

China/Chinese English: a promising or problematic variety? Perspectives from published research papers

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Abstract

Purpose – China/Chinese English (CE) has been a well-studied variety of English for over 40 years. However, there are still different opinions as to whether the terminology is promising or problematic. There are discussions on which term to name the variety: China English or Chinese English.

Design/methodology/approach – To investigate these questions, 143 published papers with more than 10 citations on CE have been reviewed.

Findings – It is found that 55% of these works preferred to name the variety as China English while 21% preferred Chinese English and 18% used both terms. Further analysis revealed that 82% of these papers demonstrated a positive attitude toward CE while only 10% were neutral and 8% negative.

Research limitations/implications – Not much updated relevant literature is reviewed since one of the criteria of the data selection is that the works must have been cited 10+ times (as a feature of the validity of the academic work), which excluded most papers published in recent years.

Practical implications – The pedagogical implications of this article are that CE, and other varieties of English should be introduced to English teaching in China to improve attitudes to the use of such terminology and possibly have an impact on English learning efficiency.

Social implications – This study will help the further development of China/Chinese English as a variety of English in the background of world Englishes.

Originality/value – This is the first study in China/Chinese English concerning the choice of the name of this variety based on the well-accepted papers published.

Keywords China English, Chinese English, Attitudes, Pedagogical implication

Paper type Research paper

R: What about the inside of your dormitory?

U3: Inside? They are different. In my dormitory, I think it's a little mess. Lots of polluted air. And we ...
we're a little lazy. We don't want to clean our room. I ... we feed a cat.

R: Oh, really?

U3: Yes, It's very dirty I think. It's not very clean. So my ... my dormitory isn't very clean. So many waste papers, but we have to make it clean every week. Once a week.

R: How many people are there in the dormitory?

U3: A big room has three. A house has three rooms. In the big house, there are ten people. In the small room there are three. In my room there are four ...

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The above excerpt is from the monograph *Chinese English: Features and implications* by Zhichang (Marc) Xu (2010, p. 112). It illustrates what China/Chinese English (CE) is. This dialogue was between Xu and a university student. The dialogue may be a little confusing to readers from developed countries since they may not realise that sharing a room by university students in China “is the conventional knowledge structure (schema)” (Xu, 2010, p. 112). This is why the student used *I* and *we* interchangeably here. Even the word choice can be quite CE, for example, when the student said *I . . . we feed a cat*, what is actually meant is that they adopted a stray cat. Keeping a cat in a university dormitory was against Xu’s schema, hence the response *oh really*. However, all these are easy to be understood by a CE user since these “schemata are culturally specific and are therefore unique to people from a certain cultural background” (Xu, 2010, p. 112).

Introduction

Ever since the introduction of China English by Ge (1980), it has drawn close attention from scholars and researchers alike (e.g. Ai, 2011; Fang, 2017; He, 2020; Hu, 2016; Hu & Jiang, 2011; Xu, 2017, 2023; Xu, He, & Deterding, 2017). As an indication of the interest in CE, *English Today* published six special featured short articles in 2023 on the use of the term Chinese English. It is believed that CE “will truly be in the forefront of the development of” English (Deterding, 2006, p. 195) and that English learners and teachers in China “seem to be shifting toward accepting ‘China English’ as a legitimate, indigenized variety” (He & Li, 2009, p. 86). It is even “likely to become a ‘future power’, and a major expanding circle English in the years to come” (Xu, 2010, p. 205) and is considered to be “the fastest growing variety of English in the world” (Hansen Edwards, 2017, p. 38). However, skeptical voices concerning CE can also be heard. For example, Wang (2015, p. 71) argued that CE “has not yet been widely recognized by its speakers” as a developing variety and most of its linguistic features “have received low acceptability”. Yang and Zhang (2015, p. 39) claimed that the concept of CE “might still remain esoteric, and CE is facing a dilemma between lack of distinctness from SEs [standard Englishes] and stigmatization of its potentially most characteristic features”. Bearing in mind the disagreement of CE as a developing variety, this article, therefore, attempts to investigate whether CE is a promising or problematic variety of English based on a review of 143 published research papers on CE. These works were selected in Google Scholar by searching “China English or Chinese English: citations (10+)” from 16 to 18 January 2023. While reviewing these 143 works, the author searched them with the following four codes: “China English”, “Chinese English”, “attitude” and “pedagogical/teaching”, and then categorised and analysed them accordingly.

