taiwan through the implementation of OCTS, and this position was also expressed in MP. In contrast, when addressing local matters related to OCTS in Hong Kong, MP preferred to present attitudes of various parties in a balanced manner. This can be observed in Text 4, where the MP reporter expressed dissatisfaction with the implementation of OCTS, ascribing the challenges to the cultural dichotomy between Hong Kong’s reverence for liberty and the central government’s inclination towards regulatory control.

Text 3: In his speech, he (Jiang Zemin) said..... ‘Peaceful reunification and OCTS’ is the most effective way to resolve the Taiwan issue.

他在演講中說.....“和平統一、一國兩制”是解決台灣問題的最好方式。

(MP, 2002-10-26, Phase 1).

Text 4: The decade-plus since the handover has seen a lack of improvement in the governance of the HKSAR and difficulties in implementing OCTS. This is partly attributed to the cultural disparities between the two systems.

回歸 10 多年，特區管治未有起色，一國兩制在落實方面出了問題，部分原因就是兩制之間的文化差異。

(MP, 2010-01-11, Phase 2).

Figure 7 also shows that MP’s attitudes predominately focused on OCTS, with minimal attention to other parties, maintaining a “matter-of-fact” representation. From a chronological perspective, the percentage of attitudes towards OCTS exceeded 96.39% in the first two phases but declined to 89.58% in the third phase and further dropped to 63.69% in the fourth phase. The attitudes that filled these gaps were criticisms between pro- and anti-establishment groups against each other’s behaviours. The sources of criticism were more or less balanced, reflecting MP’s attempt to keep an impartial stance.

The distribution of MP’s attitudes also shows a minimal shift in its neutrality. Figure 8 illustrates the fluctuation in the annualised means and the overall polarity of attitudes across the phases in MP. It is evident that judgement, the evaluation of behaviours, remained at a consistently low level throughout Phases 1 to 3 but

