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From “them” to “us”?:

The changing representation of China in the *South China Morning Post* 20 years on

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Abstract

This study provides an account of how the representation of China has changed diachronically in the *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, the leading liberal English-language broadsheet in Hong Kong, since the sovereignty transfer in 1997. Adopting a corpus-based approach to critical discourse studies, we analyse two corpora of news reports about China in the newspaper, one for 1997-2000 and the other one for 2015-2018. It is found that the representation of has changed from very negative representations focusing on human right problems in the first period to largely positive representations centring upon China’s global and economic power in the second period. The changes may suggest that the *SCMP* has to a certain extent shifted its positioning of China from “them” to “us”, though an ambivalent stance is observed. The ambivalence is discussed in relation to the economic convergence and political divergence between Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland.

Keywords: South China Morning Post, Hong Kong; representation of China; diachronic corpus analysis

1. Introduction

The Hong Kong press has been in a state of flux ever since Britain and China began negotiating the future of Hong Kong in the 1980s. According to Chan and Lee (1991), the transition period following the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 witnessed the highest degree of press freedom in Hong Kong because of the balancing up of power of Britain and China. It was also the period when China began co-opting media owners (Lee 2018). The two decades after the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty have witnessed drastic changes in Hong Kong’s media landscape.

During the early years of Chinese sovereignty, a high degree of press freedom remained in the Hong Kong press (e.g., Ching 1998, 1999; Chan and Lee 2007). The central Chinese government (often referred to through the metonymy of “Beijing”) did not openly intervene in Hong Kong’s affairs and mainly exerted influence via an informal system of politics marked by co-optation – many media owners had political appointments or eyed the Chinese market and cooperated with Beijing in exchange for political or economic benefits (Chan 2021). This resulted in widespread media self-censorship (Lee 2015; Lee and Chan 2009). Such indirect influence from Beijing was however largely counterbalanced by journalistic professionalism. Journalists in Hong Kong tended to (and still do) believe in the independence of journalists from political and economic power, the importance of factual and objective reporting and the watchdog responsibility of the media (Chan and Lee 2007).

On 1 July 2003, 500,000 people protested against the Hong Kong government’s attempt to enact national security laws as set out in Article 23 of the Basic Law. The protest is considered a “critical event” as it made the Chinese government realise that its non-interventionist approach had failed to make Hong Kong emotionally “return” to its motherland (So 2011). After 2003, Beijing adopted new strategies to control and co-opt the Hong Kong press, such as setting news agendas, so that negative events were suppressed and reports mainly focused on positive events (Lee 2015). The press generally adopted a “centrist” position during that period (Fung 2007), i.e., the avoidance of provoking China by refraining on reporting sensitive issues or being openly critical on the one hand, and of pleasing the Chinese government to maintain its objectivity on the other. Such a “no-stand” position became the new norm and an informal internal policy of many news organizations, whereas taking a clear stance was seen as radical, particularly on issues related to China (ibid, 164). Recent research points to Beijing’s more direct intervention in the Hong Kong press and the decline in press freedom (e.g., Lee 2018; Chan 2021). Such direct intervention is met with resistance among journalists. For example, in 2015, broadcaster TVB was hit with a wave of resignations in protest against the way the senior management handled the coverage of police violence in the Umbrella Movement (ibid).

Such a complicated nature of the Hong Kong press is the departure point of our research, which explores the diachronic representation of China in the *South China Morning Post* (*SCMP* hereafter), a leading English-language broadsheet in Hong Kong, during the past 20 odd years. The *SCMP* is a relatively Westernised and liberal daily (Lai 2007). According to a tracking

research project on public evaluation on media credibility by the Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (2016, 2022), the *SCMP* was evaluated as the most credible newspaper in Hong Kong from 2006-2016 and ranked the second from 2016 onwards. Nonetheless, Lai (2007) suggested that the *SCMP* has changed from a pro-British stance pre-handover to its present support for China. This changing stance is widely attributed to the two changes of ownership of the newspaper since 1993 and considered an instance of Beijing's attempt to exert influence on Hong Kong media via media ownership control (Luqiu 2017; Lai 2007). The *SCMP* was acquired by Robert Kuok, a pro-China Malaysian tycoon, in 1993. Lai (2007) suggested that press freedom was not immediately eroded after Kuok's takeover because of the resistance of many journalists, who did not always cooperate with the management. Another acquisition took place in 2015 by Chinese internet giant, the Alibaba Group, which might have important impact on the coverage of China in the newspaper. As the group made it explicit, the acquisition was "fueled by a desire to improve China's image and offer an alternative to what it calls the biased lens of Western news outlets" (Barboza 2015). Focusing on the impact of the acquisition on the *SCMP*'s editorial stance, Wiebrecht (2018) conducted a content analysis on the coverage of Hong Kong's independence by the newspaper from 2015 to 2017, and found an increasingly pro-China position over time, e.g., by quoting more frequently from mainland Chinese and Hong Kong officials, while hardly giving voice to independence activists.

