

# A Case Study of Legal Terms from 1615 to 2008

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**How to cite this paper:** Jingning Weng. (2025) A Case Study of Legal Terms from 1615 to 2008. *Translation and Foreign Language Learning*, 1(1), 1-7. DOI: 10.26855/tfl.2025.08.001

**Received:** February 21, 2025

**Accepted:** March 19, 2025

**Published:** July 29, 2025

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## Abstract

The paper focuses on the translation of typical concepts. This study takes four phases of legal translation in China and typical legal terms as “right”, “public law”, and “state” on Chinese and Western legal translations from 1615 to 2008 as the research object. This study finds that the evolution of legal terminology translation chronologically documents the maturation of China’s jurisprudence as a discipline, simultaneously signaling a transformative societal shift from early susceptibility to cultural hegemony toward emphatic assertion of state sovereignty, while progressively tracing the deepening comprehension of individual juridical personhood.

## Keywords

Legal terminology evolution; Sino-Western legal translation; Conceptual historiography

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research Background

Legal terminology translation establishes the fundamental framework for the discipline of law. The development of legal studies largely depends on the continuous updating and standardization of legal term translations.

However, due to the specialized and complex nature of legal terminology itself, combined with insufficient understanding by some translators, significant instances of mistranslated and omitted translations currently exist in legal terminology translation practice. Let alone systematically collating original translations for reference, this results in notable gaps in research on the translation history of legal studies. If representative legal terms from different periods are selected to systematically examine the diachronic evolution of their translations, and to analyze the differences between core concepts still in use today and their initial translated versions, this will provide crucial clues for clarifying the development context of the legal discipline.

### 1.2 Research Purpose and Significance

The current absence of bidirectional case studies in legal translation research, coupled with pervasive terminological gaps and mistranslations in practice, frequently impedes translators’ ability to determine accurate equivalents for legal terms.

Consequently, this study employs diachronic translations of pivotal terminology as its analytical lens, systematically mapping their evolutionary trajectory toward standardization.

This methodological approach aims to empower legal translators through comparative historical analysis to profoundly grasp terms’ essential connotations and the underlying rationale for their standardization.

## 2. Legal Translation in China

### 2.1 Incipience

The nascent phase of modern legal translation in China (c. 1800–1860) was characterized by two interdependent

forces: Western missionaries' lexicographic enterprises and progressive Qing officials' systematic appropriation of Western jurisprudence. This dual-track endeavor laid the institutional groundwork for China's reception of foreign legal paradigms.

Firstly, there are key agents and milestones. It is a conceptual bridge about missionary lexicography. For example, Robert Morrison's *Dictionary of the Chinese Language* (《华英字典》, 1815–1823) pioneered the cross-cultural mediation of core legal notions through authoritative translations such as: “斩” (decapitation), “合同” (contract), “状师/讼师” (lawyer/attorney), “八议” (Eight Deliberations).

Secondly, it is notable that official Translation is emerging for Diplomatic Praxis.

Commissioner Lin Zexu's 1839 directive to translate Emer de Vattel's *Le Droit des Gens*—executed by American medical missionary Peter Parker and Chinese linguist Yuan Dehui—yielded *Ge Guo Lü Li* (《各国律例》, Law of Nations). This text, as legal historian He Qinhua affirms, represents China's first structured importation of Western international law.

Meanwhile, scholar-official dissemination networks play an important role in this process. For instance, Late Qing literati amplified legal knowledge through transcultural compilations: Liang Tingnan's *Haiguo Si Shuo* (《海国四说》, 1846), notably its *Hesheng Guo Shuo*, elucidated America's presidential election mechanisms, term limits, and bicameral legislative structure (Senate and House of Representatives). Wei Yuan's *Haiguo Tuzhi* (《海国图志》, 1844) and Xu Jiyou's *Yinghuan Zhilue* (《瀛寰志略》, 1848) cataloged constitutional frameworks and governance models across Euro-American states.

Collectively, missionary-produced reference tools and reformist officials' institutional translations coalesced into the epistemic bedrock for modern Chinese legal transplantation.

## 2.2 Structural Transformation

Following the Opium Wars, the Qing government's urgent need to manage escalating international disputes catalyzed a strategic focus on *gongfa* (公法, international law) translation during the Self-Strengthening Movement (1861–1895). This institutional prioritization manifested through three interconnected developments:

First, treaty-imposed demands accelerated diplomatic training. The unequal treaties—notably the Treaty of Tientsin (1858) and Convention of Peking (1860)—compelled systematic cultivation of Western-language translators. Article 50 of the Tientsin Treaty, which stipulated English as the authoritative treaty language, drove a surge in government-sponsored overseas study programs, notably the Chinese Educational Mission to the United States (1872–1881).