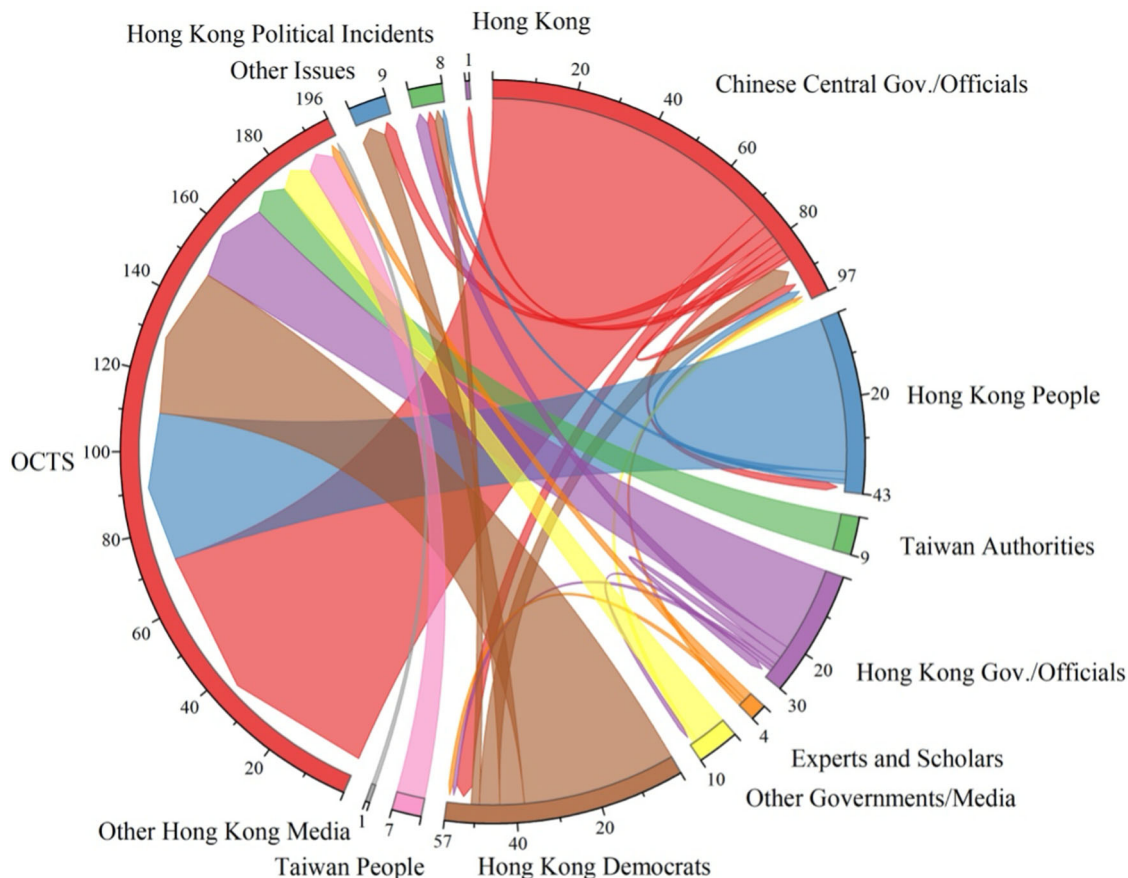


Fig. 7 Attitude direction of MP.

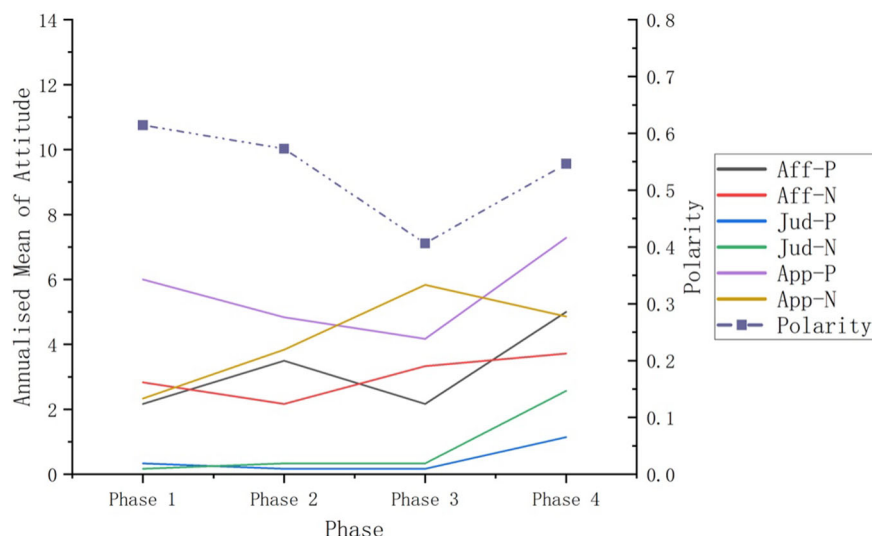


Fig. 8 Annualised means and overall polarity of attitudes across phases in *MP*.

began to increase in Phase 4. This supports the earlier argument that *MP* started to increase evaluations towards different social actors in the fourth phase. Meanwhile, *App-P* was substantially more dominant than *App-N* in the initial phase, supporting *MP*'s positive stance towards OCTS pertaining to the Taiwan question. Furthermore, regarding polarity, *MP*'s attitude towards OCTS was predominantly positive for the majority of the time, with the polarity of attitudes remaining relatively constant at 0.6. In the third phase, the polarity decreased due to an increase in negative Affect and Appreciation and a decrease in positive ones, but it never dropped below 0.4. This indicates that although the polarity of *MP*'s attitudes fluctuated during the periods of social unrests, the change was not significant, further reflecting *MP*'s attempt to maintain a neutral position.

The consistently impartial stance of *MP* is further manifested in the most frequently occurring attitudinal vocabulary items, as shown in Fig. 9. For Affect, the Security of Hong Kong people was highlighted, focusing on the public's confidence in OCTS and the central government. However, people also expressed their discontent with certain government arrangements through criticism and opposition. In terms of Judgement, *MP* focused on Tenacity when evaluating various camps. It praised the democrats for their unwavering commitment to democracy and liberty, as well as the Hong Kong government for its steadfast dedication to implementing OCTS. Regarding Appreciation, *MP*'s evaluation of OCTS centred around Reaction and Valuation, similar to *ODN*'s approach. *MP* employed a recurring pattern of expressing both commendation and criticism. For example, in Text 5, the reporter explicitly expressed their belief in the future of OCTS. However, Text 6 reported that only 10% of students in a survey believed OCTS had been effectively implemented, which highlighted the younger generation's dissatisfaction.

