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SPOTLIGHT

Marcel Granet (1884–1940)

Rémi Mathieu

Centre national de la recherche scientifique, France
mathieuremi@sfr.fr

The history of French Sinology is marked by a series of axial dates and prominent names – Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat, the Marquis d’Hervey de Saint-Denys, Paul Pelliot and, above all, Édouard Chavannes – who made Francophone studies of China remarkable throughout the nineteenth century, the age of the birth of modern scientific research. Marcel Granet, whose fame outlived his premature death at the beginning of the War, on November 25th 1940, left a durable mark on this history through the alliance that he managed to weave between his sinological knowledge, his study of sociology, brilliant intuitions, and a pedagogical capacity rooted in a writing-style as elegant as it is instructive.

He had multiple scholarly talents but was unique in his gift for popularization. It would be possible to summarily divide his work into two great threads, sometimes remarkably entwined: inform the wider educated public about the roots and mysteries of ancient Chinese culture; and share his innovative readings of the documents that for more than two thousand years have formed the foundations of “China knowledge”. It was through this scholarly route that Granet embarked on a brilliant academic career, and that he traced out a path from which he would never depart: that of an innovative, sometimes iconoclastic, interpretation of documents from, for the most part, Antiquity.

Keywords: Granet, Ancient China, Shijing, history, sociology

關鍵詞：葛蘭言，古代中國，詩經，歷史，社會學

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I. Fêtes et chansons anciennes de la Chine [Festivals and Songs of Ancient China]: the first decisive steps of “an entry into the matter”

The doctoral thesis that Granet defended in 1911 and published in 1919 is entirely consecrated to a sociological analysis of the first part of the *Shijing* 詩經 (*Classic of Poetry*). He maintains that these poems are “popular songs, as one senses” (Granet

¹ For a succinct history of European, and therefore French, Sinology, see the already old but precious small volume by José Frèches (Frèches 1975).

² See the longform interview with Jacques Gernet in Goudineau 1988, where Gernet underlines the foundational nature of Granet's method as developed in his thesis and the fact that he never abandoned either the “mould” or the method. If he is reserved about the Granet of *La Pensée chinoise* [“Chinese Thought”; not translated into English] and *La Civilisation chinoise* [Chinese Civilization], he praises the innovative character of the textual investigation in *Festivals and Songs of Ancient China*.

1919, 6). The idea is to reveal what the poems had always been telling literati who had not wanted to listen to them: the poems are, for the most part, rhymed and rhythmical songs, and their study demonstrates that they were at the heart of rural festivals before they came to be used for political and moral ends. Granet's thesis was not "unheard of" insofar as scholars, and not minor ones at that, had already perceived the popular origin of these songs gathered and standardized by scribes in the service of the seigneurial and royal courts of the pre-Confucian era. The idea is already present in Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), and even more so in Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716–1798)³ and in writers up to modern times, but had not been followed to its logical conclusion in an analysis of the *mentalités* of the authors of these songs. Granet's double dedication to "the memories of Émile Durkheim and Édouard Chavannes" gives a decisive direction to this socio-sinological approach, which borrows from both the French school of sociology and academic Sinology. Chavannes, regarded as the founder of modern Sinology, was his teacher and oriented him towards the study of Chinese Antiquity, the formative and structuring period of the thought (or rather the various schools of thought) of the vast geographical zone that is "the sinicized world", and a period whose structures were to endure up to modern times. The quality of Chavannes' works (studies and translations) seduced Granet and pushed him to choose this path, beyond which he would scarcely venture.⁴

The central idea of *Festivals and Songs* consists in extracting the outlines of an authentic peasant life – made up of love affairs, neighbourhood quarrels, struggles for prestige between communities, local cults, "relations of proximity" (what today we would call "social interactions"), including religious festivals around sacred places which were distinct from the official cults of the seigneurial courts – from the enveloping slag of the

³ See Yuan Mei 2011. The preface recalls Yuan Mei's penchant for the amorous relationships described in the *Shijing* (op. cit., 18.) Zhu Xi saw them as above all "songs of the debauched" – but this was also a first way of saying that they are not exclusively literati works.

⁴ This is not the place to give an overview – which can easily be obtained elsewhere – of Édouard Chavannes' scientific output. I will simply cite the prodigious quality of his analysis in Chavannes 1910b ("a model of erudition and precision", Granet would write) and Chavannes 1909. Of his numerous translations, I will only mention the five published volumes of the *Shiji* of Sima Qian (Chavannes 1895-1905, since republished), and of course Chavannes 1910-1911. Chavannes had been the student of the Marquis d'Hervey de St-Denys, Professor at the Collège de France, whose post he stepped into on his return from China. Granet repeats his pride at having been "the pupil of Chavannes and of Durkheim" at the end of his Introduction to *Danses et légendes de la Chine ancienne* [*Dances and Legends in Ancient China*] (Granet 1926, 56, and below, n. 9).