Second, state-sponsored translation institutions emerged as knowledge hubs. The Qing court established: Tongwen College (京师同文馆, Beijing, 1862) – First Western sciences academy with dedicated international law courses; Jiangnan Arsenal Translation Department (上海江南制造局翻译馆, 1868) – Translated 129 Western legal/political works by 1909; Foochow Arsenal Naval Academy (福建船政学堂, 1866) – Trained bilingual technical-legal personnel

Third, missionary scholars expanded legal dissemination networks. Academically trained missionaries like W.A.P. Martin (丁韪良) and Young J. Allen (林乐知) leveraged three channels: first, periodicals, Chinese Globe Magazine (《万国公报》) serialized legal commentaries. Second, education was founded St. John's College (1879) legal curriculum. Last but not least, direct translation in Martin's *Wanguo Gongfa* (《万国公法》, 1864) – the Chinese rendition of Henry Wheaton's *Elements of International Law* – became the standard diplomatic reference for Qing officials until 1911.

## 2.3 Innovative Consolidation

The Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895) precipitated a profound reevaluation of the Self-Strengthening Movement among Qing officials and intellectuals, catalyzing constitutional reform advocacy. Confronting Japan's ascendancy, legal translation underwent a decisive Japan-centric pivot, characterized by two structural shifts:

First, legal translation involves realigning the source text. Japanese legal materials supplanted Western works as primary translation objects, evidenced by a quantitative surge. Under Imperial Law Codification Commissioner Shen Jiaben, the Bureau for Law Revision (修律法律馆, est. 1902) systematically adopted Japanese criminal, civil, commercial drafts as legislative templates, exemplified by the 1907 New Criminal Code directly modeled on Japan's

1880 Penal Code.

Second, the phase goes through systematic domain integration. Translations achieved unprecedented comprehensiveness, particularly in constitutional and commercial law:

For example, The Commentary on the Constitution of the Empire of Japan (《日本宪法义解》, 1889) became Qing reformers' primary constitutional reference.

Also, Japan's Commercial Code (《日本商法典》) and Bankruptcy Law (《破产法》) informed China's first modern commercial legislation (1904–1911).

Third, it turns out jurisprudential paradigm shift. Yan Fu's *Fayi* (《法意》, 1909), his annotated translation of Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* (1748) was proved transformative. Though not a statutory text, its systematic exposition of legal philosophy and governance principles fundamentally dismantled China's penal-code-focused tradition, heralding modern jurisprudence. Constitutional scholar Liang Qichao credited *Fayi* with “replacing punishment-centricity with rights consciousness” in elite discourse.

This trilateral realignment—source selection, systematic codification, and philosophical reconstitution—collectively reoriented late imperial legal modernization toward Japanese-German civil law traditions.

## 2.4 Revival

There are dual axes of modern legal translation: institutional innovation and classical outreach.

The new phase of legal translation manifested through interconnected developments: diversified translation mechanisms and the global relevance of Chinese juridical classics, collectively reshaping legal acculturation dynamics.

First, it faces an organizational paradigm shift. Translation infrastructure transcended traditional models through tripartite evolution. For instance, actor diversification comes out. Non-state actors, such as private publishers (e.g., Commercial Press) and scholarly societies (e.g., Shanghai Law Society) supplanted missionary, official monopolies in translational agency.

Meanwhile, there are operational specializations. Professionalized workflow emerged via domain-specific translation teams, such as Civil Code Compilation Unit in 1907. Otherwise, managers focus on methodological refinement shown on the pursuit of terminological standardization such as technical terms in Law, 1909 and doctrinal exegesis, elevated translations from ad hoc renditions to systematic knowledge production.

Second, Chinese juridical heritage endures global significance. Two seminal works demonstrate trans-civilizational impact. For example, Hsi Yuan Lu (《洗冤集录》, Song, 1247) as the world's first systematic forensic science treatise, its evidentiary framework predated Europe's Fortunato Fidelis (*De Relationibus Medicorum*, 1602) by three centuries, establishing foundational principles for global forensic methodology.

Tang Code with Commentaries (《唐律疏议》, Zhang et al., 653) representing the apogee of Chinese codification, its integrated code-commentary format and governing principle — “virtue and rites as the foundation of governance” (*de li wei zhengjiao zhi ben*) became the legislative template for dynasties from Song to Qing.

The direct progenitor of East Asian legal systems via Japan's Taihō Code (701), Korea's Gyeongguk Daejeon (1485), and Vietnam's Hồng Đức Code (1483).

