

FROM FRANCOIS DE QUESNAY *LE DESPOTISME DE LA CHINE (1767)*

[translation by Lewis A. Maverick in *China, A Model for Europe* (1946)]

[Francois de Quesnay (1694-1774) came from a modest provincial family but rose into the middle class with his marriage. He was first apprenticed to an engraver but then turned to the study of surgery and was practicing as a surgeon in the early 1730's. In 1744 he received a medical degree and was therefore qualified as a physician as well as a surgeon and shifted his activity in the latter direction. In 1748, on the recommendation of aristocratic patients, he became physician to Madame de Pompadour, Louis XV's mistress. In 1752 he successfully treated the Dauphin (crown prince) for smallpox and was then appointed as one of the physicians to the King. While serving at court he became interested in economic, political, and social problems and by 1758 was a member of the small group of economists known as "Physiocrats." Their main contribution to economic thinking involved analogizing the economy to the human body and seeing economic prosperity as a matter of ensuring the circulation of money and goods. The Physiocrats became well-known throughout Europe, and were visited by both David Hume and Adam Smith in the 1760s. The Physiocrats took up the cause of agricultural reform, and then broadened their concern to fiscal matters and finally to political reform more generally. They were not democrats; rather they looked to a strong monarchy to adopt and push through the needed reforms. Like many other Frenchman of the mid 18th-century, the Physiocrats saw China as an ideal and modeled many of their proposals after what they believed was Chinese practice. At the same time, they did not ignore what they regarded as China's weaknesses. Quesnay, for example, regarded China as suffering from overpopulation, which he thought weakened the country and contributed to crime. For his information on China, he relied on other writers particularly Jacques Philibert Rousselot de Sursey's *Mélanges intéressans et curieux* (1763-65). Quesnay acknowledged relying on de Sursey for information, but copied lengthy passages word-for-word in a manner that would be regarded as plagiarism today. It is only in the final chapter, when he outlines reform proposals and thoughts on the general principles of government that Quesnay offers original thoughts. Quesnay regarded an enlightened despotism in which the king's laws would be designed to give effect to natural law and the king would regard himself as bound by and the servant of that natural law as the best government. Thus he does not mean the term "despotism" as a condemnation, nor would it have been regarded as negative by his mainly aristocratic readers; in the 1760s the notion of "enlightened despotism" covered programs for considerable political reform in Europe.]

[basis of government – from chapter 1, section 2]

The first sovereigns of China, whose laws and principal actions are [recorded by all the historians], were very good rulers. One sees them occupied solely with making their empire flourish, by enacting just laws and promoting useful arts. But afterward there were several sovereigns who surrendered themselves to idleness, to licentiousness, and to cruelty, and who furnished their successors with baleful examples of the danger to which an emperor of China is exposed when he draws upon himself the contempt or the hatred of his subjects. There were those so imprudent as to dare to exercise an arbitrary despotism in conspiracy with the military, only to be abandoned by the armies, who laid down their arms when ordered to use them against the nation. There are no people more submissive to their sovereigns in the Chinese, for they are well instructed concerning the reciprocal duties of the ruler and his subjects; they are also the most inclined to despise those who infringe on the natural law and on those precepts of ethics which form the basis of the country's religion and of the

continuous and admirable education system. The government leaves no stone unturned to maintain education on a grand scale. These imposing precepts form a sacred and well-established bond between the sovereign and his subjects. The Emperor Tchien-Hio attached the priesthood to the crown, and decreed that the sovereign alone should be the one solemnly to offer sacrifices, a rite which is still observed in China today. ... This union of church and state prevents a multitude of troubles and differences which have only been too common in countries wherein the priests have sought to assume to themselves prerogatives incompatible with their quality as subjects.

[religion and philosophy -- from chapter 2, section 1]

The primary concern of the Chinese religion is the supreme being: they worship him as the principle of all things, under the named Shang-ti, which means sovereign or emperor; or Tien, which means the same thing [Quesney was confused here: "Tien" actually means "Heaven"]. According to the Chinese expositors, Tien is the spirit that presides over heaven, and they regard heaven as the most perfect work of the author of nature. The aspect of heaven has always drawn the veneration of men heedful of the beauty and the sublimity of the natural order; it is there that the immutable laws of the creator are manifested the most clearly. But these laws should not be attributed simply to one part of the universe, for they are the general laws of all parts. This word is also taken to mean the material heaven, and the meaning is dependent upon the subject to which it is applied. The Chinese say that the father is the Tien of the family; the Viceroy, the Tien of the province; the emperor, the Tien of the empire. They render lesser worship to the spirits subordinate to the primary being, who, according to them, preside over the cities, rivers, and mountains.