Against this backdrop, our purpose is to find out how the representation of China in the *SCMP* has changed vis-à-vis the changing media context in Hong Kong, for example, whether there is a transition from a pro-British to a pro-China stance. In what follows, we will first review literature on press representations of China, followed by an introduction to our data source, i.e., the *SCMP*. We will then explicate the two linguistic disciplines fundamental to our research, namely critical discourse studies (CDS) and corpus linguistics (CL), and describe our methodology. Lastly, we will report our findings and discuss them in relation to the socio-political contexts in Hong Kong and China and the changing media environment in the *SCMP*.

2. Studies on the press representation of China

This section provides an overview of research on the press representation of China, which is by no means an underexplored topic, especially in communication/media studies and political science. We have observed two major strands of research in the fields. The first strand examines Western

news coverage of China within a particular period of time, often from a diachronic perspective. While earlier research mainly focuses on Anglo-American newspapers (e.g., Peng 2004; Yang and Liu 2012), more recent research looks into a wider range of contexts such as Germany (e.g., Hufnagel *et al.* 2022), Slovakia (e.g., Šimalčík 2021) and Latin America (e.g., Morante and Wu 2023). These studies show an overall negative image of China (although sometimes alongside positive framings in some aspects) (e.g., Šimalčík 2021; China Institute at the University of Alberta 2019) and an increasing emphasis on China as a threat and rival over time (e.g., Hufnagel *et al.* 2022; Wallis *et al.* 2022).

The second strand of research examines the representation of China in relation to a particular topic/incident. In recent years, many studies explore the topic in relation to China's infrastructure projects in the Middle East and Africa (e.g., Niu and Relly 2021), the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g., Chernin 2023) and conflicts with other countries (e.g., Liu *et al.* 2023). These studies show that the representation of China is often influenced by China's relationship with the country where the press is based. Take the coverage of China's infrastructure projects in the Middle East as an example. The Belt and Road Initiative was framed negatively by both the US and Indian press, possibly owing to the worsening Sino-US relationship and conflict between China and India (Niu and Relly 2021). On the other hand, China was framed in a positive light by the Pakistani press in the context of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (see Ahmed 2023).

A survey of discourse literature on the representation of China reveals similar tendencies. Most studies examine the topic in relation to a particular issue, for example, the political crisis in Hong Kong (e.g., Memon *et al.* 2022), the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g., Xue and Xu 2021), and the Belt and Road Initiative (e.g., Zhang and Wu 2017), and many, like the present one, combine CDS and CL (e.g., Huan 2023; Tang 2021; Liu 2019). These studies reveal a predominantly negative image of China in Western media. For example, despite the positive representation of China's influential role in the global economy, China was negatively represented as an authoritarian regime, and a military and geopolitical threat to other countries in reports about the Belt and Road Initiative in the *Financial Times*, a UK newspaper (Zhang and Wu 2017). Similarly, the Chinese government was constructed as “totalitarian”, “repressive” and “atheist” in reports about Tibet in the Anglo-American press from 2000 to 2015 (Liu 2019). However, few have investigated diachronic representations of China, and we still lack an empirical understanding of the discursive shifts with relation to the broader socio-political changes.

We could only find one relevant study examining Hong Kong newspapers, namely Wei's (2012) research on the depiction of China in *Ming Pao*, *Sing Tao Daily* and *Apple Daily*, which are liberal, pro-Beijing and pro-democracy newspapers, respectively. Her content analysis showed that the three newspapers as a whole positively represented China's economy, culture, science, films and sports, yet negatively portrayed various social problems. The analysis also revealed differences in the coverage of political news, with *Ming Pao* indicating its objectivity by balancing criticisms from different sides and *Apple Daily* being always critical of China. As regards our data source, the *SCMP*, it has proved a very popular choice of data for discourse studies on press representations, but the central focus of these studies is not on how China is represented as a country, but that of Hong Kong or a particular local incident (e.g., the Umbrella Movement and Hong Kong Extradition Law Protests) (see e.g., Ho and Chiu 2022; Cao *et al.* 2022; Liu and Zhong 2020). While these studies can undoubtedly shed light on the stance of the *SCMP*, it is also important to see how the newspaper takes positions when reporting news stories about China (events happening in the Chinese mainland, exclusive of Hong Kong, or China as a country, inclusive of Hong Kong), or to put it in another way, news stories which are less directly related to Hong Kong, particularly considering the complex relation between Hong Kong and the central Chinese government.