It might be a limitation of this article because when the author reached Page 99 of Google Scholar, the following words appeared: *Server Error. We’re sorry but it appears that there has been an internal server error while processing your request. Our engineers have been notified and are working to resolve the issue. Please try again later.* The author tried 10+ times in the following three days; these words appeared every time when it came to Page 99. So in all, 143 works on CE with 10+ citations were selected from the 1,960 items viewed (i.e. 20 items on each Google Scholar online page). Another limitation of this article is that not much updated relevant literature is reviewed since one of the criteria of the data selection is that the works must have been cited 10+ times (as a feature of the validity of the academic work), which excluded most papers published in recent years.

Name of the variety: China English or Chinese English

China English or Chinese English? In the literature on World Englishes to date, both terms are used, with the former being far more widely adopted. Such a terminological variation is not conducive to the healthy development of scholarly inquiries into critical sociolinguistic issues concerning the use of English in the country with the largest number of non-native learners and users in the world (Li, 2024).

The quotation above from Professor Li indicates that it is of great significance to choose a better term to name the variety of English in China for its future development. This is similar to Confucius' comments more than 2,000 years ago: "Without a legitimate name, without authority to the words; without authority to the words, without anything being accomplished" (Míng bù zhèng, zé yán bù shùn; yán bù shùn, zé shì bù chéng. 名不正, 则言不顺; 言不顺, 则事不成!). Figure 1 below shows the names used in the 143 works which use the term CE.

As shown in Figure 1, the last three names referring to the variety of English in China (i.e. Chinese Englishes, Chinglish and Mandarin-accented English) were used only in five works or less. Chinglish was out of favor after 2012 since "there is a stigma associated with using Chinglish as a nonstandard form of English" (Park, 2012, p. 139). In addition, "Chinglish has little trace of an ontological status in China that would indicate its sedimentation and standardization into a distinct variety" (Henry, 2010, p. 685). By way of contrast, English is used in different ways in different parts of the United Kingdom or the United States. Researchers never refer to the variety of English in these two countries as British Englishes or American Englishes. Therefore, we can ignore these three names.

Between the two names in wider use now, China English has been utilised by far more authors in even more studies (55.2%, $n = 79$) than those (21.0%, $n = 30$) using Chinese English. It is interesting to note that 26 (18.2%) out of these 143 works used both China English and Chinese English when referring to CE. It is argued that Chinese scholars distinguished China English as a "notion which is widely accepted, positively valued, and associated with a positive local cultural orientation" and Chinglish (or Chinese English) as an "interlanguage, often with pejorative connotations" (Schneider, 2014, p. 19). There are also debates about how English might be perceived in negative ways in Southeast Asia (e.g. Deterding, 2007; He & Cirocki, 2025). For example, both Malaysia and Singapore have identifiable varieties of English, but there is a weak and a strong variety of English. The weak variety is used among the locals themselves (e.g. when a Chinese Malaysian speaks to an Indian Malaysian). The weak version is perceived as inferior, even though it serves the purpose of intercultural communication very well. The strong version is used by professionals when talking with each other or for studying overseas (He & Cirocki, 2025; Azmi, 2013). If time can tell us which term should be chosen, China English is preferred to Chinese English for now. Li (2019, p. 3) argued that "in the last 20 years, the term 'China English' has been advanced as the most appropriate name for the variety of English that better expresses Chinese sociocultural realities and distinguishes the variety from the pejoratively perceived 'Chinese English' or 'Chinglish'". Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that there are arguments for the restoration of Chinese English to refer to the developing variety of English in China (e.g. Li, 2024; Li, 2019; Xu, 2017, 2023). The restoration of Chinese English as the preferred term can also be proved by the fact that all the 30 works using Chinese English, as indicated in Figure 1, were