moralizing glosses. The first part of the *Shijing*, the *Guofeng* 國風, contains sociological riches rarely noticed by the Chinese scholastics, who, not only during Antiquity but throughout the imperial period, were preoccupied with the decipherment of archaic terms and their ethico-political exploitation. After having deciphered and translated these texts (no simple endeavour for a text as difficult as the *Shijing*), Granet sets out to interpret them, not according to “fashionable theories” such as animism, but according to a modern criticism limiting itself to the facts described and the persons present.⁵ He does not try to “search in ancient facts the origin of present facts” (Granet 1919, 4) or to look for the explanation of Chinese practices in practices outside of China (a foundation-stone in Henri Maspero’s work, who drew a parallel between the ancient Chinese and the modern Tai)⁶. His interpretation insists on the symbolic value of the details of these songs: he emphasizes this in discussing the plants and animals, which are not decorative but actors in a theatre playing out its mummery before us. Through these gestures and these characters a lost world that the literati had not wanted to see rises up. A world whose rural rituals are parallel to but not identical with the court rituals painstakingly described in the *Rituals*. “There is a possibility that the songs reveal old customs that predate classical morality” (Granet 1919, 7). Granet does not speak of “myths” here (the word’s time had not yet come), but he evokes the correspondence between ritual and belief, which is a way of underlining the bi-directional relationship between myth and ritual that Claude Lévi-Strauss would study. Finally, these morsels of verse are poems to be sung individually or collectively expressing and provoking sentiments, often communal emotions where “passion speaks in all purity” (Granet 1919, 11). The form of the translation and analysis of these songs must give account of and transmit their affective force. Granet undertook this with undeniable success, rendering the melody of their passions into a harmony of sounds, thanks to the rhythms of his translations and opportunely chosen words. He rejected the moralizing interpretation and certain philological digressions of the commentators, but not the information they gave on the society, symbolic relations

⁵ In his methodological principals, he mostly takes aim at de Groot 1886, and Wieger 1909, whom he regularly assassinates. See also de Groot 1892-1910.

⁶ See Maspero 1923 and 1929, republished in Maspero 1971, 221-276. Granet himself however would not hesitate to link the customs of the Lolo of Tonkin to those of the peasants of Chinese Antiquity in support of his theses on ancient marriage customs (see below).

and relation to the imaginary of this distant time that only they can know. In this respect, he recommends consulting all commentaries on a song in order to comprehend what can be understood of it in our time (Granet 1919, 18, n. 1). His ambition was two-fold in its aim and in its means: to discover, behind the formal expression of sentiments, the authentic social relations of the peasant masses (and above all relations between man and woman, including amorous relationships), and to utilise the totality of available textual elements, including those furnished by the glossers of the first centuries. The result is astonishingly true, in contrast to Séraphin Couvreur’s annotated translation which is overly reliant on Zhu Xi’s orthodox glosses and those of his successors from the Song to the Qing (“a useful aid for the missionary”, Couvreur would say). After a first section devoted to “the love-songs of the *Che king*”, Granet then extracts from them the literary vestiges of “ancient festivals” of forgotten periods of the Zhou. “Forgotten” because little touched on by the historical texts which, like the *Chunqiu* 春秋 and the *Guoyu* 國語, only tell us of the lives of the nobility of the Eastern Zhou. It is here that he reconstitutes the local festivities little regarded by the scribes, many being linked to wedding ceremonies, others to periods of ritual purification at the turn of the year or of the seasons. It is the seasonal rhythms that will largely determine the calendar (a Chinese art *par excellence*) and therefore the scansion of the moments for social activities and the cohesion of family groups and clan alliances. He also insists on the significance of the sacred places (cults of mountains, rivers, forests) whose importance in Chinese religious life we know, and tries to retrace in the parallel activities of the nobles, described in the official rituals (*Liji* 禮記, *Yili* 儀禮, *Zhou li* 周禮), the more spontaneous rites of rural populations. It is undeniable that Granet’s description of this peasant world has all the defaults of an ideal mental *reconstruction*, but he gives life to the texts and, more importantly still, to peoples that until then it had been difficult to see as living. In this regard, *Festivals and Songs* remains a model of the genre, in its own time and in ours.