3. Theoretical background and methodology

This research is mainly informed by two linguistic disciplines, namely CDS and CL. Drawing on CDS, our research sees discourse as a form of social practice and is premised on the position that discourse and other social practices are dialectically related, i.e., language constitutes and is constituted by society (Fairclough and Wodak 1997; van Dijk 1998; van Leeuwen 2008). Critically addressing the complicated relationship between Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland, our research seeks to find out how the drastic socio-political changes in recent decades have influenced the representation of China in the *SCMP*, particularly with relation to the ideological square of "us" and "them" (e.g., van Dijk 1993). Van Dijk (1995) suggests that positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation are a fundamental exhibition of ideological structure in discourse. CL is a methodology making use of concordance programs, e.g., AntConc 4.2.0 (Anthony 2022), to analyse corpora of authentic textual data. CL tools enable CDS researchers to handle a much larger data size and provide stronger empirical evidence for their analysis (Mautner 2016). Relying on

computer software to identify linguistic patterns, CL also contributes to the reduction of researcher bias (see *ibid*; Baker, 2006; Baker *et al.* 2008). On the other hand, concerning the frequent critique against CL's insufficient attention to context, CDS, with its close attention to context, serves as a useful lens to understand the findings of corpus analyses (Baker *et al.* 2008).

Our dataset comprises two corpora of news reports about China in the *SCMP*. The first one is composed of reports during the three-year period right after the handover, i.e., July 1997 to June 2000, while the second one is composed of reports from July 2015 to June 2018. The second period is right after the aforementioned acquisition by the Alibaba Group but before the implementation of the National Security Law in 2020. To keep our data size manageable yet representative of the coverage of China in the *SCMP*, we included all reports about China in the main news section (i.e., those on A-pages) published on the first ten days of each month. As our interest is on news reports, which supposedly observe the journalistic norm of objectivity, we also excluded opinion pieces, e.g., editorials. The news reports were collected from Factiva, a global news database, using the search term ‘china* OR chinese OR beijing* OR mainland* AND NOT hong AND NOT kong* AND NOT sar*’,ⁱ with the asterisk acting as a wildcard. The reason for excluding reports containing “hong”, “kong” and “sar” is that our interest is in reports about either mainland China or China as a country, rather than those under the category of “local news”. Table 1 details the two resulting corpora. The size of the 2015-2018 corpus is much larger than that of the 1997-2000 corpus in terms of both the numbers of texts and tokens, which reflects the newspaper’s growing attention to Chinese news in recent years.

Table 1: Overview of the 1997-2000 corpus and the 2015-2018 corpus

	1997-2000 corpus	2015-2018 corpus
Number of texts	757	1,246
Number of tokens	203,928	591,805

The data were analysed using the concordancers AntConc 4.2.0 (Anthony 2022) and ConcGram 1.0 (Greaves 2009). AntConc 4.2.0 enables us to compare the two corpora against each other and measure keyness of words. Unlike AntConc 4.2.0, ConcGram 1.0 can only indicate frequencies of semantic groupings within one single corpus. It is nevertheless uniquely featured by its ability to “identify all the potential configurations of between 2 and 5 words in any corpus...to

include the associated words even if they occur in different positions relative to one another (i.e., positional variation) and even when one or more words occur in between the associated words (i.e., constituency variation)” (Cheng *et al.* 2006, 413), with all such configurations being called a concgram. For example, in terms of the concgram “human/rights/abuses”, ConcGram 1.0 can identify not only the term “human rights abuses”, but also permutations e.g., “abuses of human rights” and “human rights and political abuses”. The combination of the two concordancers therefore enabled us to identify keywords of each corpus and analyse their semantic groupings thoroughly.

Turning to the procedures, we first generated a keyword list for each corpus using AntConc 4.2.0 and examined the words which appear significantly more frequently in each of the corpora. The BE06 Corpus, a one-million-word corpus of written British English (Baker 2009), was used as the reference corpus. Keyness was calculated using the log-likelihood test and statistical significance was set at $p < 0.0001$ (15.13 with Bonferroni). There were altogether 607 keywords in the 1997-2000 corpus and 927 keywords in the 2015-2017 corpus, and we only looked at the top 200 positive keywords. As we are only interested in the “aboutness” of the corpora (Scott and Tribble 2006), while compiling the keyword lists, we excluded all function words. After compiling the lists of top keywords, we categorised them thematically and compared the thematic differences between the two corpora. The thematic categorisation of keywords not only showed us a clear picture of how the coverage of China has diachronically changed in terms of what to include and emphasise, but also enabled us to decide which thematic categories to focus on for a more in-depth analysis. For each thematic category focused on, we conducted a detailed examination of the relevant keywords in terms of their co-occurring patterns and/or their concordance lines using ConcGram 1.0.