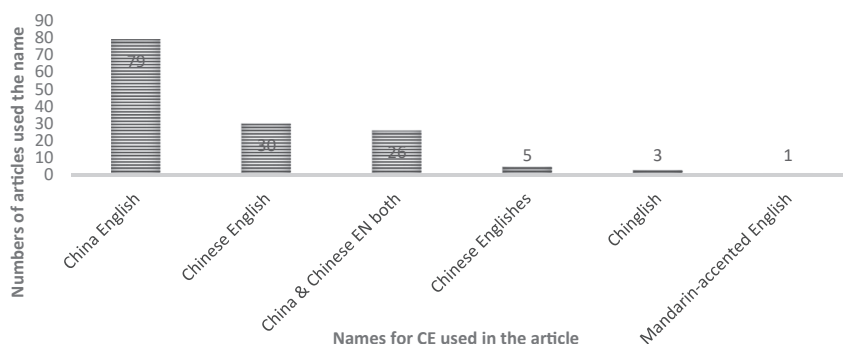


Figure 1. The names referring to the variety of English in China. Figure by the author

published after 2008, while 30 of the 79 works using China English were published before 2008.

In detail, the arguments in favour of China English include the following: “since the term Chinese English has tended to be held in contempt by both native speakers and most Chinese. . . the term China English has become self-justifying as a label for an English with Chinese characteristics and culture – to be regarded as a member of the family of English in its own right” (Wei & Fei, 2003, p. 44). Moreover, Gil (2005, p. 118) argues that “the process of indigenization has been, and still is, occurring in China. China’s interaction with English has resulted in a distinctly Chinese variety of English known as China English”. He and Li (2009, p. 83) also believe that “being a performance variety of English, ‘China English’ (with a noun as premodifier) is more suitable than ‘Chinese English’ (with an adjective as pre-modifier)” for the name of the variety of English in China. In addition, it is explained that “the widespread use of a name such as ‘China English’ rather than ‘English in China’ to refer to an indigenous variety marks a key moment in its development as it matures with an independent status and shifts from Phase 3 (Nativization) to Phase 4 (Endonormative Stabilization)” of Schneider’s five-phase Dynamic Model for the Postcolonial Englishes evolution (Xu & Deterding, 2017, p. 118).

However, notwithstanding the above arguments, the voices supporting the choice of Chinese English have been increasingly heard in recent years. For example, Chinese English rather than China English is used to “mean the local features of China because most of the popular varieties in the world use the nationality before English, for example, British English, American English and Australian English” (Chen, 2015, pp. 2–3). Wang (2017) also believes that it is questionable to use China English for the variety of English in China, and instead, he believes that Chinese English should be used. Xu (2017, p. 241) further summarised that “people start disassociating Chinese English with Chinglish . . . that Chinese English should be used as a term to refer to the Chinese variety of English on a par with other members of World Englishes”.

Attitudes towards the variety of English in China

Figure 2 below demonstrates that positive attitudes towards CE as a developing variety have been expressed in 117 (82%) of the 143 studies reviewed, while only 15 (10%) and 11 (8%) studies, respectively, were neutral or negative towards this variety.