II. Sociological studies, and the development of a method applied to Ancient China

The intellectual filiation of Granet is closely linked to his time, and particularly to the French school of sociology of Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss.⁷ He regarded himself as a sociologist of China and his academic works belong to this innovative lineage. In a series of studies that appeared during the first years of the 20th century, he would use the whole body of ancient (that is to say essentially pre-imperial) literature to reconstruct a living system intended to give an exact image of China's original society and thought. From Durkheim, who died in 1917, he borrowed the notion of "total social fact", believing that all facts and gestures take place in a context where they are interdependent and symbolically linked to each other.⁸ He therefore concentrated on collective representations and on the various phenomena which might translate a social group's awareness of itself and of other groups or even of other ethnicities (at the time "other races" would have been used) such as the barbarians. It is not difficult to imagine that he would have read the founder of the French school of sociology's *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* [*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*] or *Les Règles de la méthode sociologique* [*The Rules of Sociological Method*] with profit. He focused especially on religious facts, as he had begun to in *Festivals and Songs*, knowing how to use official literati documents but being most interested by the study of the popular emotions that group phenomena (marriages, funerals, births, festivals and banquets, theatrical combats) imply. He borrowed a powerful concept, still in use today, from Marcel Mauss, who was also a friend of his, and his study *Essai sur le don* [*The Gift*]: the idea of the exchange of goods through gifts and counter-gifts. Granet had no difficulty in applying this concept to Ancient China, even keeping the Amerindian term *potlatch* (Granet 1926, 611, 613 n. 1), doubtless little suited to the Asian

⁷ Here I will reproduce certain points developed in my preface to the revised and annotated reissue of Granet 1994, VI ff.). At the head of a paragraph in his article "Le dépôt de l'enfant sur le sol...", see below), he cites a major methodological proposition of Mauss: "It is necessary to rediscover both the social sentiments and the social structures which these myths are only representations of, and these rites only the gestures of." Reciprocally, Mauss would say of Granet "All I know of China is what my colleague and friend MG has taught me" (Mauss 1938, 273). On the study of these two intellectual filiations, see the still pertinent analysis of Goudineau 1982, *passim*.

⁸ At the time (beginning of the 20th c.), Durkheim dominated the French intellectual landscape. Granet would be inspired by the ideal of giving an account of the logical totality of a society which "made up a system". Mircea Eliade wrote that Granet was "fascinated by Durkheim's sociology" (Eliade 1971, 306).

context. The gift created an obligation towards, and a dependence on, the giver on the part of the receiver, who would then try to regain the upper hand, feeling obliged to offer more in return through presents, at the risk of ruining himself but also of acquiring prestige. Granet insists here on the behaviour symbolised by the act of “ceding” (*rang* 讓) in order to conquer a superior position over the debtor who owed a present. The historical narratives of the *Shiji* 史記 and the *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 would supply him with a reservoir of examples to support this thesis, so evident today, on ancient social relations.

Among the works that he published along these lines, let us draw attention to the studies grouped together in a posthumous volume *Études sociologiques sur la Chine* [*Sociological Studies on China*] (Granet 1953). In a quite long article “La polygynie sororale et le sororat dans la Chine féodale. Étude sur les formes anciennes de la polygamie chinoise” [“Sororal Polygyny and Sororate in Feudal China. A Study of the ancient forms of Chinese polygyny.”] (Granet 1920a), Granet sought to demonstrate that the ideal marriage was with a group of sisters or, in a lesser form, with a woman accompanied by companions who could have been her younger sisters. If they were not her sisters they would be relations, and obligatorily from the same clan. The aim of the process was to matrimonially unite two clans, and not only a man and a woman. Evidently, if this phenomenon is demonstrable it is only for the nobles whose ritualized chronologies we have. It is more difficult to prove for the peasantry, unless we suppose that marriage customs were identical at both ends of the social spectrum. Granet nevertheless affirms that “the assembled texts [...] formally establish that sororal polygyny was, in practice, a generally followed custom and obligatory, in law, for the nobility” (Granet 1953, 27). Here it seems that Granet is describing an idealized system (ideal for the ritualists at least) the practical application of which it is difficult to envisage (he himself recognizes that the companions of brides are often relatives rather than sisters, Granet 1953, 44). He even postulates “a trace of levirate” (marriage between a widow and a brother of her deceased husband) in ancient Chinese society, a hypothesis which seems audacious in the light of classical literature. This hypothesis leads him to conclude in the existence of a primitive system of “the collective union of a group of brothers with a group of sisters” (Granet 1953, 52, 58, taken up again in

Granet 1926, 15 and n. 2). Granet's analysis here, although intoxicating, does not convince, resulting above all as it does from the exploitation of a few late commentaries justifying certain ritual practices which appear to the commentators to reflect an ideal the reality of which seems insufficiently demonstrated.⁹

More relevant, in my eyes, is the article "Coutumes matrimoniales de la Chine antique" ["Marriage Customs of Ancient China"] (Granet 1912) in which Granet takes up and systematizes the information on marriage already gathered during his investigation of the poems of the *Shijing*. He adopts, with youthful verve, the same attitude as in *Festivals and Songs*, and disparages the Chinese commentators as "limited philologists [...] incapable of observation, [...] there is reason to mistrust them" (Granet 1953, 69, 85). All the finesse of Granet's university thesis reappears in this article's analysis of the poems of Antiquity, and the emotional substance of these songs is drawn out from the behaviour and emotional affects expressed or implied. He brilliantly shows the links between the agricultural calendar and prenuptial and wedding practices, which are so closely correlated: for one becomes engaged in the Spring, and marries in the Autumn.

