

# English Spelling Variation and Change in Newspapers in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan

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Which English spelling system is preferred in the Chinese news media: British or American?

## 1. Introduction

English spelling has a reputation for being notoriously difficult to learn, whether for native speakers of English or for those who learn it as an additional language. An additional problem for EFL learners is that there are two somewhat different systems to choose between: the British system and the American one. As Bondesen (2004: 4) points out, ‘although the two spelling systems are much more similar than they are different, there is variation between them.’ (For surveys of some of the main differences see Trudgill & Hannah, 1994; Carney, 1997.) The spelling discrepancies between the two varieties are systematic, and originate in large part from American spelling reform as a symbol of ‘linguistic independence’ (Knowles, 1997), and from the work of early American linguists such as Benjamin Franklin and Noah Webster. The aim of this article is to investigate the spelling preferences of English users in a few regions outside Britain and the United States, and to establish whether any clear patterns of regional variation are discernible.

In the Greater China context, many English varieties have been recognized, including Chinese English (or even Chinese Englishes, e.g. Bolton, 2003), Hong Kong English (e.g. Bolton, 2000, 2002), and Taiwan English (e.g. Jian, 2004). However, the actual Englishes used in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan have their own regional characteristics since social, cultural,



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economic and political factors all play a part in shaping English forms. Wang (1991) notes that both the spoken English and the written English in China are a linguistic mixture and products of the two standard English varieties, which will be referred to in the present article as Standard British English (BrE) and Standard American English (AmE) respectively.

Over the years, the linguistic features of the different varieties in Greater China have been described in great detail, focusing on such aspects as pronunciation, lexis, sentence structure and discourse patterns. However, the subject of English spelling has thus far been inadequately explored. Which spelling system does each of these varieties favor? The BrE model or the AmE model? Few empirical studies have been conducted in this field, and no statistical evidence has been offered to disclose English spelling practices and preferences in these regions. To our knowledge, there have hardly been any studies of international variation in English spelling preferences since the pioneering work of Bondesen (2004), who investigated regional variation in English spelling in Canadian newspapers. Bondesen found that British spelling conventions were used, overall, at a higher rate than the American ones by journalists from seven Canadian regions in the year 2000. The present study will investigate whether similar or different trends are observed in the Greater China context.

Almost two decades ago, Fishman posed the following question: '[a]re there forces or processes which transcend the English mother-tongue world itself and which also contribute to the continued spread and entrenchment of English in non-English mother-tongue countries?' (Bolton, 2003: 15). Fishman identified multinational corporations and elementary and tertiary-level education as key contributors to this process. In addition to these, the present study will propose that the news media are also playing an important part in precipitating the continued spread of English (or rather a prestigious English variety) and its underlying ideologies.

In order to understand recent developments in English orthography preferences in Greater China<sup>1</sup> in the domain of the media, this article reports on a comparative study of the English spelling practices of *China Daily* (Mainland China), *The Standard* (Hong Kong) and *Taipei Times* (Taiwan) from 2000 to 2010, and reveals regional orthography variations and diachronic changes in their spelling preferences. The specific research tasks are:

1. To examine whether there was any systematic regional variation in actual English spelling practices among the three newspapers during the period 2000–2010;
2. To reveal whether there were any diachronic changes in the orthographical preferences of each of the three newspapers, and to identify any observable changes or trends over this period;
3. To determine when any spelling preference shifts occurred, and to consider possible causes and consequences.

## 2. Method

Three popular and representative English-written newspapers were used as newspaper sources for this research. *China Daily*, established in 1981 and published Monday through Sunday, has the widest print circulation of any English-language newspaper in China. *The Standard*, distributed Monday through Friday, boasts that it is 'Hong Kong's biggest circulation English daily newspaper.' It is now a powerful, influential medium in Hong Kong with a diverse audience and a broad reach since becoming a free newspaper in September 2007. *Taipei Times*, launched on June 15, 1999, assumes 'the mission of presenting a voice long absent in the Taiwanese media: an English-language journal of record for national and international readers, presented from a Taiwanese perspective.'

