

# Rhythm as Form of Individuation Process (part 1)

Saturday 3 March 2018, by [Pascal Michon](#)

## Rhythms of Universal Individuation in Ancient China: The Tao (Granet - 1934)

Mauss' works opened up radically new perspectives. Unlike later theories of society, their approach was not based on the concepts of "structure" or "system," but on that of "rhythm." By referring to rhythm, they cleared the way for a entirely novel theory of singular and collective individuation which seems today to retain a great explanatory and critical potential. However, we must also recognize some of their respective limitations. Apart from a few allusions to more complex societies, these works provided precise information only on the rhythms of segmentary societies, that is to say, of social groups in which the division of labor was very limited and the chains of interdependence relatively short. Thus, one might wonder if this theoretical breakthrough could be legitimately extended to more differentiated social groups.

In this instance, Marcel Granet's work on ancient China, *The Chinese Thought* (1934), which was contemporary with Mauss' on archaic societies but unfortunately has never been translated into English, constituted a remarkable contribution. Granet (1884-1940) reconstructed the transition from a segmentary to a differentiated society in which a centralized power had taken over and showed that rhythm played a role just as great in this society, one of the most sophisticated and developed in Antiquity, as in the simpler social groups it had replaced.

Like Mauss' works, Granet's contribution has been interpreted in ways which today constitute real "epistemological obstacles," in Bachelard's sense, and which must first be overcome. His insistence on criticizing previous interpretations which considered Yin, Yang and Tao as mere abstract principles, substances or even forces, and his suggestion to consider them as categories determined by a system of symbolic oppositions, has been regarded as a prefiguration of the Levi-Straussian system (Levi-Strauss, 1949; Goudineau, 1982, Karsenti, 1997). According to Bruno Karsenti, for instance, Granet has been one of the firsts to have substantivized the adjective "symbolic" and used it—like Mauss Karsenti claims—as a concept designating "a *system of signs*, organized like a language, and as such ensuring its own coherence and its own meanings." (Karsenti, 1997, p. 188)

As a matter of fact, in the introduction of *The Chinese Thought*, Granet declared, with regard to language, to have started from "the *symbolics [des symboliques]* [...] to outline certain dispositions of the Chinese spirit." He mentioned the "national system of symbols" (p. 27) and concluded: "It will undoubtedly be acknowledged that if these provisional conclusions appear a bit systematic, it is because I had to define the spirit of a system" (p. 30). It is true, too, that throughout his study, Granet insisted on the "emblematic" character of the great Chinese "categories."

The antithesis of Yin and Yang seems to sum up all contrasts. This antithesis is in no way that of two Substances, two Forces, two Principles. It is simply that of two Emblems, which are richer in suggestive power than any other. Together, they know how to evoke all the other emblems grouped into couples. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 124, 126, my trans.)

Moreover, it is true that Granet insisted on the substitutability of the emblems.

The Chinese multiply the classification systems, and then multiply the interweaving of these systems. They avoid anything that makes things comparable and care only about what seems substitutable. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 331, my trans.)

At first glance, all these pieces of evidence seemed to converge and reflect a structural orientation. But, as for Granet's two contemporaries, this impression was misleading because all these concepts received their meaning only from a system that was entirely dominated by the question of rhythm. Like Mauss and Evans-Pritchard, Granet was in no way a Structuralist or even a pre-Structuralist. He could be deemed being one only at the price of a singular distortion and impoverishment of his thought whose origin actually goes back to Levi-Strauss' reading. It is about time, more than eighty years after Granet's death, to release his work from the overinterpretations that have been covering it and to retrieve its original methodological concern: the reflection on the organization of the flow which was at the core of the ancient Chinese thought.

To swiftly reach the heart of Granet's thought, I will start from one of the examples that has long passed for one of the prefigurations of a structural approach. In Book III Chapter II of *The Chinese Thought*, Granet proposed a very detailed analysis of the correlation tables between microcosm and macrocosm which were most commonly used by ritualists, physicians and philosophers in ancient China. In a gigantic system of correspondences and interactions, the Elements, the Directions, the Colors, the Flavors, the Odors, the Vegetable Foods, the Domestic Animals, the Lares or Parts of the house, the Genies of the Directions, the Sovereigns, the Musical Notes, the Numbers, the Couples of Ten Cyclic Signs, the Animal Classes, the Human Activities, the Virtues, the Passions, the Gestures, the Body Elements and the Viscera responded to each other by series of five (p. 375-382). All these tables featured apparently one or rather several systems of signs that were both substitutable and opposable to one another. On the one hand, each element of a series could be associated or replaced by an element of any other series. One of the five Colors immediately evoked one of the five Odors, which in turn evoked one of the five Directions, etc. On the other hand, the elements of a series differed from each other in the same way as the elements of any other series. There was between the five Elements a differential relation, identical to that which distinguished the five Directions, and it was the same with all series of emblems. We were thus apparently dealing with the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes of a structure within which each position seemed to represent a "value" in the Structuralist sense of "internal difference."

