

The Ancient China Studies of Marcel Granet: An Examination of *Festivals and Songs of Ancient China*

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Abstract

As both a sinologist and a sociologist, Marcel Granet tended to combine the sociological methods with textual analysis, which is best illustrated in his monograph *Festivals and Songs of Ancient China*. Although his methodology is imperfect, it challenged some traditional interpretation and provided inspiring perspectives for the study of ancient Chinese religions.

Key words: Marcel Granet; *Festivals and Songs of Ancient China*; *Shi Jing*

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INTRODUCTION

Marcel Granet (1884 – 1940) was a French sociologist, ethnologist and Sinologist. As a follower of Edouard Chavannes (1865 – 1918) and Émile Durkheim (1858 – 1917), Granet was one of the first to bring sociological methods to the studies of China, with a special focus on Chinese folk religion in the pre-Qin period (before 221 B.C.). In one of his best known works, *Festivals and Songs of Ancient China*, Granet applied sociological analysis to the Confucian classic *Shi Jing* (the Book of Odes, 诗经) in an attempt to find the true meaning of its love songs and reconstruct the ancient festivals behind them. His methodology is inspiring for both *Shi Jing* studies and research on ancient Chinese religions in the pre-Qin period, and is therefore worth reviewing.

1. FRENCH ACADEMIC CULTURE

Marcel Granet's studies of China were greatly influenced by the academic culture in France at the time.

France has a long and distinguished Sinological tradition that can be traced back to the late sixteenth century, when missionaries from the Society of Jesus began to introduce Chinese culture to the French, primarily via translations of Chinese classics and reports on their own missionary experiences in China. After the nineteenth century, French Sinology moved beyond its missionary roots and developed into an independent academic field. The beginning of the twentieth century saw the rise of several prolific and influential French Sinologists, among whom Edouard Chavannes was the most accomplished. An expert on Chinese history, religion and epigraphy, Chavannes is best known for his translations of major segments of *Shi Ji* (Records of the Grand Historian, 史记), the work's first ever translation into a Western language, and for his exhaustively researched and detailed study of the indigenous cult of Mount Tai, which included annotated translations and extensive commentary. In his studies, Chavannes adopted both the traditional methodology of careful textual analysis and new methods of modern historical and scientific research. His approach to Sinological studies was passed on to Marcel Granet and two of his other students – Paul Pelliot (1878 – 1945) and Henri Maspero (1883 – 1945).

The turn of the twentieth century in France was also marked by the rise of the Durkheimian school of sociology founded by David Émile Durkheim, who was driven by a desire to justify sociology as a legitimate discipline distinct from philosophy or psychology. For Durkheim, a fundamental aim of sociology is to discover structural “social facts;” that is, sociology should study phenomena attributed to society at large, rather than being limited to the specific actions of individuals. In his view, social facts have an independent existence greater and more objective than the actions of the individuals composing society, and

may exercise coercive power over them. Only such social facts can explain observed social phenomena, and social science should be purely holistic. These ideas of structural functionalism and holism are fundamental to Durkheimian sociology, which, in the 1920s and 1930s, developed so as to become hardly distinguishable from what one usually thinks of as “cultural anthropology.” At that time, being a Durkheimian came to mean being a student of “primitive” peoples, societies, or civilizations, with a passion for linking social phenomena to a specific social organism and studying it with sociological methods (Paul Vogt, 1976), pp.33-44). Marcel Granet was such a Durkheimian.

Granet’s engagement with the Durkheimian sociological theory began with his enrollment in 1904 in the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, where he majored in history, and also studied philosophy, law, and sociology. His experiences of studying under Émile Durkheim lent a Durkheimian character into his work. In 1908, he began to study Chinese under Edouard Chavannes, thus inheriting the legacy of French Sinology. Combining the perspectives of both Durkheim and Chavannes, he was uniquely able to bring sociological methods to the study of ancient China.

2. THE GENERAL METHODOLOGY OF GRANET’S ANCIENT CHINA STUDIES (YANG, 2003, PP.193-218)

As pointed out by Granet’s student Professor Yang Kun, Granet argued that the history of ancient China can be divided into three phases: the primitive period, which is the longest period and is enshrouded in legends and mysteries with no confirmed records; the feudal period with half-reliable records; and the imperial period beginning with the Qin dynasty, which marked the start of the real “historical” period. Influenced by the Durkheimian conception of sociology, Granet’s studies focused largely on the first two relatively “primitive” periods. Unlike many of his Chinese counterparts who relied mainly upon the archaeological discoveries made in the twentieth century, Granet took the view that archaeology in China was still very much embryonic, and instead based his research on his own unique ways of interpreting historical texts.