A small corpus was built for the research, consisting of 1080 passages from the abovementioned newspapers, written by local journalists. Three passages per month on average were chosen from each newspaper, and news articles of the first, the 15th and the last day of each month were selected regardless of topic, genre and style. Usually, the first passage in the online archive of every issue was chosen if it was written by a local journalist<sup>2</sup>. Accordingly, 36 passages were selected per newspaper per year, resulting in a total of 1080 passages over the 10 years from the 3 newspapers.

The next step was to identify representative spelling categories in the corpus and obtain occurrence frequencies for both BrE and AmE spelling variants. Trudgill & Hannah (1994) list 16 major spelling differences between the two varieties<sup>3</sup>. This research draws upon this categorization. However, only 6 of these pairs (-our/-or, -ise/-ize, -ll/-l -re/-er, en/-in- and -mme/-m) occur in statistically significant numbers in the corpus. Accordingly, the article will focus exclusively on these pairs.

The corpus analysis software AntConc (Anthony, 2014) was used to obtain and calculate the data in this study. AntConc's Concordance tool was used to search for valid words for this research. For example, in order to establish how many words are ended with *-or* instead of *-our*, the 'Search Term' \*or was used. The asterisk means that there may be letters before *or*. The number of Concordance hits tells us how many eligible words are found under the condition, but some words needed to be eliminated because not all of them were valid words for this research (e.g. *or*, *for*, *doctor*, *director*, etc.) The process of retrieving words for other spelling categories was the same. The percentages of BrE spellings vs. AmE spellings of the six spelling pairs were then calculated, and the inter-paper spelling variations and intra-paper spelling changes were revealed by making year-by-year comparisons.

### 3. Results

Altogether, 2119 valid words were found in the corpus for the six differently spelled pairs. In the following two subsections, the spelling practices of the three newspapers will be described from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives.

#### 3.1 Regional variation in English spellings

The following six tables present the occurrence frequencies of each item in each of the six spelling pairs from 2000 to 2010. In each pair below, the first item is the British spelling form, while the second is the American form. Each set of data in the tables has two numbers: the one on the left refers to the occurrence frequency of the BrE spelling form in a given year, while the one on the right refers to that of the AmE form. To reveal regional variation, these sets of data need to be compared vertically year by year.

##### *-our vs. -or*

The examples containing *-our/-or* are *honour/honor*, *habour/habor*, *labour/labor* and *favourite/favorite*. BrE ends relevant words with *-our* while AmE simplifies it into *-or*. In total, 295 words ending with *-our/-or* are found in the corpus. The data in Table 1 indicate that the American form *-or* (55.93%, n = 165) was used at a higher rate than the British counterpart (44.07%, n = 130) over the 10 years in all three papers.

For this pair, striking regional spelling variation used to be observed among the three papers. All local Taiwanese journalists at the *Taipei Times*

Table 1: Analysis of *-our vs. -or*

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
<i>China Daily</i>	15/0	14/1	10/1	16/1	19/1	11/3	2/10	0/7	0/3	0/15
<i>The Standard</i>	10/0	7/1	6/0	5/1	13/5	1/5	1/4	0/5	0/10	0/4
<i>Taipei Times</i>	0/7	0/15	0/1	0/12	0/6	0/7	0/15	0/4	0/11	0/10

chose to spell the concerned words exclusively with the American *-or* throughout the whole decade. However, local journalists with *China Daily* and *The Standard* overwhelmingly chose to spell relevant words the British way before 2007 and 2006 respectively, but switched to the American form afterwards. In short, variation among the three newspapers for this pairing ceased to exist from 2008 onwards.

