

# Exploring the Chinese Mindscape

By [Amazon Customer](#) on December 8, 2015

Format: Kindle Edition

By “mindscape” I mean the way Chinese experience their environment – social and physical – on a deep emotional or intuitive level. Dr. Sundararajan does not write as a Westerner might, from the outside looking in, but as an insider, as a native Chinese looking out. That description, however, does not do justice to Dr. Sundararajan’s background and capabilities. She is equally at home in the West and the East, and she writes in English better than most native English speakers. "Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture" is the work of a first-rate scholar.

As the title suggests, the book focuses on Chinese emotions. Too often, when Western emotions are contrasted with emotions in other cultures, an implicit assumption is made that the Western emotions are somehow more fundamental or universal than the other, “indigenous” emotions. To complicate cultural analyses further, it may also be assumed that the concept of emotion remains the same across cultures. It does not, as Dr. Sundararajan's analysis amply demonstrates.

For the most part, Dr. Sundararajan avoids direct comparisons between Chinese and Western emotions, particularly emotions that are episodic or circumscribed in time, such as anger, fear, and grief. Rather, reflecting Chinese conceptions of emotion, Dr. Sundararajan focuses on more global conditions that have strong affective value; such conditions often have no clear beginning and end. Examples discussed in some detail by Sundararajan are authenticity, creativity, solitude, empathy, intimacy, gratitude, and emptiness. Her main goal is to provide a framework for interpreting such conditions. That framework naturally draws on ancient Chinese wisdom, especially Confucianism and Daoism. But this is not a book on history or philosophy. Where relevant (and it often is), Dr. Sundararajan draws on contemporary empirical research to explicate the cognitive mechanisms that help mediate affective experiences, regardless of culture.

As an author, Dr. Sundararajan gives a lot of herself, and she expects a lot of the reader. Hers is not a superficial survey; it requires concentrated effort, like climbing a mountain. She advises that the book be read in small bits, allowing sufficient time for thinking and reflection each step of the way. It is good advice; the view from the top is well worth the effort.

Who should read this book? Not the casual reader, I would advise. However, I believe it to be essential reading for anyone interested in the study of emotions, or what is now commonly called “affective science”; also, for anyone who conducts business in China, or who expects to engage interpersonally with Chinese on more than a superficial level. More abstractly, China has a rich literary and poetic tradition, much of which has been translated into English. That literature cannot be fully appreciated without some knowledge of the Chinese mindscape.

Is Dr. Sundararajan’s book the last word on the Chinese mindscape? By no means, but it is a very significant first word. As with a traditional landscape, whether depicted in paintings or travelogues, there can be no last word; landscapes change and new perspectives are always possible. But I feel confident when I say that Dr. Sundararajan has set a precedent that future inquiries into Chinese emotion and culture cannot ignore. More than that, if I may change metaphors, "Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture" holds before us a mirror that allows us to see our own culture and emotions more clearly. That, in fact, may be its greatest value.

James R. Averill, Professor Emeritus, UMass, Amherst