

Book Review:

*Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture: Thinking Through Psychology*

Louise Sundararajan

Reviewed by Gerald Cupchik

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Louise Sundararajan's book offers a comparison between Western and Chinese culture based in part on differing modes of cognition that underlie lived experiences. Her approach is more nuanced than the usual East and West comparison. First, she is careful to focus on Chinese culture instead of making sweeping generalizations about the East. Second, while using the term "West," she focuses on contemporary Western psychology. Since scientific psychology does not necessarily represent the full scope of knowledge about Western emotions, this book pertains primarily to western psychological conceptualizations of emotions, not Western emotional experiences per se. Sundararajan presents as a scholar with a foot in each of two worlds. On the one hand, she introduces many valuable concepts from Chinese culture and, in particular, the contrast by Confusion and Daoist approaches to life and meaning. On the other hand, she is well versed and established in the mainstream literature from Western psychology with a bit of philosophy thrown in.

Sundararajan summarizes the challenge of understanding Chinese emotions as follows: "This suggests that a central problem for understanding Chinese emotions is the gap between mainstream western scientific terminology and indigenous Chinese psychology." At the heart of her book is the bridging of dynamics of emotional processes in Chinese culture with concepts and findings in the Western empirical tradition. Implicitly juxtaposed against mechanistic thinking in Western psychology is the Chinese approach that focuses on dynamic processes. Sundararajan explains this difference in terms of that between non-relational and relational cognition. Relational cognition, which applies to Chinese culture, focuses on holistic mind-to-mind transactions based on shared meanings. Western culture embodies more linear non-relational cognition emphasizing mind-to-world transactions and mastery over the environment. Whereas the former is marked by Communal Sharing, the latter is reflected in Market Pricing. Understood in terms of a "dual processing model," the Chinese mode of thought is automatic, intuitive, and holistic (System 1), whereas the Western approach is effortful and reflective (System 2). Summing up these differences in mindsets, she claims that the Western and Chinese cultures are "upside-down universes of each other."

Obviously, establishing broad categories and binary oppositions such as the 'West' and the 'East', involves many levels of abstraction. To some, this distinction is suspect and ultimately misleading. One of the most stringent critics of this approach is Edward Said (1978) who considers it a legacy of Orientalism, the persistent East and West comparison.

"Throughout the exchange between Europeans and their 'others' that began systematically half a millennium ago, the one idea that has scarcely varied is that there is an 'us' and a 'them,' each quite settled, clear, unassailably self-evident." (Said, 1993, p.

Continuing this line of criticism, Sundararajan uses the East and West comparison in a subversive manner. First, instead of using the West-East comparison in an “us versus them” fashion, she suggests that the two conceptualizations of emotion are complementary-- somewhat like *yin* and *yang* with each taking turns being the under-current of the other. Second, she turns cultural reductionism on its head. Instead of reducing all cultural phenomena to collectivism versus individualism, she uses the cross cultural findings on cognitive styles as an explanatory framework to foreground the rich cultural phenomena of Chinese emotions, with special focus on the nuanced differences in conceptualization of emotion between China and modern Western psychology.

To elaborate on this central theme, Sundararajan devotes one chapter each to the three foundational ways of thinking in Chinese history — harmony, Confucianism and Daoism. Chinese discourse on emotion is founded on the notion of harmony which is “understood as moderation” based on self-regulation. There is a dynamic quality associated with the search for complementary relations between seeming opposites (the *yin* and *yang* dialectic). This effort after optimal harmony leads to emotional refinement as exemplified in this description of Confucius as “mild, and yet dignified; majestic, and yet not fierce; respectful, and yet easy.” Framed in terms of Western psychology, this effort after harmony is characterized in terms of “concurrent goal pursuit” so as to be inclusive and make the best possible choices.

The Confucian approach to social development emphasized strong social ties and inner/private consciousness in a “rites-based” society. This contrasts with a Western emphasis on “big gods,” laws, and public spaces. The Chinese communal approach emphasizes the quality of relationships and concern for the other. The goal was to humanize power so that respect was “earned through sharing and helping.” Accordingly, “the ideal model of the social order is the family” and the cultivation of an inner sense of self that is sincere and cultivated through the arts, in particular music and poetry. Thus, emotional engagement is fundamental to ritual performances as in mourning where deep sorrow is considered more important than attention to minute details of observances. The outcome of this approach is filial piety combining intimate benevolence with respect for authority.

The ideals of Daoism are exemplified in the attributes of hermits who abandon the existing social order in favour of the solitude preferred by wanderers. Giving up the comforts of society and social status enabled inward hermits to achieve a state of transcendence and a deeper appreciation of harmony with nature. This was embodied in a spiritualized approach to social relations which emphasized equality in contrast to the hierarchy embodied in a Confucian emphasis on elder and younger, father and son, and so forth. The Daoist approach to independence and transcendence focussed on uniqueness rather than on egocentrism and competition with the attendant deleterious effects on health. The acceptance of an eremitic life style flourished when Chinese civilization was at its zenith during the Tang and Song dynasties rather than during its decline under the Mongol rulers.