**-ise vs. -ize**

Words ending with the morphemes *-ise* (preferred in BrE) and *-ize* (preferred in AmE) are *socialise/socialize*, *publicise/publicize*, *modernise/modernize*, *industrialise/industrialize*, etc. *The Standard* was more likely to adopt *-ise* before 2005 while *China Daily* and *Taipei Times* were consistently inclined to use more *-ize* at the end of words, *Taipei Times* in particular. However, this striking inter-newspaper variation between *The Standard* and the other two existed only before 2005, from which year on the American spelling was universally adopted, as is shown in Table 2. Overall, *-ize* was used with an overwhelmingly higher frequency (90.04%, n = 705). Only 9.96% of the words (n = 78) had the British ending *-ise*, and most of them occurred in *The Standard*.

**-ll vs. -l**

For the spelling pair *-ll/-l*, the practices of Mainland China and Hong Kong were again similar. Before 2007 and 2008 respectively, *China Daily* and *The Standard* tended to use *-ll* more when words ending with *-l* are added suffixes *-ed*, *-ing*, *-er* or *-ment*. Accordingly, words such as ‘travel’ and ‘label’ were inflected into ‘travelled’ and ‘labelling’ following the British spelling convention. These two newspapers then both experienced a preference switch from BrE to AmE. By contrast, *Taipei Times* remained loyal to the American English model throughout the whole decade. Of all the occurrences (n = 242) for the three papers in Table 3, *-ll* accounts for 48.35% (n = 117) while *-l* 51.65% (n = 125).

**-re vs. -er**

Typical words with *-re* and *-er* are *centre/center*, *fibre/fiber*, *metre/meter* and *litre/liter*. Spelling variations among the three regions were also revealed for this pair. The BrE *-re* played a dominant role in *China Daily* and *The Standard* in the first few years of the decade. *The Standard* then began to use *-er* more after 2004, and *China Daily* used more *-er* from 2007. By contrast, *Taipei Times* persisted

Table 2: Analysis of -ise vs. -ize

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
<i>China Daily</i>	0/48	0/34	0/1	2/6	1/12	0/6	0/14	0/11	0/10	0/42
<i>The Standard</i>	18/0	19/0	16/0	12/0	9/20	0/30	0/13	0/20	0/18	0/16
<i>Taipei Times</i>	0/30	1/58	0/7	0/51	0/29	0/27	0/43	0/39	0/66	0/54

Table 3: Analysis of -ll vs. -l

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
<i>China Daily</i>	7/1	5/3	3/4	3/1	3/5	6/3	2/6	2/3	2/8	2/12
<i>The Standard</i>	15/0	15/1	10/0	10/0	5/1	5/3	3/2	2/2	4/6	0/2
<i>Taipei Times</i>	2/8	1/5	0/0	5/8	5/12	0/5	0/5	0/6	0/8	0/5

in the use of the American *-er*. Overall, *-er* frequency (53.71%, n = 152) was higher than that of *-re* (46.29%, n = 131) for the three papers during the whole decade (see Table 4).

#### *en-* vs. *in-*

The pair *en-/in-* occur in words like *enquiry/inquiry*, *ensure/insure*, etc. The spelling preferences of the three papers for *en-/in-* were also different, as can be seen in Table 5. From 2001 to 2010, *China Daily* used British *en-* with a higher frequency except for the first two years. In 2009 and 2010, the American spelling *in-* completely disappeared from *China Daily*.

By contrast, both *en-* and *in-* feature in *The Standard*, although the American spelling was somewhat preferred. Once again, the *Taipei Times* remained AmE-loyal and used more *in-* persistently over the decade. Overall, *-in* (64.91%, n = 222) was used at a higher rate than *-en* (35.09%, n = 120) in the three papers.

#### *-mme* vs. *-m*

Examples for this category include *programme/program*, *gramme/gram*, *kilogramme/kilogram*, etc. BrE spells these words with *-mme* while AmE uses a single *-m* at the end.