These remarks were not completely mistaken but their Structuralist interpretation overshadowed a decisive point: all these oppositions and permutations were possible and could only make sense because they were actually sustained and actualized by the rhythm of the Universe.

“The note *kio* [1] (= East-Spring = Wood), for example, moves the *liver* and puts the man in harmony with the perfect *Goodness*.” Nothing can better as this sentence of Sseu-ma Ts’ien signal the emblematic interaction and deep solidarity that unite physical and spiritual *under the domination of the cosmic rhythm* [italics mine]. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 377-378, my trans.)

Similarly as in Mauss and Evans-Pritchard, a large part of Granet’s readers has seen only *constant difference* and *structure* where *temporal difference* and *rhythm* were prime considerations. All these tables, which have long passed off as the center of his thought, were in fact only synoptic immobilizations of something that the ancient Chinese, and Granet himself after them, saw as organizing the flow of the world. Yin, Yang, Tao and all the classifications by four or five that they had multiplied were not so much, in fact, principles, categories, or even symbolic rubrics, in the sense that we give to these words, as rhythms. The Tao, for example, was defined in one of the oldest extant texts that have been consecrated to it, the *Hi ts’eu* [2], by the following formula: “*Yi yin yi yang tche wei Tao* - All yin, all yang, this is the Tao.” But Granet pointed out that this sentence did not endowed the Tao with the meaning of a category by which a synthesis or a sum of Yin and Yang would occur, or, on the contrary, from which both would emanate as hypostases of an immobile, central and unitary being of the world, but—which was quite different and escaped traditional Western ontology—the meaning of “regulator of alternation.”

The Tao is a Total consisting of two aspects which are also total, because they *completely* (*yi*) substitute for one another. *The Tao is not their sum, but the regulator* (I do not say: the law) *of their alternation*. The definition of the *Hi ts’eu* invites us to see in the Tao a Totality, so to speak, alternating and cyclical. The same Totality is found in each of the appearances, and all contrasts are imagined on the model of the alternating opposition of light and shadow. Above the Yin and Yang categories, the Tao plays the role of a supreme category which is, all together, the category of Power, Total and Order. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 325, my trans.)

Like Yin and Yang, the Tao was not a common substance or a supreme force. It was a concrete category which “set the rhythm of things”; it was “the rhythm of the Space-Time.”

It really presides over the play of all groups of acting realities, but without being considered either as a substance or a force. It plays the role of a Regulatory Power. It does not create beings: it makes them be as they are. It sets the rhythm of things. All reality is defined by its position in Time and Space; in all reality is the Tao; and the Tao is the rhythm of the Space-Time. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 325, my trans.)

The Tao, then, was a “general principle” only in the sense that it was the “rule of all mutation,” which allowed both the production of the world and its manipulation.

In the technical language of divination, the word Tao expresses the essential rule that is found at the bottom of all mutation—actual as much as symbolic—because it globally presides over all mutations. The Tao appears, therefore, as the Ordering Principle which presides, at the same

time, over the production—by way of alternation—of the sensible appearances, as well as over the manipulation—by way of substitution—of the emblematic rubrics which signal and arouse realities. It is all together (because there is no need to distinguish between the technical, the real, and the logical order) the Power of regulation, which is obtained by manipulating the emblems, the effective Knowledge which presides over the substitutions of symbols, the active Order which comes to fruition, by perpetual mutations, in the totality of the Universe. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 328, my trans.)

We see why reducing the emblems to classificatory signs is utterly misleading: it completely misses their pragmatic-dynamic aspect. Order and knowledge were not separable from power. Emblems took on classificatory functions only as forms of mutation. The ancient Chinese, generally speaking, “attributed to their emblems a figurative power which they did not distinguish from a productive efficiency” (p. 24, my trans.). The notions of class and hierarchy were never dissociated from that of efficiency which presided over the one and the other. Granet always showed the two aspects related to each other, which led him to emphasize the importance of Tao as “rhythmic order” in the ancient Chinese thought.