In "Le dépôt de l'enfant sur le sol. Rites anciens et ordalies mythiques" ["The placing of the infant child on the ground. Ancient rites and mythic ordeals."] (Granet 1922b), Granet sets out to interpret poetic and ritual texts, dating from the Zhou and from the Han, and related to the placing of a newborn child on the ground of their birthplace. This practice is attested in paragraphs of the *Liji*, verses in the *Shijing*, and in extracts from a manual for the education of girls written by the great scholar Cao Dagu 曹大家 (official title of Ban Zhao 班昭, 49-120, poetess and co-author, with her brother Ban Gu 班固, of the *History of the [Former] Han* 漢書). The child is thus tested and their will for life put to the quick, for girls as well as for boys, through the energetic help of the earth. However, this is also the moment when the first differentiation between the sexes appears, and in their status, hierarchy, and future roles. Symbolic signs are displayed at the entrance to the room defining their tasks: for a boy, a bow, for a girl, a piece of cloth. This same "placing" was carried out for the dying, who sought the same chthonic energy. The site of the placement was generally in the southwest

⁹ Vandermeersch 1977, 315 ff. emphatically rejects the theory of levirate advanced by Granet.

corner of the house, the residence of the powerful family guardian spirits (Granet 1953, 167-168, 170, 192). For the dying, the ritual was accompanied by a recalling of the soul launched from the house's roof. Granet establishes a link with the mythological stories recorded in the *Shijing* which recount the destinies of exceptional heroes abandoned on the ground and saved by the gods, such as Houji 后稷, the Lord of Millet. He qualifies this part of the narrative as a "mythic ordeal" (Granet 1953, 181, 183) during which the gods, Heaven, Fate... make known to man the capacities of the abandoned infant but (*and therefore?*) chosen by spiritual forces. This study is certainly one of the most successful, fortuitously mixing ritual practices, collective emotions and mythology. It is a forerunner of the studies on a larger canvas found in *Dances and Legends*.

In two other articles "La vie et la mort. Croyances et doctrines de l'antiquité chinoise" ["Life and Death. Beliefs and doctrines in Chinese Antiquity."] (Granet 1920-1921), and "Le langage de la douleur d'après le rituel funéraire de la Chine classique" ["The language of suffering in the funerary rituals of classical China"] (Granet 1922a), Granet returns to this sort of analysis, principally carried out on the basis of rituals (*Liji*, *Yili*, *Zhou li*, *Da Dai liji* 大戴禮記 etc). He examines the Chinese conception of life and death as situated on a numerological plane, a concept dear to the literati and especially to the Confucians. For them, these two segments of human existence are part of a logical and quantifiable system whose respect will ensure the correct unfolding of life and death, as long as the right *tempi* are observed. Numbers determine the emotions linked to these events and also to certain beliefs, such as those relating to great men's reincarnation in certain of their descendants. As he clearly states, numerology served to allow scribes to demonstrate to everyone the unity of the universe and its coherence as manifested in the inalienable relationship established between man and the world (Granet 1953, 220). This enterprise is revisited in the second article, explicitly based on Mauss's article "L'expression obligatoire des sentiments" ["The obligatory expression of sentiments"] (Mauss 1921). Granet founds his analysis (here it is tempting to write 'again and always') on the ritual classics cited above rather than on the philosophers, whom he makes no use of but who nevertheless could have offered him perspectives different to the formal views of ritualists of all stamps. The language of suffering (essentially what is discussed is the language of grief) was more codified than any other and all groups (nobles and peasants, literati and merchants, soldiers and

religious officiants...) sought to conform to its multiple and complex rules. It was not, however, merely a spectacle, ritualized gestures, an exchange of gifts and banquets (Granet 1953, 233, 238). Grief is of course also an emotion that the poets and philosophers articulated and on which they have many things to say which cannot be contained within the normativity of the princely courts. On this point, Granet's analysis reduces the field of investigation by considering it primarily in its symbolic aspects.

Finally, the *Catégories matrimoniales et relations de proximité dans la Chine ancienne* [*Matrimonial Categories and Relations of Proximity in Ancient China*] (Granet 1939) marks a new departure, unfortunately the final one – he died the following year, in Granet's endeavour to reconstruct ancient Chinese society through the reconstitution of its family structures. This study's very far-reaching analysis was innovative for its time. It made an important impact on non-orientalist sociologists through its approach, which presupposed a knowledge of the language and technical terms of family relationships, which are so complex in the Chinese model of the family. In *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté* [*The Elementary Structures of Kinship*], Claude Lévi-Strauss voiced his debt to Granet, but also underlined the errors in his analysis, at least as far as the Chinese domain was concerned. But it is true that by that time Lévi-Strauss could refer to other works by Chinese sociologists more specialized in the domain and who had themselves benefitted from cutting-edge contemporary research, particularly that carried out in the United States.¹⁰ Here again, Granet served as a pioneer, and ran the risk of being carried away by the seductive force of some of his own intellectual constructions which have not always been confirmed by subsequent studies. Lévi-Strauss speaks of his “confused and contradictory” interpretations, his “too simplistic” hypotheses, of the “extremely doubtful” context of Granet's demonstrations which were obsessed by an Australian system that he took as a frame of reference, and on top of all this that he opposed peasant mores to feudal institutions (*customs* versus *rites*). Lévi-Strauss's criticisms drew on research carried out by Chinese sociologists publishing in English, including Han-Yi Fêng, Francis Lang-Kwang Hsu and Fei Hsiao-Tung (H. T. Fei) (here I respect the transcriptions used by these authors, who