Text 5: The future of OCTS and the Hong Kong SAR will only become better.
一國兩制和香港特區的明天只會更加美好。(MP, 2017-5-13, Phase 4).

Text 6: Only around 10% of the interviewees believed that the principle of OCTS has been effectively implemented.

對於一國兩制、港人治港及高度自治的實施情況，認為有落實的受訪者只佔約一成。

(MP, 2017-7-17, Phase 4).

Analysis of AD. In sharp contrast to *ODN*, *AD* predominantly represented attitudes from the anti-establishment camp while minimising the representation of official viewpoints. In terms of the targets of attitudes, the newspaper consistently engaged in an overt critique of the central government and the pro-establishment camp, accusing them of undermining and abusing the OCTS framework. For its attitudes towards OCTS, *AD* did not challenge the premise of "One Country" but focused on the "Two Systems" component. For *AD*, the term "One Country" evolved from its original implication as "the premise of one China" to a signal of "the central government's vertical governance over Hong Kong", a rhetorical strategy that led to a complex interplay between resistance and recognition in *AD*'s discourse on OCTS.

First, in terms of the sources of attitudes, as shown in Fig. 10, the most notable feature is the prevalence of attitudes from the anti-establishment camp, accounting for 31.58%. *AD* also featured a considerable proportion of attitudes from Hong Kong people, experts and academics, as well as from other governments and media, with a combined proportion of 24.29%. In contrast, the voices of the Chinese government were relatively scarce, accounting for only 23.08%. Across the four phases, the proportion of anti-establishment attitudes consistently increased and reached its peak at 39.68% in the third phase. This increase was closely correlated with the rise of local resistance within the social dynamics of Hong Kong. On the one hand, the accumulation of anti-establishment attitudes in *AD* contributed to the formation of local oppositional forces. On the other hand, the opposition forces sought a platform for expressing their voices. As the social unrests in Hong Kong intensified, *AD* decreased the number of direct attitudes from the anti-establishment camp in the fourth phase and instead conveyed their attitudes through the perspectives of Hong Kong people, experts and academics, as well as other governments and media. By relying on third-party quotes, *AD* attempted to limit its direct association with the anti-establishment group, potentially in an effort to reduce allegations of inciting hatred during the social turmoil.

Second, in terms of the targets of attitudes, *AD* represented a considerable amount of evaluation towards OCTS, comprising 68.11% of the total attitudes. Other attitudes primarily targeted the Hong Kong government/officials (9.45%) and the central government/officials (5.12%), where they were criticised for violating and distorting OCTS. That is, OCTS was both a subject