4. Findings

4.1 Key themes

Nine key themes have been identified in the two keyword lists, namely domestic politics, human rights, places, diplomatic disputes, economy, society, environment, media and global/regional power (see Table 2). A point to bear in mind is that several keywords apply to and are hence grouped into more than one thematic category. Keywords which are too general to be categorised are put into the category of “others”, e.g., “people” and “urged”. Two key differences have been

identified in the coverage of China between the two periods. The most notable difference lies in the distribution of themes related to local and global affairs. It is found that the 2015-2018 corpus pays much more attention to global affairs, with 44 and 38 keywords falling into the categories of diplomatic disputes and global/regional power, respectively, compared with only 22 and two keywords in the corresponding categories in the 1997-2000 corpus. In contrast, the 1997-2000 corpus focuses more on domestic issues, especially political ones. Politically oriented keywords, i.e., those in the categories of domestic politics and human rights, predominate its keyword list (76 and 38 instances respectively, compared with 42 and four instances in the 2015-2018 corpus). The second key difference between the two periods lies in the weight of human rights issues, which carry a much heavier weight in the 1997-2000 corpus (38 keywords) than in the 2015-2018 corpus (4 keywords). The shift of focus may reflect the *SCMP*'s positioning of China as "them" in the first period, when sensitive issues are highlighted and criticised, and as "us" in the second period, when it reports global affairs from a more ingroup perspective. Informed by the results of the thematic categorisation of keywords, we decided to focus on the two thematic categories with the most significant difference for a thorough analysis of co-occurring patterns of keywords, namely human rights and global/regional power.ⁱⁱ

Table 2: Thematic categories emerging from the top 200 keywords

Category	Scope	No. of keywords	
		1997-2000	2015-2018
Domestic politics	political leaders and bodies, government officials/officers, governmental bodies and their governance, party politics, policymaking, the military	76	42
Human rightsⁱⁱⁱ	different aspects of human rights including forms of human rights abuses, people and places involved, and reactions to those abuses	38	4
Places	places in China	29	21

Diplomatic disputes	China's diplomatic disputes, and countries and leaders involved	22	44
Economy	companies, finance, investments, exports and different sectors, e.g., tourism	12	9
Society	education, healthcare, transportations, entertainment, law and various social problems, e.g., crimes and poverty	9	16
Environment	pollution, resources and natural disasters	4	2
Media	(social) media and the internet	2	4
Global/regional power	China's global projects, global responsibilities, global influence, and countries and people involved	2	38
Others	keywords that can occur in many different contexts, e.g., “people”, “type” and “seen”	25	31

4.2 Human rights

Human rights are a dominant theme in the 1997-2000 corpus (38 keywords, compared with only 4 keywords in the 2015-2017 corpus). The keywords point to different forms of human rights issues (e.g., political, religious, and ethnic repression) as well as international concern over China's human rights. In order to obtain a clearer picture of how the newspaper frames China's human rights record, we analysed the co-occurring words of the concgram “human/rights”, and based on concordance analysis, categorised those co-occurring words which shed light on the representation of China, as shown in Table 3. Table 3 reveals a strikingly negative representation of China as a human rights violator. Beijing is represented as the social actor of *abusing*, *violating* and *trampling* on human rights and Chinese officials as *intimidating* a dissident into leaving the country and as *torturing* ethnic minority detainees and prisoners. China's human rights record is also problematised, as realised by words including “problems”, “issues” and “deterioration”. While the newspaper also uses relatively positive words e.g., “progress”, they are often used in a negative

fashion (e.g., “there has been no progress”). “Human/rights” also co-occurs with a list of words relating to international reactions to China’s human rights abuses, which are dominated by negatively value-laden words. On the one hand, China is represented as the target for *accusations*, *criticisms* and *condemnation* by the West, and its human rights record as a cause for *concern* and *dismay*. For instance, Text 1 reports the common Western perception of China’s one-child policy as a violation of human rights. On the other, China is represented as diplomatically isolated and as under pressure from the United Nations and the Western world to abide by international human rights norms, as seen by words e.g., “pushing” and “resolution”. Text 2 reveals how China is pushed by the United Nations to review its laws to meet international standards.

