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XIX.17 A property particular to the government of China

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

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The legislators of China went further [1] : they conflated religion, laws, morals, and manners ; all of that was morality, all of that was virtue. The precepts that related to these four points were what they called the rites. It was in the exact observation of these rites that the Chinese government prevailed. People spent their entire youth learning them, and their entire life practicing them. The learned taught them, the magistrates preached them ; and as they subsumed all the minor acts of life, so long as the means were found to see that they were exactly observed, China was well governed.

Two things were able to easily engrave the rites into the hearts and minds of the Chinese : one, the difficulty of the writing, to which the mind has for a very large part of life been uniquely occupied, [2] because it was necessary to learn to read in the books and for the books that contained them ; the other, the fact that, the precepts of the rites being in no way spiritual, being simply the rules of communal practice, minds are more readily convinced and impressed with them than with something intellectual.

The princes who, instead of governing through the rites, governed by force of corporal punishments, were trying to make the punishments do something it is not in their power to do, which is to instill morals. Punishments will indeed remove from society a citizen who, having lost his morals, violates the laws ; but if everyone has lost his morals, will they restore them ? Corporal punishments will indeed put an end to several consequences of the general malady, but they will not correct that malady. Thus, when the principles of the Chinese government were abandoned, when its morality was lost, the state fell into anarchy, and revolutions followed.

[1] See the classical books of which Fatherdu Halde has given us such fine passages.

[2] That is what established emulation, the flight of idleness and esteem for knowledge.