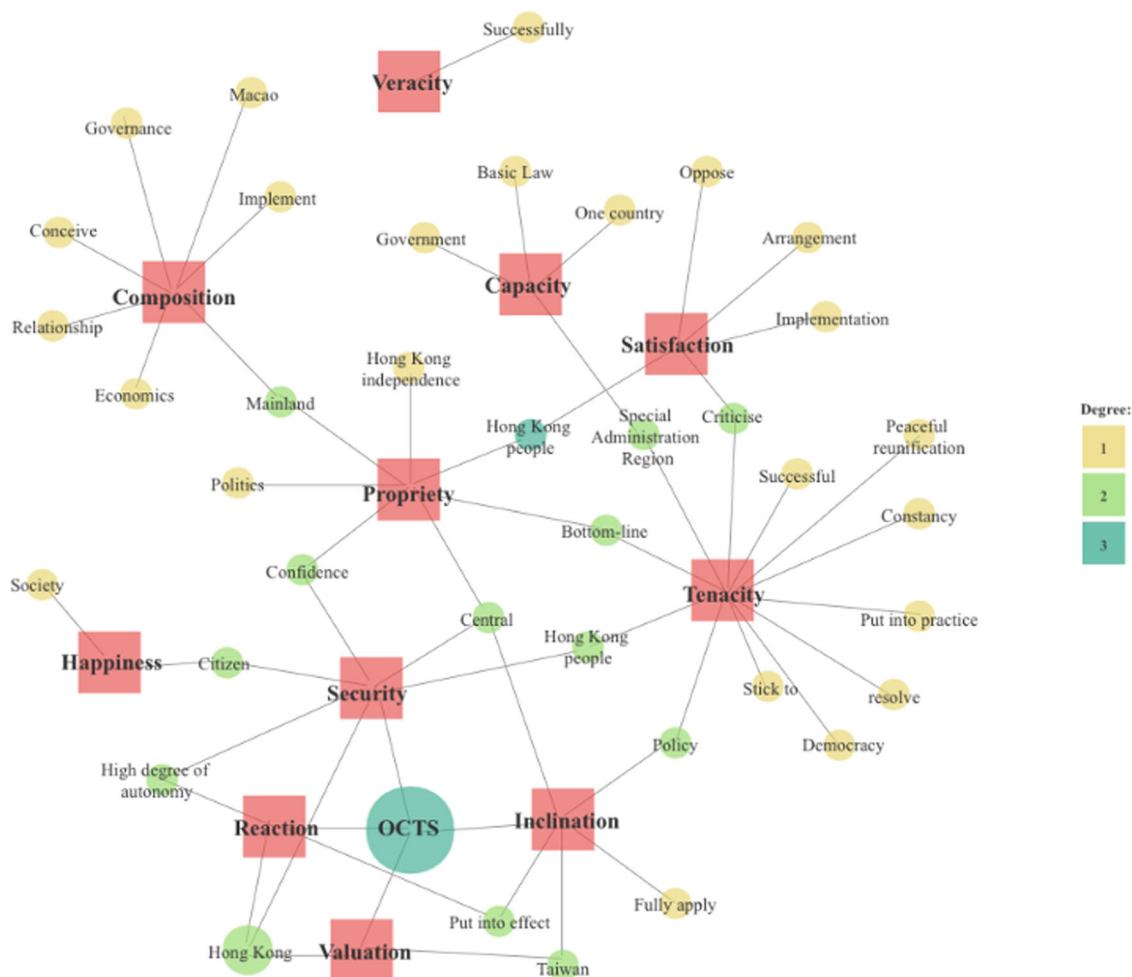


Fig. 9 Attitude-vocabulary co-occurrence network of MP.

of discussion and a tool for political criticism. It is noteworthy that there was limited evaluation towards the democratic or anti-establishment forces in AD's reports. As depicted in Fig. 10, the Hong Kong Democrats received only 5 evaluations, compared to 14 for the central government and 27 for the Hong Kong government. This could be considered as a strategy to support the anti-establishment camp. That is, AD represented a higher number of attitudes from the camp and at the same time refrained from making them as targets of judgement. Moreover, when the anti-establishment camp were represented, the attitudes served to legitimise their behaviours as defending rather than destructing OCTS.

In terms of attitude distribution, AD's representation of OCTS was predominantly negative, with an increasing emphasis on criticising the authorities' distortion of the policy during its implementation. Figure 11 depicts the annualised means and overall polarity of these attitudes over time. It demonstrates a prevailing trend towards negativity across all the three categories of attitude. The polarity towards OCTS was consistently below 0.45, displaying a continuous declining trend and reaching 0.2 in the fourth phase (i.e., nearly 80% of the attitudes were negative). Specifically, AD's reports exhibited a transformation from initial scepticism regarding the implementation of OCTS to the subsequent negative judgement of the central government's alleged distortion and abuse of the policy. For example, in Text 7, AD employed the phrase "merely empty talk" to underscore profound doubt regarding the policy's efficacy to fulfil its intended goals in view of the lack of trust between mainland

China and Hong Kong. In the fourth phase, AD posited that OCTS had been significantly eroded. For example, in Text 8, the term "overt execution" encapsulates AD's perspective that OCTS was "dead" due to the persistent encroachment by the central authorities. It resorted to the opinion of the democratic camp to express a profound sense of discontent with the government.

Text 7: If the suspicions between Beijing and Hong Kong are not resolved, OCTS is merely empty talk. 倘若中港兩地的猜疑不化解，一國兩制只是空談。(AD, 1999-2-24, Phase 1).

Text 8: The democratic camp slammed the Foreign Ministry for openly violating the Basic Law and saw it as tantamount to overt execution of OCTS.

民主派轟外交部公然違反《基本法》，等同公開處決一國兩制。

(AD, 2020-3-19, Phase 4).

