

## *My Image Beyond the Image of Louise Sundararajan's Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture*

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Louise Sundararajan. *Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture: Thinking Through Psychology*. International and Cultural Psychology Series. Edited by Anthony J. Marsella. New York, NY: Springer, 2015, EUR 88.38 (hardcover). ISBN 978-3-319-18220-9.

*Louise Sundararajan's aim in Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture is to provide an explanatory framework for cross-cultural differences between Chinese and what she refers to as "Western" cultures from the methodological perspective of indigenous psychology, which aims to give voice to the knowledge that exists beyond the limits of mainstream "Western" psychology. Her book is deeply interdisciplinary, drawing from philosophy, psychology, cognitive science, physics, biology, anthropology, sociology, and linguistics. She also identifies some of the shared roots of Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, and other similarities between Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Indian cultures, in order to further explicate the various concepts of Chinese emotions. As a result, Sundararajan also draws some more general conclusions regarding what she refers to as "Eastern" cultures.*

**Key words:** Chinese emotions; eastern emotions; western emotions; rationality; cognition; dual-process theory; mind-to-world mapping; mind-to-mind mapping

Although *Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture*, by Louise Sundararajan, was published in 2015, it has not received much attention, especially in the area of philosophy of emotion. Yet in light of recent concerns regarding nationalism and diversity in the United States (U.S.) and the United Kingdom (U.K.), the political struggles/uprisings in Hong Kong against mainland China, and the differentiated responses to COVID-19 in English-speaking (e.g., U.S. and U.K.) countries and Confucian inspired countries (e.g., China, Taiwan, and South Korea), her book deserves further consideration.

The book may be able to offer a framework that would allow us to provide a more accurate analysis of the emotional experiences that arise from such conflicts and crises, at both the personal and group levels, especially within a pluralistic society. For example, Sundararajan's book helped me to better understand my own experiences as a Korean American navigating between both my collectivist Korean and my individualist American cultures. It also helped me to better consider alternative possibilities for resolving some of the current conflicts and crises of pluralistic societies of hyper-individualism and hyper-capitalism, such as the U.S., and of hyper-collectivism, such as mainland China. This is because Sundararajan's book is also an introduction to both optimal and suboptimal Eastern<sup>1</sup> decision-making processes, which can help both kinds of cultures achieve a wider perspective so as to achieve a more harmonious existence.

Her framework may also be of interest given the current rise of 4E (embodied, enactive, embedded, and extended) approaches in the philosophy of emotion and mind. Sundararajan provides an understanding of some of the fundamental principles of contemporary embodied and extended theories of mind and emotion, which challenge earlier dualist traditions that are rooted

primarily in Western philosophical works of scholars like Plato and Descartes as well as conventional Western dual-process theories.<sup>2</sup>

As a point of clarification, however, Sundararajan seems to include Aristotle's influence on Western traditions as a contrast to Chinese traditions (39), which may seem to challenge her aim to distinguish Eastern from Western cognitions, especially with regard to System 1 and System 2 processes and with respect to the kind of cognition involved in virtue. Her reference to Aristotle, however, is simply a segue into her discussion regarding the differences between Chinese and Western cultures. So it should not be taken as constituting a part of her central argument for her framework, and it may nevertheless serve as a counterexample to her argument.

In the remainder of my review, I will first provide a brief account of the structure of Sundararajan's book. Second, I will advance my summary of Sundararajan's framework, which forms the basis for her central argument. I will also focus primarily on her main argument for her framework, especially the notions of relational and non-relational cognition, rather than go into detail about each chapter and the specific import of Daoism and Confucianism to understanding Chinese emotions.<sup>3</sup> Third, I will conclude my review by providing a brief criticism of her general framework and offering two possible responses to this criticism.