Text 1: The one-child policy has been criticised in the West as a violation of basic human rights.
(2 June 2000)

Text 2: The UN Human Rights Office is pushing Beijing to review its laws relating to economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights. (25 September 1998)

Table 3: Co-occurring words of “human/rights” in the 1997-2000 corpus

The actions of Beijing	abused (2), abuses (9), intimidate (4), torture (2), trampling (2), violation (3), violations (5)
Human rights situation	deterioration (2), improvement (2), issues (9), problems (4), progress (3), record (17), records (2)
International reactions	accused (3), against (8), concerns (5), criticised (3), condemning (5), condemnation (2), critical (2), criticism (4), criticising (2), dismay (2), pressure (5), pushing (3), resolution (12)

A concordance analysis of the co-occurrences between “human/rights” and the words in Table 3 shows that China’s human rights record is negatively framed from a Western perspective. This is manifested in the imbalance between Beijing’s voice and opposing voice in the coverage. It is found that 15 and 14 instances of the co-occurrences quote comments from opposing groups in China (including outlawed parties, dissidents and repressed religious groups) and the West

(including Western country leaders, governments, officials, senators, organisations and experts) respectively, whereas only seven represent the voice of Chinese leaders/officials and state-run media, all being responses to criticisms by the West, e.g., denials of human rights abuses and counter-attacks on the West. Text 3 cites state-run Xinhua News Agency's report of a Chinese official's response to the negative evaluation on China's human rights situation by a US human rights report. An interesting point about this example is that it puts in scare quotes the state-run agency's description of China's progress in human rights as "unprecedented". According to Martin and White (2005), scare quotes are a common device to achieve distancing effects. Focusing on the news reporting genre, Richardson (2007, 87) even maintains that scare quotes are often used "to indicate a contentious truth claim – or at least that the truth claim is not the reporter's". This is only one of the very many instances where the *SCMP* puts comments by state-run media in scare quotes. Therefore, even when giving voice to Beijing, the newspaper clearly distances itself from Beijing's stance.

Text 3: But Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao told Xinhua it [the US State Department's annual human rights report on China] had turned a blind eye to the "unprecedented" progress China had made on improving human rights. (2 February 1998)

As regards the 2015-2018 corpus, human rights issues only play a minimal role, with only four keywords in this regard, namely "liu", "guo", "xinjiang" and "crackdown". As "liu" and "guo" are common Chinese surnames and do not only (but mostly) refer to political dissidents in the corpus, we focus on the other two keywords, "xinjiang" and "crackdown", for a more detailed analysis. "Xinjiang" is mostly used to report a series of violent incidents in Xinjiang. An analysis of the list of co-occurring words of "xinjiang" indicates that those involved in the incidents are framed as extremist-separatist-terrorists, as seen by the words used to describe them and their actions (e.g., "extremists" and "terrorism"). They are also explicitly associated with the Islamic State and its claimed territories (i.e., "afghanistan", "islamic" and "syria"). Such representation frames Beijing's security measures in Xinjiang as necessary and legitimate anti-terrorism acts. The *SCMP* adopts a rather pro-Beijing stance in the coverage of the unrest in Xinjiang, in contrast to the common Western stance. This finding is also supported by the co-occurring patterns between "xinjiang" and various reporting verbs including "said" (18 instances), "accused" (4 instances) and

“blamed” (3 instances). The *SCMP* mainly refers to Chinese sources in the coverage, except two references to scholars based in London. Both quotes comment on the risk of terrorist attacks in China and do not show the journalist’s stance towards the incident.

As regards the keyword “crackdown”, it is most frequently used to cover the nationwide action on human rights lawyers and activists on 9 July 2015, co-occurring with “lawyer(s)” 16 times, “rights” 11 times and “human” twice. The use of the reference term “(human) rights lawyers” is of importance here. For one thing, it is value-laden, representing the lawyers under arrest positively as human rights advocates who stand up for righteousness and justice. For another, it is exactly how these lawyers are often referred to in Western media outlets. It is noteworthy that the Chinese government repeatedly dismisses criticisms from the West and emphasises that it was nothing to do with human rights, but simply law enforcement. This can be realised, for example, by an editorial by state-owned Xinhua News Agency on 17 December 2015 titled “Do not mistake law enforcement for rights crackdown”, which refers to the lawyers as “lawless lawyers” or “apprehended lawyers”. The *SCMP* apparently represents the crackdown from a Western perspective, characterising the lawyers as human rights defenders, and Beijing, by implication, as a human rights violator.

