

# Imagining the State: Translated Sovereignty in the First Chinese Translation of a Biography of Washington

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## Abstract

In 1886, Li Ruqian 黎汝謙 (1852–1909) and Cai Guozhao 蔡國昭 (dates unknown) translated Washington Irving's renowned biography of George Washington (1732–1799), which appeared under the title *Huashengdun quanzhuan* 華盛頓全傳 (*A Complete Biography of Washington*). It was the first Chinese translation of a biography about George Washington. The translation proved to be a valuable source of information for Chinese readers in the nineteenth century, as it covered the American Revolutionary War and the founding of the Republic, providing insights into American history and politics.

Through the Li and Cai translation, this paper aims to explore how Chinese intellectuals understood and imagined the nature of a modern state during the late nineteenth century. The analysis will be contextualized through a discussion of sovereignty in the history of the interaction between China and Euro-American countries. As Qing China's foreign relations differed from the Westphalian system of sovereignty featured by the Western "family of nations," the concept of sovereignty was understood inconsistently. In their interpretation of Western forms of sovereignty, the Chinese translators employed terms such as *zizhu* 自主 (self-governance), *junzhu* 君主 (absolute monarchy), *minzhu* 民主 (republic), and *yihui* 議會 (parliament), echoing what Henry Wheaton (1785–1848) referred to as "external sovereignty" and "internal sovereignty." This paper will analyze these terms to uncover changing Chinese perceptions of sovereignty and evaluate their impact on how Chinese intellectuals envisioned a modern state.

The primary approach adopted in this analysis is back translation, which draws on Max Huang's (2008) work and comparative close reading, enabling a nuanced examination of the differences and contingencies in the meanings of concepts between Western and Chinese contexts. Ultimately, this paper will contribute to our understanding of the political landscape as conceptualized by Chinese intellectuals before the peak of Japanese influence in the early twentieth century.

### **Keywords**

translation studies, George Washington, sovereignty,  
modern state, intellectual

## **1. Introduction: The Modern State and Western Sovereignty**

Li Ruqian and Cai Guozhao (referred to as Li and Cai hereafter) were members of Qing China's (1644–1911) delegation to Japan during the 1880s. They were among the early diplomats who resided in foreign countries on a regular basis, thus creating more opportunities for Chinese individuals to interact with Westerners. During their tenure, they translated Washington Irving's renowned biography of George Washington, the first Chinese-language biography of the American president. The Li and Cai translation, which appeared under the title *Huashengdun quanzhuan* 華盛頓全傳, was first published in 1886 by *Zhuyitang* 著易堂, a bookstore in Shanghai. In 1896, the translation was republished serially in *Shiwubao* 時務報 (*The Chinese Progress*), from the first to the eleventh issue (8 August to 15 November 1896). It provided a comprehensive history of the founding of the United States and its political system, making it an invaluable source of information for intellectuals in the nineteenth century aiming to reform China.

Through the translation of the biography of George Washington by Li and Cai, this paper will explore how Chinese intellectuals understood and envisioned the nature of a modern state during the late nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The entire analysis will be contextualized through a discussion of sovereignty. In their time, since there was no such concept as *zhuquan* 主權 in the sense of Western sovereignty as we know it today, the Chinese translators employed a range of different terms to interpret this foreign notion. To uncover changing Chinese perceptions of sovereignty and evaluate their impact on how Chinese intellectuals conceptualized a