Public Interest and State Legitimation

How were state formation and early modern politics shaped by the state’s proclaimed obligation to domestic welfare? Drawing on a wide range of historical scholarship and primary sources, this book demonstrates that a public interest-based discourse of state legitimation was common to early modern England, Japan, and China. This normative platform served as a shared basis on which state and society could negotiate and collaborate over how to attain good governance through providing public goods such as famine relief and infrastructural facilities. The terms of state legitimacy opened a limited yet significant political space for the ruled. Through petitioning and protests, subordinates could demand that the state fulfill its publicly proclaimed duty and redress welfare grievances. Conflicts among diverse dimensions of public interest mobilized cross-regional and cross-sectoral collective petitions; justified by the same norms of state legitimacy, these petitions called for fundamental political reforms and transformed the nature of politics.

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Public Interest and State Legitimation

*Early Modern England, Japan, and China*

WENKAI HE

*Hong Kong University of Science and Technology*
To my mother Xu Xiaohua and my father He Yongshou
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So many people and institutions have made this work possible. In the summer of 2009, I visited the Komaba Campus of the University of Tokyo. Mitani Hiroshi was my host. On the first day I went to his office, he took me to an izakaya (a sort of Japanese pub) near the campus. We talked about how to understand the political implications of the indigenous practice of “public deliberation” in Tokugawa Japan and Qing China. Mitani Hiroshi introduced me to the research of Japanese historians such as Kurushima Hiroshi and Hirakawa Arata, which prompted me to move away from the Meiji era and enter into the world of Tokugawa Japan. At the same time, Paul Slack’s work on social policy in Tudor and early Stuart England was a constant source of inspiration. The scholarship on social policies in Tokugawa Japan and early modern England resonated with my own research into the central–provincial debates in Qing China over welfare policies related to currency, famine relief, and financing of water control projects.

In 2011 I began this journey of comparative historical analysis to explore state formation from the perspective of safeguarding domestic welfare rather than fighting foreign wars. The passion I felt in the early stage of research was soon overwhelmed by the huge difficulties of studying diverse issues – famine and poverty relief, infrastructural facilities, and popular petitions over welfare grievances – in three quite different early modern states. I struggled to digest the immense literature on legitimacy and early modern political thought. Although I managed to write several papers by utilizing Qing archival materials, I found it very hard to come up with a coherent framework to integrate the case of Qing China with those of early modern England and Tokugawa Japan. At points, I

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