

Construction of Legitimacy from a Cross-Cultural Perspective: A Case Study of the American Declaration of Independence and the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom's Announcement to the People of All Directions for Punishing the Barbarian Qing by Divine Command

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ABSTRACT

This study compares the 18th-century American *the Declaration of Independence* and the 19th-century Chinese Taiping Heavenly Kingdom's *Announcement to the People of All Directions for Punishing the Barbarian Qing by Divine Command*. Drawing on a cross-cultural research framework and combining quantitative and qualitative analysis, the study conducts a comparison from four dimensions: textual analysis, argumentative logic, historical context, and discursive strategies to explore the similarities and differences in constructing legitimacy within cross-cultural contexts. The study finds that both are political declarations of resistance against authority, sharing a similar argumentative logic in legitimacy construction: From building legitimacy premises to criticizing existing regimes and calling for action. Meanwhile, they exhibit significant differences in sources of power, discursive strategies, and visions of power. These differences stem from the cultural divides between Puritan and Confucian civilizations and reflect the unique responses of different civilizations to legitimacy during the process of modern transformation. The research provides a new perspective for understanding the logic of legitimacy argumentation in cross-cultural political practices and reveals the dialectical relationship between local traditions and universal values in legitimacy construction.

Keywords: Cross-cultural comparison, Construction of Legitimacy, Declaration of Independence, Announcement to the People of All Directions for Punishing the Barbarian Qing by Divine Command.

1. INTRODUCTION

The *Declaration of Independence* (1776) and the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom's *Announcement to the People of All Directions for Punishing the Barbarian Qing by Divine Command* (1852) represent typical texts of resistance discourse in Western Puritan and Chinese Confucian civilizations, respectively. Influenced by Enlightenment thought, the former negates the legitimacy of British royal rule over the North American colonies, while the latter seeks to challenge the cultural orthodoxy of the Qing Dynasty through the rhetoric of "punishing the barbarians by divine command". This study

employs quantitative text analysis, comparison of argumentative logic, reconstruction of historical context, and examination of discursive strategies to explain the universal frameworks and unique paths of constructing legitimacy from a cross-cultural perspective. By doing so, it aims to provide a reference for understanding how different civilizations construct discourses of power legitimacy.

2. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS AND COMPARISON

The American *Declaration of Independence* and the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom's *Announcement to*

the People of All Directions for Punishing the Barbarian Qing by Divine Command consist of 1,338 words and 1,613 Chinese characters respectively. Through quantitative analysis of the

two texts, the author finds significant differences in the distribution of argumentative content (see "Table 1"):

Table 1. Proportions of argumentative content in the two texts

Dimensions	Declaration of Independence	Announcement to the People of All Directions for Punishing the Barbarian Qing by Divine Command
Proportion of Theoretical Foundation	~26%	~17%
Proportion of Specific Accusations	~52.0%	~54%
Proportion of Historical Reference	~8.0%	~17%
Proportion of Religious Symbols	~0%	~23%

In *the Declaration of Independence*, the theoretical foundation accounts for approximately 26%, specific accusations 52%, and historical reference 8%. Taking Locke's *Two Treatises of Civil Government* as a model, the text establishes Enlightenment discourse such as "all men are created equal" and "inalienable natural rights" as the logical starting point for constructing legal-rational legitimacy. Through 27 charges against the British king, it systematically demonstrates the systematic violation of colonial rights by British rule. Finally, declaring "Free and Independent States" establishes the legal sovereignty of the new regime, completing the logical cycle from "rights appeal" to "sovereign reconstruction."

In the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom's *Announcement to the People of All Directions for Punishing the Barbarian Qing by Divine Command*, the theoretical foundation accounts for approximately 17%, specific accusations 54%, historical reference 17%, and historical reference and mobilization 23%. The text begins by using symbols such as "Heavenly Father God" and "Divine Land" to establish the sacredness of "executing justice on behalf of Heaven." Through stigmatizing rhetoric like "barbarian demons" and "snake-devil Yama," it reinforces the binary opposition between "Huaxia Civilization" and "barbarians." By invoking historical figures like, who resisted Yuan and Qing rule, it continues the traditional Chinese declaration strategy of "using

history as a mirror" for analogical historical argumentation.

Furthermore, high-frequency word statistics reveal that the two texts exhibit distinct orientations in their semantic networks.