¹⁰ See Lévi-Strauss 1967, 358 ff. Elsewhere, in Lévi-Strauss 1964, 23 n. 1 and Lévi-Strauss 1966, 397, he recalls his admiration for Granet, whose work he qualifies as “admirable”, describing his “brilliant” intuitions as being “of genius”.

lived in the United States and are cited in this way by Lévi-Strauss). In the field of the sociology of Ancient China it would seem that Granet rather imprudently ventured onto ground that he did not completely master.

III. Mythology as it is danced, a new reading of ancient narratives (synthesis of *Dances and Legends*)

The *magnum opus* of Marcel Granet was and has uncontestedly remained his magisterial study of ancient Chinese mythology, *Dances et légendes de la Chine ancienne* [*Dances and Legends in Ancient China*] (Granet 1926, reissued in 1994a). At the time, Chinese “mythology” was a new idea. The mythology of “primitive” peoples had long been the object of scientific study. It was investigated through oral fieldwork carried out amongst living populations. Its object was primarily the peoples without writing (it was sometimes said, “without history” [*sic*]) of North America, Africa, and Oceania, for reasons which are incontestably linked to colonization in all its forms. However, at the beginning of the 20th century, the only scholarly mythology imaginable for Europeans was that of Greece and Rome, based on the writings of the authors considered as classics studied by the Humanities. Apart from Ancient Egypt or Vedic India – rare specialities reserved for a happy few – few scholars ventured beyond the shores of the Mediterranean, the linguistic barrier forming a major obstacle. Granet had the idea of applying the model of compilation and analysis of written mythical narratives to China’s formative period, essentially that of the Zhou. Even the word “mythology” (*shenhuaxue* 神話學, a recent coinage) is still scarcely recognized, in China or in the West, when speaking of Chinese Antiquity; often the more lay term “legends” is used in preference.¹¹ Granet had already envisaged the question from a purely religious angle in his short work *La Religion des Chinois* [*Religion of the Chinese People*] (see below) in 1922. Several years later he would set out on a vast investigation with the aim

¹¹ It is the term used by B. Karlgren in Karlgren 1946, 199-365, published not long after the death of Granet. It is again used in the title of the lengthy study of Maspero 1924, and evidently in *Dances and Legends...* where Granet uses it interchangeably with “fables” (Daoist), and even “novels” (“romans”) (Granet 1926, 31, 32 n. 3). Is a “fable” (fabula) only a picturesque and moral story, unanchored in religious soil? There would appear to be grounds for distinguishing between the terms.

of presenting a quasi-complete representation of Chinese myths (even if he would deny such exhaustivity [Granet 1926, 41-42, 55]). Once again, this immense work was placed under the auspices of Mauss to whom it was dedicated and who read the proofs. Granet hoped to find social facts, that is to say village customs and rural rites, but also and above all ways of thinking about the world and human relations, in these mythical narratives. But is it possible to construct a socio-political reality from a narrative based on the imaginary and the symbolic? One phrase encapsulates the principle behind his analysis: “Legends derive from the transformation into narrative of the ritual dramas and religious dances that played an important role at the time when seignorial power was being established.” (Granet 1926, 1, 51, 389). The relationship between a myth’s narrative and its transposition in “ritual drama” constitutes an enigma that anthropologists have not ceased to try to solve, as Lévi-Strauss attempts in his *Mythologiques*. Does the *legend* derive from the drama or the drama from the *legend*? Scholars played a major role in the compilation of narratives and they historicized them, inserting figures of reference such as the sage kings and emperors of pre-historical periods for didactic purposes. Moreover, the morsels of text are particularly brief, because subject to scholarly censorship that aimed to render them edifying. China did not know the genre of the epic, all that there is are these centos grouping several phrases, sometimes only several words, that need to be joined up together to be made sense of and to reconstruct the structure of a system. Granet quickly perceived that certain schemes recurred constantly, such as accepted – if not compulsory – narrative constructs, and this regardless of the period, from the Shang to the Han (Granet 1926, 37 n. 1, 48, 51, 593). Furthermore, historical literature being almost exclusively in the hands of the Confucians, ethics must always triumph in the name of social harmony and the purity of morals of the ancestral line. The centos (the term he uses to refer to these short narratives taken up by the authors in service of their ideology) that can escape from the control of the philosophers of the time and the court historians are rare. Where, in this scholarly literature intended for the “knowledgeable” and the princes – above all for their education – is there space for the popular speech that could give an account of the very real local cults and deeply-held beliefs of the peasant world (the question already posed itself for the poems of the *Shijing*)? We think here of Kuafu’s 夸父 race with the sun, of the propensity of the bird *jingwei* 精衛 to cross the Ocean, of the