*China Daily* tended to prefer *-mme* before 2006, but *-m* afterwards. A similar pattern can be observed for *The Standard*, with 2005 being the year of its preference switch. After 2005, *-mme* completely died out, and the authority of the American convention *-m* was firmly established in the paper.

By contrast, Taiwanese journalists exclusively used *-m* at the end of related words. Not a single such word was spelled the British way in *Taipei Times* during the whole decade. Overall, the data in Table 6 also demonstrate the usage of the simpler *-m* (59.77%, n = 104) outnumbers that of *-mme* (40.23%, n = 70) in the three papers.

Overall, the spelling practices of *China Daily* and *The Standard* displayed similar trends over the decade, and both witnessed a preference shift from BrE spelling to AmE spelling around the years 2005-2007, broadly speaking. In contrast, *Taipei Times* adhered to the American spelling system throughout the period. Its spelling scenario has been much simpler and more consistent than that of the other two papers.

As for the overall variation in the usage of British and American conventions, the American ones were used at a higher rate of frequency over the decade for all the six pairs without any

**Table 4: Analysis of -re vs.-er**

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
<i>China Daily</i>	9/0	13/6	11/0	18/0	24/0	14/4	1/4	3/5	2/6	0/10
<i>The Standard</i>	7/0	5/0	13/1	8/0	3/4	0/5	0/10	0/6	0/7	0/20
<i>Taipei Times</i>	0/7	0/8	0/2	0/6	0/9	0/5	0/5	0/7	0/8	0/7

**Table 5: Analysis of en- vs. in-**

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
<i>China Daily</i>	6/42	9/11	2/1	8/2	3/3	4/3	3/2	4/2	6/0	6/0
<i>The Standard</i>	3/0	1/0	3/2	13/10	3/3	4/6	2/3	1/2	1/3	0/9
<i>Taipei Times</i>	9/11	6/10	1/3	6/18	7/26	7/25	0/0	2/8	0/8	0/9

Table 6: Analysis of -mme vs. -m

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
<i>China Daily</i>	22/3	2/4	6/1	3/0	18/0	1/5	0/9	0/3	3/5	0/8
<i>The Standard</i>	5/0	3/0	4/0	2/0	1/2	0/3	0/4	0/5	0/1	0/3
<i>Taipei Times</i>	0/2	0/2	0/1	0/7	0/3	0/6	0/13	0/1	0/4	0/9

exception, and this undoubtedly projects the dominant status of the AmE spelling system in these media despite the fact that the BrE conventions *-our*, *-ll*, *-re*, *-en*, *-mme* were all favored in both *China Daily* and *The Standard* in the first years of the decade.

### 3.2 Diachronic changes of English spelling preferences

Horizontally embedded in the data in each of the tables above are diachronic changes of English spelling preferences over the decade. These can be revealed when every year's percentages of BrE or AmE spellings are compared.

#### Spelling preference shifts in *China Daily*

Figure 1 shows the percentages of BrE spellings in *China Daily* from 2001 to 2010. Overall, with the exception of the *en-/in-* pair, whose usage tended towards BrE, there was a general shift from BrE to AmE spellings. Among four other pairs, three shifts occurred in the year 2007, and one in 2006. For the pair *-ise/-ize*, the paper's overall position remained relatively stable, following American usage throughout the period.

However, the general BrE-to-AmE spelling preference change trend in *China Daily* is characterized by more instability. Before truly following the American system, this newspaper oscillated between the two spelling systems, in particular in the first half of the decade. The *-ll/-l* pair is the most typical example for such a state of flux, BrE spelling often being around 50% per year before 2008, after which it ultimately stabilized with a clear preference for single *-l*. The example of *en-/in-* exhibits a similar degree of unpredictability. Contrasting with the other five lines, the *en-/in-* pair in *China Daily* displayed a distinctly non-mainstream direction. Such states of instability and unpredictability in spelling choices suggest that *China Daily* probably lacked clear editorial policies with regard to English spelling conventions.