Specifically, in *the Declaration of Independence*, keywords such as "rights", "people", and "government" form a rational semantic network centered on "rights, government and contract" (see "Table 2"). Its core feature is constructing legitimacy through the contractual relationship between "the people" and "the government," with "rights" as the logical starting point. The argumentative chain relies on rational deductions from Enlightenment thought—natural law, social contract theory, and utilitarianism—rather than traditional authority or moral ethics. Additionally, *the Declaration* emphasizes the primacy of individual rights, presenting government as a tool designed to serve individual interests, which embodies liberal values.

In the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom's *Announcement to the People of All Directions for Punishing the Barbarian Qing by Divine Command*, the keywords "Heaven", "Barbarians", and "Central Kingdom" reflect an ethical narrative of "Mandate of Heaven, Hua-Yi Distinction, Confucian ethics" (see "Table 2"): taking the "Mandate of Heaven" as the foundation of legitimacy, the "Hua-Yi Distinction" (the divide between Chinese

civilization and barbarians) as a mobilization tool, and "Confucian ethics" as the value goal. The logical chain relies on traditional patriarchal ethics and ethnic discourse rather than rational contracts. Meanwhile, the text emphasizes the wholeness of

the Huaxia ethnic group and cultural orthodoxy, aiming to restore a "heaven-ordained" ethical order where individual values are subordinate to ethnic and Confucian norms.

Table 2. Frequency of keywords in the two texts

Text	Keywords	Frequency
Declaration of Independence	"right/rights"	10
	"people"	10
	"government"	6
Announcement to the People of All Directions for Punishing the Barbarian Qing by Divine Command	"天" (Heaven)	28
	"胡" (Barbarians)	26
	"中国" (Central Kingdom)	56

3. ARGUMENTATIVE LOGIC OF LEGITIMACY CONSTRUCTION

When the *Declaration of Independence* constructs legal-rational authority through Enlightenment reason and the *Announcement to the People of All Directions for Punishing the Barbarian Qing by Divine Command* reconstructs Mandate of Heaven legitimacy through traditional ethics, the differences between these two discourse systems in argumentative structure, sources of authority, and logical deduction profoundly reflect the cognitive divide between Puritan and Confucian civilizations.

To theoretically justify the North American resistance against British rule and the *Declaration of Independence*—and to convey the spirit and atmosphere of this historic moment in order to win the sympathy and support of people worldwide—Jefferson strived for clarity and force in both the structure and content of the document. Influenced by 18th-century Enlightenment thought, he adopted the deductive logic commonly used in Enlightenment discourse within the *Declaration of Independence*. Through a rigorous syllogism, he constructed a legitimacy argument that anchors the justness of resisting authority in verifiable rational rules.

In the *Declaration of Independence*, the syllogism's major premise is: The purpose of

establishing a government among humans is to protect the people's inalienable natural rights; if a government violates these natural rights, it ought to be overthrown by the people. The minor premise is: The British government acted tyrannically toward the North American people, breaching its contractual obligation to protect their rights. The conclusion is: Therefore, it was rightful and justified for the North American people to overthrow British colonial rule in North America and achieve independence.

The *Declaration of Independence* is grounded in "rationalism" opening by anchoring the legitimacy of American independence in a universal natural law system ("to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them"). Drawing on John Locke's social contract theory from *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), it asserts that "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness". This argumentative structure establishes a logical starting point through a priori rights presupposition, shifting the foundation of legitimacy from "monarchical authorization" to "universal human reason," providing a universal framework for subsequent arguments. The text then lists 27 specific charges, focusing on the British king's breach of contractual obligations to "protect the people's rights," thereby negating the

legitimacy of British rule over the North American colonies. Finally, defining the new entity as "Free and Independent States" establishes that the new regime's power derives from "the consent of the governed," not monarchical privilege. This conclusion echoes Thomas Paine's assertion in *Common Sense* that "government is a necessary evil," forming a legal-rational closed loop of "rights transfer, contract failure, sovereign reconstruction" and formally declaring American independence.