AD's attitude-vocabulary co-occurrence network, as shown in Fig. 12, further demonstrates how AD employed its attitudes towards OCTS as a pivotal delegitimizing strategy to criticise the pro-establishment camp and the government. First, Composition was closely connected to OCTS, underscoring the inherent disparity within the policy framework. As exemplified in Text 9, AD explicitly criticised that "One Country" prevailed over "Two systems". It repeatedly criticised that the central government's intervention had eroded the ethical and legal bedrock of the "Two Systems" construct and resulted in the gradual dissolution of Hong Kong's distinctiveness and autonomy, thereby deviating from the original intent of OCTS. Second, AD's network shows

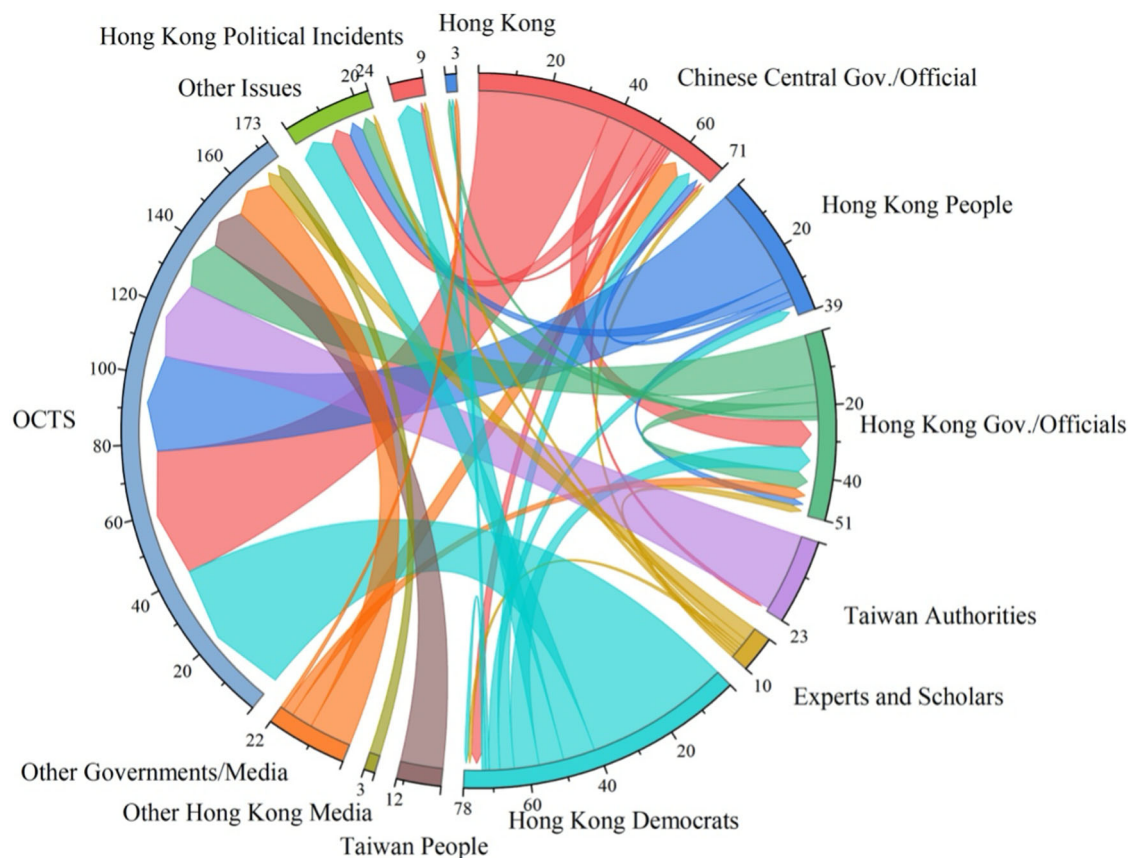


Fig. 10 Attitude direction of AD.

