

## BOOK REVIEW

*Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture: Thinking Through Psychology*, by Louise Sundararajan, New York, NY (and Cham, Switzerland): Springer, 2015, 210 pp., \$129.00.

Reviewed by Richard Reilly  
St. Bonaventure University

*Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture: Thinking Through Psychology* by Louise Sundararajan (2015) is a fascinating and important work. It is fascinating in its disclosure of the rich texture of emotions in Chinese culture, primarily through scores of literary examples drawn from philosophical-religious and poetic classics as well as from contemporary cultural practices. It is important, since properly understanding the range of emotions and how they underpin Chinese cultural norms challenges the adequacy of some central analyses in what constitutes “mainstream psychology” in Western culture. This review article first provides an overview of the structure of the book and re-presents a series of central insights on how emotions function in Chinese culture. Second, it recounts, according to Sundararajan, how the functions of emotions in Chinese culture pose challenges to mainstream psychology. Concluding remarks address the yet wider significance of Sundararajan’s work: how an enriched understanding of emotions makes humane living possible. The chief aim of this review is to provide a firm sense of the Sundararajan’s overall project—just a “sense,” as her study incorporates the findings of hundreds of published studies in psychology and the insights of scores of Chinese literary texts.

*Keywords:* emotion, Chinese culture, relational cognition, mainstream psychology, mindful awareness

This book is fascinating and important. It is fascinating in its disclosure of the rich texture of emotions in Chinese culture, primarily through scores of literary examples drawn from philosophical-religious and poetic classics as well as from contemporary cultural practices. It is important, since properly understanding the range of emotions and how they underpin Chinese cultural norms challenges the adequacy of some central analyses in what constitutes “mainstream psychology” in Western culture. Dr. Louise Sundararajan has the background and expertise to execute such a rich cross-cultural study. She grew up in Chinese culture, studied Chinese religious traditions (Harvard PhD), and has spent three decades as a practicing psychologist (EdD, Counseling Psychology, Boston University) while also heavily engaged in academic research on emotion (Fellow of the American Psychological Association).

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Richard Reilly, Department of Philosophy, St. Bonaventure University, P.O. Box 1, St. Bonaventure, NY 14778. E-mail: rpreilly@sbu.edu

Sundararajan (2015) summarizes her work's "potential contributions" in the Preface:

This book is the first systematic study of Chinese emotions from a theoretical frame-work that seeks not only to do justice to the indigenous perspectives, but also uses the latter to interrogate mainstream psychological theories and research on emotions. (p. x)

The book demonstrates how folk theories of non-Western cultures can function as potential competitors and valued interlocutors in the theory construction of the emotions . . . thereby rendering [mainstream psychology] more open to novel and deviant ideas from within as well as without the field of affective science. (p. xi)

I will first provide an overview of the structure of the book and re-present a series of central insights on how emotions function in Chinese culture. In Section 2, I recount, according to Sundararajan (2015), how the functions of emotions in Chinese culture pose challenges to mainstream psychology. I conclude with remarks on the wider significance of Sundararajan's work: how an enriched understanding of emotions makes humane living possible. My aim is to provide a sense of the Sundararajan's overall project—just a "sense," as her study incorporates the findings of hundreds of published studies in psychology and the insights of scores of Chinese literary texts.

## Structure and Summary

### Part 1: "Conceptual Foundations for the Analysis of Chinese Emotions"

Part 1 includes four chapters. Chapter 1 explores explanatory models of culture and cross-cultural differences. The focus here is on understanding culture as rationality and East–West differences in cognitive styles (relational cognition vs. nonrelational cognition) as differences in rationality. These are categorized in 21 dimensions that serve ideals of symmetry (chaos/harmony) or asymmetry (order). Basically, relational cognition serving the ideal of symmetry maintenance and restoration is holistic, integrative, and intuitive, within the cultural context of strong social ties, communal sharing, mind–mind transactions, and strengthening social relations. Nonrelational cognition, by contrast, is analytic, differentiating, highly conceptual, and rule-based, within the cultural context of weak ties, market pricing, mind–world transactions, and mastery of the environment. The following three chapters highlight the roles of relational cognition in the quest for harmony in Chinese culture, particularly as informed by Confucian and Daoist traditions.