## 1 The Structure and Main Argument of Sundararajan's Book

Sundararajan's book begins with a preface and acknowledgements before her table of contents. The preface provides a clear outlined summary of her book, which clearly indicates her intentions for each of the four parts of her book, as well as each of her twelve chapters. Her preface also notes the potential contributions that her book can make: 1) providing "the first systematic study of Chinese emotions from a theoretical framework that seeks not only to do justice to the indigenous perspectives, but also uses the later to interrogate mainstream psychological theories and research on emotions" (x); 2) providing a way for outsiders to "see the world and feel the way the locals do" (xi); 3) demonstrating how an indigenous understanding of Chinese emotions can contribute to the greater general discourse on theorizing about emotions, and 4) providing alternative resources for problem solving in both Chinese and non-Chinese cultures. It concludes with some reading tips, including recommendations that one "take small bites, with savoring," that one "have fun skipping," especially given the redundancy of the concepts she discusses, and that "there is no need to start from the beginning" (xi). In doing so, Sundararajan not only provides the reader with reading tips, but also invites them to experience some of the aspects of relational cognition, which constitutes the core of her framework.

In part one, Sundararajan focuses mainly on introducing her main argument and framework, which runs throughout her book. She summarizes this argument in chapter one, in the following way:

1. Building on the notion of cognition as adaptive systems shaped by environmental demands and life experiences, (Kozhevnikov et al., 2014), I argue that the ecological niche of strong ties puts a premium on mind-to-mind transactions, which are tasks best served by the relational cognition, whereas that of weak ties capitalizes on mind-to-world transactions, which are tasks best served by the non-relational cognition.
2. Mind-to-mind transactions, served by relational cognition, capitalizes on similarity and resonance, whereas mind-to-world transaction, served by non-relational cognition,

privileges detection of difference. To the extent that similarity entails symmetry, whereas difference asymmetry, relational cognition tends to privilege symmetry, whereas non-relational cognition asymmetry.

3. The majority difference in cognitive styles between China and the West—such as holistic versus analytic, or associative rule-based reasoning—falls along the divide between the two distinct cultural ideals—symmetry versus asymmetry, or symmetry restoration versus symmetry breakdown (6).

Passage three summarizes Sundararajan's main conclusion—that “symmetry restoration and symmetry breaking are two different and opposed orientations of thought,” which “[constitute] the major difference in rationality between China and the West” (6). Passage one constitutes her foundational tenet that the major difference between Chinese and Western cultures lies in the difference between the ecological niche served by permanent bonds between similar individuals (strong ties), which is more indicative of collectivist cultures like China's, and the temporary relations among dissimilar individuals (weak ties), which is more indicative of individualist cultures in the West. Passage two provides the necessary links between the notions of the ecological niches of strong ties versus weak ties, mind-to-mind versus mind-to-world transactions, relational versus non-relational cognitions, similarity versus difference, and symmetry versus asymmetry, along with the corollaries of similarity restoration/maintenance versus similarity breaking, for Sundararajan to sufficiently draw her conclusion.

She also elaborates, in part one of her book, on the fundamental concepts on which her argument and framework depends: “culture” defined in terms of a “repository for emotional knowledge” (3), the central notions of relational cognition in contrast with non-relational cognition (chapter 1), the notion of harmony as an aspect of relational cognition (chapter 2), and the notion of relational collectivism, which is relationship-based, in contrast with collective collectivism, which is group-based (chapter 3). She also elaborates on the notion of Oceanic Merging (chapter 4), which can be described as the merging of oneself with all of nature and existence. In terms of the notion of symmetry, Sundararajan speaks of Oceanic Merging as “ultra-symmetry,” in which “no differentiation is possible” (65). This notion, however, is not an essential aspect of her central argument, which is quoted above, although it is essential for Sundararajan to draw her more general conclusion that the rationalities of Chinese and Western cultures constitute “upside-down universes” to each other (15).

Sundararajan provides everyday cultural examples of Chinese emotions as evidence for the major tenets of her framework in part two. The emotions she introduces may seem quite foreign to members of individualistic cultures, such as heart-aching love as an example of empathy-based emotions (chapter 5), the kind of affective intimacy that is grounded in mind perception rather than mind reading (chapter 6), spontaneity as freedom from top-down cognitive control (chapter 7), and the toleration of *sajiao* (adorable petulance) as a way of engendering gratitude (chapter 8).