This dual trajectory, forward-looking institutionalization and retrospective classical validation, repositioned China within global legal dialogues.

## 3. Typical Concepts and Analysis

The translation of legal translations created several modern Chinese legal terms, which made some critical legal neologisms not only enter the Chinese world from the English world but also eventually become standard legal terms today. In this section, the author will analyze the terms “right”, “public law” and “state”.

### 3.1 Right

#### 3.1.1 Lin Zexu's Translation

The earliest translator of public international law was Lin Zexu, who organized the translation of the famous Swiss diplomat Emmerich de Vattel's masterpiece of international law, *The Law of Nations*, and published it under the name of “各国律例.” The word “right” in *The Law of Nations*, which initially means “legitimacy (正当性)” and “autonomy (自主性)” was translated as “reason (道理)” which is equivalent to only translating the word “right” into

“reason”, but missing the connotation of the subject’s “autonomy.”

### 3.1.2 W. A. P Martin’s Translation

It was not until William A.P. Martin’s Law of Nations(《万国公法》) that the word “right” was translated as “权利(right).” This was a first in China. As an American Presbyterian missionary who had lived in China for more than sixty years, William A.P. Martin recontextualized the word “right” to import the context of “right” into China. A.P. Martin’s translation of the Western concept of sovereignty (“right of a state to self-government and autonomy”) with the word “autonomy” in The Public Law of Nations(《万国公法》) is an example of how the word “right” has a moral and ethical character.

Right has the essence of moral “legitimacy” and the core of “autonomy” of the subject, and it is the conversion of the subject of “right” by William’s translation that enables it to obtain the form of legal right as the keyword of The Public Law of Nations.

Although William’s translation of “right” is very appropriate today, in connection with the unique situation of Chinese society at that time, the lack of correct or consistent with the Western concept of freedom and power, for right (English), droit (French), regt (Dutch), and so on, translator could not find a completely accurate translation of the words in modern countries. The finalized word “right” can be regarded as an inappropriate translation.

### 3.1.3 Modern Translation

Before Yan Fu, the Japanese scholar Fukuzawa Yukichi was also concerned about the complex connotation of right and had adopted the term “权理 (right reason)”, but due to various reasons, it did not achieve mainstream status.

The term “right” in China can be traced back to the period of 1900 to 1911, after parts of the jurist Yellin’s *Der Kampf ums Recht* (《权利竞争论》,1872) were translated into Chinese and widely read did the term “right” seem to have begun to establish itself as a public term in China.

According to Jin Guantao and Liu Qingfeng’s analysis, it was during the period from 1900 to 1911 that the term “right” became one of the most used political and cultural terms in China.

## 3.2 International Law

### 3.2.1 Common Translation

The term “International Law” initially originated from the Latin word for Roman law, “*jus gentium* (万民法).” The *jus gentium* was the law that regulated the relationship between Roman citizens and foreigners and between foreigners and foreigners, and its counterpart was the *jus civile* (市民法), which was only applicable to the relationship between Roman citizens. In *The Laws of War and Peace* (《战争与和平法》), Grotius used the term “*jus gentium*” to describe the law of interstate relations, which was later translated into the English term “Law of Nations.”

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In 18th-century, English jurist J. Bentham formally used “International Law” instead of “Law of Nations” in his book “*Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (《道德及立法原理绪论》)”.

### 3.2.2 W. A. P. Martin’s Translation

William unified “*jus gentium*”, “Law of Nations” and “International Law” in Wheaton’s original work and translated them as “公法 (public law).” William’s translation mixes several concepts of international law and the boundary between internal and external public law in the original book and uniformly replaces them with “公法 (public law).”

This simplification of the concepts avoids disputes over the nature and effectiveness of international law on the one hand and leaves room for the translator’s translation and manipulation on the other. From the viewpoint of the whole translation, Martin A.P. Martin intentionally interpreted international law according to the analogy of domestic “公法 (public law)” and deeply imprinted the character of “公(public)” for the dissemination and development of international law in China.

### 3.2.3 Mizukuri's Translation

In 1873, the Japanese scholar Mizukuri, also influenced by Western empirical jurisprudence, in his translation of Wu Erxi's Introduction to the Study of International Law (《国际法研究导论》), used the term "international law" to refer to "international law", which was the first appearance of the Chinese term "international law" (Qiu, 1968, p. 29).

### 3.2.4 Modern Translation

From the beginning of the 20th century to the present, "国际公法 (public international law)" has become the common name for China's legal discipline and system of international law.