Harmony as a "dynamic equilibrium" is to be maintained or restored by ensuring that a plurality of elements are unified such that the identity of each is maintained in a balance proper to enriching the whole. Such is the case when a variety of instruments appropriately contribute to the performance of a musical composition or when just the right proportion of ingredients creates a savory soup. In each instance, rather than the elements yielding a homogeneous result, they yield a complexity of sound or taste that harmonizes the distinct characteristics contributed by each element. Sundararajan (2015) contrasts the "subtle art" of harmony cooking where the chef adds ingredients according to her refined taste, and recipe cooking where one follows behavioral instructions. As we shall see, this contrast illuminates two dimensions of our emotional lives: emotions primarily may be cultivated and savored through (internal) experience, refined through an exposure to the arts; or emotions primarily may be behaviors regulated by hardwired responses of the body to the environment, as seen through the lens of science (including biology and neurophysiology).

Sundararajan (2015) sees the quest for harmony in Chinese culture in light of traditional Confucian and Daoist teachings on the cultivation of an “authentic self.” It is imperative to understand, as Sundararajan points out, that the type of collectivism championed by Confucius is “relationship based,” not “group based,” and that the social self is derived from interpersonal relationships. Interpersonal relationships conjoin two related components: the cultivation of feelings, primarily through poetry and the other arts, and a commitment to *li*, the ritualized forms of behavior appropriate to one’s relationships. The authentic self is a relational consciousness that venerates traditional practices as well as “creativity in the ‘inner spirit’ that transcends all outer forms” (Sundararajan, 2015, p. 49). Accordingly, it is one’s true feelings that properly motivate and flavor one’s ritualized behaviors. Sundararajan quotes Hsün Tzu: “when rites are performed in the highest manner, then both the emotions and the forms embodying them are fully realized” (p. 50). *Li*, as understood through poetry, embody the emotional harmonies of humane reciprocity.

Whereas for the Confucian, the pursuit of authenticity involves personal cultivation through perfecting the rites, the Daoist hermit seeks “unique individuality” by renouncing community life and being with Nature. Sundararajan (2015) notes (p. 70) that while the Western brand of individualism capitalizes on competition (social success), the Daoist brand of individualism capitalizes on the need for uniqueness and transcendence. In a later chapter, Sundararajan explains the emotional source of the hermit’s self-reliance and creativity.

The capacity to be alone can be examined on two registers, cognition and emotion. Cognitively, it is the capacity for absence; emotionally it is the capacity for loneliness. Both are required skills for the designer environment of solitude. The emotional state that names this absence-based intimacy is nostalgia. (p. 152)

She then goes on to claim (Sundararajan, 2015, p. 153) that longing, a blended emotion consisting of the sadness of separation from what/who one loves, is the creative component of nostalgia. Consolation lies in the “companionship” offered by reminiscence. Through artistic expression, one might aim to communicate and share one’s deepest self. Nevertheless, Sundararajan (2015) claims:

The highest manifestation of mental and spiritual freedom is reached when the hermit proves himself to be free from depression in the face of harsh realities—the insurmountable barriers to communication . . . as suggested by the imagery of the mighty river that cuts across his path. (p. 154)

In solitude, the Daoist hermit’s relational cognition with ultrasymmetry transcends all distinctions—“everything merges into an all pervading sense of oneness” with which one is lovingly united (p. 65).

## Part 2: “Tracing Emotions Daintily Through Things Psychologically Chinese”

For the Confucian and the Daoist, emotion (more so than reason) is at the core of one’s quest for authentic selfhood. Core emotions such as humane consideration and nostalgia are: complex blends, inner and private, cultivated through artistic imagination, likely to manifest spontaneously as appropriate, and serve to maintain or restore harmony in one’s social or natural environment. These themes are further illustrated in the four chapters comprising Part 2, where we encounter the blended emotions of *teng*, “heart-aching love,”

*gan-lei*, “responding in kind,” *gan-ying*, “stimulating-responding [in kind],” and *gan-ji*, gratitude induced by “indebtedness.”