Unlike the rational deduction of *the Declaration of Independence*, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom's legitimacy argument follows the traditional Chinese tripartite framework of "Mandate of Heaven, Hua-Yi Distinction and Confucian Ethics." Through endowing divine authority, reconstructing moral order, and invoking historical precedents, it constructs a narrative of justness consistent with the Confucian cosmological view. The declaration takes "Mandate of Heaven" and the "Hua-Yi Distinction" as its logical starting points, opening with the assertion: "We hold that the world is the world of Central Kingdom, not the world of barbarians." It grafts the Christian "Heavenly Father God" onto the Chinese concept of "Mandate of Heaven," reconstructing the genealogical structure of "God, Emperor, Subjects" to establish the sacred source of authority for the revolutionary movement. Through triple oppositions of race, culture, and religion, the declaration accuses the Manchus of "shaving hair and changing clothing" and "disgracing ancestors," violating the Confucian ethic that "body and hair are gifts from parents," and labels them "demonic beings" and "beasts." Culturally, it criticizes the Qing for "wearing barbarian attire like monkeys wearing hats and destroying ancestral costumes," emphasizing "China has its own Confucian ethics" and transforming political resistance into a cultural war to "defend Huaxia civilization." Religiously, it elevates "Heavenly Father God" as the sole true god, denouncing the Qing for "worshipping ghosts and gods" and constructing a religious opposition of "true god vs. evil god" to reinforce the necessity of "punishing demons by divine command." By invoking historical figures like Wen Tianxiang and Shi Kefa, loyal heroes who resisted foreign rule, the declaration integrates anti-Qing resistance into the Confucian narrative of "loyalty and righteousness", strengthening its traditional moral legitimacy. Finally, with the slogan "eradicate demons", it combines religious promises and secular punishments to clarify revolutionary goals and a reward-punishment system, completing the call to

action. The text's structure presents a three-layer progression of "Mandate of Heaven argument, moral accusation and revolutionary call," grounding its legitimacy in a "sacralized past" and the reconstruction of moral justness.

This construction of legitimacy is deeply rooted in the historical memory of the "Hua-Yi Distinction." Through the contrast "The Central Kingdom has its own Confucian ethic, yet the Manchus have created demonic laws," the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom ties legitimacy to cultural orthodoxy, aiming to restore the Confucian order of a "nation of rites and propriety."

4. CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the 18th century, the North American colonies had developed a mature self-governance system: town councils, colonial assemblies, and British constitutional traditions together formed the governance framework. However, Britain systematically deprived the colonies of their right to tax through acts such as *the Sugar Act (1764)* and *Stamp Act (1765)*. *The 1774 Intolerable Acts*, which closed Boston Harbor, completely escalated tensions. This collective experience of "rights deprivation" thus provided a real-world foundation for legal-rational legitimacy.

The spread of Enlightenment ideas accelerated the "de-religionization" of legitimacy foundations. Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (1776) popularized concepts like "monarchy is a disgrace to humanity" and "government is a necessary evil" in accessible language, elevating "popular sovereignty" beyond Puritan contexts to a universal principle. In *the Declaration of Independence*, Jefferson deliberately downplayed religious elements, retaining only "Nature's God" as the source of rights and anchoring legitimacy in "rationally demonstrable" natural laws. This "rationalization" strategy also shaped the text's structure: approximately 60% of its content constructs a "tyranny evidence chain," aligning with legal-rational legitimacy's reliance on "impersonal rules"—objective, rule-based justifications detached from personal or divine authority. By prioritizing empirical proof of British violations, *the Declaration* embodies Enlightenment faith in reason as the ultimate arbiter of legitimacy, distinguishing it from legitimacy claims rooted in tradition or divine sanction.

By the mid-19th century, China faced an "unprecedented transformation in millennia": after

the Opium War (1840–1842), the *Sino-British Treaty of Nanking* shattered the Qing dynasty's myth of the "Heavenly Empire." Meanwhile, land concentration and conflicts between Hakka people in Guangxi province provided a mass base for the Taiping movement. Hong Xiuquan translated "God" in the *Bible* as "Heavenly Emperor God" and declared himself the "second son of God," echoing the *Book of Documents* principle that "Heaven's will is discerned through the people's will." The Taipings reconstructed the narrative of the "divine right of kings" as "the Heavenly Emperor God commands the Heavenly King to punish demons," inheriting China's political tradition of the "transfer of the Mandate of Heaven."

Unlike the *Declaration of Independence's* rational argument, the *Taiping Announcement* relies on dual mobilization of morality and emotion. Terms such as "demonic barbarians," "filthy stench," and "poisoning the world" appear with a frequency of 28%, constructing a "good vs. evil opposition" through stigmatization. Phrases like "Chinese people bow their heads and serve as subjects—how can they not awaken from this heavenly calamity" emphasize physical metaphors of "ancestral tombs and clan relations," appealing to ethnic sentiment and historical memory. These rhetorical strategies fuse moral condemnation of "barbarian defilement" with emotional appeals to collective identity, transforming political rebellion into a sacred mission to defend Chinese civilization.

Hong Xiuquan's charismatic authority was pivotal in this process. Through dramatic rituals like the "descension of the Heavenly Father" and "possession by the Heavenly Brother," he cast himself as a "mouthpiece of the Mandate of Heaven," converting textual legitimacy into a tangible "sacred experience." This "performativity" inherits China's traditional "ritual legitimacy"—where emperors reinforced their "sage-king" image through ceremonies like heaven worship and court lectures—while the Taipings reinvented authority through religious rituals. By embodying divine will through theatrical acts, Hong transcended textual argument, grounding legitimacy in visceral, experiential belief rather than rational deduction.