The second part of the book is dedicated to exploring complementary “contours of the emotional landscape” in Chinese culture. An example of dynamic harmony is embodied in deep

feelings (*qing*) surrounding “heart-aching love” (*xin-teng*) which can be both bitter and sweet at the same time. In Western language, this emotion combines the perception of vulnerability with empathy and anxiety over the well-being of another. These feelings are situated in a “gut-feeling approach to morality” that is central to Chinese culture. This analysis of intimacy is predicated on “we-ness,” bonding that is based on shared mind-to-mind intention and modelled after the parent-child relationship rather than the mating pair. Metaphysically, the Chinese notion of affect implies a sympathetic universe which is sustained by an affective bond among all things from humans to stones and rocks in nature. Emotion in this context works by means of a “resonating feedback loop” not unlike that of a tuning fork. The importance of emotional resonance / attunement is brought home through examples of paradoxical communications of affect such as an expressed emotion of seeming anger that masks the underling feeling of relief and gratitude.

Of particular importance in a Chinese context is the presence of spontaneity, authenticity, and creativity in an emotion. Wisdom of the ancients helps to explicate these different facets of emotion. As in the case of traditional poetry, the ideal state of emotion freely embodies a simple message that is deeply felt. Thus, an authentic expression of emotion is sensitive to the meaning of a situation and is free from the interference of intentions to control it by a deliberate mind. This account of spontaneity in the Chinese expression of emotion is at odds with a Western academic emphasis on appraisal and purposive action. But it does fit with a mystical approach such “that the unleavened bread of mystical experience has no use for the yeast of discursive thought.”

The author reminds us of the duality in Chinese culture, between the hierarchical nature of social relations from a Confucian perspective (e.g., between parent and child) and the horizontal emphasis on egalitarian relations in Daoist thought (e.g., between person and nature). In a hierarchical context, we find the complex intimacy between parent and child who may be “spoiled rotten,” given vulnerability and immaturity. This transforms into caring gestures toward parents as youth gives way to indebted gratitude in adulthood. Thus, the good feelings attendant to gratification of impulses leave a glow of self-worth that changes to filial piety and caring gestures. As my young guide on a tour of Nanjing expressed it to me: “I am nothing without my family.”

Refinement in Chinese culture is embodied in the concept of *savoring* which applies both in everyday life and in an aesthetic context. This concept is unique in that it encompasses both positive and negative episodes. Temporality plays an important role encompassing both immediate and retrospective experiences in subtle nuances. Thus, from a Chinese perspective, savoring includes mindful awareness of sensory experiences that are integrated in an ideal mental world best expressed in poetry.

The greatest challenge to a Western mind is appreciating the insight into emotions that comes from experiencing *emptiness* which may also apply to negative experiences in one’s life. Savoring without blinding expectations (thus emptiness) enables the person to appreciate the gist of things and also fosters novel connections. This new understanding is enhanced by reflective self-consciousness that formalizes relationships and sets the stage for “enlightenment.”

When placed in a broad multicultural and historical context, the Chinese approach to

emotion differs substantially and substantively from that favoured in the West. While the West has long been concerned with the ways that emotion can distort “reality,” the Chinese notion of *qing* holds that emotion “discloses something that is true about the person and the world” by grounding the person in reality. This sensitizes the person to the undisclosed or implicit impact that the world has upon us. While Western theory focuses on differences (“symmetry breakdown”) that foster action and control, the Chinese privilege symmetry as evidenced by a heightened appreciation of harmony and resonance with others and nature as a whole.

My reading experience heightened an understanding of the ways that the principle of complementarity is actively embodied in Chinese philosophy and social relations. The Confucian emphasis on hierarchy, and its effects on maintaining social harmony through parent-child relations, is complemented by a Daoist appreciation of how silence and intimacy helps us savour subtle qualities of nature and our social world.

Sundararajan makes a valiant attempt to build a bridge between traditional Chinese concepts and thinking through ideas in contemporary psychology. In part, this effort is successful because it shows how Western ideas and findings can resonate with Chinese culture. But it also indirectly reveals the burdens of Western mechanistic ideas that are worlds apart from the holistic attitude underlying Chinese thought. This awakens a savouring mind to the need for Western culture to be more reflective about its own purposive and “Enlightened” biases or, as the subtitle of the book suggests, “thinking through psychology.”

I hope that Europeans/North Americans appreciate Sundararajan’s in-depth representation of their work. But I personally feel that her account of Chinese emotion does not need Western psychology at all since, from my perspective, Western research seems to have lost ecological validity. Thus, the value of this book is not just that it introduces us to principles underlying the empathic, moral, and aesthetic values of Chinese culture. It shows us the limitations of our own Western concepts and empirical methods that may lead us away from a resonant understanding of the social world. In Chinese landscape paintings, we project ourselves into the empty spaces and resonate (from Hsieh Ho’s Six Principles) with the implied meanings; in other words, projection and empathy. Thus, by adopting a Daoist worldview, we enter into phenomena and overcome the alienating effects of experimental conditions and method as a whole. We essentially adopt the *Verstehen* orientation at the heart of a German Romantic perspective that is both empathic and intuitive rather than the British Enlightenment emphasis on distant and logical sympathy. Incorporating a sense for “emptiness” and “resonance” can help us think through the biases of Western psychology and enhance the insightful outcomes of our empirical projects.

Said, E. W. (1993). *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Said, E.W. (1978). *Orientalism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.