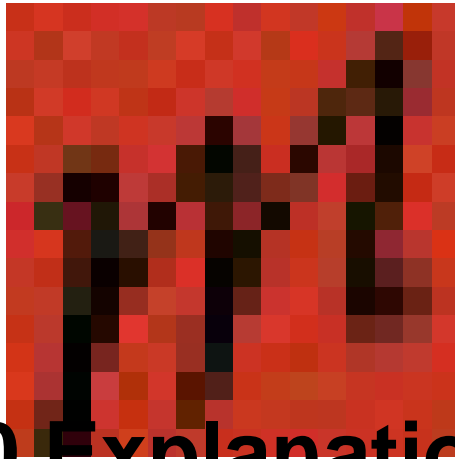


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# XIX.20 Explanation of a paradox on the Chinese

- The Spirit of Law - Book XIX. On the laws in the relation they have to the principles that constitute the general spirit, the ethos, and the manners of a nation -

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What is singular is that the Chinese, whose lives are entirely regulated by the rites, are nevertheless the most duplicitous people on earth. This appears especially in commerce, which has never been able to inspire in them the good faith that is natural to it. The buyer must bring his own scale, [1] each merchant having three : a heavy one for buying, a light one for selling, and an accurate one for those who are on their guard. I think I can explain this contradiction.

China's legislators had two objectives : they wanted the people to be submissive and tranquil, and to be hard-working and industrious. By the nature of the climate and the terrain they have a precarious life ; they can assure their living only by dint of industry and labor.

When everyone obeys and everyone works, the state is in a happy situation. It is necessity, and perhaps the nature of the climate, which have given every Chinese an unimaginable avidity for gain, and the laws have made no attempt to check it. Everything has been forbidden where acquisition by violence was concerned ; everything has been allowed when it was a matter of obtaining through artifice or industry. Let us therefore not compare the morality of the Chinese with that of Europe. Everyone in China has had to focus on what was useful to him : if the thief has looked after his interests, the dupe has needed to think of his own. In Lacedæmon it was permissible to steal ; in China it is permissible to deceive.

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[1] Journal of Lange in 1721 and 1722, vol. VIII of *Voyages du Nord*, p. 363.