Notably, neither is a purely "indigenous product": *The Declaration of Independence's* discourse on "natural rights" implies Puritan "elect consciousness", with its declaration of "equality" in practice confined to white men; the Taiping "Heavenly Emperor God" represents a hybrid of Christian doctrine and Chinese folk beliefs. This

cultural hybridity reveals that legitimacy construction is both a selective activation of local traditions and a strategic response to external challenges: the United States integrated colonial identities through "universalism" discourse, while China sought to reconstruct the disrupted Hua-Yi order through "cultural nationalism" in the face of imperialist shocks. By blending foreign ideological elements (Enlightenment rationalism for the U.S., Christian theology for the Taipings) with indigenous cultural schemas (Puritan covenantal thought, Confucian Hua-Yi Distinctions), both texts demonstrate how legitimacy is forged not in cultural isolation, but through dynamic negotiation between local heritage and transnational influences. This dialectical process—where universalist claims mask historical exclusions and cultural revivals absorb foreign ideas—highlights the contingent, strategic nature of legitimacy narratives in cross-civilizational contexts.

5. STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE DISCOURSE

As a core carrier of power reconstruction, resistance discourse not only embodies the negation of old authorities but also reflects different civilizations' deep-seated imaginings of a "just order." The divergences between *the Declaration of Independence* and the *Taiping Announcement* in their discursive foundations, rhetorical strategies, and visions of power fundamentally represent a cross-cultural dialogue between Puritan rationalism and Confucian cosmological thinking.

From the perspective of discursive foundations, the *Declaration's* resistance discourse takes "natural rights" as its logical origin. Influenced by Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, it constructs a syllogistic system of "rights, contract and resistance." This discourse exhibits distinct characteristics of individualistic rationality: emphasizing "all men are created equal" and "inalienable rights endowed by the Creator," it frames the right to resist as an a priori entitlement from natural law, rather than one rooted in specific historical or religious traditions. The term "Rights" appears 10 times in the text, closely linked to individual values such as "Life" and "Liberty." Concurrently, government is defined as a rights-protecting instrument established by "the consent of the governed"; if it engages in "long-term abuse of power," the social contract is invalidated, making resistance a "self-evident truth." This reduction of political relations to a "social contract" aligns with

Weber's concept of "legal-rational legitimacy," which relies on "impersonal rules"—objective, universal principles detached from personal or traditional authority.

The Taiping resistance discourse is rooted in the traditional ethical framework of "Mandate of Heaven, Hua-Yi Distinction, Confucian Ethics," with its core logic being a moral mission to "execute justice on behalf of Heaven." The declaration defines Qing rule as "barbarians usurping the divine mandate," violating both the "Heavenly Father God's mandate" and China's cultural orthodoxy. Inheriting the Book of Documents principle that "the Mandate of Heaven is not constant; it supports only the virtuous," it proclaims that Hong Xiuquan, as the "second son of God," is ordained by Heaven to punish demons, imbuing resistance with the sacredness of "punishing evildoers on behalf of Heaven." The character "Heaven" appears 28 times, frequently co-occurring with "Heavenly Father God" and "Mandate of Heaven," constructing a legitimacy chain of "Heaven's mandate-moral mission." Through binary opposition such as "Central Kingdom has its own language, clothing, and Confucian ethics, yet the Manchus have created demonic laws," it transforms resistance into a "civilizational defense war." The term "barbarians" appears 26 times, combined with stigmatizing vocabulary like "filthy stench" and "demonic barbarians," appealing to ethnic and cultural identity. The justness of resistance is thus grounded in a "Heaven-ordained moral mission," with individual rights overshadowed by the collective narrative of "universal righteousness."

In terms of rhetorical strategies, *the Declaration of Independence* uses logical connectives ("For") 29 times, while the Taiping Announcement employs emotional intensifiers (哉/矣/乎, equivalent to "ah," "oh," "indeed") 11 times. The Declaration adopts an "evidence-oriented" approach, dedicating nearly 60% of its text to listing 27 specific tyrannies of the British king, covering legislative despotism, judicial manipulation, economic exploitation, and other dimensions. This "legal document-style" detailed presentation has two key features: first, it is de-emotionalized, avoiding exclamation marks or moral evaluations, instead using objective sentence pattern like "He has..." to list facts, allowing the necessity of resistance to emerge naturally from the "tyranny evidence chain"; second, it universalizes the colonial experience, abstracting specific grievances into universal problems in "the course of human events." The opening statement—"When in

the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another"—elevates resistance beyond regional limits, framing it as a duty "to defer to human opinion."

