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XIX.19 How this fusion of Chinese religion, laws, morals, and manners came about

- 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 had the tranquility of the empire as the principal object of government. Subordination seemed to them the best means of maintaining it. With this thought, they believed they must inspire respect for fathers, and gathered all their strength for that. They instituted an infinite number of rites and ceremonies to honor them during their lives and after their deaths. It was not possible to do such honor to dead fathers without being impelled to honor them while they were alive. The ceremonies for dead fathers had more to do with the religion ; those for living fathers more to do with the laws, the morals, and manners ; but these were just parts of a single code, and that code was very extensive.

Respect for fathers was necessarily tied to everything that represented fathers : old men, masters, magistrates, and the emperor. This respect for fathers assumed a return of love for the children, and consequently the same return from the old to the young, from the magistrates to those who were under them, and from the emperor to his subjects. All these formed the rites, and those rites the general spirit of the nation.

You will appreciate that the relationship which the apparently most indifferent things can have with the fundamental constitution of China. This empire is shaped by the idea of a family government. If you diminish paternal authority, or if you even retrench the ceremonies that express the respect one has for it, you weaken respect for magistrates who are thought of as fathers ; the magistrates will no longer have the same attention for the people they should think of as children ; the bond of love which exists between the prince and the subjects also will fade. Take away one of these practices, and you shake the state. It is quite indifferent in itself whether a daughter-in-law rises every morning to go render such-and-such duties to her mother-in-law ; but if we observe the fact that these outward practices are a constant reminder one of a sentiment it is necessary to imprint in every heart, and which from every heart goes to form the spirit that governs the empire, you will see that it is indispensable that this or that particular act be performed.