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VII.7 A fatal consequence of 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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VII.7 A fatal consequence of luxury in China

We see in the history of China that she has had twenty-two dynasties which have succeeded one another, which is to say she has experienced twenty-two general transformations, not counting innumerable local ones. The first three dynasties were of rather long duration, because they were wisely governed, and the empire was less extensive than it was to become. But we can say in general that all these dynasties began rather well. Virtue, attention, and vigilance are mandatory in China : they were present at the beginning of the dynasties, and they were wanting at the end. Indeed it was natural for emperors brought up in the fatigues of war, who succeeded in bringing down from the throne a family awash in delights, should preserve the virtue they had shown to be so useful, and fear the sensuality they had observed to be so fateful. But after those first three or four princes, corruption, luxury, idleness, and delights carry away the successors : they close themselves up in the palace, their mind weakens, their life shortens, the family declines ; the grandees rise, the eunuchs acquire prestige, only children are placed on the throne ; the palace becomes the enemy of the empire ; an idle population living there ruins the one that works ; the emperor is killed or destroyed by a usurper, who founds a family, whose third or fourth successor goes into the same palace to close himself in once more.