

# Rhythm as Form of Individuation Process (part 2)

Friday 2 March 2018, by [Pascal Michon](#)

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## Rhythms of Archaic Societies: The Proto-Chinese (Granet - 1934)

According to Granet, the non-metrical conception of rhythm—i.e. not based on a *métron* - *measure* as the Greek metric—which was typical of ancient China, was possibly derived from an immemorial cultural basis resulting from the social functioning of the archaic societies. I say “possibly” because we bump here into one of the most fragile, but not the least suggestive, aspects of Granet’s contribution.

Granet pointed out that the main categories of ancient Chinese thought—in particular Yin and Yang—were mainly known to us through a few poetic collections (*Che King*, a compendium compiled at the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC), manuals of divination (*Yi king*, and his appendix the *Hi ts’eu* probably composed in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC) and calendars (which we trace back from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC). However, it seemed to him more than probable that these first extant scholarly elaborations had been drawn from a much older common cultural background dating back probably from the second millennium BC. This, for instance, showed through the lack of concern, by the authors who used these notions, to precisely define them probably because they were part, in their time, of a widely shared heritage. Thus, Granet thought being able to get a glimpse into this pre-historical background through a number of documents usually disregarded by specialists: the oldest calendars, some legends and myths, and some ancient rituals described in sources from the historical era.

Through these documents, it was possible, Granet suggested, to reach anonymous cultural categories that could be traced to the alternation of forms of the most archaic societies. This provided a continuous view on the history of ancient Chinese thought, from the very early times of the second millennium to its bloom in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC. Given the period of time involved (at least a thousand or perhaps two thousand years), also in view of the scarcity of additional archaeological observations that were available in his days, we realize the extremely perilous nature of Granet’s suggestion. It is very difficult to know, in fact, whether the social forms he reconstructed had actually existed or they only resulted from the filtering of extant evidence through the sieve of Durkheimian conceptions. As a matter of fact, this reconstruction coincided so well with the Durkheimian and Maussian descriptions of archaic populations, that one cannot help but have some doubts about it. At the same time, the Granetian project remains fascinating.

First of all, Granet did not mechanically repeat, as it is sometimes suggested, the Durkheimian doctrine. If all categories of ancient Chinese thought had a social origin, once their origin was pinpointed, only history allowed, in Granet’s eyes, to account for their becoming. Chinese civilization

was characterized by having brought to a high level of abstraction the most archaic forms of life, but also by having eventually preserved this intellectual basis despite the deep and various morphological transformations it had undergone: first, the build-up of a royal power (from 1500 BC); then, its decay and substitution with feudal powers (from the 10<sup>th</sup> century BC); followed by the formation of more urbanized kingdoms administered by civil servants (at least since the “Warring States period” between 453 and 221 BC); finally, their suppression and unification with the establishment of an imperial power (late 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC). Moreover, this research program allowed Granet to suggest a series of brilliant hypotheses concerning the relationship between the Chinese conception of rhythm and the forms of power that existed in the first truly documented periods, which—all considerations concerning their archaic origin put aside—remain among the most captivating points in his work.

The first series of evidence used by Granet to support his historical reconstruction was provided by the oldest Chinese calendars. The latter comprised lists of rustic proverbs concerning natural signs such as the flight of wild geese to the North or to the South, or the beginning or end of hibernation of some animals. These proverbs obviously provided means to distribute and coordinate agricultural activity; their popular origin and the antiquity of the tradition they recorded, therefore, made little doubt. Now, they were already conjoined by two, “mating in the same way as Yin and Yang” (p. 131). Moreover, without following strict astronomical conceptions, these proverbs provided true “*life-formulas* [formules de vie]” (p. 131) which indicated mutations of beings over time.

Since they adjust their life [*réglant leur vie*] to the course of the sun, the swallows, according to scientists, mark exactly the two equinoctial terms with their arrivals and departures. But rustic calendars teach us that swallows do not just travel. In autumn, they retire to marine hiding places [...] In winter, the swallows *stop* being swallows: by entering their aquatic retreats, they *become* shells. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 336, my trans.)