All the canonical books, and especially the one called Shu Chan, present the Tien as the creator of all that exists, the father of peoples; he is an independent and omnipotent being who knows even the innermost secrets of our hearts; it is he who rules the universe, who foresees, postpones, hastens, and determines at will all and happenings here below; his holiness is the equal of his omnipotence, and his justice, his sovereign charity; nothing that man does moves him, but virtue; the poor in the thatched cottage, the king on the throne, whom he deposes at will, enjoy equally his justice, and receive punishments suited to their crimes. Public calamities are warnings that he employs to arouse men to the love of virtue; and his mercy and his clemency surpasses severity; the surest way of turning away his indignation is by reforming evil ways. He is called the father, the lord; they assert that no outward worship can please the Tien if it does not come from the heart, and is not prompted by inner feeling.

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The emperor, it is said in their canonical books, is the only one who is permitted to render formal worship to the Shang-ti; the Shang-ti has adopted him as his son; the emperor is the principal heir to his grandeur on earth. He clothes the emperor with his authority, and entrusts him with his commands, and heaps benefits upon him.

No one but the most elevated person in the empire is fit to sacrifice to the master of the universe. Let the sovereign dissent from his throne! Let him humble himself in the presence of the Shang-ti! Let him thus draw the benedictions of heaven upon his people! This is the foremost of his duties.

In 1725 there was a terrible flood caused by the overflow of a great river; the higher mandarins did not fail to attribute the cause of this misfortune to the negligence of the subordinate mandarins. "Do not lay the blame on the mandarins," responded the sovereign, "it is I who am guilty; these calamities afflict my people because I lack virtues that I should have. Let us think of correcting our faults, and of alleviating the suffering caused by the flood; as for the mandarins whom you accuse, I pardon them; I accuse only myself for having too little virtue."

[education – from chapter 2, section 5]

There is no city, town or village without teachers to instruct of the use, to teach them to read and write. Then over larger cities have colleges in which, as in Europe, the degrees of bachelor and licentiate, or master of arts, may be taken. The doctor's degree may only be taken in Peking. The possessors of the two higher degrees fill the magistracy and all of the civil offices.

The instruction of the people is one of principal functions of the mandarins. On the first and the 15th of every month when the mandarins of the locality assemble with ceremony, and one of them makes a speech before the people, which always revolves around paternal kindness, filial obedience, the deference due to magistrates, and everything that may preserve peace and Concord.

The instruction which the mandarins must give the people twice monthly is prescribed by a law of the empire, and also sixteen maxims upon which this instruction must be based:

1. To urge upon them earnestly the duties of filial piety and the deference that younger brothers should show to the elder, in order to teach the young people how much they should respect the fundamental laws of nature.
2. To urge that they keep always in their families a respectful worship of the ancestors, to cause peace and concord to reign.

3. That they maintain unity in all the villages, in order to avoid quarrels and lawsuits.
4. That they put high esteem on the occupations of husbandry and of those who cultivate the mulberry tree, so that there will be no lack of grain for food or of clothes to wear.
5. That they accustom themselves to habits of economy, frugality, temperance, and modesty; these are means by which each can keep his conduct and his affairs in good order.
6. That they encourage in every way the public schools, so that the youth may be there be taught good morals.
7. That everyone apply himself to his business, as in fact no means of keeping the heart and mind at ease.
8. That they stamp out sects and errors at their inception, in order to preserve the true and solid doctrine in all its purity.
9. That they instruct the people as to the established penal laws, so they may not become intractable and unruly in their attitude toward their duty.
10. That they instruct everyone thoroughly in the rules of civility and propriety, with the purpose of maintaining good manners and urbanity in society.
11. That they take every care to rear well their children and the younger brothers, in order to prevent them from abandoning themselves to vice and disorderly passions.
12. That they abstain from slander, to affect scandals which might injure innocence and virtue.
13. That they refrain from harboring the guilty lest they find themselves involved in their punishment.
14. That they pay punctually the established taxes, to protect themselves from investigations and vexation by the tax collectors.
15. That they act in concert with the local authorities in each city, to prevent robberies and the escape of the guilty.
16. That they suppress impulses to anger, as a means of protecting themselves from a great number of dangers.

