

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

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To my mother Xu Xiaohua and my father He Yongshou

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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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