Chinese scholars active during the Qing Dynasty and those from the Doubting Antiquity School (*Gushibianpai* 古史辨派) of the early twentieth century were very much keen on figuring out the actual time when a historical text was written in order to determine its authenticity, and regarded as worthless many texts discovered to be authored later than claimed. Granet however argued that it was the facts recorded in the texts rather than the texts themselves that truly counted. In his view, it is the duty of researchers to distinguish real social facts from distorted historical narratives, or in the words of his student Li

Huang 李璜 (1895 – 1991), to “unravel the true from the fake” (伪里求真).

Moreover, he suggested that even if a text was found to have been created later than claimed, it could still be important for an understanding of mythology. In addition to carefully reading and interpreting texts as other Sinologists did, Granet also valued the social significance behind the texts, which distinguished him as a sociologist. Granet’s attitude towards texts was a bold challenge to traditional Chinese textual criticism and the orthodox French Semantics of his time, and anticipated the much more radical argument of Postmodernists that historical texts, whether primary or secondary, are all subjective and selective in nature, and are therefore no different from literary works. While such argument unfairly neglects the historical instinct – seeking the truth about the past — it has provided a thought-provoking perspective.

According to Yang Kun, the sociological analysis used throughout Granet’s studies of historical facts is characterized by four features: i) emphasizing the quality, rather than quantity, of facts; ii) regarding social facts of ancient China, from a Durkheimian perspective, as a natural, objective and integrated whole not influenced by individual emotions or feelings; iii) comparing facts happening within the same cultural sphere or in different phases of one cultural organism; and iv) reducing reliance on field research methods which were typically important in sociological analysis.

This methodology of sociological analysis can be found in nearly all his works, best represented by his influential *Fêtes et chansons anciennes de la Chine* (1919; translated into English as *Festivals and Songs of Ancient China*, 1932).

3. FOCUS: FESTIVALS AND SONGS OF ANCIENT CHINA

In this book, Granet explored ancient Chinese beliefs and customs in the pre-Qin period (before 221 B.C.) using evidence from the Confucian classic *Shi Jing*. Granet’s book consists of two parts, one on “The Love Songs of *Shih Ching*,” and another on the historical reconstruction of “The Ancient Festivals” of China. After a section on “How to Read a Classic,” the other three sections of the first part are textual studies of a selected number of the poems included in *Shi Jing*, which are classified into “Rustic Themes,” “Village Loves,” and “Songs of the Rivers and Mountains.” Based on this selected evidence, a reconstruction of ancient festivals is attempted in part two, which is divided into sections on “Local Festivals,” “Facts and Interpretation,” “The Seasonal Rhythm,” “The Holy Places,” and “The Contests.”

The reason why Granet selected the love songs of *Shi Jing* for his study was that “the *Shih Ching* is an ancient text through which it should be easy to make

the acquaintance of ancient forms of Chinese religion,” (Marcel Granet, 1932, p.4) and that “poems are unlikely to be altered by the compilers of the collection. It is easier in poetry than in prose to differentiate between the original thought and the notions which may have arisen to obscure it.” (p.5) So after carefully reading the songs as well as their various interpretations by subsequent generations, Granet tried to make a distinction between the explanations of words or syntax which were given out of moral or political purposes and those supplied merely to justify an academic interpretation. In his opinion, the latter could be used to help understand the songs while the former should be excluded. To ascertain the meaning of each ode, Granet focused on the rhythms they contained, which he thought could reveal certain correspondences of expression allied to certain correspondences between things, and he also made comparisons between analogous poems. At the same time, information concerning history or customs in these poems was carefully collected. All these measures were aimed to go deeper than the classic interpretations and reveal the original meaning of these love songs. Take the ode *The Carambola Tree*¹ for example. It was generally interpreted from the Han through Qing dynasties as a description of the hardship of life and the darkness of the ruling class. But in Granet’s observation, the structure of this ode is surprisingly similar to that of the ode *Beautiful Peach Tree*, both describing a tree of fine growth, and therefore marriage is the subject of the former as it is of the latter – a conclusion that is now thought to have convincingly challenged the traditional interpretation.