beauty Chang'e's 常娥 flight to the Moon... Many of these mythical fragments are found in a major work that is unique for its genre because it is not contaminated by the ideological conflicts of its time: the *Shanhai jing* 山海經 or *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (translated into French as *Classique des Monts et des Mers* by the author of this article). Granet makes constant and permanent use of this text, and his exemplary use of its scholarly glosses is extremely incisive. But the bibliographical store on which he draws is larger still: all of ancient Chinese literature is exploited, its texts but also its commentaries and sub-commentaries (Granet 1926, 42-43). This method does raise some questions, as the works concerned cover a period spanning over a millennium, even if the majority are from the Eastern Zhou, for well-known historical reasons.¹²

By means of this intercrossing of anecdotes, Granet reconstructs a China he regards as real, from its origins to the birth of official history at the beginning of the Empire. This reconstruction does not constitute the main interest of the work, hypotheses about the roots of Chinese civilization and the supposed formation of a “feudality” having long been thrown into question by archaeologists and historians from both West and East (the hazardous but reiterated theory of the coexistence, following an invasion, of two peoples in Chinese Antiquity had a long shelf life). What really comes to life in these pages are the ways of representing to oneself the complex world of relationships among men (struggles for power and for prestige, real and symbolic conquests of territory and space), and between men and life-forces (animals, plants, cosmic elements) through foundational cosmogonic narratives. The recovery of these narratives – most frequently in the form of short apologia – by Daoist authors would give them a long life allowing them to find their place in fantastical literature during the Han period, and remain there throughout the Six Dynasties. What had been a ritual drama would become a literary object, but also an element of the “Daoist” religious cult (thinking here of “the Paces of Yu 禹” of distant origin). At no point however did this ensemble constitute a “system” . For that it would have needed a

¹² See my discussion in the preface to Granet 1926, XIV-XV. B. Karlgren criticized Granet for this undifferentiated use of texts of varied origins, eras, and ideologies, see Karlgren 1946, 278 n. 1, 325 n. 1, 346, 351... However Granet defied the fashion of his time for questioning the dating of ancient texts: “If we allow free rein to the Chinese and the Sinologists, soon nothing possessing any documentary value will rest of all the ancient literature”, he writes (Granet 1926, 24 ff.)

master craftsman such as Hesiod or Homer to lend coherence to these disparate, imbroglioned narratives the structures of which are so unbelievably complex. Granet could not, and did not wish to, surmount the incoherences that are the very essence of ancient mythology, but his presentation, although not complete was by this very fact representative of the ancient mythic world. The reception of this masterpiece was simultaneously enthusiastic and critical. For my part, it is precisely because I took on the task of criticising it when I prepared the “revised and annotated” edition that I have maintained my enthusiasm for a study still without equal in the finesse and profundity of its analysis, independent of occasional errors.

Granet has the good sense, in this book as in others, to defer to future archaeological discoveries for the confirmation of his hypotheses (Granet 1926, 619). Unfortunately in his time archaeology did not furnish him with any very relevant elements to cast into doubt or refine his hypotheses. The 20th and 21st centuries have been periods of an unequalled richness in archaeological finds, especially in the field of texts written on bamboo slips (thinking of the sites of Mawangdui 馬王堆 and Guodian 郭店). These have cast into doubt many of the approximate truths of the beginning of the 20th century in ways that Granet, or any other Western or Chinese researcher, could not have guessed at. The chronology of texts is a major element of an analysis that replaces the ideas and ritual practices described in them in a socio-political context. Although he was conscious of the difficulty of treating writings of different ideological, geographical and historical provenances on the same footing, he drew few methodological conclusions from this. The inventor of a sociological approach to fictional, and sometimes sacred, narratives, he was unable to confront the results of his work with those of other Eastern or Western scholars. Granet’s approach thus has, in his own eyes as in ours, the value of a *hypothesis*. However, these mythological domains are as illuminated by interpretative intuition as by the hope of a properly historical demonstration.

