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BOOK REVIEW

Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture: Thinking Through Psychology

Louise Sundararajan
New York, NY: Springer International Publishing, 2015, 210 pp.

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This book lays out a systematic, elaborate, and theoretically complex foundation of Chinese emotion while simultaneously interrogating the deeply entrenched and dominant categories of cognition, feeling, emotions, and self in Western psychology. At the outset, the author of the book, Louise Sundararajan, offers a warning: If a reader is looking for an empirical analysis of blue ribbon emotions in Western psychology, such as happiness, anger, and sadness, then they are setting themselves up for disappointment. Instead, she explains that in contrast to the English term *emotion*, the Chinese counterpart *qing* refers to the heart and mind and "covers a much broader spectrum, ranging from moods and sentiments to ever so subtle emotional nuances that color everything we see through the affective lens" (p. xii). Sundararajan writes that this book, at its broadest level, is about non-Western lived experiences that have for, too long, been falsified and distorted by Western psychology. She elegantly crafts an indigenous psychology of emotions and cognition through both the dual frames of psychology and culture. Sundararajan describes indigenous psychology as a "psychological inquiry that subsists in the gap between the canonical terms of mainstream psychology and a phenomenal world that has its point of reference a Mecca that falls outside the pale of the epistemological universe of Western psychology" (p. vii).

The book then makes a grand effort to unpack the multilayered, rich, fluid, and traditional folk knowledge about Chinese emotions from the inside and it is organized under four overarching themes that are spelled out in 12 chapters. The first theme in Part 1 of the book gives a rationale for the book and sets up the theoretical foundations for explaining why culture is crucial to understanding individual cognitions. Sundararajan then adopts a hybrid model of explanation in which culture is defined both as a practice and as a cognitive style of thinking. She defines culture as a repository of emotional knowledge, as a conceptual space, and as rationality. Concepts such as the meaning of *quing*, *guanxi*, *yin* and *yang, li, sajiao, quinggan, jingie, wu, kong,* and *gan,* are contextualized and defined with texts and social relations. Then she proposes that we replace the binary theories of individualism and collectivism with an explanatory framework that illustrates the cross-cultural differences in China and the West as differences in rationality and cognitive styles.

Thus the key differences in cognitive styles between Chinese and Western culture is, for example, anchored in differences between holistic versus analytic or associative versus rule-based reasoning and relational cognition versus nonrelational cognition. Sundararajan theorizes these differences as reflecting distinct cultural ideals of symmetry-restoration versus symmetry-breakdown. The Chinese relational cognition is based on upholding symmetry of social connections in managing chaos, wholeness of experience, high nonverbal communication and having strong ties with the collective community. The Western nonrelational cognition is based on asymmetry of weak communal ties, order, control and mastery of environment and high conceptual language use. Sundararajan further exemplifies the various components of this theoretical system by showing how harmony (optimal and suboptimal) and harmony maintenance in

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Chinese culture serves as an example of symmetry maintenance and dialectical and holistic thinking. Then Sundararajan draws on Confucianism and concepts such as *Li* (rites) and other Western research on emotions to distinguish between group based-collectivism from relational collectivism. The former focuses on conformity to hierarchy, authority, social norms and processes of adaptation to social pressure whereas the latter focuses on communal connections, other-directedness and a genuine caring for others. She argues that the group versus relational systems are further embedded in a socialized power orientation as opposed to a personalized power orientation.

Part 2 of the book then focuses on explaining the meaning and interpretation of Chinese emotions such as empathy-based emotions, resonance -based emotions, freedom-based emotions, and indulgence/gratitude -based emotions in everyday life. Sundararajan argues in order to understand Chinese emotions we have to trace its phenomenon with a "gentle paint brush, rather than to nail discreet emotions down, if there is such a thing, with codified labels and categorizations" (p. 75). The various chapters under this section are attempts by the author to gently paint the multifaceted everyday emotions that she calls emotional blends that have an inherent richness, ambivalence, and cultural nuance. Thus the common emotions of spontaneity, of *xin-teng* "heart-aching love," notions of intimacy, *sajiao* (being spoiled-rotten), and gratitude are investigated in this section.

Part 3 of the book focuses on the Chinese creativity within the context of the principles of Daoism as it aims to refute stereotypical ideas that "Asians are not very creative" (p. 430) or do not posses the skills of being revolutionarily creative individuals. Sundararajan claims that in contrast to Western psychology's definition of creativity, the Chinese harmony model of creativity does not go against the crowd but rather creative action requires going "both with and against the flow" and the model of creativity for the Chinese is not "God so much as Nature" (p. 144). Thus creative independence in the Chinese cultural context, she discusses, is attained by going away from the group instead of challenging or going against the crowd. The chapters in these sections draw on a wide array of theoretical concepts from Chinese ancient and modern psychology, poetry, Indian psychology, and Western psychology. Sundararajan provides one of most profound and clearest examples of Chinese notions of creativity, aesthetics, the art of savoring, solitude, engaged detachment, community, radical emotional transformation from an in-depth indigenous perspective. She observes that as an aesthetic emotion the concept of savoring differs from Western and Indian philosophy. The Western understanding of savoring is framed within the concept of positive experiences and usually refers to consumption or perception with prolonged attention. In contrast the Chinese experience of savoring is connected to a

