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VII.6 On luxury in China

- The Spirit of Law - Book VII. Consequences of the different principles of the three governments with respect to sumptuary laws, to luxury, and to the condition of women -

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Particular reasons call for sumptuary laws in some states. Population by the force of climate can become too great, and at the same time the means of sustaining it can be so uncertain that it is well to put everyone to work cultivating the land. In such states, luxury is dangerous, and sumptuary laws must be rigorous. Thus, to ascertain whether luxury should be encouraged or forbidden, we must first look at the relationship that exists between the number of people and the means of providing them a living. In England, the soil produces more grain than is needed to feed those who work the land and those who provide clothing. So there can be frivolous arts, and therefore luxury. In France, enough grains are grown to feed the field hands and those who are employed in manufacturing. In addition, foreign trade can, in exchange for frivolous things, yield back so many necessary things that luxury is hardly to be feared.

In China, on the contrary, the women are so fertile, and the human race multiplies to such a point, that the lands, however cultivated they be, barely suffice to feed the inhabitants. Luxury is therefore pernicious there, and the spirit of labor and economy is as mandatory as in any republic there may be. [1] They must apply themselves to necessary arts, and flee the sensuous ones.

That is the spirit of the noble decrees of the Chinese emperors. "Our ancestors," said an emperor of the Tang family, "held as their maxim that if there was a man who was not tilling or a woman who was not occupied, someone in the empire was suffering from the cold or from hunger..." [2] And on that principle he had an infinite number of monasteries of bonzes destroyed.

The third emperor of the twenty-first dynasty, [3] to whom precious stones found in a mine were brought, had the mine closed, not wanting to tire his people working for something that could neither feed nor clothe them.

"Our luxury is so great," said Kiayventi, "that people decorate with embroidery the shoes of the young boys and girls they are obliged to sell." [4] With so many men busy making clothing for just one, how could there not be many who lack clothing ? There are ten men who consume the revenue of the lands against one farm worker : how could there not be many people wanting for food ?

[1] Luxury has always been checked there.

[2] In a decree related by Father du Halde, vol. II, p. 497.

[3] History of China, twenty-first dynasty, in Father du Halde's work, vol. I.

[4] In a speech related by Father du Halde, vol. II, p. 418.