#### Spelling preference shifts in *The Standard*

*The Standard* showed a clear pattern in its spelling preference shift. Spellings of the six pairs all gradually moved away from BrE towards AmE. Three preference shifts occurred in the year 2005, two in 2006, and one in 2008. By 2010, all six spelling pairs preferred AmE usage, with the BrE alternatives totally absent. Contrasting with the more chaotic patterns for *China Daily*, the tidy graph lines in Figure 2 are more gradual, smooth and predictable

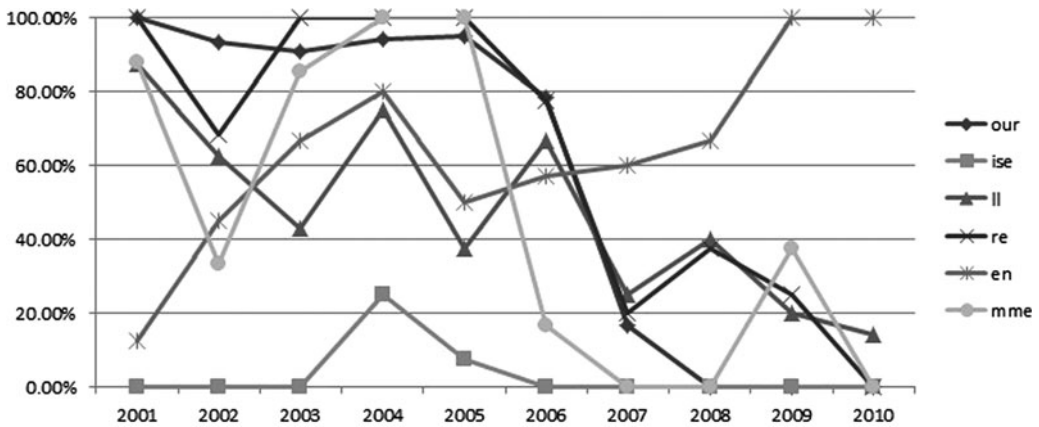


Figure 1. Frequencies of BrE Spellings in *China Daily* 2001–2010

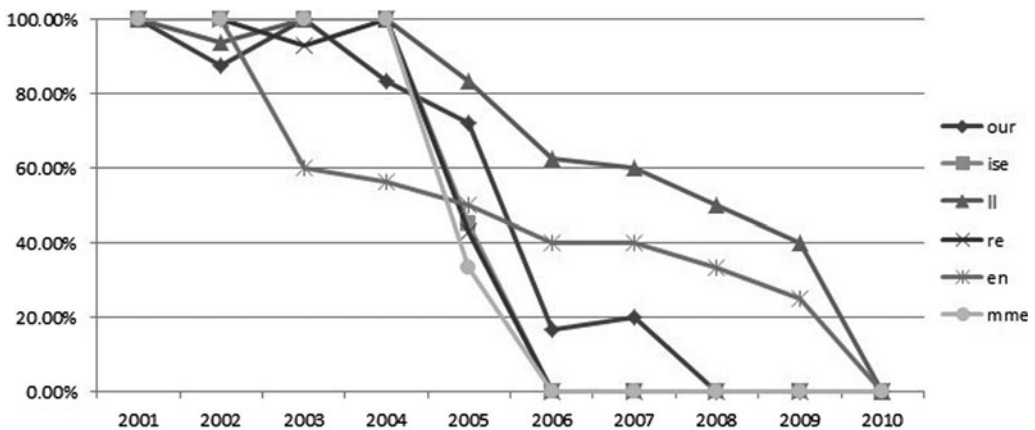


Figure 2. Frequencies of BrE spellings in *The Standard* 2001–2010

despite minor fluctuations, and clearly indicate a steady decrease in BrE spelling usage.

