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# VIII.21 On the Chinese empire

- The Spirit of Law - Book VIII. On the corruption of the principles of the three governments -

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Before ending this book, I shall answer one objection that can be made to everything I have said so far.

Our missionaries tell us of the vast empire of China as an admirable government that combines in its principle fear, honor, and virtue. It is therefore a vain distinction I have posited when I established the principles of the three governments.

I do not know what honor they are talking about, among peoples who can be made to do something only by beating. [[1](#)]

Besides, our merchants have not by any means given us a notion of the virtue our missionaries are talking about ; you can consult them on the banditry of the mandarins. [[2](#)]

Besides, the letters of Father Parrenin [[3](#)] on the trial brought by the emperor against neophyte princes of the blood who had displeased him [[4](#)] show us a regularly followed plan of tyranny, and violence to humankind methodically perpetrated, which is to say in cold blood.

We have further the letters of M. de Mairan [[5](#)] and the same Father Parrenin on the government of China. After some very sensible questions and answers, the marvel disappeared.

Might it not be that the missionaries had been fooled by an appearance of order, that they had been struck by the continual exercise of the will of a single man, by which they themselves are ruled, and whom they are so fond of finding in the courts of the kings of the Indies, because as they are going there only to make major changes, it is easier for them to convince the princes that they can do anything than to persuade the peoples that they can bear anything. [[6](#)]

Finally, there is often something true even in errors. Particular and perhaps unique circumstances could make the government of China less corrupt than it should be. Causes derived in the main from the physics of climate might have forced the moral causes in this country, and work wonders of sorts.

China's climate is such that it prodigiously favors the propagation of the human species. Their women have such great fertility that nothing comparable on earth is known. The cruellest tyranny there does not halt the progress of propagation. That prince cannot say, like Pharaoh, "Let us oppress them wisely." [[7](#)] He would rather be reduced to formulating the wish of Nero, that the human race have but one head. Despite the tyranny, the climate will always assure that China will populate, and triumph over tyranny.

Like all countries where rice grows, [[8](#)] China is subject to frequent famines. When the people are dying of hunger, they disperse to seek means of subsistence ; bands of four or five bandits form everywhere. Most are quickly eliminated, others swell, and are again eliminated. But with such a great number of provinces, and so far-flung, it can happen that some group strikes it rich. It maintains and fortifies itself, assumes the form of an army corps, goes straight to the capital and the chief mounts the throne.

Such is the nature of the thing that the bad government is the first punished. Disorder surges suddenly, because the prodigious population lacks subsistence. What makes it difficult in other countries to recover from abuses is that they do not have pronounced effects ; the prince is not alerted in a prompt and obvious manner, as he is in China.

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He will not feel, like our princes, that if he governs badly he will be less happy in the afterlife, and less powerful and wealthy in this one. He will know that if his government is not good he will lose the empire and his life.

Since despite their exposition of children, the population still grows in China, [9] it takes tireless work to make the land produce enough to feed them. That requires of the government an effort that is not made elsewhere. It has at every moment an interest in seeing that everyone can work without fear of being robbed of his labors. It must be less a civil government than a domestic government.

Such is the origin of the statutes that have been so much talked about. They have tried to make laws reign with despotism ; but what is joined with despotism no longer has any strength. In vain has this despotism, pressed by its misfortunes, tried chain itself : it arms itself with its chains and becomes yet more terrible.

China is thus a despotic state of which the principle is fear. Perhaps in the early dynasties, the empire being not so vast, the government was declining somewhat from that spirit. But not today.

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[1] It is the rod that governs China, says Father du Halde.

[2] See Lange's relation, among others.

[3] Dominique Parrenin (1665-1741), missionnaire jésuite en Chine.

[4] On the Sourniama family, *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*, 18th volume.

[5] [Jean-Jacques Dortous de Mairan, a prominent French scientist and member of French and English academies.]

[6] See in Father du Halde how the missionaries make use of the authority of Kanghi to silence the mandarins, who always said that by the country's laws a foreign religion could not be established in the empire.

[7] [*Venite sapienter opprimamus eum ne forte multiplicetur* (Exodus 1:10 : 'Let us oppress them wisely, lest they multiply').]

[8] See below, Book XXIII, ch. xiv.

[9] See the memoir of a Tsongtu for clearing fallow lands, *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*, 21st volume.