Alignment and Antagonism in Flux: A Diachronic Sentiment Analysis of Attitudes towards the Chinese Mainland in the Hong Kong Press

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Abstract : Despite the extensive discussions about Hong Kong's sentiments towards the Chinese Mainland since the sovereignty transfer in 1997, there has been no large-scale empirical analysis of the changing attitudes in the mainstream media, which both reflect and shape sentiments in the society. To address this gap, the present study uses an optimised semantic-based automatic sentiment analysis method to examine a corpus of news about China from 1997 to 2020 in three main Chinese-language newspapers in Hong Kong, namely Apple Daily, Ming Pao, and Oriental Daily News. The analysis shows that although the Hong Kong press had a positive emotional tone toward China in general, the overall trend of sentiment was becoming increasingly negative. Meanwhile, the alignment and antagonism toward China have both increased, providing empirical evidence of attitudinal polarisation in the Hong Kong society. Specifically, Apple Daily's depictions of China have become increasingly negative, though with some positive turns before 2008, whilst Oriental Daily News has consistently expressed more favourable sentiments. Ming Pao maintained an impartial stance toward China through an increased but balanced representation of positive and negative sentiments, with its subjectivity and sentiment intensity growing to an industry-standard level. The results provide new insights into the complexity of sentiments towards China in the Hong Kong press and media attitudes in general in terms of the "us" and "them" positioning by explicating the cross-newspaper and cross-period variations using an enhanced sentiment analysis method which incorporates sentiment-oriented and semantic role analysis techniques.