

## PREFACE<sup>1</sup>

It is a great pleasure to introduce *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (2007) to a Chinese readership. The book examines how the wider world shaped a single document and how it spread globally after its initial publication. It would be absurdly immodest to compare my own work with the American Declaration of Independence of 1776, but I am pleased that it, too, has taken on a life of its own as it has spread across the globe. Chinese is now the sixth language—after Italian, French, Japanese, Portuguese and Spanish—into which my book has been translated. I am therefore very grateful to SUN Yue, and to the Commercial Press, for bringing it to such a large new audience. I hope you will enjoy reading it as much as I did researching and writing it.

Some books are written by design. Others appear almost by accident. *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* was a book I had not intended to write. Nonetheless, in retrospect, I can see that it emerged logically from my earlier interests as a historian. For the first part of my scholarly career, I studied the British Empire in the Atlantic World. My first book, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (2000), was an intellectual history of British conceptions of empire from the mid-sixteenth century to the mid-eighteenth century; soon after its publication, I co-edited a collection of essays on *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800* (2002) which carried the history of the British Atlantic as far as the American Revolution and into the period after the independence of the United States.<sup>2</sup> In between these two projects, I had become interested in the text that announced that thirteen former British colonies in North America were leaving the British Empire to become the United States of America. I noticed that this “Declaration by the Representatives of

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<sup>1</sup> Forthcoming in David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History*, trans. SUN Yue (Shanghai, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 2000); David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Basingstoke, 2009); see also David Armitage, “The American Revolution in Atlantic Perspective”, in Nicholas Canny and Philip Morgan, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Atlantic World, 1450-1850* (Oxford, 2011), 516-32.

the United States of America, In General Congress Assembled” (4 July 1776) was written in the language of eighteenth-century international law, or what contemporaries would have called the law of nations. One or two other historians had had the same insight, but a more general historical readership seemed unaware of the Declaration’s international context. To make that better known, I wrote an article on the Declaration of Independence and international law that appeared in 2002.<sup>3</sup> I had no greater ambitions for that essay than that it should become a single chapter of a book I was planning on the intellectual history of international relations in the eighteenth century. That book was never written: its design ultimately failed.<sup>4</sup> However, another book emerged by accident—the one you are now reading in Chinese translation.

*The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* owed its genesis to an enterprising editor at Harvard University Press. She had heard me present a paper on the Declaration of Independence and suspected that there might much more to say about its international and global history. She suggested that I write a short book expanding the article; the idea was attractive, and I thought optimistically I could finish it in a few months and then return to other projects. As it turned out, I worked on the book intermittently for another five years. I gathered material on the international context of the Declaration in 1776, on its reception and impact after 1776 and, most expansively, on the more than one hundred other declarations of independence that had appeared since 1776. The result was much more ambitious than my editor, or I, had ever expected: a work that offered not just an original argument about the meaning of the Declaration but also a brief history of the process by which statehood became a nearly universal condition for humanity in the past two centuries and more. The book was now so ambitious that I allowed *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* to supplant the broader monograph I had originally planned on international thought in the Age of Revolutions.

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<sup>3</sup> David Armitage, “The Declaration of Independence and International Law”, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> series, 59, 1 (January 2002): 39-64.

<sup>4</sup> A thoroughly reconceived version of that project, including a revised version of my original 2002 article on the Declaration of Independence, recently appeared as David Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought* (Cambridge, 2013).

No book can be immune from the moment that gave rise to it. This one is no exception. Not long before I started working on it, some American historians had been calling for their colleagues to “globalise” American history—that is, to find new ways to place a story often seen as exceptional into international and transnational contexts. I was sympathetic to that movement: I am not an American (I was born in Britain and only moved permanently to the United States in my late twenties) and as a foreigner teaching in the US, I had always tried to introduce my students to more cosmopolitan perspectives on history, their own included. In this regard, I could see a great opportunity to promote the globalisation of American history by taking a novel approach to the Declaration. After all, if it proved possible to “globalise” the very birth-certificate of the United States, the most American of American documents, why could not any aspect of American history be globalised in the same way?