Regarding these songs from a holistic viewpoint instead of individually, Granet found a number of commonalities in them – rural themes and rustic subjects, simple and direct art, symmetrical form, and particularly the lack of individuality of their sentiments, which necessitates the assumption that they were of impersonal origin. He then noted in a further observation that they were all products of rural improvisation during spring and autumn — the most mentioned seasons in these love songs — when young people from neighboring villages would gather to celebrate the festivals marking the beginning and ending of farming for the year. For Granet, these songs were clear sociological evidence of independent and objective social facts; or more specifically, of the religion associated with spring and fall festivals which exercised coercive power on the people composing this particular social organism.

¹ The content of “The Carambola Tree” is as follow: “In the valley is a carambola tree; Charming the grace of its branches! How full of vigour its tender beauty! What a joy that thou hast no acquaintance! In the valley is a carambola tree; Charming the grace of its flowers! How full of vigour its tender beauty! What a joy that thou hast no husband! In the valley is a carambola tree; Charming the grace of its fruits! How full of vigour its tender beauty! What a joy that thou hast no wife!”

In the following part of the book, Granet used evidence obtained both from *Shi Jing* and other ancient texts to delve deeper into the ancient spring and fall festivals and to explore how various local rituals and customs were finally simplified and integrated into the worship of the imperial court. In his study of these ancient Chinese festivals, Granet was guided by two rules, which are obviously Durkheimian: i) “Facts will not be explained by representations which might be suspected of being explanations deliberately thought out, or beliefs of derived formation.” (Marcel Granet, p.164) and ii) “No attempt will be made to explain the whole by the parts” so as to “prevent the explaining of all the practices of a festival by one which is regarded as essential.”

In his analysis, Granet highlighted the seasonal nature of ancient Chinese festivals, noting that “the natural laws conceived by the Chinese upon the model of the rules governing their own life, appeared to them to be constant when they themselves remained subject to the laws appropriate to men. The rhythm of their life decided the alternation of the seasons; their festival of rest gave nature authority to rest; their winter seclusion assured the independence of species for the season; irregularity in their customs would have thrown the universe into disorder.” (p.178.) According to him, this is rooted in the traditional Chinese notion that men, like Nature, must do things at the proper time – a keen observation that required a profound understanding of Chinese culture.

However, despite the path-breaking nature of his work, there are still some limitations worth noting.

Firstly, while his innovative interpretation of *Shi Jing* from the perspectives of sociology and cultural anthropology uncovered interesting details that were previously ignored or distorted and remains inspiring even today, Granet’s study is limited by an incomplete knowledge of Chinese history and literature and inaccurate translation of reference materials. These have led to misunderstandings of the origins of *Shi Jing*², thus shaking the foundation of his theories.

Secondly, Granet’s bold attempt to view the odes in *Shi Jing* from a holistic perspective has proved successful in revealing the similarities in their forms and functions. However, his work suffers from an over-emphasis on structural functionalism and an inclination to stuff these love songs into his framework of “rural improvisation”. In fact, personal feelings can be genuinely felt in these songs, each of which expresses a subtly different sentiment. The lines that they seem to borrow from one another were commonly used at the time, especially by scholarly elites, in reference to moral conduct and social practices, and as a safe way to criticize those in power.

² This is a complicated issue but there is a general consensus that most of the songs and odes in *Shi Jing* were written by scholarly officials drawing on folk songs, because at that time only they had access to education (学在官府).

Thirdly, in his reconstruction of ancient Chinese festivals, Granet contended that such festivals typically marked seasonal rhythms, and were usually held in holy places near rivers or mountains associated with rituals best represented by singing contests between men and women. This theory is obviously influenced by the Durkheimian emphasis on the three most important concepts in every religion: sacred objects, a set of beliefs and practices, and the moral community. However, Granet lacked solid evidence to back up these claims regarding the holy places and singing contests. As Professor Li Anche has said, “he did not even give all the evidence in the *Shih Ching*, much less, in fact nothing, in terms of archaeology” (Li, 1938, pp. 449-451.), and this has weakened the force of his argument.

CONCLUSION

As both a sinologist and a sociologist, Marcel Granet had benefited greatly from the academic culture in France, and was influenced by Edouard Chavannes and David Émile Durkheim in particular. He tended to combine the sociological methods with Chinese traditional textual analysis, which is best illustrated in his monograph *Festivals and Songs of Ancient China*. In this book, Granet tried to find the true meaning of the love songs recorded in *Shi Jing* and reconstruct the seasonal festivals behind them. Granet’s methodology of studying historical facts from a social perspective is of great value, though not perfect, and it can be further enhanced when supported

by a solid textual understanding. Moreover, his attention to the seasonal festivals extracted from *Shi Jing* and other historical texts challenged some traditional understanding and provided inspiring perspectives for the study of ancient Chinese religions.

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