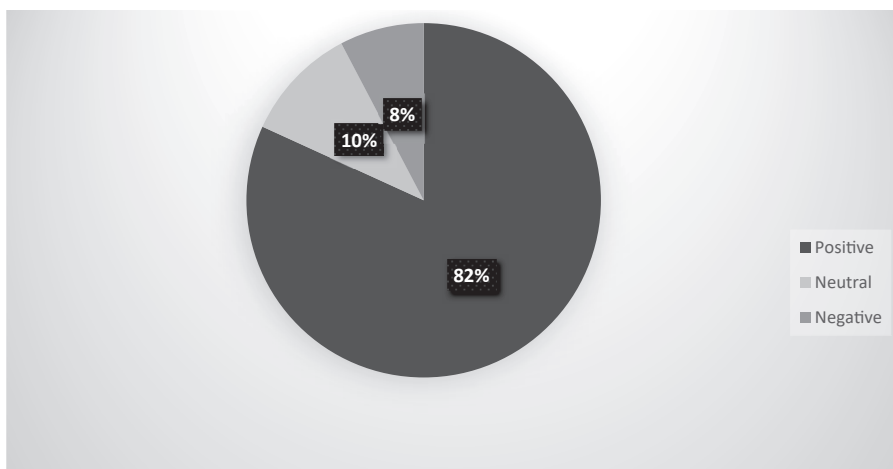


Figure 2. Attitudes towards the variety of English in China. Figure by the author

The positive voices towards CE include the following. More than 20 years ago, Zhang (1997, p. 41) believed that “learners of English in China genuinely expect to learn Standard English, that China English is acceptable, appropriate.” Jin (2005) reported that Chinese EFL learners were positive towards CE, which consequently led to their preference for a local instead of a native speaker (NS) teacher of English. Therefore, CE should be regarded as “an autonomous variety not to be confused with ‘Chinglish’” (Li, 2007, p. 12). He (2007) also argued that the final destination of CE is not a native or near-native variety of English but a full-blown performance variety. China English was even considered as a “putative” and “stable variety” (Lee & Chen, 2009, p. 161). He and Zhang (2010) proved that the NS-based pedagogic norms and models were mostly desirable in China’s tertiary ELT, which may be supplemented with the successfully codified and well-promoted features of CE. In addition, it was argued that people traditionally regarded as NNSs of English were often NSs of the new varieties of English like CE and Japanese English (Sharifian, 2013). China/Chinese English is still at a developing stage but will become more important in the future in China’s professional world (He, 2017). Xu (2020, p. 278) concluded that “with increasing recognition and acceptance of Chinese English, this rising variety shall become one of the major varieties of English in the expanding circle and a powerful member in world Englishes”.

The neutral arguments towards CE are exemplified here as well. Gil and Adamson (2011) believe that it is an overstatement to claim that English is already indigenised in China since McArthur (2006) believed that the indigenisation of CE might still be in progress. This process may be lengthy due to the “deep-rooted native ideology in China regards English as a learned language” (Fang, 2018, p. 27).

Nonetheless, negative attitudes toward CE should also attract our attention. For example, Jiang (2010) argued that it was still possible that a Japanese or a Chinese would prefer to speak good British English or American English instead of good Japanese English or CE. Moreover, Mahboob and Liang (2014) showed that CE features failed to index CE as a new variety and recommended that future studies should not make generalisations. It has also been claimed that participants in a study about their perceptions of CE were unwilling to regard CE as a legitimate new variety of English (Wang & Gao, 2015). It is argued that more studies towards people’s attitudes on CE are needed to judge the recognition of CE by Chinese people. Therefore, CE should be considered as a *performance variety* at this stage since it may be too early to consider it as a well-established variety of English at present (Fang, 2017). Similarly, although the existence of some new varieties is recognised, which do not include the Expanding Circle Englishes, and CE is one of this Circle (Sadeghpour & Sharifian, 2017).

At the end of this section, it should be pointed out that researchers still hold different opinions on the status of CE. Some of them consider it as an institutionalised variety (e.g. Tian, 2013), while most others regard it as a performance variety (e.g. Fang, 2017; He & Li, 2009).