Heart-aching love, experienced in many contexts, is characteristic especially of how a parent emotionally relates to a child. The love one feels for another is mixed with feelings of concern, anxiety, and even anger due to the beloved’s susceptibilities to being hurt, harmed, or diminished. “In China the ideal attachment figure’s vigilance and commitment to protection is manifest as worry” (Sundararajan, 2015, p. 79). Sundararajan (2015) notes three phenomenological components of heart-aching love: perception of vulnerability, empathic pain over the well-being of someone unable to fend off danger or harm, and a caregiving response (*ibid.*). Interestingly, Sundararajan goes on to observe: “to the extent that reciprocity lies at the very core of filial piety, parent’s (sic) heart-aching love can be reciprocated by adult children”; and, “In children’s upbringing, empathetic pain becomes the path to social mindfulness” (p. 83).

Intimacy in Chinese culture, Sundararajan (2015) contends, is marked by shared intentionality and resonance based on mental sharing and mind-to-mind transactions. The foundation of such intimacy is affectivity (*gan*). Sundararajan quotes Yan Yan Zhi (pp. 384–456):

Things do not interact at random; they are responsive [*gan*] to each other according to categorical correlations [*lei*]. Of all the things, the human heart/mind has the greatest capacity for responsiveness in kind [*gan-lei*]. (p. 96)

Indeed, Sundararajan points out that mind-to-mind transactions, felt affinity, is experienced in prelinguistic exchanges between parents and infants, and even “constitute the resonating feedback loop of a sympathetic universe” (p. 95).

The key player here is *lei* (parity)—the ontological categorization that opens up common ground between similar others. This process is initiated by the caregiver (Mind 1), who interprets the baby’s facial grimaces as expressions being capable of sharing intentions, just like herself. When a relation of parity between Mind 1 (caregiver) and Mind 2 (baby) is thus established, the responsive order becomes operative, which subsequently unfolds as a chain of emotional signaling in recurrent feedback loops. (p. 99)

On a broader scale, an important function of aesthetics is to cultivate such mutual intentionality between artist and observer or between poet and reader, as well as stimulating-responding loops among human minds and between human minds and the expressions of nature.

We have noted that emotion serves harmony maintenance and restoration in Chinese culture. This is clearly illustrated by Sundararajan’s (2015) examples of *gan-ji* (gratitude), which marks one’s “sensitivity and responsiveness to the impact of indebtedness” (p. 129). Her two main examples are *sajiao* (being spoiled rotten) and males’ “flower drinking.” *Sajiao* refers to the selfish behaviors of the immature—primarily of young children acting like spoiled brats and (by extension) of young women who act childish in flirtation. The dynamic here is that self-centered indulgence, within a relationship of strong ties, cultivates “acknowledging dependency and associating asymmetrical relationship with nurturance” (p. 130). Hence, *sajiao* lays the groundwork for the child’s early development of sensitivity and responsiveness to indebtedness. Interestingly, Sundararajan does not explicitly link her discussion of *sajiao* with *teng* (heart-aching love); but, it would seem that a child who understands the caregiver’s capacities both for loving indulgence as well as for loving worry, would (come to) feel deep gratitude for her.

By contrast, males’ flower drinking at hostess clubs within the mixed ties of business

is a routine for “ego repair” through self-indulgence that fosters bonds of trust with one’s business associates and superiors.

The benevolent other is split into two roles—the hostess who entertains you and the boss who pays for all your expenses there. These two benevolent others take care of two separate components of the *sajiao* game: The hostess takes care of activities . . . which pertains to . . . feeling good and ego-repair. The boss takes care of activities . . . which pertains to the capacity for self-control and use of discretion. (Sundararajan, 2015, p. 134)

The favor of being feted by the boss, obviously, results in *gan-ji*. Sundararajan (2015) implies that such indebtedness-induced gratitude both strengthens one’s discernment in controlling one’s indulgences and enhances the proportion of one’s reciprocity. In this regard, she quotes a Chinese proverb: “Reciprocating a drop of beneficence, a surging fountain of gratitude” (p. 130).

### Part 3: “Chinese Creativity”

Part 3 consists of three chapters. The first offers four important claims: Chinese privilege art rather than science as the primary venue for creativity; the “product” of creativity is the creative person himself or herself; Daoist creativity is fostered in solitude; and, art is the projection of an ideal mental world, “a designer environment that nurtures as well as demands cognitive and emotional skills pertinent to solitude” (Sundararajan, 2015, p. 148). We already noted the chapter’s discussion of the role of nostalgia (longing) in cultivating the capacity for solitude (loneliness) and creativity in the Daoist hermit.