### Spelling preference shifts in *Taipei Times*

As shown in Figure 3, the spelling preferences of *Taipei Times* have remained firmly pro-American throughout the period of the study. For the four pairs of *-our/-or*, *-re/-er*, *-ise/-ize*, *-mme/-m*, the percentages of British spellings were consistently approaching 0% from 2001 to 2010; all words were spelled in accordance with the American spelling conventions except for one insignificant occurrence of *-ise* in 2002.

Though BrE spellings of the other two pairs (*-ll/-l* and *en/-in-*) did occur in *Taipei Times*, their frequencies never exceeded 50%, and even these spellings still moved towards a complete AmE usage by the end of the decade. Indeed, by 2009

no trace of BrE spellings could be found in *Taipei Times* anywhere in the corpus. It should be noted that no data were found in the corpus for the *-ll/-l* pair in 2003 or for the *en/-in-* pair in 2007 for *Taipei Times*, so their respective use frequencies in these two years have to be regarded as zero, but are better not compared due to the lack of data which might have resulted from the sampling. It is for this reason that the two lines in Figure 3 break at these two points on the timeline.

To sum up, English spellings of *China Daily* and *The Standard* have been noticeably Americanized over the decade. Though a few British spellings (such as *en-*) were still found in 2010 in *China Daily*, the trend towards American spellings is clear and inexorable. In contrast, *Taipei Times* experienced fewer spelling changes from 2001 to 2010 because it persisted in using more AmE spellings throughout the decade, although even here it



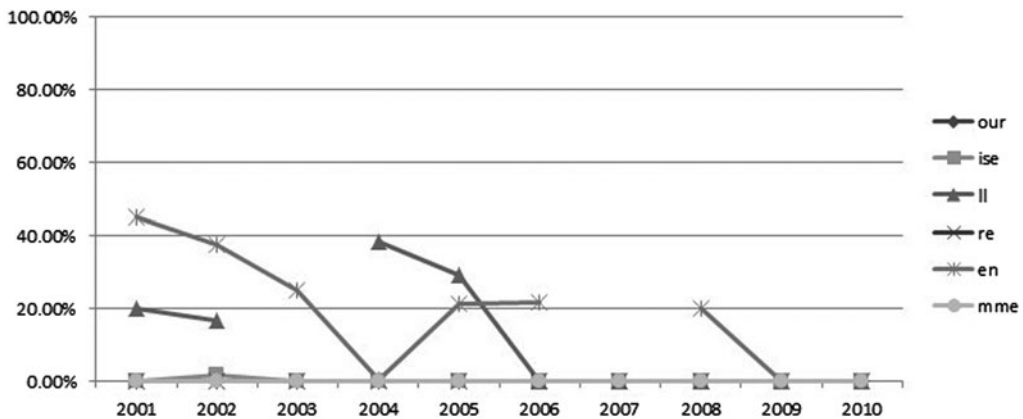


Figure 3. Frequencies of BrE spellings in *Taipei Times* 2001–2010

is the case that English spellings in this paper have become even more Americanized during the period.

### 3.3 Discussion

The regional variations and changes identified in the current research might have different causes and consequences. English teaching materials that have been used in Mainland China in the past may have contributed to the preference for BrE spellings observed at the beginning of the decade. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most of the English teaching materials used in China originated from Britain. For example, the *Linguaphone* textbooks in the 1970s, the BBC television English series *Follow Me* in the 1980s, and *New Concept English* afterwards all had a strong BrE flavor, and exerted a great influence on English users in Mainland China.

For Hong Kong, its history of British colonization must have resulted in the prevalence of linguistic elements from BrE in the past, and thus is likely to have been an important factor contributing to *The Standard's* now bygone preference of BrE spellings. Taiwan and the U.S.A have maintained close commercial, cultural and political ties for many years, and it is thus natural that Taiwan English spelling preferences have had a consistently American flavor.