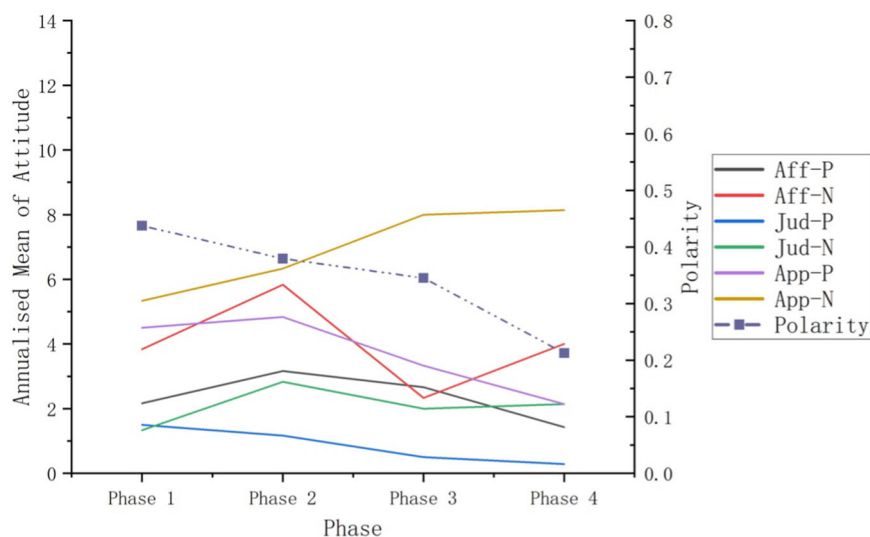


Fig. 11 Annualised means and overall polarity of attitudes across phases in AD.

two relatively clear chains around OCTS: OCTS-Valuation/Reaction-Propriety/Tenacity, and OCTS-Satisfaction/Security-Capacity. Specifically, the first chain suggests that the “death” of OCTS (Valuation/Reaction) can be attributed to the wrongdoings (Propriety) and inconsistency (Tenacity) on the part of the pro-establishment camp and the government. The second chain suggests that the current state of OCTS engendered public discontent (Satisfaction) and a lack of confidence (Security)

regarding the authorities’ efficacious execution of OCTS policies (Capacity). Together, the two chains highlight the intrinsic linkage between the behaviours of the government and the negative sentiments in Hong Kong society, thereby delegitimising the former.

Text 9: However, within just a decade plus since the Hong Kong handover, both Hong Kong and Taiwan have witnessed how OCTS has evolved from an original emphasis of “Two