Whether as an emblematic classificatory system or as the matrix of all mutations, the couple of Yin and Yang thus plunged its roots, beyond its scholarly elaboration by soothsayers and astronomers, in immemorial and collective body of beliefs. But, this anonymous body was itself, Granet suggested, a spontaneous translation of the social life rhythms typical of the most ancient times. These animal “life formulas” reflected, in an almost explicit way, those of archaic societies.

Animal mutations are the signals and emblems of the transformations of social activity. The latter, as the mutations themselves, are accompanied by habitat changes and morphological variations. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 132, my trans.)

Hence, when the first Chinese scholars theorized upon or rather pragmatically used the categories of Yin and Yang, they only perpetuated earlier mental forms reflecting the morphological variations of ancient Chinese societies.

In the calendars, Yin and Yang appear as the principles of the seasonal rhythm. If the scientists could use them to play this role, it is because these emblems had the power to evoke *the rhythmic*

*formula of the way of life* [régime de vie] formerly adopted by the Chinese. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 29, my trans.)

The whole erudite doctrine of *Tao* – rhythm and the emblems of *Yin* and *Yang* that emerged in the texts in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, may have derived from a collective and partly mythical body of beliefs which itself was greatly influenced by the seasonal morphological variations of ancient Chinese societies.

The notions of *Yin* and *Yang* could be used to organize the Calendar, because, like the sayings of which it is made, these notions were based on *a rhythmic ordering of social life which was the counterpart of a double morphology*. This double morphology has been translated, in the myth, into the theme of the alternations of form. The need for natural signals led to attribute to things a life-formula in which the rhythm that animated society could again be found. In a parallel way, this life-formula has been determined by attributing to the realities chosen to provide signals *alternating forms* intended to serve, by turns, as emblems for the *contrasting aspects* which, in activity as well as in habitation, the social life was successively endowed with. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 136, my trans.)

The whole universe thus seemed to consist of a collection of antithetic forms cyclically alternating.

From then on, the order of the world seemed to result from the interaction of two lots of complementary aspects. Since *Yin* and *Yang* were regarded as the master emblems of these two opposing groups, scientists were led to consider them as two antagonistic entities [...] The classical opposition of *Yin* and *Yang* taken as symbols of latent or active, hidden or manifest energies, recalls exactly the old formula of social life, which sometimes was spent in the sunny fields and sometimes was restored in the dark of the winter retreats. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 136, my trans.)

Concurrently with the calendars, Granet exploited a second body of documentary evidence: the description of the rituals that were performed in the most ancient times during the equinoctial rural festivals—which are today traced back to the time of the Shang dynasty (second half of the second millennium BC) which is the earliest dynasty of traditional Chinese history supported by archaeological evidence. According to Granet, but we must recognize that his arguments are quite convincing, these rituals highlighted a fairly tight correspondence between the symbolic opposition/alternation of *Yin* and *Yang*, and the traditional morphological opposition/alternation of sex groups. As in Eskimo, Malagasy or Malay societies, there were poetic duels. However, these jousts apparently opposed the two sexes, or more probably the members of a single age group grouped by sex, which were entities considered as *Yin* and *Yang*.

Men and women began by forming two antagonistic choirs. On either side of a ritual axis, they challenged each other, in verse, aligned face-to-face. If, in the women's camp, one was moved while recognizing in the opposing side a truly male aspect (*yang-yang*), it is apparently because the *Yang* (sunny side) was reserved to the group dedicated to labor in full sun. To men belonged

the *adret* [sunny side of a valley] (*yang*), and to women the *hubac* [mountain slope facing the north] (*yin*). The festival field showcased the entire Yin and Yang, the shady slope reaching the slope of light, the sexual groups clashing before mating. “Yang calls, Yin answers”; “Boys call, girls answer.” These twin formulas indicate the antithetical order which controls the relations of the two antagonistic symbols, the same way it regulates the competition of the two rival corporations. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 141, my trans.)

The names which designated the two opposite parties were quite revealing.

The terms that are used are significant: they can only be explained as references to rites and games of sexual festivals. It is said of the Yang that he calls and starts singing (*tch'ang*): this is what boys actually do during sung feast. Yin is said to respond by giving a harmonious replica (*ho*): such was indeed the role of girls. Girls and boys preluded to their union (*ho*) by a joust (*king*): Yin and Yang also jousted (*king*) before uniting (*ho*), and they would do so, like the delegates of the two rival corporations, each spring and each autumn. The word (*ho*), which denotes these symmetrical unions, applies too to the chanted replies which indicate the perfect match of the jousters; similarly, it serves to express the harmony (*ho*) that results from the acting in concert [*action concertante*] (*tiao* or *tiao ho*) of Yin and Yang. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 142, my trans.)