The notion of Tao goes beyond the notions of force and substance, and Yin and Yang, which indiscriminately represent forces, substances and genres, are still something else since these emblems have the function of classifying and animating together the antithetical aspects of the universal Order: Tao, Yin and Yang synthetically evoke, globally arouse the rhythmic order which presides over the life of the world and the activity of the spirit. The Chinese thought seems entirely controlled by the conjoined ideas of order, totality, and rhythm. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 25, my trans.)

The ancient Chinese thought certainly appeared as a substantialist or an ontological, however it was in a very different way from Structuralism. The classificatory system of symbolic oppositions indexed on the two major emblems Yin and Yang did not appear as a structure composed of purely differential relations—as Lévi-Strauss, who relied on the very simplistic model of phonology, believed—but as a set of oppositions, which were not exclusive but on the contrary inclusive and occurring either by “resonance” or “rhythmically.”

The distinction between the Same and the Other is secondary to the antithesis of the Equivalent and the Opposite. Realities and emblems evoked each other by mere resonance when they are equivalent; they occur rhythmically when they are opposed [...] All these rubrics [*rubriques*] take turns in the work (the various Elements, as well as Yin and Yang, ruling alternatively): the most detailed classifications are only conceived to translate a more complex feeling of Order and an analysis (more thorough without ever becoming abstract) of the rhythmic realizations of this Order in Space and Time entirely composed of concrete parts. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 336, my trans.)

One could easily repeat this demonstration with other types of emblems. I will only take one more example which is quite significant in a comparative perspective: that of numbers. Granet showed that numbers, especially those of the decimal and duodecimal finite series, which doubled the

decimal infinite series, certainly served to classify and hierarchize the world, but also that these uses made sense only within a more global practice of dynamic integration. Let us start with the two series of even and odd numbers. They made it possible to distinguish and, at the same time, relate to each other a very large number of realities, which for ancient Chinese thought had the virtue of making them intelligible: “The first use of even and odd numbers is to distribute all things between Yin and Yang categories” (p. 276, my trans.). If we consider now the number five, we can observe the same kind of intellectual functioning. The latter served to connect the five Senses, the five Directions, the five Elements, the five Virtues, etc. It thus constituted a link between apparently disjointed realities of the Universe.

Do we not see that the Five Elements are the major Rubrics [*Rubriques*] of a system of correspondences, that there is no reason to consider them neither as substances nor as forces, that they are, first of all, the symbols of the Five groupings of emblematic realities spread across the Five Sectors of the Universe? [...] We must therefore see in the Five Elements the emblems of a general distribution of things in a Space-Time where the layout of the *templum* delimits four areas and marks the center. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 311, my trans.)

The numbers were therefore operators of division and association. However, here again, Granet emphasized that their “classificatory” function was an integral part of a “protocol” and “rhythmic” conception of the Universe outside of which they did not mean anything.

They were used to adjust the things and the measures specific to each thing to cosmic proportions, so as to show that all would fit in with the Universe. The Universe is a hierarchy of realities. A protocol function is immediately added to the classificatory function of Numbers. Numbers are used to hierarchically classify all real groupings. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 292, my trans.)

But these very hierarchies referred in turn to temporal cycles.

This conception allows (apart from their practical uses) to use the Numbers for the sole purpose of making manifest the structure of the World and the successive stages of civilization through which the rhythm of universal life is expressed. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 275, my trans.)

Thus we must recognize both a classificatory and a pragmatic functions as essential qualities of Numbers.

Assimilated to sites, and always considered in relation to concrete Times and Spaces, Numbers have for essential role not to allow *additions* but to represent and link together various modes of *division*, valid for such or such groupings [...] Rather than to calculate different quantities they are used to note the variable organization which can be attributed to such or such sets. The qualitative differences of these groupings and their value as an absolute Total attract more interest than their arithmetic value, as we understand it. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 207-208,

my trans.)

We see that the ancient Chinese thought, at least as Granet reconstructed it, appeared entirely centered on the notion of rhythm as form of individuation. Just as in archaic societies, the rhythm was not mechanical in any way, nor was it cyclical or cosmic in the Greek sense of this word. In ancient China, the Tao did not mean a periodic return of the same, nor a simple alternation of strong and weak beats. The Tao, notes François Jullien after Granet, was understood as a regulation without rule—Granet insisted: “the regulator (I do not say the law).”