This inward turn of one’s attentiveness is explored in the following chapters, “Savoring (*pin wei*), From Aesthetics to the Everyday” and “Emptiness (*Kong*): Insight-Based Emotional Transformations.” We are informed:

Chinese theories of savoring emphasize the self-reflexive [second-order] awareness in which the intentional object of emotion is the experience, rather than the experienced object—one does not primarily relish the smelling rose, but the delightful smell. (Sundararajan, 2015, p. 163)

Such savoring, in solitude, pays “attention to thoughts and feelings down to their subtlest variations” (Sundararajan, 2015, p. 164).

Chinese savoring computes multiple emotional states to capture a particular affective brew . . . [and] is an affirmation of the individual self with its taste, values, and memories as the sole measure of what is worth savoring. (Sundararajan, 2015, p. 158)

Refinements of emotional acuity are not pursued in order to regulate behavior but to enhance mindfulness of self and the richness of experience.

Still, nuanced savoring enhances one’s intuitive grasp of “the gist of things.” Insightful connections, patterns, and implications breaking new ground come more readily as mindfulness deepens. In particular, savoring negative experiences in life can result in an “existential shudder” (*kong*, emptiness) that is the affective side of breakthroughs in consciousness yielding insight (*wu* [*satori*], enlightenment). Sundararajan (2015) explains how one who cultivates emotional acuity and intuitive reasoning, is prone to make “strong evaluations” amid extensive processing. So, for example, when one comes to see his life’s investment in material gain against the backdrop of impermanence and death, what was so favorably valued might be judged utterly void of meaning; one might then be shaken to a new awareness or experience of self.

### What Is an Emotion?

In her brief (11-page) concluding chapter, “What is an Emotion? Answers From a Wild Garden of Knowledge,” Sundararajan (2015) proposes a “modest beginning” in response to James’s question by considering how we model emotions. She first examines Chinese folk models of emotion, then briefly considers Western theoretical models of emotion, and then puts forth an “impact-focus” account of Chinese emotion. This account of emotion contrasts significantly with the appraisal and evolutionary models of emotion favored in psychological science.

The word closest to “emotion” in modern Chinese, Sundararajan (2015) points out, is a compound, *qing gan*, indicating two tributaries of meaning. *Qing* discloses something true, real, or genuine about the person and about the world; the true condition of a situation is correlated with one’s deep responsiveness or feelings in the situation. *Gan* represents “the affectivity that connects us all,” as illustrated in the notions (touched on above) of *gan-lei*, “responding in kind,” *gan-ying*, “stimulating-responding [in kind].”

The upshot is that Chinese emotions are not primarily cognitive representations of one’s own bodily responses in the world, but rather are ways of engaging mutually with others and/or one’s environment. In this context, Sundararajan (2015) invokes (pp. 193–194) a recent philosophical view, “the extended mind hypothesis”—that “the mind is distributed in the world and outside the head”—to distinguish mainstream stimulus-response accounts of emotions and the resonating feedback loop of *gan-ying* as two types of sensing.

At this point, it becomes clear how theoretically important Sundararajan’s (2015) account of prelinguistic emotional exchanges between parents and infants is, for clearly, 6-month-old infants are not equipped for the kinds of cognitive appraisals that mainstream models presume. Sundararajan briefly comments on alternative frameworks to mainstream psychology—core affect theory, the transactional account, mindfulness, and the impact-focus approach. She feels the latter provides the best basis for understanding Chinese emotions.

In contrast with cognitive appraisal theories, the claim from Chinese aesthetics is that adaptive action rests squarely upon higher levels of awareness, otherwise known as metacognition (Chapters 7 and 10). In savoring the protonarratives of experience, for instance, emotion scripts are held in check while awareness of impact (*gan*) reigns supreme. (p. 198)

Emotions are a “mode of communion,” and humans have a propensity to share inner states, “personal takes on impact,” with each other, “from cradle to grave” (pp. 199–200).