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The official gazette of the empire is another means of instructing; it furnishes historical instruction, and presents all manner of examples to inspire veneration for virtue, love for the sovereign, and horror of vice; it informs the people regarding decrees, regarding acts of justice, and regarding the vigilance of the government. The names of dismissed mandarins may be read there with the reasons for their disgrace: one was too harsh, another too indulgent, another was negligent, another lacked judgment. This gazette also mentions payments granted, retrenchments made, etc. It relates fully the court judgments, the calamities occurring in the provinces, and the relief measures undertaken by the local mandarins by order of the emperor. A digest of the ruler's ordinary and extraordinary expenditures, the remonstrances with which the superior tribunals have made to him about his conduct, the eulogies given by the emperor to his ministers or the reprimands made by him, are all included therein. In short, the gazette contains a faithful, detailed, circumstantial account of all the affairs of the empire.

[laws – from chapter 3, section 1]

The laws of China are all based upon the principles of ethics, for, as has already been pointed out, ethics and politics in China form a single science; and in that empire all the positive laws have as their sole aim to maintain the form of the government. There is no power above these laws; they are found in the classical books, which are looked upon as sacred and are called the U Ching, which is to say, the five books. As the Jews revere the Old Testament, the Christians the New, and the Turks the Koran, so the Chinese respect the U Ching. But these sacred books do not attempt to separate religion, the government of the Empire, and the civil and political laws. All three are irrevocably dictated by the natural law, the thorough study of which is the principal aim of the sovereign and of the scholars entrusted by him with the detailed administration of the government. Thus, everything is permanent in the government of that empire, like the immutable general and fundamental law upon which it is established, firmly and with enlightenment.

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There is no tribunal in the empire, the decisions of which can have the force of law without the confirmation of the ruler. His own decrees are perpetual and irrevocable laws, when they do not violate use usages or the public welfare, and after they have been recorded by the viceroys, the magistrates of the provinces, and published throughout their jurisdictions. But even the edicts and the laws of the emperor will have force in the empire only after registration in the sovereign tribunals [the highest councils of government].

The custom of remonstrating with the emperor has been encouraged at all times by the laws of China, and is freely and courageously practiced by the tribunals and the great mandarins. He is admonished with sincerity and audacity, that to moderate his power is to increase it rather than to destroy it; it since such and such of his ordinances are contrary to the welfare of the people he should revoke them or modify them; that one of his favorites is abusing his kindness by oppressing the people, and that his favorite should be deprived of his charge and be punished for his transgressions.

If it should happen that the emperor has no regard for these remonstrances, and that he should visit his displeasure upon the mandarins who had the courage to embrace the public cause, he would fall into contempt, and the mandarins would receive the highest eulogies; their names would be immortalized and celebrated forever by all manner of honors and praises. Even the outright cruelty of some wicked emperors did not deter these generous magistrates; they one after another exposed themselves to the danger of the cruelest kind of death such as has been suffered by the first individuals who had presented remonstrances. Those terrible examples did not diminish their zeal; they continue to express themselves, one after another, until the tyrant, impressed by their courage, yielded to their representations. But fierce and refractory emperors are rare in China; theirs is not a barbarous government. Its fundamental constitution is entirely independent of the emperor. Violence is detested there, and generally the sovereigns hold to a type of conduct quite the opposite; they themselves recommend that they not be left unaware of their faults.

[the economy – from chapter 1, section 3]

Thus if China enjoys a happy abundance, it is owing not only to the depth and fertility of the soil, but also to the great number of rivers, lakes and canals that water it. There is no city, not even a small village, especially in the southern provinces, that is not located on the edge of the river or a lake or some canal or stream.