Thus, long before being elaborated by scholars, the categories of Yin and Yang seemed to already govern the rhythmic relations of sex groups during the great social renewal celebrations that took place at the two equinoxes.

The conception as the name of these emblems proceed from the show of the assemblies, where, lined up facing the shadow or facing the sun, two singing choirs replied to each other. They competed in inventiveness and proverbial knowledge, engaging in traditional improvisation. So were invented most of the poetic centones which constituted the matter of the calendar; these centones evoke scenes in the ritual setting of festivals during seasonal changes: hence their value as emblems and signals. [...] The conception of Yin and Yang was sketched on the occasion of dramatic shows where two interdependent and rival corporations, two complementary groups, were jousting and communing. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 142, my trans.)

Granet completed his analysis a little further down, emphasizing again the sociological basis of the categories of Yin and Yang.

The opposition between sexes appeared as the foundation of the social order and served as a principle for a seasonal distribution of human activities. In the same way the opposition of Yin and Yang appeared as the foundation of the universal order: we saw in it the principle of a rhythmic distribution of natural works. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 144, my trans.)

The reconstruction of the morphological variations of the ancient Chinese societies, which resulted

from Granet's research, and on which he ultimately based his interpretation of the fundamental categories of ancient Chinese thought, was probably too beautiful to be entirely true. Yet it would be mistaken to entirely dismiss it. Granet did not slavishly repeat Durkheim's and Mauss' analyses and he was actually quite close to Evans-Pritchard on some important points.

Like many archaic societies, the antique Chinese societies experienced, he claimed, a double morphology. After having been dispersed during the agricultural season, men gathered during the off-season in hamlets and villages.

A simple rhythm contrasted—like a weak to a strong time—the period of disseminated life, in which only a latent social activity subsisted, with the period of congregation entirely devoted to the regeneration of social bonds. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 109, my trans.)

However women, the weavers, followed a reversed rhythm.

Farmers and weavers formed groups that the difference in the ways of life, interests, wealth, attractions, made rival but also solidary. These *complementary groups* divided between them the work to do, distributed the various tasks, as well as the *times* and *places* where they were to be done. Everyone had a *life-formula*, and social life was the result of *the interaction of these two formulas*. The weavers never left their village, they spent the winter preparing the hemp fabrics for the new season. Instead, for men winter was off-season. They rested before going again to work in the fields. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 139-140, my trans.)

This emphasis on the division and grouping by sex was apparently a characteristic of the oldest Chinese societies, and in any case it permeated the festivals which took place at the two equinoxes and during which the social groups experienced periodic "regeneration." Each of these two annual festivals provided an opportunity to honor and celebrate alternately one of the two sex groups.

Men and women, whom their work had alternately enriched, would meet at the beginning and at the end of the low-season. These meetings were occasion of fairs (*houei*) and rendezvous (*ki*) where each corporation, the weavers in spring, the plowmen in autumn, would come in turn to the foreground. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 140, my trans.)

These gatherings, according to Granet, strongly resembled the North-West Indian *potlatches* and constituted "total social phenomena" in Mauss' sense.

The social group put all forces at its disposal into action. It spent everything and expended itself entirely: living and dead, beings and things, goods and products of all kinds, humans as gods, women with men, young and old people, everything was mingled into one bitter and invigorating orgy. The jousts that prepared this total communion sought above all to pit against each other the deceased and the living, the old and the young, the whole past and future, in all possible ways.

(*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 110, my trans.)

As in the Eskimo, during these celebrations, a choir of men and a choir of women were confronted in dance and poetry jousts: “As long as the dance and poetry fight lasted, the two rival parties had to alternate their songs.” (p. 143) These celebrations ended, of course, as in the Eskimos, with a hierogamic ritual.

These festivals took place in valleys where the river drew a sort of sacred border line. It was by crossing it that the representatives of the two rival corporations began to mingle and prelude to the collective hierogamy which ended the festivities. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 141, my trans.)

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