The above analysis shows three key differences in the coverage of China’s human rights records between the two periods. First, human rights issues are apparently in the spotlight in the 1997-2000 corpus, but largely avoided in the 2015-2018 corpus. Second, the newspaper’s negative stance on China’s human rights record is articulated much more overtly in the 1997-2000 corpus. The coverage not only employs very negative words to describe China’s human rights abuses, but also frequently refers to local opposing voices and Western criticisms. In contrast, in the 2015-2018 corpus, the newspaper only subtly expresses its critical stance by positively representing the lawyers arrested as human rights defenders. In the coverage of the Xinjiang unrest, there seems a shift towards a pro-Beijing stance. The *SCMP* mainly cites Chinese sources and frames the unrest as terrorism, rather than a human rights issue. Third, the 1997-2000 corpus often represents China’s human rights record as a cause for international concern and intervention, and the Western world, especially the US, as having hegemonic power over China, and as constantly criticising China and pressurising China into making changes; in contrast, the 2015-2018 corpus represents human rights as a domestic issue with few references to foreign countries. The shift can be

regarded as a process of “normalisation” (Krzyżanowski 2020), where new norms in framing human rights related events have been created.

4.3 Global/regional power

China’s global/regional power is the second most salient thematic category in the 2015-2018 corpus (38 keywords), whereas only two keywords fall into this category in the 1997-2000 corpus. This can be attributed to China’s rapid increase in global reach and influence over the past two decades as well as the *SCMP*’s changing stance. We will first look at the two keywords in the 1997-2000 corpus, namely “korea” and “korean”. As both keywords pertain to China’s influence over North Korea in the Four-Party Talks on the Korean Peninsula (1997-1998)^{iv}, we will focus on the concgrams “china/korean” (10 times), “china/korea” (9 times), “beijing/korea” (4 times) and “beijing/korean” (4 times). These concgrams do not regularly co-occur with value-laden words. An analysis of their concordance lines shows that the coverage includes references to sources with diverse viewpoints. For example, Text 4 cites some unnamed officials’ comment about China’s influence over North Korea and its potential to contribute to the peace talks. Overall, the *SCMP* does not seem to take sides in relation to China’s role in the talks.

Text 4: Last night marked the entry of China into the multi-party Korean peninsula discussions. Officials said it could play a crucial role in nudging Pyongyang towards a softer line in setting a date and agenda for peace talks. (6 August 1997)

Compared with the 1997-2000 corpus, China’s global/regional power is a much more important theme in the 2015-2018 corpus. As Table 4 shows, only nine keywords relate generally to China’s global role and influence, whereas the remaining ones surround three aspects of China’s global/regional power, namely the Belt and Road Initiative, China’s organisation or participation in intergovernmental forums and its role in the North Korea crisis. Considering the lack of space, we will only examine how China is represented in relation to the Belt and Road Initiative, which is the most prominent topic. As Table 4 indicates, 12 out of the 38 keywords related to China’s global power concern the initiative, its participating countries or their leaders. It is a development initiative proposed by China’s President Xi Jinping in 2013, aiming to link Asia, Europe and Africa

by road and by sea, and hence integrate China better into the globe and boost trade and economic growth.

Table 4: Keywords related to China's global/regional power in the 2015-2018 corpus

The Belt and Road Initiative	trade, economic, belt, infrastructure, russia, projects, nepal, duterte, asia, philippines, manila, investment
Intergovernmental forums	cooperation, trade, summit, economic, congress, asia, ties, asian, asean, pacific, forum, joint
Role in the North Korea crisis	korea, north, korean, nuclear, pyongyang, kim, seoul
General	talks, relations, meeting, nations, leaders, global, leadership, bilateral, power

We first conducted a concordance analysis of the concgrams ‘Belt/Road/China’ and ‘Belt/Road/Beijing’. We will start by looking at how the aim of the initiative is represented, which not only indicates the perception of what Beijing seeks to do through the initiative, but also attitude towards Beijing. While the initiative is often referred to relatively neutrally as a trade and infrastructure project, attitudinal representations can be found. Table 5 indicates that the representation of the aim is predominantly positive. In terms of the journalistic voice, the initiative is represented most frequently as a platform for China to strengthen ties or connections with other countries (11 instances). The newspaper also often represents the voice of China (i.e., Chinese leaders, officials and scholars) and that of the West (i.e., Western leaders), with the former more often referred to. It gives voice to China eight times, which is always positive. The initiative is most often positively described as a platform for cooperation. This can be seen in Text 5, where a Chinese scholar is quoted to highlight the nature of the initiative as “a platform for regional economic cooperation” rather than “a tool of geopolitical competition”. Apart from a platform for cooperation, there are similar proportions of instances that positively evaluate the initiative as enabling China to be better connected with other countries and to boost trade. In contrast with the above representations, when Western politicians’ comments are cited (3 times), the initiative is always represented as a tool for China to expand global and geopolitical influence. However, the ratio of comments from Western sources is minimal, compared with that of the 1997-2000 corpus,

and interestingly, Western politicians' negative comments on the initiative are typically put in scare quotes in the 2015-2018 corpus (cf. the analysis of Text 3).