The great lakes and many lesser ones, added to the numerous springs and streams that descend from the mountains, have stimulated the industry of the Chinese; they derive great benefits from the multitude of canals that serve to irrigate their lands, as well as to establish easy communication from one province, or from one city, to another. ... All the canals in China are very well maintained, and the greatest care is taken to make the rivers navigable. Even though there are several of them that wind through mountains and rocks that are extremely rough and steep, nevertheless, the hauling of the barges and boats is made easy. By dint of great toil they have succeeded in cutting the base of the rocks in an infinite number of places, making a level tow path for those who tow the barges.

However, in spite of the industry and sobriety of the Chinese people, the fertility of the soil, and the abundance that reigns, there are few countries that have so much poverty among the humbler classes. However great that empire may be, it is too crowded for the multitude that inhabit it. All Europe combined would not number so many families.

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Misery produces in China an enormous number of slaves, or persons who indenture themselves under the condition that they may some time redeem their freedom. A man sometimes sells his son or even himself and his family for a very small price. The government, so attentive in other matters, closes its eyes to these difficulties, and this frightful spectacle is repeated every day. The authority of masters over slaves is limited to ordinary duties, and they treat them like their own children; also, the slaves' loyalty to their masters is inviolable. If a slave acquires money by his own industry the master has no right to take the slave's wealth, and the slave may buy back his freedom if his master consents, or if he has retained the right to do so in his indenture.

Everyone tries to earn a decent living, and it is only by continuous labor that one can provide this; and it is there in the world a nation more laborious, a people more sober and industrious!

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In conclusion, all the inventions that industry can discover, all the improvements that necessity brings to attention, all the resources that self-interest inspires, are here employed and used profitably. A great number of miserable people owe their subsistence only to the care that the taken picking up rags and sweepings of all kinds that are thrown into the streets. Traders even carried on and the night soil, to fertilize the land; in all the provinces of China a great number of people may be seen carrying buckets for this purpose.

[wealth and property – from chapter 2, section 7]

The ownership of wealth is quite secure in China; we have previously seen that the right of property is extended even to slaves or bonded domestics, and throughout the empire children inherit the wealth of their parents and of relatives according to the natural order of the right of succession. As regard polygamy, the usage in China is much like that of the picture out before the captivity of the Hebrews and Egypt. Although by their laws a Chinese may not have more than one legitimate wife, the choice of whom is made with consideration for equality of station and age, nevertheless having several concubines is permitted. However this is only by suffrage, to the end of that he may not die without posterity. The law grants this liberty only to men whose wives have reached the age of forty years without children.

The humbler classes in China live almost entirely upon grain, herbs and vegetables, and nowhere in the world are kitchen gardens more common or better captivated. There are no uncultivated lands near the cities; no trees, hedges, or ditches; they would be afraid to leave the slightest piece of land unused.

The soil commonly yields three crops a year, the first, rice; the second, a crop that is planted before the rice is harvested; and the third beans or some grain. The Chinese spare no pains in collecting all kinds of sweepings suitable for fertilizing their lands, and this contributes greatly to maintaining cleanliness in the cities. All the grains that we are familiar with in Europe such as wheat, rice, oats, and millet, as well as peas and beans, grow well in China.

It is the custom that the landlord takes half of the harvest and pay the taxes; the other half is left to the farmer for his expenses and his labor. As lands are not charged with ecclesiastical tithes there, the husbandman's portion is much the same as the income of farmers in this country, in provinces where the soil is well cultivated.

[domestic and foreign commerce – from chapter 2, section 9]

It has been seen the Chinese Empire is furry well provided with all kinds of products and it is easy to presume from this at the commerce of this nation is quite flourishing. But as the Chinese find all the necessities of life among themselves (and since the great population assures a market to consume all these commodities within the country itself), their foreign commerce is very limited in comparison with the size of the state. The principal trade is carried on within the empire, all of the parts of which are not equally provided with the same things. Inasmuch as each province has its needs and only its particular products, all with lapse into poverty, were it not for the fact that they exchange with one another their useful products. An established circulation in the country eighteen hundred leagues in circumference obviously presents a very extensive commerce; moreover the historian says that the commerce carried on in the interior of China is so great that all Europe's commerce could not be compared to it. A purely domestic commerce may seem quite inadequate to those who believe that nations must trade with foreigners in order to grow rich in money. They may not have noticed that the greatest opulence possible consists in the greatest consumption possible. This consumption has its source within the territory of every nation, and this territory is even the source of gold and silver, whether they are taken from mines, or purchased with other products. Those who own mines sell their gold and silver in order to extend their consumption, for which use the metals, and themselves, or useless; those who do not owned its merchandise, by, simply to facilitate exchange in their trading, nor do they burn themselves with the beyond this usage, because gold and silver are purchased by riches are more necessary than these metals, and because the more one