IV. Dissemination: access to Ancient China for the wider public

The work of dissemination begins when a scholar is sufficiently master of his subject and has proved his aptitude to carry a scientific enquiry to term. This was the case for

Granet, if we think of the two vast synthetic ensembles that are his *Chinese Thought* and *Chinese Civilization*. Certain of his articles that appeared at the beginning of the 1920s show their author's desire to address the non-sinological "honest man". This is the case for a small number of analyses reprinted in the above-mentioned (and inappropriately named) volume *Études sociologiques sur la Chine*. In his "Remarques sur le taoïsme ancien" ["Remarks on Ancient Taoism"] (Granet 1925), he returns to the Paces of Yu, a ritualized gesture in the practice of religious Daoism which finds its origins in a myth whose traces seem ancient. It would seem to be possible to assimilate what Granet calls neo-Daoism (*néo-taoïsme*) to the religious Daoism that appeared in the 2nd century. The question of a continuity between the mystical Daoism of Zhuang zi and the so-called "magical" practices of this late Daoism, which is nevertheless a heritor of the first, is posed (Granet 1925, 249). This question has since been more comprehensively tackled by Chinese and Western Sinologists. In "L'esprit de la religion chinoise" ["The Spirit of Chinese Religion"] (Granet 1929b), Granet evoked the place of the "three religions" (*sic*) (Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism) in social life, although saying that he would, as was his habitude, "leave Buddhist mythology to one side". In this essay he rapidly surveys and offers a synthesis of religious practices, which he will be able to more fittingly develop in his work for the wider public *Religion of the Chinese People*.

La Religion des Chinois [*Religion of the Chinese People*] (Granet 1922c, then 1951, reprinted 1980) proposes an overview of popular and lordly practices and their afferent mythologies. Only a few pages are devoted to Daoism and Buddhism, scarcely doing justice to these two grand teachings of Chinese civilization. The author's affirmation that the first Daoist religious movements are "very poorly known" (Granet 1922c, 132) is sufficiently eloquent of his lack of interest in these developments of the thought of the Dao. Along similar lines is his claim that the introduction of Buddhism into China "is doubtless destined to remain a mystery", a witness to the limited attraction this doctrine held for him. Globally speaking, in this book he offers the bases, that will become more scholarly expositions in *Chinese Civilisation*, in language which is both accessible and agreeable to read, a virtue which traverses the majority of his work.

Finally, in “La droite et la gauche en Chine” [“Right and Left in China”] (Granet 1933), he demonstrates how diverse the notions of “right” and “left” are in China and in Europe, in practice and in their symbolic representations. Not only when speaking of the human body, but also for the cosmos, and for man’s representations of the world and social relations. In China, *yin* and *yang* play a primordial role in the fixing of this physical and imaginary horizontality (Granet 1933, 277).¹³

Chinese Civilization appeared in 1929.¹⁴ It is divided into two main sections: political history and Chinese society. The first begins with the five mythical emperors and finishes with the Han dynasty (in fact the Former Han). In other words the historical background is examined very rapidly (Granet 1929a, 19-59) and for Granet a chronological history of China ends very early. It would be possible to argue that reducing the history of “Chinese civilization” to this period is misleading, if not wrong, especially when it is presented in forty pages.¹⁵ The second part, which treats the inhabitants of the countryside, the foundation of chiefdoms, seigneurial towns, and society at the beginning of the imperial period, is more interesting and more appreciated. It is here that Granet’s talent for synthesis really comes into play and shows its worth, despite the severe judgements of some Sinologists at the time, such as Alfred Forke.¹⁶ His talent for storytelling and the, sometimes affected, elegance of his style contributed to the public success of *Chinese Civilization*, but also gave rise to exaggerated accusations of imaginary constructions and misleading exploitation of the texts. His sociological analyses of an essentially pre-imperial China are based on the prior research whose value we have outlined above, and which cannot be treated condescendingly or superficially and without recognition for a work of synthesis so clear and intelligible for the layman.

¹³ Here we will not touch on the article “Quelques particularités de la langue et de la pensée chinoises” [“Some particularities of Chinese language and thought”] (Granet 1920b), which, in spite of its interest, bears the mark of its time of publication. Advances in linguistics, in particular Chinese linguistics, mean that graphological and philological analyses, and even more so, the grammar, are for the most part outdated. For the time, however, the effort to inform the reading public was a welcome initiative.

¹⁴ Granet 1929a was published in Paris by La Renaissance du livre, then reissued in pocket format in 1968 by Albin Michel. In 1994 I contributed to a new edition accompanied by a bibliographical index of citations and an afterword (Granet 1994b, 509-571); references given are to this 1994 edition.

¹⁵ On this period see, in French, Maspero 1927, republished in 1965. Granet only cites this major work a dozen times in the footnotes to his *Civilisation chinoise*. Also see Gernet 1964, not to mention the major syntheses of Ancient Chinese history published in English...

¹⁶ He sees it as a dreamed-up China, “an interesting novel”, and his appraisal finds common ground with the American criticism of Ding Wenjiang, who is severer still (see my reissue, Granet 1994b, 536-537).

Certainly, Granet puts his cards on the table from the beginning, declaring that he intends to express “the state of [his] opinions” without trying to address himself to the specialists (Granet 1929a, 15), but starting from “a direct analysis of the documents”. This is what makes it a remarkable work for its time and of a literary quality unique for the genre, at least in the European world.