Pedagogic implications of the variety of English in China

On 21 September 2017, China announced that it aims to build 42 first-tier universities and 465 first-tier disciplines in the world by the year 2030 and that China will be a nation strong in higher education (MoE, 2017). To achieve these goals, China/Chinese English needs to be well-recognised since it is believed that in the background of English as the international language, the practical need for English promotion in China cannot be ignored, especially in China’s higher education sector (He, 2018, 2020). In so doing, it should be emphasised: (1) that we need to introduce different varieties of English rather than merely British English and American English to learners in China since the language no longer solely belongs to its NSs heritage but it now has a wide NNSs base; (2) that the objective existence of CE should be acknowledged so as to enhance students’ confidence to learn and use it; (3) that the acknowledgement of the objective existence of CE will empower local NNS English teachers’ legal position as EFL teachers and hence to improve their confidence and efficiency in

teaching and (4) that universities should bear in mind today's multilingual realities while making their medium of instruction policies and designing their teaching curriculum.

In addition to the above summary of pedagogic implications of the variety of English in China, other voices in this aspect can also be heard and most of them support this summary. For example, China is employing lots of local English teachers. These bilingual local teachers can share their EFL learning experience, their awareness of Chinese students' learning habits and local testing systems, and their knowledge of the well-accepted CE linguistic features with EFL learners in China, which NS teachers do not have (He & Miller, 2011). Hu and Jiang (2011) also argue that (1) students from the Outer and Expanding Circles no longer learn English mainly for communication with Inner Circle people, (2) an NS-based model is no longer the only appropriate ELT model for all students and (3) not all NSs can teach English in the Outer and Expanding circles. There are studies (e.g. Yang & Liu, 2016) showing that a lot of Chinese students respect NNSs' English and hope to learn more about different varieties of English since they learn English not only for academic success but mainly for communicative needs given that NNSs have outnumbered NSs by a large margin. Besides, WE-informed teaching materials are believed to be necessary for advanced English learners in addition to NS-based materials (Si, 2019). He and Li (2023, p. 162) concluded that the NS-based pedagogic model can be enriched with well-codified features of CE so as to improve ELT in China.

We must keep in mind, though, that there are also other voices claiming that the development of CE will not have much influence on ELT in China in the near future, especially for scholars in China who need to publish internationally, since no matter how rapid the development of CE, the young scholars today will still have to face the pressure to publish in standardised Englishes (Flowerdew, 2015).

Conclusions

To conclude this article, we can argue that CE is a promising variety in the context of world Englishes. Moreover, we see that although China English has been used by far more studies and researchers than Chinese English since 1980s, "the time is ripe for Chinese English to be adopted as the preferred term, or banner, for characterizing the variety of English of a country which has the largest number of users and learners of English in the world" (Li, 2023, p. 190) since "to bring home the argument that English is now a language of the Chinese people, there is nothing simpler to stop using China English and start embracing Chinese English" (Li, 2023, p. 193). Furthermore, if we take a metaphysical stand, we can even argue that CE does not exist as a *variety*. Instead, a *translanguaging practice* should be preferred (Xu, personal communication). Against these backgrounds, ELT in China's higher education is suggested to pay due attention to the relevant implications brought along with the development of CE in the context of world Englishes, which echoes Kirkpatrick's (2007, p. 151) prediction made 17 years ago but still seemingly sensible nowadays that CE "is soon likely to become the most commonly spoken variety of English in Asia". In the development of CE, new technologies can play a positive role. For example, the popularity of TikTok may increase the use of CE since many Chinese people with some English proficiency will use their CE on TikTok.

Future research is needed to further investigate the following aspects of CE, among others: (1) the literature written in CE and the reference works on CE (e.g. a CE dictionary) since these two criteria "provide strong evidence for an established variety" against which CE still do not meet (Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2002, p. 270); (2) the reflection of CE speakers' cultural conceptualisation since "it is the cultural underpinnings that create the greatest challenge for intervarietal communication" (Proshina, 2014, p. 6); (3) "the perceived status of and attitudes towards CE" so as to "ensure that those surveyed in such research represent a representative cross section of the population and users of CE" (Kirkpatrick, 2007, p. 278) and (4) more corpus-based investigations to codify CE linguistic features because "the acceptance of China English depends largely on the well-codification and promotion of its features at various linguistic levels" (He, 2020, p. 147).

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