buys of them to more he diminishes his consumption, which is true opulence. Moreover the commerce of nations, which has no object other than consumption, is confused with a commerce of merchants, which is a service that they make pay very well, and that all the more so when their own commerce is extended afar. The more than nations can save the cost of this, even to the harm of the great fortunes of merchants, the more they will gain for consumption and for the outlays necessary for the perpetual reproduction of the riches that sprang from the earth and furnish the revenue of the nation and of the sovereign.

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Since the domestic commerce of China is flourishing is not surprising that the inhabitants take so few pains to extend it abroad, especially when one notes the scorn that they have for foreign nations. The foreign commerce is very limited; the maritime cities of Canton, Amboy, and Ningpo are the only ports where cargoes may be loaded for abroad. Their voyages by sea are no longer very extensive; they scarcely pass the straits of the sound; the ordinary shipping runs to Japan, Siam, Manila, and Batavia.

[administration – from chapter 5]

If [foreign authors] mean by “despotism” the absolute power of compelling the exact observance of the laws and the fundamental maxims of the government, there is in fact no human power able to stay the power of the emperor. But he himself is so strict in the administration of justice, that the constitution of the government would cry out against any arbitrary clemency that he might exercise through partiality. But if these [authors] attribute to him an authority that is arbitrary and superior to the laws of the nation, they disregard the fact that the constitution of China is based upon natural law in such an irrefragable and so emphatic a manner that it deters the sovereign from doing evil, and assured him in his legitimate administration supreme power in doing good.

The emperor has two councils established by the laws; one of them extraordinary and composed of princes of the blood; the other ordinary, or made up of the ministers of state, who are called Kalaos. Is this body that examines important affairs, makes reports to the emperor, and receives his decisions.

Besides these councils and the six councils in Peking, the functions of which [will be] explained, it should be noted that by a stroke of well reasoned policy designed to preserve centralized authority under one head and to prevent these bodies from impairing the imperial authority or plotting against the state, the jurisdictional powers have been so divided the end of them are reciprocally dependent; if it is a question of some military project, the formation of the armies and their progress is the province of the Ping Pu, whereas their financing is ordered by the Hu Pu, and the boats and vessels for transporting them in the Navy is dependent upon the Kung Pu. Beyond this precaution, the court also

appoints an inspector who inquires into everything that takes place within each council; without being entitled to speak or vote, he attends all meetings, and all decisions are communicated to him. He secretly advises the court or he even publicly accuses the mandarins of faults they have committed, not only in the exercise of their duties, but in their private lives as well; their acts, their words and their habits are all at closely censured. These officers, who are called ka'o li szu, are undaunted even by the princes of the blood and the emperor himself.

As to the provinces, they are directly administered by two kinds of governors; the lower kind govern only one province and reside in its capital, but these same provincial governors obey the viceroys, called Tsung-tu, who govern two, three and even four provinces at the same time. Whatever the authority of these governors, their respective rights are so well regulated that conflicts over jurisdiction never arise.

It may be difficult to believe that the emperor of China has time personally to look into the affairs of such a vast empire and to receive the homage of that host of mandarins he appoints to vacant positions, or that seek to obtain appointments; but such marvelous order is kept there, and the laws have so well provided for all difficulties, the two hours a day suffice for all his duties.

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All the mandarins are restrained further by the visitors from the court sends into each province, the ka'o li szu. The fear in which these compilers are held is so general that it gives rise to the proverb "the rat has seen the cat." This is not without reason, for these censors have the right to deprive all guilty mandarins of their rank and their positions. These censors inform the emperor by special memoranda of the faults of the mandarins. These are immediately distributed throughout the empire and referred to the Li Pu (the civil service board), which ordinarily pronounce sentence on the guilty. In short, the authority of these inspectors is very great, and their severity is as firm as their power; the emperor himself is not safe from their censure when his conduct violates the regulations and laws of the state.