> number of process terms such as, evaluation of flavor (*pin wei* . . .) being cognizant of flavor (*zhi wei*), and retrospective flavor (*hui* wei . . .) . . . the Chinese aesthetics of savoring is part of the Confucian program of self-cultivation for social harmony and the art of government. (p. 158)

The concluding section, Part 4, synthesizes the various theoretical insights from across the 12 chapters. Sundararajan states that instead of asking the question "what is emotion?" we should be asking "how we model emotions?" She then proceeds to define the concept of emotion by anchoring it in concepts of *Qing* (emotion is for truth), *Gan* (affectivity that connects us all) and Chinese folk theory of mind. She writes,

> In contrast to the Western notion of emotion as a disruptive force to be regulated by reason and cognition . . . the Chinese consider the human capacity for responding to impact affectively as a positive quality to be enhanced through expanding consciousness. Consciousness expands not by reason or cognition but by mind-to-mind transactions. (p. 200)

Sundararajan has set up an elegant theoretical system by mining ancient Chinese philosophical, psychological and poetic texts derived from Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and classical poetry to give us a comprehensive psychological understanding of how emotions are tied to hierarchy, relationality, creativity, freedom, love, and self. This book represents an impressive and well-articulated theoretical project that goes beyond the Western canon and opens up a significant vista into Chinese psychology and philosophy that will be of tremendous benefit to scholars from mainstream, cultural, indigenous, and cross-cultural psychology.

One of the gaps in Sundararajan's theoretical system is that her analysis of emotions is largely

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based on interpretations of classical and modern texts and does not adequately address how individuals embedded in their everyday social practices negotiate and cultivate their emotions within the contours of the traditional, ancient, modern, capitalistic, heterogeneous Chinese society. The globalization of the world has created, as Inda and Rosaldo (2002) argued, a set of complex interdependencies where immigrants and people are on the move; capital moves feverishly across borders; financial exchanges are interlinked across the globe; and cultures have acquired a mobility that brings about new struggles and negotiations about self, identity, community, family, and nation. Contemporary scholars have defined globalization as an empirical condition of the modern world that is characterized by complex connectivity (Tomlinson, 1999), disjunctured cultural flows (Appadurai, 1996), cultural diffusion and hybridization (Pieterse, 2004), and neoliberalization (Harvey, 2005). Scholars, such as Aihwa Ong (1999), have extensively written about how global capitalism in China is creating new cultural representation of "Chineseness" that is connected to neoliberal principles, state-governed market capitalism, individual's and the government's notions of flexible citizenship, the growing power of overseas Chinese, transnational mobility, and a large emerging Chinese global elite population.

Yunxiang Yan, an anthropologist, writes that the rise of the individual in China in the current era of globalization is radically different from the European or western notions of individualization. He (Yan, 2010) wrote that for many current Chinese's youth, the "primacy of personal happiness and individual realization has without doubt become the ultimate goal in life, indicating that society has undergone an ethical shift from collective-oriented values to individual oriented values" (p. 2). The rise of the individual, he further noted, is a significant social reality of the 21st century Chinese culture, and central to this transformation is the ongoing negotiation and contestation between new notions of the individual and various forms of collectivity represented by socialism, family, and the Chinese state. However, Yan argued that what is notable in contemporary China is that more than the state and the society, the family now plays an influential role in cultivating individual identity. Yan wrote that the rise of the individual in China does not reinforce a Western conception of an individual as an autonomous, self-directing, atomic person with alienable rights endowed at birth. Instead, Yan (2010) elaborated that individual rights are rather defined as earned privileges and that individual identity continues to be defined in relation to the collective. Individual choices are mediated and negotiated by collective spaces, such as the increasingly democratized family, the state, and communist policies geared toward accumulation of capital and power. The collective and the ancient traditions are reframed and are used as new forms of resources by the rising individual. The new forces of globalization and neoliberalism are creating contested concepts of self and identity within China where both Confucian ethics and communist practices exist along side the new hybrid cultural, political, and economic practices. Undoubtedly, Sundararajan has written a very major and noteworthy book on Chinese emotions and culture, but I believe that including an analysis on the connections between emotion, emotion-talk, conflicting social practices and new conception of identity in contemporary neoliberal China would have added more theoretical potency to the book. However, this is a minor issue that Sundararajan has overlooked.

The book, on the whole, is insightful and dazzling in making interdisciplinary connections across psychology and related disciplines and it serves as a powerful example of articulating a sophisticated and elaborate theoretically informed indigenous psychology. The book opens up a sharp and incisive theoretical vocabulary on the conceptual foundations that make up Chinese emotions and it shines a light on the intricate ways in which ancient and modern Chinese culture and creativity, cognition, self, emotions, family, and society are intertwined. The mainstream, Western psychology literature has for too long overlooked the depth of Chinese philosophical and psychological understanding of emotions and it has much to benefit by creating a dialogue and engaging with this book. I believe this book, like the Chinese concept of *qing*, will resonate with the heart and the mind and it will be of importance to cognitive psychology, cultural psychology, indigenous psychology, theoretical and philosophical psychology, anthropology, and Asian studies and to ongoing scholarly debates on the cultural meaning of emotions.

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