Table 5: Aims of the Belt and Road Initiative

	Source		
	Reporter	China	The West
To strengthen ties/connections with other countries	11	2	0
To boost trade	2	2	0
To serve as a platform for cooperation	0	3	0
To provide development momentum for participating countries	0	1	0
To expand global or geopolitical influence	2	0	3

Text 5: “China doesn't want the belt and road strategy to be seen as a tool of geopolitical competition, but a platform for regional economic cooperation. China does not rule out possible cooperation with countries with shared interests there,” he said. (3 July 2017)

Another key aspect of the representation of the initiative is the power of China. China is positively constructed as a rising superpower through the foregrounding of its economic power and considerable contributions to the initiative. Nine out of the 61 instances of “Belt/Road/China” draw attention to the substantial amount of China's investments in the initiative, either by referring to the exact amount or using terms e.g., “huge sums” and “multibillion-dollar”, which points to China's economic power. On the other hand, the positive representation of China's power can also be realised by the emphasis on its global ambitions through the initiative. A glimpse of the co-occurring words of “belt/road” shows that the concgram often co-occurs with words which highlight the large scale of the initiative, including “ambitious”, “massive”, “big”, “sprawling” and “vast”.

Comparing the representation of China's global/regional power between the two periods, two notable differences can be found. The first difference lies in the scale of power. China is

represented as having regional power over North Korea in the 1997-2000 corpus, and as a global power with substantial economic strength and growing international influence in the 2015-2018 corpus. The two corpora are also different in journalistic stances. In the 1997-2000 corpus, the newspaper reports China's influence over North Korea in a rather objective manner. In sharp contrast, the 2015-2018 corpus positively frames China as a responsible superpower which makes every effort to connect itself with other countries and contribute to the world economy. Nonetheless, the positive representation is mixed with a small proportion of negative representation concerning China's geopolitical ambitions, typically by quoting Western politicians, reflecting the *SCMP*'s ambivalent stance.

5. Conclusion

In this final section, we will start by summarising our corpus analysis results and provide a contextual explanation of the changing representation of China over the past two decades. Our study first categorised the top 200 keywords of each of the corpora and found a noticeable change of focal points from local politics, especially human rights issues, in the 1997-2000 corpus to global affairs in the 2015-2018 corpus. We then narrowed down our focus to two major thematic categories, namely human rights and global/regional power, and conducted an in-depth analysis of the keywords in the two categories. The findings revealed that the representation of China in the *SCMP* has diachronically shifted from very negative to ambivalent, demonstrating increasing alignment with Beijing. This is particularly the case in the representation of China's human rights records. In the 1997-2000 corpus, the foregrounding of China's human rights abuses suggests the framing of China as an authoritarian state that does not tolerate dissenting voices. In contrast, in the 2015-2018 corpus, the newspaper minimises its coverage of human rights issues and avoids representing the Xinjiang conflict from the perspective of human rights, but that of terrorism. Concerning China's global/regional power, in the 1997-2000 corpus, China is only represented as having regional power over North Korea in a rather objective manner, whereas in the 2015-2018 corpus, China is positively framed as a rising global superpower that does its utmost to cooperate and connect itself with other countries, and to a lesser extent, as a potential threat from a Western perspective.

The changing representation of China in the *SCMP* reflects the newspaper's changing stance as well as coping strategies in relation to the transforming social context in China and the

complicated relationship between Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland. In terms of its stance, our findings suggest that the *SCMP* has to a certain extent deviated from its original pro-Western stance, probably owing to the two ownership changes since the 1990s. Understanding the findings from the well-known ingroup-outgroup or “us” and “them” framework (van Dijk 1993, 1995), the utterly negative representation of China in the 1997-2000 corpus clearly shows that the newspaper embraced Western political ideologies and treated China as an outgroup (i.e., “them”). In the 2015-2018 corpus, however, the ambivalent representation indicates that China is represented as an outgroup to a much lesser extent. However, despite the newspaper’s increasing alignment with Beijing, it seems inaccurate to say that it adopts an overall pro-Beijing stance, as some scholars suggest (e.g., Lai 2007). While economic topics are reported positively, some politically oriented topics are still reported from a critical, rather than pro-Beijing standpoint.