Behind this scholarly motivation lay a more immediately political purpose. I began working on the book in the aftermath of 9/11 and in the shadow of the Second Gulf War and the US-led invasion of Iraq. At that time, the administration of President George W. Bush stood accused of flouting international law, of abusing international institutions such as the United Nations and of “going it alone” rather than following the consensus of the international community. It seemed to be a paradox that the Republicans who were the strongest promoters of such unilateralism were, in a different context, often legal originalists, or believers that the contemporary application of the US Constitution should be constrained by the original intentions of its authors in 1787-88. I call this a paradox because a truly consistent originalism would also have to abide by the strict interpretation of the US’s other major founding document, the Declaration of Independence, which announced “a decent Respect to the Opinions of Mankind”, addressed itself to “a candid World” and spoke the legal language of “the Powers of the Earth”, or the international community of 1776. This seemed to be a message worth recalling by all Americans, but especially by their leaders, at this fraught moment in the US’s relations with the wider world.

These historical and historiographical motivations led me to pursue three goals in the book. The first was to show how the United States had been born international—that is, that the newly formed states (in the plural: they would only become a singular noun after the Civil War of 1861-65) would be bound by international agreements and act in accordance with prevailing international norms. The second was to illustrate how a text that began as international was both Americanised and globalised, how it acquired an almost scriptural aura at home in the United States even as it inspired parallel movements for national liberation abroad. And the third was to begin to answer what I had long thought was one of the most important, but least investigated, questions in modern history: how did the surface of the planet come to be so comprehensively covered with territorial sovereign states (193 of them represented at the United Nations by 2013)? Each of the book's three chapters took one of these aims: the first on the world in the Declaration, the second on the Declaration in the world and the third on the world formed by the other declarations of independence since 1776.

A short book with such big ambitions could only be suggestive not conclusive. However, I think it is fair to say its argument that the Declaration of Independence was also a declaration of *interdependence* has been generally accepted: it is now impossible to ignore the Declaration's significance for international as well as domestic audiences when considering its original meaning. There have been other gratifying signs of the book's international, even global, impact. Not only has it now been translated into six languages, it has been the subject of two major roundtable discussions in American and European journals.<sup>5</sup> It has generated similar studies of the international context and global circulation of

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<sup>5</sup> David Armitage, Laurent Dubois, Robert Ferguson, Daniel J. Hulsebosch and Lynn Hunt, "Critical Forum: Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History*", *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> series, 65, 2 (April 2008): 347-69; David Armitage, Tiziano Bonazzi, David C. Hendrickson, Peter S. Onuf and Arnaldo Testi, "Round Table on Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History*", *RSA Journal: Rivista di Studi Americani*, 20 (2009): 79-108.

American and British constitutionalism.<sup>6</sup> And it has already inspired four conferences: one in Sydney, Australia, in August 2010, on the global history of declaring independence; a second in Mexico City in September 2010 on Spanish American declarations of independence;<sup>7</sup> a third in Tel Aviv in December 2011 on the 1948 Israeli Declaration of Independence; and the most recent, in March 2013, in Charlottesville, Virginia, on the 1804 Haitian Declaration of Independence.<sup>8</sup> I have also been particularly proud that the book has reached a broad reading public, well beyond the academy, in the United States, not least among high-school students and their teachers. There can be no greater reward for an author than the knowledge that their work is shaping civic consciousness as well as scholarly conversation.