[administration, continued – from chapter 3, section 3]

In Peking there are six sovereign councils, the functions of which are as follows:

The first is called Li Pu; it nominates the mandarins who are to govern the people, and supervises the conduct of all the magistrate of the Empire; it is also the depository of the seals.

The second, called Hu Pu, is charged with the levying of taxes and with the direction of finances.

The third, which is given the name Lee Pu, is to maintain the customs and rites of the empire.

The jurisdiction of the fourth, which is called Ping Pu, extends over the troops and over the posts established along all the highways that are maintained by the emperor.

The Hsing Pu, which is the fifth, judges crime. Before it all capital offenses are finally decided. This court alone has the right to condemn to death without appeal; but it cannot bring about the execution of the criminal until the emperor has endorsed the decision.

Supervision of public works and all the concerns ports and navigation is the province of the council called Kung Pu.

All of these councils are divided into chambers to which the businesses distributed, and as the burden is not the same in our departments, the number a mandarins in the councils varies proportionately.

Beneath the six sovereign councils they are many inferior councils and tribunals, and over these there are only the emperor and the grand counsel which is called the Council of Kalaos, composed of four to six mandarins who are like ministers of state. The six superior councils have departments which, among us, are allotted to the secretaries of state, to the chancellor and to the comptroller general of finances. The sections of all these councils are closely watched by very strict and attentive inspectors; they do not undertake affairs of state unless the emperor transmits matters to them or places them in their jurisdiction. In case one council should require the services of another, they consult and meet together to arrange for money and troops according to the custom of the empire and the needs of the case. At all other times, each council is concerned solely with the affairs in its own jurisdiction.

In a kingdom so vast is easy to understand that the administration of finances, the direction of troops, the administration of public works, the choice of magistrates, the support of the laws and customs, and the administration of justice, require a free exercise of the functions on the part of these principal councils. This has made necessary a multitude of mandarins at the court and in the provinces.

[military forces – from chapter 1, section 5]

... the number of soldiers the emperor maintains in his empire, according to Father DuHalde, is seven hundred sixty thousand. All these soldiers, the greater part of whom are cavalry, are well clad and quite adequately maintained. Their weapons are sabres and muskets. Their salaries paid every three months. In short, the condition of the soldiers is so good that there is no need of employing artifice or force to enlist them: it is a career for man to follow the military profession, and everyone is eager to gain admission, whether by influence or by gifts. It is true that an added advantage of the soldier's profession is that one ordinarily serves an accountant in which he lives. Discipline is very

well observed, and the troops are often drilled by their officers, but their tactics are not very extensive.

Their naval force is unimportant, and quite neglected. As the Chinese have no formidable neighbors on their seaward side, and as they engage very little in foreign commerce, they have small need of a navy for their defense and for the protection of the merchant marine -- a protection which is quite burdensome. However, they have sometimes had rather large naval forces, that of vessels of a straight and type of construction that was not modern -- in fact quite inferior to those to be seen today in the maritime nations of Europe. Chinese navigation has made little progress in this regard.

But it must be agreed that on the rivers and on the canals they have a skill that we lack; with very few sailors they manage barges as large as our ships. There are great numbers of them in the southern provinces; they are nine thousand, nine hundred ninety-nine of them always kept in the service of the emperor and the state. Their skill and navigating rapids, says Father LeCompte, is something amazing and incredible; they almost defy the forces of nature, boldly navigating waterways that would frighten other people.

[the sciences -- from chapter 2 section 4]

If [in China where] the speculative sciences have made little progress, those of the natural law have reached the highest degree of perfection, and if, in other countries, the former sciences are well cultivated and the latter quite neglected, it might seem that the one does not contribute to the other. But this would be an error; truths are revealed reciprocally, and wherever these different sciences are not equally well cultivated we find certain defects contrary to good order. In China, where the speculative sciences are neglected, men are too much given to superstition; in other countries, where little study is given to the study of the natural law, the governments are deplorable; this is that which has made China to be preferred over the other countries.