Interestingly, Sundararajan’s (2015) overall view is that various models of emotions seem to capture insights over some range of emotions; thus, differing models are more complementary than nullifying, as her concluding remarks attest:

In the final analysis, the story about emotions can be told in many different ways, depending on our models of the mind. The adult-normed account of the mind privileged by mainstream psychology capitalizes on the narrative structure of goals that loom large in adults’ life. The child-normed account privileged by the Chinese (Chapter 6) capitalizes on the expressive dimension of emotions, a dimension that plays a pivotal role in the protoconversation between infant and caregiver. (p. 200)

Since all cultures need both relational as well as nonrelational cognition, difference [*sic.*]

between cultures is not a matter of presence versus absence as much as that of prevalence in one or the other modes of cognition. This point is best articulated by the polarities of *yin* and *yang*, in which the dominant element in one system is present as the nondominant element in the other. (p. 201)

### For a Future Worth Living to Be Possible

*Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture* systematically integrates a wide range of psychological and literary research to advance illuminating perspectives on the nature of emotion. Midway through, this question comes to mind: Does this book primarily provide an understanding of emotion in Chinese culture or does it equally provide an understanding of human emotion, by integrating the insights of academic psychology and (primarily) Chinese literature?

While Sundararajan's (2015) stated aim is academic—to reveal the nature of emotion in Chinese culture in order to cultivate an interest in complementary theoretical models of emotion—I also find her study truly important for how it might guide us toward a genuinely humane future. In the 20th and 21st centuries, as globalization advances, rabid discord, armed conflict, and chaotic destruction proliferate. The fuel for this, across cultures it seems, is the fanning of the afflictive emotions: anger, hatred, fear, greed, and possessiveness. What exacerbates these emotions is media-driven rhetoric of we versus them ideology. By creating “group-think” appraisals on what conditions are beneficial and harmful, destructive emotions are inflamed among social groups who target other groups (who might well be behaving similarly). As adult-normed emotions based on appraisals are all too subject to destructive sociopolitical influences, even manipulations, it is important to understand how individually and collectively we might manifest more humanely our emotional nature.

Buddhist practice, among others, enables “transformation” by liberating oneself from the clutches of afflictive emotions, often rooted in the separation and comparison of self and others. One approach is to apply counteracting virtue-emotions as antidotes, for example, generosity to overcome greed, sympathetic joy to counteract envy, patience to counteract anger, compassion to overcome hatred and indifference, and so on. Such virtue-emotions disclose a shared mind/world, not an “I versus other” mind/world; and they may be cultivated through meditative and mindful living practices. The basis of such transformation is to be “selflessly aware” of situations as they arise, that is, to not make appraisals on the basis of what one sees as beneficial or harmful to one's (separate) self. In silent, noncognitive stillness, one becomes aware of the dependencies of self and others, of self and environments, and in this awareness, the virtues that make for communion with others readily manifest.

If adult individuals can accomplish emotional reorientation through relational cognition serving the ideal of mutual, humane consideration, might not the nature of Chinese emotion provide guidance in how to raise and educate a community to privilege the ideal of harmony maintenance and restoration? In an earlier article, Sundararajan (2014) discusses the “negative emotion” of shame in Chinese culture. On her analysis, young children are shamed in order for them to feel the hurt of others so that they learn to be more considerate of others. The focus here is not on the judgment, “You are bad,” but on providing support for the child's learning to behave well. Understanding and feeling (if not acknowledging) one's wrong-doing in the eyes of others without the guilt of being inherently defective, sets the stage for the child's manifesting “the affectivity that connects us all (*gan*).” This approach to wrong-doing is embodied in practices of “restorative

justice” in lieu of retributive punishment that are increasingly common in Western societies. This is an example of how a community’s emotional responsiveness can evolve in light of a commitment to prioritize harmony maintenance and restoration, taking into account the humanity of each person.

Is the locus of emotion in the body/mind of the individual or between bodies/minds and environments, or both? Sundararajan does not so much defend a thesis on how emotion should be modeled as to broaden both the array of emotions to be considered and the questions to be explored, if we are to account for human emotion in the full range of lived experience.

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### Author Note

Richard Reilly is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at St. Bonaventure University. His areas of research interest include ethics, moral psychology, comparative philosophy, and Buddhism.

Received February 19, 2017

Accepted March 7, 2017 ■

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