*Regulated* does not stand only for “regular”: the term means that the regularity in question is not given in advance, that it is constantly to be brought about: a regularity *at work*, dynamic—whose way is therefore always unprecedented. (F. Jullien, *Figures de l'immanence. Pour une lecture philosophique du Yi King*, Paris, Grasset, 1993, p. 267)

To put it differently, the Tao was a modulation without model, as Jullien’s rendering of a Chinese scholar from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Wang Fuzhi, clearly shows.

It would betray the idea of regulation, says Wang Fuzhi, to imagine that it could obey a pre-established model; and one would be, in particular, completely wrong concerning the meaning of the initial phrase of this paragraph: “A *yin*-a *yang*, this is called the Way (of regulation),” to believe that it could mean: “a *yin*, then a *yang*, a *yin*, then a *yang*” in a mechanical way, like two threads that would not stop alternating on a frame to “weave” the canvas. (F. Jullien, *Figures de l'immanence. Pour une lecture philosophique du Yi King*, Paris, Grasset, 1993, p. 265)

Rhythm, in this non-metric form, replaced in ancient Chinese thought, without being a mere analogue, the oppositions on which Western thought has massively been built up. It made the oppositions between Sacred and Profane, Pure and Impure, Left and Right inoperative.

The Chinese do not strongly oppose Religion to Magic, nor Pure to Impure. Sacred and Profane do not even constitute two distinct kinds. The Right can be devoted to secular works without becoming the antagonist of the Left. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 363, my trans.)

Rhythm also replaced the oppositions between Same and Other, Being and Non-Being, Being and Becoming, Transcendence and Immanence, Sign and Thing, Subject and Object. In a general way, it constituted the paradigm of a way of thinking foreign to any dualism or, as François Jullien rightly claims, of a thinking based on “immanence.”

The distinction between the Same and the Other is secondary to the antithesis of the Equivalent and the Opposite. Realities and emblems evoke each other by mere resonance when they are equivalent; they occur rhythmically when they are opposed [...] Yin and Yang do not oppose the

way of Being and Non-Being do, nor even in the way of two Genres. Far from conceiving of a contradiction between two different *yin* and *yang* aspects, the Chinese admit that they complement and perfect each other (*tch'eng*)—in reality as well as in thought. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 336, my trans.)

It is therefore possible to say that, in ancient China, the doctrine of Tao, Yin and Yang, viz. the doctrine of rhythm, has occupied the place taken in the West by the ontology: “The ontological and logical order are translated together into rhythmic and geometrical images” (p. 164, my trans.). However, noticeably, this doctrine involved no ontology, no doctrine of being; it entirely focused on efficiency and its universal modulations.

The Chinese representation of the Universe is neither monistic, nor dualist, nor even pluralist. It is inspired by the idea that the Whole is distributed between hierarchical groupings in which it nevertheless dwells entirely. These groupings can only be distinguished by the Efficiency power which is proper to them. Linked to hierarchized as much as singularized Space-Times, they differ, if I may say so, by their content, and, even more, by their tension: Chinese see in them more or less complex, more or less diluted, more or less concentrated realizations of the Efficiency. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 336, my trans.)

Granet suggested that this non-dualistic characteristic of the ancient Chinese thought, its orientation towards immanence and the primacy it gave, consequently, to rhythm, probably derived from earlier religious conceptions based on the belief in the Universe as a living animal endowed with both sexes.

In sacred events, while implementing a coherent distribution of sites, occasions, activities, uses, emblems, a total order was restored by celebrating, it was believed, a collective wedding and while Yin and Yang also united and sexually communed. If, therefore, Time, Space, Society, and the Universe owe their *bipartite order* to the category of sex, it is by no means the result of a metaphysical tendency to a substantialist dualism. *The idea of couple remains associated with that of communion, and the notion of totality controls the rule of bipartition.* The opposition of Yin and Yang is not conceived, in principle, (and has never been conceived) as an absolute opposition comparable to those of Being and Non-Being, Good and Evil. It is a relative opposition, and of *rhythmic nature*, between two rival and interdependent groups, which are complementary in the same way as two sexual corporations, alternating like them in work and emerging in turns on the foreground. (*The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 145, my trans.)

[Next chapter](#)

---

## Footnotes

[1] For the names of works or words cited by Granet I preferred, for the sake of simplicity, to keep the spelling he used. For the names of dynasties and places to which I refer for myself, I use instead the *pin yin* transcription.

[2] Which is itself an appendage of the divinatory textbook named *Yi King*, dated traditionally from the 5<sup>th</sup> century, but more probably composed in the 4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries. See M. Granet, *The Chinese Thought*, 1934, p. 116, n. 4.