The Taiping Announcement to the People of All Directions for Punishing the Barbarian Qing by Divine Command relies on a rhetorical strategy of "historical reconstruction", constructing legitimacy through invoking Confucian classics and anti-Qing traditions, alongside analogical deduction from historical precedents to contemporary reality. The text implicitly invokes the Spring and Autumn Annals principle of the "Hua-Yi Distinction"—"Barbarians disrupt Xia; they must not throw Central Kingdom into chaos"—and the Rites of Zhou principles of "kinship respect and hierarchical reverence" to accuse the Qing of "destroying ancestral costumes and defacing Chinese characters," framing resistance as a historical mission to "restore China's orthodoxy."

It also employs abundant bodily metaphors such as "poisoning the world," "plunging the people into misery," and "endangering ancestral tombs" to intensify emotional shock over "barbarian tyranny" rather than launching specific institutional critiques. This discursive strategy of "moral indignation" aligns with the traditional Chinese "declaration" convention of "persuading through reason and moving through emotion."

From the perspective of power visions, the ultimate goal of *the Declaration of Independence* is to establish "Free and Independent States," embodying distinct modernity: the text never mentions any specific leader, referring to the colonial collective only as "We." legitimacy derives from "the consent of the people" rather than personal charisma, and it explicitly grants the new nation full sovereign capacities such as "declaring war, forming treaties, and conducting trade"—implicitly embracing the Westphalian sovereign system. Carl Schmitt's "theory of sovereign decisionism" is manifested here as "establishing a new order through revolutionary decision"—the act of declaring independence itself serves as a sovereign decisive act to legitimate the break from imperial authority.

In contrast, the Taiping power vision did not transcend the framework of "monarchical autocracy" but sought to replicate traditional dynastic structures. Hong Xiuquan combined the roles of "religious leader" (second son of God) and "political leader" (Heavenly King), using rituals

like the "descension of the Heavenly Father" to amplify his personal sacredness and reconstruct "charismatic authority" dependent on such "exceptional divinity." Although the declaration criticized the Qing for "selling official positions for bribes," it established a strict hierarchical system of "military advisors, prime ministers, inspectors," restored the enfeoffment of kings, and even stipulated that "noble and humble must be distinguished in hierarchy, and norms must differentiate between high and low"—in essence a "religious repackaging of old imperial power." While advocating to "revive the institutions of the Three Dynasties"—such as abolishing Manchu script, restoring Han clothing, and adopting the "Heavenly Calendar"—it denounced Confucian classics as "demonic books", exposing contradictions in its cultural integration.

6. CONCLUSION

This study, through a comparison of the Declaration of Independence and the Announcement to the People of All Directions for Punishing the Barbarian Qing by Divine Command, demonstrates the dual logic of constructing legitimacy from a cross-cultural perspective—the dialectical unity of universal argumentative frameworks and cultural specificity in legitimacy construction. Both the Declaration of Independence and the Announcement to the People of All Directions for Punishing the Barbarian Qing by Divine Command follow the resistance logic of "legitimacy premise-criticism of existing regimes-call to action," but their cores embody profound differences between legal rationality and traditional ethics. The former, rooted in Enlightenment thought, anchors legitimacy in "natural rights" and "social contract," inaugurating a modern paradigm of legal-rational legitimacy; the latter relies on the narrative of "Mandate of Heaven-Hua-Yi Distinction," seeking orthodoxy reconstruction within the cyclical logic of traditional dynastic succession, which reflects the path dependence of Confucian civilization on "moral-historical" legitimacy.

The differences between the two are not merely textual strategies but a deep dialogue between Puritan civilization and Confucian civilization: while the Declaration of Independence reduces politics to a designable rational system through "disenchantment," the Announcement to the People of All Directions for Punishing the Barbarian Qing

by Divine Command attempts to rebuild sacred authority through "reenchantment." This contrast highlights that in the globalized context, legitimacy discourse is neither a simple "rational construction" nor a mechanical "traditional inheritance." Instead, it is an effective response to the question of legitimacy by balancing local cultural traditions and universal values, and through the creative transformation and innovative development of cultural genes within the tension between historical accumulation and contemporary needs.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The first author Siji Chen is responsible for conducting comparative textual and cultural analysis, and writing the whole essay from the first draft to its final version.

The corresponding author Jie Li is responsible for determining the research focus, designing the research framework, and developing the analytical methodology.

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