The author of *Chinese Civilization* then conceived the ambitious idea of presenting a general synthesis of the philosophers of Antiquity, which was to become the work for which he was long best-known, *Chinese Thought*, published in 1934 and presented as a “complement” to the preceding work. This is not the place for an appraisal of the virtues – and the few vices – of this grand synthetic work. Other authors have since expressed more incisive opinions and more diversified approaches.¹⁷ However Granet had had the audacity to believe that it was possible to offer a global vision of the “recipes for wisdom” elaborated during the golden age of the *hundred schools*.

V. Conclusion. What remains of Granet?

The final tally of Marcel Granet’s work must be placed in context: there can be no judgement that removes him from the intellectual world in which he lived and in which his work was conceived. Child of the 19th century and adult of the beginning of the 20th, he inherited the historical, archaeological and sociological knowledge of the period which saw the birth of scientific Sinology with Chavannes and Pelliot. Born at the same time as Positivism and Scienticism, he was one of the first to uncover the social imaginary, trying to reconstitute it from fragilely-established and difficult to interpret texts. His other great merit is to have attempted an exhaustive study of Chinese rituals in order to build a model that would give a system, for the peasant world as well as for the upper classes.¹⁸ The reception of his works was sometimes lukewarm and on a few

¹⁷ In France, let us mention Cheng 1997 (multiple re-editions), and the many publications of François Jullien seeking to identify the “unthought” (“impensés”) in Europe and China. The studies published under the direction of Joseph Needham and Michael Loewe are remarkable examples of enquiry in the fields of Chinese thought, not to mention the works of Jacques Gernet.

¹⁸ Two French authors have taken up this sort of enquiry along other paths: Vandermeersch 1977 (see note 11), and Boileau 2013, which I have reviewed (Mathieu 2017).

occasions critical. But, expressing himself in an elegant and limpid language, Granet was able to conquer wider audiences than just his colleagues, which played no small part in the success of his publications.

To know China, Granet is not enough. But it is not vain to begin from his approach and then to enrich it with the many works produced by contemporary Sinology, not just in France but also in the United States and in Europe. If he can be reproached it is not so much for his errors of interpretation (others have made similar mistakes since) but for having given the impression that all China could be understood through its formative phase. To the contrary, the imperial period opened the long era of what is called “classical” China, which was regarded as “eternal” by the Europeans who discovered it. It is not impossible that Granet was still a prisoner of this immobile, conservative vision. Yet, it is to Granet that so many of us European Sinologists, and more largely wider publics curious about the cultures of the Orient, owe having penetrated into a world regarded as difficult of access. Far from taking an esoteric approach, such as the obscure visions of the missionaries, he was able to show that it is only possible to understand China through an intimate knowledge of her ancient texts.

Appendix: The Reception of Granet in China

The works of Granet (*Gelanyan* 葛蘭言) have received varied receptions in China. His claim to explain Chinese society and thought if not better than, then at least differently than, Chinese scholars has scarcely been enthusiastically received. The interpretations of “sinological anthropology” have been criticized.¹⁹ Nevertheless an important part of the Chinese intelligentsia – who studied in France at the beginning of the 20th century – showed an interest in his work. The French school of sociology was appreciated and some of its works were translated into Chinese. Durkheim’s *Les Règles de la méthode sociologique* were translated and prefaced by Xu Deheng 許德珩 (1890–1940) and Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868–1940); Wang Li 王力 (1900–1986), who studied at the University of Paris, also published a translation of Durkheim’s *De la division du travail social* in 1936. The principal publications of Marcel Mauss, including his *Essai sur le don* were also translated. Yang Kun 楊堃 (1901–1998), who had been Granet’s student, was influenced by his works before graduating in 1930. He published an *Introduction to the Research of Marcel Granet* in 1943. Today’s Chinese school of anthropology has promoted Granet as one of the most important of the European scholars who worked for the understanding of China. Amongst them, Wang Mingming 王銘銘 – who teaches in Peking and is one of the school’s most public figures – has promoted the translations and works of Mauss and Granet, which have been rediscovered and revalorized. In the footsteps of Granet, folklorists such as Ma Changyi 馬昌儀, and mythologists, such as Yuan Ke 袁珂, have, in a certain manner, placed their research in the line of the scientific study of beliefs and “superstitions” (the word *mixin* 迷信 is of Japanese origin) that have resurfaced after the Cultural Revolution. Today’s Chinese school of anthropology can trace its origins back to the work of Granet and of Mauss, as Wang Mingming (2018, 151) notes. In the current political context, Granet has benefitted from renewed interest as a promoter of Chinese thought in the West (Lu 2018).

¹⁹ See Xu Lufeng and Ji Zhe 2018, 40–41 ff, and the special issue of the journal *cArgo, Revue Internationale d’Anthropologie culturelle & sociale* on “The New Chinese anthropology. La nouvelle anthropologie chinoise.”

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