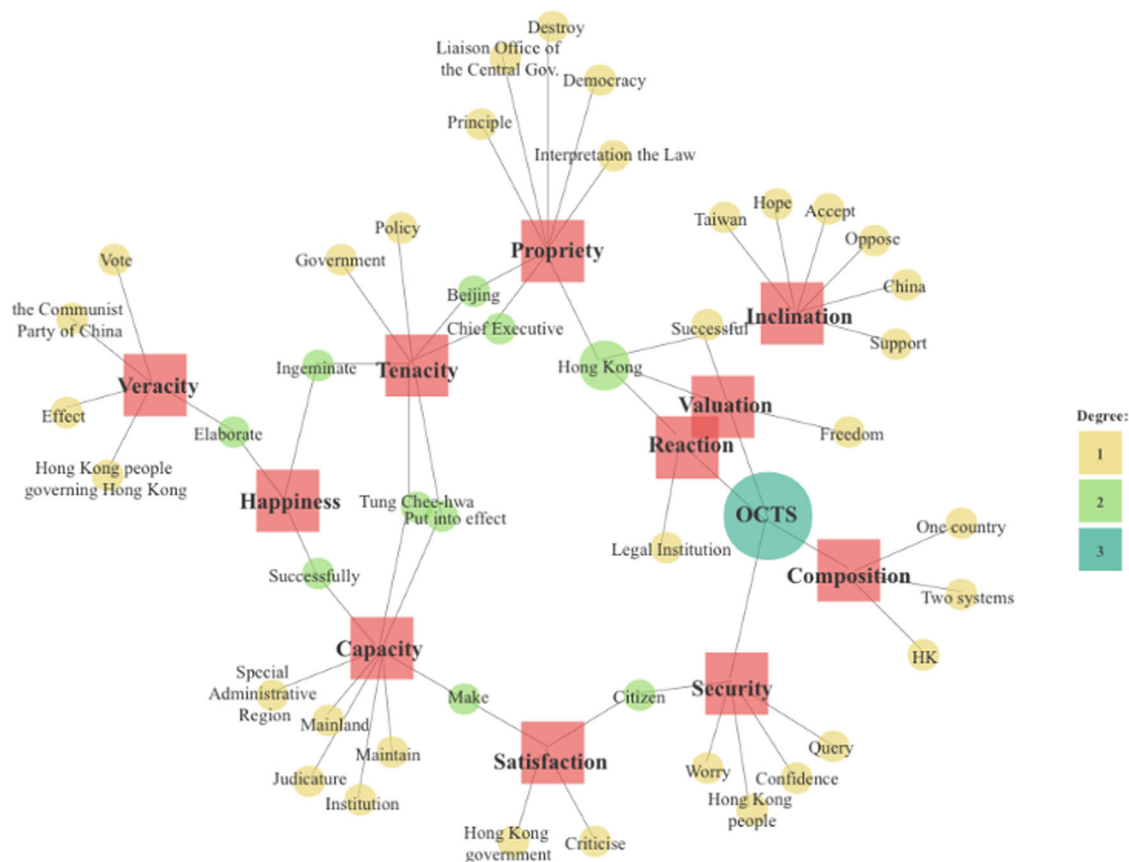


Fig. 12 Attitude-vocabulary co-occurrence network of AD.

Systems,” with each party minding its own business, to the present overriding of “One Country” over “Two Systems.”

但是香港回歸之後，港台兩地有目共睹，「一國兩制」從突出「兩制」，「井水不犯河水」，演變到「一國」凌駕於「兩制」，才短短十幾年時間。

(AD, 2015-5-12, Phase 4).

Discussion and conclusion

We have analysed the attitudes towards the OCTS policy in the Hong Kong press 23 years following the sovereignty transfer. The results demonstrate that the attitudes presented in the news were not random but were deliberate choices in terms of whose attitudes were selected, what attitudes were selected, and towards whom or what the attitudes were directed. The attitudes served as argumentation strategies to legitimise or delegitimise the OCTS policy and behaviours of key stakeholders, which provided a systematic analytical framework beyond the identification of topoi (e.g., Wodak 2009). Table 1 presents a qualitative summary of the attitudes of different newspapers towards OCTS, categorised according to Affect, Judgement, and Appreciation.

For ODN, the most prominent feature and primary discursive strategy was the portrayal of the OCTS policy as the cornerstone of Hong Kong politics, treating it as an unquestionable yardstick for evaluating various social actors and events. With this core attitude, ODN placed emphasis on the government’s determination to implement the policy and highlighted actions of local anti-establishment forces that distorted and violate it. Conversely, AD’s stance on OCTS was marked by a pronounced

critique of the central government and the pro-establishment camp for manipulating and violating the policy. While acknowledging the framework of OCTS, AD criticised that only the “One Country” component was implemented whereas the “Two Systems” component was ignored. As a result, OCTS became a tool for the central government to impose more control over Hong Kong. As for MP, it occupied a middle ground and represented the perspectives of different parties. The newspaper offered a balanced and impartial coverage of the policy’s implementation process.

From the perspective of discursive shift (Krzyżanowski 2020), the findings demonstrate remarkable changes during the 23 years and variations among the three newspapers in their representation of OCTS. For ODN, the three stages of *enactment*, *gradation* and *normalisation* were relatively clear. In the *enactment* stage, ODN introduced OCTS into public discourse through balanced discussions from different perspectives, including those of the authorities and local anti-establishment forces. At this stage, political and legal concepts were recontextualised as media topics through new discursive elements such as attitudes analysed in this study (which were largely absent in legal discourses on OCTS). Then the representation of OCTS underwent a gradual but significant discursive shift towards the domination of government and pro-establishment voices, which constituted the *gradation* stage. Official stances on the supreme and unquestionable status of OCTS were *perpetuated* through repeated explanations and legitimations of the policy. Finally, direct attitudes towards the policy gradually decreased, and attitudes regarding how the government implemented the policy, how local forces distorted and violated it, and whether its implementation was undermined became dominant. OCTS was *normalised* as a standard for evaluating

Table 1 Attitudes in the three newspapers.

