


BOOK REVIEW

Public Interest and State Legitimation: Early Modern England, Japan, and China

By Wenkai He. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023.
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Wenkai He's *Public Interest and State Legitimation: Early Modern England, Japan, and China* is the second book he has written on Anglo-Japanese-Chinese comparative political and institutional history. Whereas his first book, *Paths towards the Modern Fiscal State* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), focused on state income and fiscal capacity, *Public Interest* turns towards the expenditure side of governmental activity, and then goes well beyond it into the politics of legitimation and public protest. It is an intellectually expansive, theoretically informed, and deeply insightful piece of scholarship that sets the bar very high for social science-oriented comparative history. It also opens the door to a number of critically important follow-up questions—about deeper layers of causality at various points in state development, or about the relative shape and intensity of legitimation politics in different regimes—that should occupy the field of political history for many years to come.

The book begins with the observation that pre-existing scholarship has thought of early modern and modern state-building as driven primarily by war or by coercive relationships between state and society. In contrast, He seeks to build an account that focuses more on political legitimation, and specifically on the role of public interest enhancement in legitimating states. By doing so, he demonstrates how state–society collaboration on public goods provision can produce a positive feedback loop in which the state legitimates itself in a relatively cost-efficient manner, without requiring the aggressive use of coercive force.

When applied to English, Japanese, and Chinese history, this basic framework produces first a description of cross-regional commonality that spans multiple centuries, followed by a shorter but nonetheless decisive period of divergence, then followed by a gradual reconvergence into the kind of ideologically modern politics that dominated the Eurasian twentieth century. In the first phase, “early modern states” existed in all three countries: in England from 1533 to 1640, in Japan during the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603–1868), and in China from the Tang–Song Transition (circa 900–1100) to 1840. All three early modern states governed in an institutionalized, impersonal manner and, more importantly for He's purposes, delivered robust amounts of material welfare to their populations as a condition for sociopolitical legitimation.

The specific form of such welfare ranged from public works to famine relief, and it could be provided either through governmental bureaucracy or through less formal modes of state–society collaboration. If the state ever failed to facilitate adequate provision of such material welfare, society could and did express its unhappiness through various forms of collective action, usually compelling the state to negotiate over how to settle these grievances.

In the second phase—from 1640 to the later eighteenth century in England, the Meiji Era in Japan, and the post-Taiping Rebellion phase of the Qing Empire—all three regimes restructured and expanded their fiscal apparatuses. In the English and Japanese cases, this expansion of state fiscal capacity fed into a fundamental transformation in the nature of sociopolitical legitimation. Although the provision of material welfare continued to be a major source of legitimation, both countries also developed a new sort of politics in which the public interest was conceived in non-material terms: as religious piety, as moral righteousness, as national honor, and so on. In Qing China, however, material welfare continued to occupy nearly the entire wavelength of sociopolitical legitimation, and it was not until the early twentieth century that notions of non-material public interest became politically powerful.

He further posits that the second-phase rise of nonmaterial conceptions of the public interest was closely connected to rising tensions between “the domestic and international dimensions of the public interest” (33), which itself was a “necessary condition for instigating cross-regional and cross-sectoral collective petitions for fundamental political changes” (33). Thus, these nonmaterial conceptions were often fueled by social perceptions of national geopolitical strength, weakness, honor, and humiliation, and therefore sharply differed from the still predominantly materialistic concerns that drove “domestic” legitimation politics. Only when the international and domestic dimensions came together, often in a volatile fashion, did the conditions for modern ideological politics emerge. After the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901), even China had reached this threshold, thereby bringing all three regimes into a third phase of twentieth-century reconvergence.

As even this very bare-bones summary can show, this is a book full of bold and exciting ideas about the political foundations of modern state-building. By bringing public interest provision to center stage, He provides another much-needed corrective to the common fallacy, most often seen in sections of institutional economics, that pre-modern states were predominantly extractive and oppressive. The synthetic narrative of early modern functional commonality among the three regimes is particularly illuminating, and it is an exemplary piece of comparative framing. Working across wildly divergent socioeconomic and political circumstances, He nonetheless manages to conceptually pinpoint a functional frame in which the three regimes can be compared apples-to-apples. This allows him to convincingly make broader, more abstract claims about the nature of early modern regime legitimation than scholars who offer purely contextual descriptions of each individual regime. Likewise, the distinction between material and nonmaterial forms of public interest is sharp and persuasive, offering a fresh perspective on what separates modern politics from its predecessors.

He has written the book, generally, in a very precise manner, careful not to overstep his clearly high standards of narrative rigor. While the book makes some causal claims—the aforementioned claim about domestic–international tensions being a necessary condition of “collective petitions for fundamental political change” being the most prominent example—it stays away from other kinds of causal issues that its comparative narrative naturally invites the reader to wade into. For example, the reader is

left to wonder why nonmaterial conceptions of public interest emerged more robustly in Meiji Japan than in post-Taiping China. If such conceptions were tied, as He points out, to the political salience of geopolitics and international tensions, then ideally there should be some account of why geopolitics and perceptions of national shame were less salient in Chinese legitimization politics than in their Japanese counterpart—the operative phrase here being “less salient,” rather than “non-existent.” Was it because, even after fiscal expansion in both countries, the Qing fiscal regime remained weaker than its Meiji counterpart, or because the two countries had vastly different levels of socio-ideological homogeneity? Perhaps it was because geopolitics affected socioeconomic life in China less than in Japan? Many other possibilities come to mind. The book chooses, perhaps prudently, to avoid tackling these deeper “why” questions head-on. Nonetheless, it unavoidably whets the reader’s appetite for them.

Similar self-imposed limitations exist in the book’s description of early modern state legitimation. It would be hard to dispute He’s qualitative claim that material welfare-based “domestic” legitimation played a major role in legitimating all three regimes, but this raises the further questions of “how much,” and “to what extent.” Throughout their early modern phases, Qing fiscal income, as a share of overall economic production, was several orders of magnitude smaller than English or Japanese fiscal income, which in turn forced the Qing state to rely more heavily on state–society collaborations to supply public goods. These are, perhaps, differences of degree rather than kind, but there is no reason why such quantitative differences are less historically significant—either for understanding the nature of Qing governance and politics, or for inquiring into the origins of global economic and political divergence—than the qualitative similarities that He ably documents.

The book is, indeed, very careful not to make any such insinuation. Instead, it simply focuses on describing the similarities, rather than parsing the differences. By doing so, it inevitably limits its own ability to weigh and contrast the role that welfare provision played in political legitimation relative to other factors, such as ideology, culture, warfare, or the provision of social justice. This is, again, likely a prudent choice for a book that already covers an enormous amount of descriptive and analytical ground, but again it unavoidably whets the reader’s appetite for more.

All in all, *Public Interest and State Legitimation* is a powerful book that contributes substantially to our understanding of how early modern states politically legitimated themselves, and how the transition to modernity reshaped these legitimization politics. It pursues deep theoretical inquiry and rigorous comparison of a more structured kind than is commonly seen in historical writing these days—harking back, perhaps, to the style of Max Weber, Charles Tilly, and the sociopolitical theorizing of the mid-twentieth century. The most rewarding way to engage with and expand upon the book’s arguments is therefore to operate on the same intellectual wavelength. I would urge all early modern and modern historians of Eurasia, not to mention political scientists, economists, and sociologists with significant historical interests, to give that a try.