It is now six years since *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* was published for the first time in English. With the benefit of hindsight, I can see more clearly where it fits within my own unfolding oeuvre as an historian. It marked a move away from the Atlantic world to the history of other parts of the world and to more global historical concerns<sup>9</sup> It was also evidence of what I have called elsewhere the “international turn” in intellectual history, a move towards the intellectual history of international ideas and institutions as well as to a more internationalised intellectual history focused on the transnational circulation of ideas, arguments and books:<sup>10</sup> this international intellectual history is the subject of

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<sup>6</sup> George Athan Billias, *American Constitutionalism Heard Around the World, 1776-1989: A Global Perspective* (New York, 2009); David Golove and Daniel J. Hulsebosch, “A Civilized Nation: The Early American Constitution, the Law of Nations, and the Pursuit of International Recognition”, *New York University Law Review*, 85 (2010): 932-1066; Linda Colley, *Charters of the Lands: Britain, the World and the Written Constitution, 1780- 2000* (forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> See Alfredo Ávila, Jordana Dym and Erika Pani, eds., *La era de las declaraciones. Textos fundamentales de las independencias en América* (Mexico City, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Selected papers from this conference, with an introduction by David Armitage and Julia Gaffield, will appear in *Slavery and Abolition*, 35 (2014).

<sup>9</sup> See also David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds., *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760-1840* (Basingstoke, 2010); David Armitage and Alison Bashford, eds., *Pacific Histories: Ocean, Land, People* (Basingstoke, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> David Armitage, “The International Turn in Intellectual History”, with comments by Peter K. Bol, GE Zhaoguang, Leigh Jenco, Viren Murthy and SUN Lung-kee, and a

my latest book, *Foundations of Modern International Thought* (2013).<sup>11</sup> It gave rise to my current major book-project, *Civil War: A History in Ideas* (forthcoming), which looks at the intellectual history of breaking states over two thousand years, from ancient Rome to the present, much as *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* examined the making of states over some two hundred years.<sup>12</sup> The chronological sweep of both books, across centuries and then millennia, also exemplifies a larger trend towards “the return of the *longue durée*”, in reaction to the narrower time-scales and tighter focus on periods of roughly 5-50 years that have characterised most historical writing, at least in the English-speaking world, since the 1970s.<sup>13</sup>

In all these ways, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* has been a pivotal book in my own career, the culmination of many of the arguments of my early work as well as the seedbed for many of the major concerns I have pursued in more recent years. However, it would be narcissistic to end on such a purely personal note. Historians are notoriously bad prophets (though no worse than economists or political scientists, for example): when I finished my book, I had thought that the age of declaring independence that began in 1776 had almost certainly come to an end. I was wrong. Not long before my manuscript went to press, Montenegro declared its independence from the Serbian Republic in June 2006; Kosovo followed suit in declaring its independence from Serbia in February 2008. Two years later, in response to a challenge by Serbia to Kosovo’s independence, the International Court of Justice at The Hague ruled in 2010 that international law did not prohibit declarations of independence. Perhaps partly emboldened by this decision, the people of South Sudan voted overwhelmingly in January 2011 to secede from Sudan, leading to the South Sudanese declaration of

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“Reply to My Critics”, *Intellectual History* [Taipei], 1 (2013); also in Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought*, 17-32.

<sup>11</sup> Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought*.

<sup>12</sup> For a brief overview of the aims and argument of this project, see David Armitage, “What’s the Big Idea? Intellectual History and the *Longue Durée*”, *History of European Ideas*, 38, 4 (December 2012): 493-507.

<sup>13</sup> David Armitage and Jo Guldi, “The Return of the *Longue Durée*”, *Global History Review*, 5 (2013).

independence—and the successful creation of the world’s newest state—in July 2011.<sup>14</sup> Where the next such declaration of independence will come from is hard to predict. What is more certain is that any future declarations, like the well over a hundred others produced in the past two centuries, will be able to trace their ancestry back to the American Declaration of Independence of 1776. In this sense, we can see that the dying Thomas Jefferson was remarkably prescient when he called the Declaration—in the words with which I begin my book—“an instrument, pregnant with [Americans’] fate and the fate of the world”.

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<sup>14</sup> David Armitage, “Declarations of Independence, 1776-2012”, in Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought*, 215-32, brings the story up to date.