Attitudes	ODN	MP	AD
Affect	Confidence in OCTS	Both acceptance and resistance to OCTS	Scepticism and dissatisfaction over the implementation of OCTS
Judgement	Officials: Firm implementation of the policy Local forces: Distorting the policy	Officials: Firm implementation of the policy and violation of the policy Local forces: Protecting the policy and overturning the policy	Officials: Violation of the policy
Appreciation	Nature Status Cornerstone of Hong Kong politics Undermined and internally imbalanced	- Successfully implemented and losing control	Instrument for controlling Hong Kong and internally imbalanced Undermined and abused

and de/legitimising other events and behaviours, indicating the normative status of OCTS for *ODN*. This shift was motivated by the socio-political changes in the third and fourth phases (i.e., after 2009), particularly several large-scale protests such as the Occupy Central movement in 2014 and the Anti-extradition Amendment Bill Movement in 2019. *ODN* attempted to delegitimise the protests by arguing that they violated OCTS. There were no remarkable efforts to legitimise OCTS because most protesters did not challenge the OCTS policy, as further elaborated in the discussion of the discursive shift in *AD*.

AD was sceptical about the implementation of the OCTS policy during the *enactment* stage. Through its coverage of Taiwan-related issues, *AD* highlighted the sentiment of disagreement towards the policy within Taiwanese society, which, in turn, triggered doubts about the future of the policy in Hong Kong. Then *AD* gradually moved from the initial emotional reaction to a more rational criticism against the inherent imbalance of the two components and the dismissal of “Two Systems” during the implementation of the policy. It *perpetuated* a position that accepted the OCTS framework but claimed that the policy had been distorted and manipulated by the authorities (cf. Lee et al. 2020). Through giving voice to the anti-establishment camp and the attitudes analysed above, *AD* consistently delegitimised the behaviours of the authorities related to OCTS. Finally, *AD normalised* the “death” of OCTS (i.e., the Two Systems), asserting that the policy had become an instrument for the central government to exert control over Hong Kong. On this ground, the above-mentioned protests and resistance were legitimised or rationalised as defending the real spirit of OCTS. It also highlighted negative sentiments within Hong Kong society, such as discontent and worry, as a result of the “death” of OCTS, which further rationalised their resistance.

Different from *ODN* and *AD*, discursive shifts in *MP* were not so remarkable. For the majority of the time, *MP* provided a platform for different parties to express their opinions, including both supporting and critical voices, which reflected its liberal stance as an elite-oriented broadsheet. This echoes the finding of Gao and Feng (2023) that *MP* largely maintained its objectivity despite the socio-political changes, although its initial focus on OCTS itself gradually shifted to include other parties. As a result, the three stages of discursive shift do not seem to be applicable to the case of *MP*.

To conclude, our research has revealed a notable evolution and a spectrum of perspectives in Hong Kong mainstream newspapers’ representation of OCTS. The analysis provides novel insights into the model of discursive shift. First, multiple paths of discursive shifts may co-exist in a society. Our analysis has revealed variegated trajectories, stages, and timeframes among different newspapers, which reflects their different ideological objectives and social agendas. Different stages may have different timespans and may be demarcated to varying degrees. Therefore, we cannot presume the existence of the three stages and attempt to indiscriminately identify the three stages in analysis. For example, *MP* upheld an impartial stance during the period with no remarkable discursive shift. Second, different or even conflicting discursive “norms” may be enacted and perpetuated. For instance, OCTS was legitimised and then represented as a normative standard for de/legitimising social events and behaviours in *ODN*. In contrast, *AD* criticised the distortion of OCTS and normalised its death to legitimise resistant behaviours. All in all, the simultaneous lines of “melodies” together constituted the polyphonic discourse of media attitudes in Hong Kong.

These variegated attitude shifts across the different newspapers were fundamentally anchored in their unique ideological underpinnings and were embedded within the broader canvas of societal dynamics. The multifaceted and shifting media discourse not only reflects the complexity of the OCTS policy's reception but also underscores the media's role in shaping and mirroring public discourses and sentiments. However, it should be noted that the data for this study only covers news reports from 1997 to 2020 and the impact of the Hong Kong National Security Law introduced in 2020 was not evident. The media landscape has witnessed significant changes since 2021, with the termination of AD being one of the most noticeable events. The media now exhibits greater caution in reporting news related to OCTS, with a diminished presence of oppositional voices and an emphasis on patriotism and national unity, in line with the principle of "patriots administering Hong Kong" (Petersen 2023). Future research may analyse the nuances of recent discursive shifts on OCTS brought by the National Security Law and the creation of new discursive norms.

Data availability

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from <https://github.com/gaoqy219/researchData>.

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Author contributions

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Informed consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

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