Against this background of inter-newspaper variations, the diachronic spelling preference shifts took place between 2005 and 2007 for most pairs in *China Daily* and *The Standard*. As Crystal (1997b: 359) points out, '[m]any factors contribute to the gradual spread of a language – chiefly political and military might, economic power, and religious influence.' Given this complexity, the identification of possible causes may well prove

elusive. The changes observed in the current study might have been the result of the interplay of many factors occurring simultaneously. The first important cause might be the possible changes of newspapers' in-house editorial policies, which can play an important role in shaping and determining English forms<sup>4</sup>. For example, it has been observed that '[M]ainland English-language newspapers such as the *China Daily* conform to an American copy-editing style.' (Danielewicz-Betz & Graddol, 2014: 26) In addition, closely related with editorial policies are the economic advantages of AmE spellings in saving writing effort, time, ink and paper. Such advantages might have helped perpetuate the spelling change direction in the three newspapers since simpler spellings save the cost of printing, which is a particular concern of newspapers. In addition to the contrasts of *-mme/-m*, *-our/-or*, and *-ll/-l*, opposites of *-ou/-o-*, *-oe/-e-*, *-dgement/-dgment* and the lack of diacritics in words like *café* and the lack of hyphens for many compounds also contribute to AmE's advantage in saving the learning and writing effort as well as the cost of printing<sup>5</sup>.

Moreover, the accumulating effect of the United States as a superpower over the years and the spread of AmE in the regions studied here might be a fundamental cause. In many cases, AmE is a symbol of fashion. Hu (2004, 2005) and Jin (2005) mention that the pedagogic model of English in China is currently dominated by native speaker-based models, especially American English. This domination seems to be reflected in the English spelling preference shifts identified here. This new trend has also been noted by some scholars.

The findings of the current study support the predictions and observations of previous scholars such

as Bondesen, who predicted that ‘the changes will be a move from using British English spelling to using American English spelling because to date, this is the pattern that one sees happening all over the world, including England.’ (Bondesen 2004: 114; see also Crystal, 1997a; Bolton, 2003) The current study also suggests that the situation described by Danielewicz-Betz & Graddol (2014: 26), in which ‘English spelling and usage in mainland China tends to be American-based, whereas in Hong Kong, a former British colony, it is British,’ is now rapidly changing towards a similar preference for AmE norms.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study addressed an issue that had not been adequately treated before, i.e. the English spelling variations and changes in three newspapers in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. The data indicate a general drift towards AmE spelling preferences in these newspapers.

The study also supports the claim that a region’s English spelling variation is correlated with its historical context, and the consequent English orthography change is perpetuated by social changes, not only local changes, but also global ones - the elevated status of AmE as the global ‘prestige’ variety of English in this case. This kind of change has potential benefits. For example, if regional variations are eliminated by the most prestigious variety, this might serve to help ‘tidy up some of the anomalies [and] give greater consistency to the whole system.’ (Carney, 1997: 67) This in turn may avoid possible confusion for learners of English as a foreign or second language. In the meantime, it seems reasonable to conclude that the rising prestige of AmE will inevitably continue to erode the global status of BrE, and cause a shift of language loyalty in a growing number of regions.

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#### Notes

1 According to Wikipedia, Greater China, or Greater China Region, is a term used to refer to Mainland

China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau. The first three regions are within the scope of the present research.

2 The criterion for choosing local journalists is based on the authors’ names. If they are spelled like Chinese names, they are chosen, otherwise not. The articles can represent a newspaper’s spelling preference since they are reviewed by editors before being published.

3 Obviously in actual practice there might be variation in the usage of all the spelling pairs even when used by Britons and Americans.

4 The author wrote to both *The Standard* and *Taipei Times* to enquire about their editorial policies concerning English spellings, but received no replies.

5 Despite the general tendency that AmE spellings use fewer letters, there are exceptions, e.g. AmE uses *-ction* rather than *-xion* as in *connection*; it uses double *-ll-* rather than single *-l-* as in *fulfillment*.

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