The ambivalent stance in the 2015-2018 corpus can be attributed to the economic convergence and socio-political differences between Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland. Economically, it is a rather incontrovertible fact that China has much better integrated into the global community and witnessed a surge in economic power and global influence, particularly after joining the World Trade Organization in 2001. This transformation is therefore a reason why the *SCMP* (and Western media) has given more extensive coverage to China’s global affairs and frames China as a rising global superpower. For Hong Kong in particular, with growing economic integration with and dependence on the Chinese mainland since the sovereignty transfer, its economy has directly benefited from China’s surging economic power and global projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative, which explains why these aspects are represented quite positively in the 2015-2018 corpus. However, the positivity is restrained in the sense that there is no explicit praise for the Chinese government. To compare our findings with those of Zhang and Wu’s (2017) study on the representation of the Belt and Road Initiative in *China Daily* and the *Financial Times*, the representation in the *SCMP* seems somewhere in-between the very positive representation of China in the Chinese newspaper (as a peace-loving country, an international co-operator, and a responsible global power) and the ambivalent representation in the UK newspaper (positive in terms of its influential global role, but negative in terms of its authoritarian regime, and military and geopolitical aggressiveness).

The ambivalent representation in the 2015-2018 corpus is also due to the socio-political differences between Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland. Despite the rapid assimilation of Hong

Kong into China, the political-ideological gap between Hong Kong and the mainland remains. Our findings suggest that the *SCMP* still adopts a Western stance on some human rights issues, which reflects the journalistic resistance to political power (e.g., Lee 2018) and that “a significant degree of press freedom is maintained in Hong Kong” (Lee 2015, 141). However, that does not mean that the newspaper’s stance remains unchanged, or that reporters can express their critical attitudes explicitly. Rather, the ambivalent stance and the movement towards “us” is reflected in the newspaper’s *selectivity* or *framing* of events, and various strategies have been developed to cope with political constraints. First, the minimised ratio of human rights reports reflects its “centrist” position, which refers to the avoidance of provoking the central government by refraining from reporting sensitive issues (Fung 2007). Second, in terms of the expression of criticism, the reports reflect an “intensified objectivity” (Lee 2015), for example, by using more factual narrative forms, and resorting to “external voices”, rather than directly expressing the reporters’ own attitudes. Overall, the reports reflect a distinct type of “borderline discourse” (Krzyżanowski and Ledin, 2017), where criticism is mitigated and mixed with legitimization. These changes could also be attributed to China’s endeavour of projecting a positive but trustworthy international image through *SCMP* (Barboza 2015).

Situated in the unique context of Hong Kong, the findings shed new light on van Dijk’s (1993, 1995) framework of “us” and “them”. Firstly, “us” and “them” may be a continuum rather than a dichotomy, as demonstrated through the movement towards “us” (but not completely “us”) in the *SCMP* reports. Secondly, “us”, “them”, and the in-between status are multidimensional and can co-exist in one newspaper. A newspaper may consider the Chinese mainland as “us” in the economic sphere, as “them” in the political sphere, and as somewhere in-between in other areas. Considering “us” and “them” as a multidimensional continuum provides new opportunities for CDS researchers to capture the complexity of ideological stances and discursive shifts (cf. Krzyżanowski, 2020).

To conclude, our corpus analysis showed that the representation of China in the *SCMP* has changed from very negative representations focusing on human right problems right after the handover to more positive, though ambivalent, representations centring upon China’s global and economic power in recent years. As one of the first attempts to investigate the diachronic changes in the press coverage of China in Hong Kong media from a corpus-based CDS perspective, the study has provided solid linguistic evidence on how the representation of China in the *SCMP* has

changed over the past two decades and explained how the changes relate to the socio-political contexts in Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland. It contributes an empirical case study to the underexplored area of the representation of China in the Hong Kong press, with relation to the evolving relationship between Hong Kong as a special administrative region of China and the nation, and the common perception that Hong Kong media have become pro-Beijing since the handover. Theoretically, the study provides further understandings about van Dijk's (1993) "us" and "them" framework and the complexity of discursive shifts (Krzyżanowski, 2020). Despite the contributions, the limited space of this research has precluded us from exploring other themes that deserve scholarly attention (e.g., international disputes). Meanwhile, it is worth researching how the representation of China has changed in other newspapers, in particular, Chinese-language ones, which have a much wider reader base, so as to give a more comprehensive picture of how the perception of China has changed in the Hong Kong mediascape.

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ⁱ ‘sar’ is the abbreviation of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China.

ⁱⁱ We did not include the category of domestic politics for a further analysis, although the number of keywords in this category in the 1997-2000 corpus far outnumbers that in the 2015-2017 corpus. The reason is that many keywords in this category are names of national leaders and officials, which is largely due to the change in state leadership.

ⁱⁱⁱ Although human rights are fundamentally a domestic political issue, we single it out for the sake of this research. The rationale is that as will be clear from the analysis, China’s human rights record is often represented as a cause for diplomatic tension with Western countries in the 1997-2000 corpus, so it is a domestic political issue with global implications.

^{iv} The four parties included North Korea, South Korea, the US and China.