## 3.3 State

### 3.3.1 Earlier Dictionary's Translation

In early English-Chinese dictionaries, the state was translated as "邦, 国, 家 (state, country, nation)."

In 1845, in the Chinese-English Dictionary by the Englishman Morrison, the state was translated as "形势, 光景, 情形, 品级, 地位, 邦, 国, 体面 (situation, light, circumstance, rank, position, state, country, decency)."

The English missionary Maddox in his Dictionary which was completed on February 3, 1847, explained state as "国, 邦, 域, 国家, 邑 (country), 大臣 (High official of state), 国家之事 (councilor of state), 钦犯 (a state prisoner), 国势 (state of nation).

In 1864, the German missionary Rob Trundy compiled the English-Chinese Dictionary, which translated state as "国, 邦, 邦国, 国家 (country, state, state, nation)".

### 3.3.2 W. A. P. Martin's Translation

In 1865, the American missionary William A.P. Martin translated state as "邦, 邦国, 国, 国家 (state, state, country, nation)" in The Public Law of Nations.

As independent communities acknowledge no common superior, they may be considered as living in a state of nature with respect to each other. (Wheaton, 1855, p. 3)

a. 邦国天然同居, 虽无统领之君。(Martin, 2003, p. 7)

So also of confederated States; their right of sending public ministers to each other, or to foreign States, depends upon the peculiar nature and constitution of the union by which they are bound together. (Wheaton, 1855, p. 274)

b. 合盟各邦互相通使, 或遣使至国外, 其可否必视其合盟之法而定。(Martin, 2003, p. 142)

### 3.3.3 John Fryer's Translation

In 1868, the Englishman John Fryer, employed by Jiangnan General Bureau of Machinery Manufacturing, cooperated with Xu Shou and Hua Hengfang to translate more than 100 kinds of Western books, including works on international law, such as "International law", "Commentaries Upon International Law." Among the translations, John Fryer's works include the following. In John Fryer's translations, "邦 (state)" and "邦国 (state country)" gradually evolved into a unit within "国 (country)" and "国 (state)" and "国家 (country)" appears more frequently.

a. 又交战之国与局外之国亦有分所当得与分所为之事。.....国家所管之地, 与民间业主之有其地者, 关系相同。(Fryer, 1898, p. 6)

b. 从前国家派赴他国办事之公使人员, 大半皆用校注, 盖其学识胜于平常有爵之人, 且明各种律例。(Fryer & Yu, 1898, p. 6)

c. 此三十年间, 各国中人心最恶, 其国家之法与教会之法, 国王与教王可以做主。(Fryer & Yu, 1898, p. 10)

### 3.3.4 Yan Fu's Translation

Yan Fu, a translator known as the modern Xuanzang, translated State as "country" in his book "History of Politics (《社会通论》)."

Character of the State. The new type of community formed by these events differed fundamentally from that which preceded it. (Wang, 2005, p. 75)

a. 国家形性。以前者之二事, 而性社会兴。言其形性, 有绝异于蛮夷、宗法二社会者。(Yan, 1931, p. 80)

b. 国家特点: 与前者有别的新型共同体。

Incidentally, also, its action sowed the seed of the great problem of pauperism, or State relief of the indigent.

(Wang, 2005, p. 139)

- a. 自行车制亡，而鳏寡孤独者不得其养，此国家赈贫之政之所由兴也。(Yan, 1931, p. 163)
- b. 其结果是带来贫穷后果的同时，国家也随之开始履行救济的职责。

### 3.4 Modern Translation

In the surge of various currents of thought, the three core elements of the state (sovereignty, territory, and people) have gradually been understood and accepted, while the ancient Chinese meanings of “state” such as “公家,帝王,封地,食邑,国都 (emperor, fiefdom, demesne, capital)” gradually faded out of people’s view.

## 4. Conclusion

Modern legal translation in China has engendered a bidirectional and mutually constitutive pathway for the transplantation of juridical knowledge, characterized by extra-territorial dissemination and intra-territorial propagation.

The extra-territorial pathway, originating in the Yuan dynasty, involved Japanese jurists, Korean officials, Western missionaries, and pioneering Chinese legal scholars systematically elucidating the essence of the Sinic legal tradition through analytical commentaries in periodicals and translated treatises—notably Western renditions of seminal works like the *Tang Code with Commentaries (Tangli Shuyi)*. This facilitated the global diffusion of Chinese juridical epistemology, transforming indigenous legal wisdom into a transnational intellectual resource. Concurrently, the intra-territorial pathway, emerging in the Ming dynasty, manifested through Western missionaries and indigenous collectives compiling foundational bilingual lexicons (e.g., Robert Morrison’s *Dictionary of the Chinese Language*) and directing the systematic importation of Western jurisprudence. This trajectory evolved strategically from an initial focus on Anglo-American international law—epitomized by W.A.P. Martin’s magisterial translation *Wanguo Gongfa (Elements of International Law)*, which established the first comprehensive framework for Western legal acculturation—toward Roman civil law traditions, thereby reconstituting China’s jurisprudential architecture through deliberate epistemic restructuring.

