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XII.7 On the crime of lese-majesty

- The Spirit of Law - Book XII. On laws that constitute political liberty in its relation to the citizen -

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XII.7 On the crime of lese-majesty

The laws of China stipulate that whoever shows disrespect for the emperor shall be punished by death. As they do not define what this disrespect is, anything can furnish a pretext to take the life of anyone at all, and to exterminate any family at all.

When two persons responsible for writing the court gazette had included circumstances in some anecdote which were found to be untrue, someone said that to lie in a court gazette was to show disrespect for the court, and they were put to death. [1] A prince of the blood having distractedly placed a note on a memorial signed with red brush by the emperor, it was decided he had shown disrespect for the emperor, which unleashed against that family one of the most horrendous persecutions that history has ever recorded. [2]

All it takes is for the crime of lese-majesty to be vague for the government to degenerate into despotism. I shall speak more extensively on this subject in the book on the composition of laws. [3]

[1] Father du Halde, vol. I, p. 43.

[2] Letters of Father Parrenin in *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*.

[3] [Book XXIX.]