These dual pathways converged and catalyzed one another through four pivotal breakthroughs, each marking a paradigm shift in China’s engagement with global legal systems. Wilhelm Lobscheid’s *Wu Che Yunfu (Five Chariots Repository)*, through its meticulous glossing of over 50,000 entries, inaugurated the methodological alignment of Sino-Western legal concepts, establishing the first systematic terminological equivalence and laying the philological groundwork for subsequent legal acculturation. The 1864 publication of Martin’s *Wanguo Gongfa* transcended mere textual translation, operationalizing a complete framework of Western international law within the Qing diplomatic apparatus and serving as the inaugural template for systemic legal transplantation in East Asia. Shen Jiaben’s Bureau for Legal Revision (修订法律馆, 1902–1911) leveraged translated Japanese codes—particularly the 1880 Penal Code and 1898 Commercial Code—to engineer China’s transformative shift from imperial penal statutes (*li*) to modern civil and criminal paradigms, directly informing the drafting of China’s first modern codes (e.g., *Draft Criminal Code of the Great Qing*, 1907). Contemporary global-facing translations, such as Brian McKnight’s *The Washing Away of Wrongs (Xiyuan Jilu, 1247)* and Wallace Johnson’s *Tang Code* (1979), have facilitated transcivilizational dialogues on classical Chinese forensics and codification logic, positioning Sinic jurisprudence as an indispensable resource for global legal philosophy.

Spanning the 1840s to the twenty-first century, this interconnected process propelled Chinese legal studies through four consecutive developmental phases: (1) *Incipience*, centered on conceptual calibration through bilingual lexicography; (2) *Structural Transformation*, institutionalizing systemic translation practices under state aegis; (3) *Innovative Consolidation*, effecting substantive legal modernization through strategically prioritized domain translation (e.g., constitutional, commercial); and (4) *Revival*, reclaiming classical Chinese jurisprudence as a constituent element of global legal heritage. Cumulatively, these phases facilitated the discipline’s evolution from a technical adjunct of diplomatic necessity to a rigorous interdisciplinary field possessing historical depth, methodological autonomy, and theoretical innovation.

Diachronic analysis of key terminological shifts—specifically “state” (*bang* [邦] → *guojia* [国家]), “international law” (*wanguo gongfa* [万国公法] → *guoji fa* [国际法]), and “right” (*quan* [权] → *quanli* [权利])—reveals a dual-layered hermeneutic process. At the operative level, translators progressively shifted strategies from *culturally adaptive localization* (e.g., *gongfa* [公法], emphasizing Confucian-tinged universal moral order) to *systemically precise*

*conceptualization* (e.g., *guoji fa* [国际法], presupposing sovereign equality). At the epistemological level, lexical transformations reflect China's deepening comprehension of three foundational constructs: (1) the *ontology of sovereignty*, transitioning from suzerain-tributary hierarchies (*fan shu* [藩属]) to Westphalian nation-stateness (*minzu guojia* [民族国家]); (2) the *normative architecture of international ordering*, evolving from Sino-centric ritual governance (*chaogong zhixu* [朝贡秩序]) to rules-based adjudicative equality (*pingdeng sifa* [平等司法]); and (3) the *jural boundaries of personhood*, reconfigured from kinship-based ethical obligations (*lunli yiwu* [伦理义务]) to individual statutory entitlements (*fading quanli* [法定权利]). Through this dialectic between linguistic precision and epistemic transformation, Chinese legal translation consolidated its own knowledge regime: an autonomous discursive matrix integrating historical sensibility, philological rigor, comparative methodology, and theory-driven practice.

Ultimately, this bidirectional transplantation—oscillating between exporting Sinic legal wisdom and internalizing exogenous juridical paradigms—constitutes a unique epistemological revolution in global legal history. By transforming translation from an instrumental task into a generative epistemic practice, modern Chinese legal scholars forged a dialectical synthesis: conserving indigenous normative consciousness while rearticulating its principles within globally resonant frameworks. This paradigm sustains its vitality not merely as an academic subfield but as an essential methodology for navigating twenty-first-century legal pluralism.

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