Part three focuses on providing an explanation of how relational cognition can provide for experiences of creativity (chapter 9), which individualistic, non-relational thinkers may believe is necessarily rooted in non-relational cognition, and also argues for a more sophisticated understanding of System 1 processes through her discussion of savoring (chapter 10) and emptiness (chapter 11). Finally, in the fourth part of her book (chapter 12), Sundararajan summarizes her view of relational cognition in Chinese culture into an account of and an indigenous psychological approach to studying Chinese emotions.

## 2 Sundararajan's Framework

According to Sundararajan's framework, the principal distinction between Chinese and Western cultures, including their rationalities, lies in the difference in the values that Chinese and Western cultures place on the ideals of symmetry versus asymmetry, along with the corollary ideals of symmetry maintenance/restoration versus symmetry breaking. Chinese culture developed within an ecological niche of strong ties whereas Western cultures developed within an ecological niche of weak ties, and this difference underwrites the difference between two distinct cognitive systems: relational and non-relational cognitions.

Initially, through her discussion of symmetry in relational cognition (chapter 1) and harmony as a feature of symmetry (chapter 2), Sundararajan also respectively relates these two distinct kinds of cognitions with the two distinct cognitive systems of conventional, Western, dual-process theories: System 1 and System 2 processes. Yet, through her discussion of metacognition in terms of levels of awareness, in chapter eleven, which she initially introduces in chapter two (34-5) and more fully introduces in chapters five and seven of part two of her book, she argues for a more sophisticated understanding of System 1 processes, which is the kind of cognition that she primarily associates with Chinese culture. In doing so, she challenges the distinction between System 1 and System 2 processes, according to the contemporary, received, Western views of dual-process theories.

As Sundararajan continues in chapter one, relational cognition leads to a preference for mind-to-mind transactions and non-relational cognition leads to a preference for mind-to-world transactions, which is associated with non-relational cognition. Mind-to-world transactions focus primarily on mind-to-world mappings, whereas mind-to-mind transactions focus on within-mind mappings and between-mind mappings.

The kind of cognition that has a preference for mind-to-world transactions instantiates subject-object relations with the environment, and it takes an epistemic attitude of control and manipulation. As such, information accuracy (i.e., truth) is highly prioritized in mind-to-world mapping. The kind of cognition that prioritizes mind-to-mind transactions instantiates subject-to-subject relations and takes an epistemic attitude of communing with the self and others. With this type of cognition, assessing trustworthiness more than truth is the aim. Sundararajan also notes that "while life requires both types of cognition to function, cultures have a preference for either one or the other" (17; also read Sundararajan 2019).<sup>4</sup>

In prioritizing mind-to-mind transactions, relational cognition attends primarily to similarities, which Sundararajan characterizes in terms of involvement. Non-relational cognition prioritizes mind-to-world transactions and attends primarily to differences, which she characterizes in terms of differentiation. Furthermore, it is in these distinct foci (similarities/involvement and differences/differentiation) that the values of symmetry and asymmetry, along with their corollaries, enter Sundararajan's framework. Symmetry, as well as its corollary symmetry restoration/maintenance, can be understood as the cultural ideal of maintaining equal treatment among in-group members. Asymmetry, along with its corollary of symmetry breaking, can be understood as the cultural ideal of maintaining differences among co-participants of weak ties.

Although valuing either are matters of degree, Sundararajan illustrates the ideal of valuing symmetry over asymmetry with her example of communal sharing. In such cases, there is a symmetry in the relations between each of the co-participants (e.g., members of a family) such that any one of the co-participants can eat as much or as little as any of the others. The ideal of valuing asymmetry over symmetry is best illustrated by her example of market pricing, in which a \$10 plate

cannot be switched with a \$30 plate among strangers at a restaurant since it is important for the co-participants (e.g., the restaurant owner and patrons) to keep these relations distinct.

Depending on the degrees to which one of the values of symmetry or asymmetry is weighted over the other, these differential preferences distinctively give rise to five kinds of rationalities: Oceanic Merging, Communal Sharing, Authority Ranking, Equality Matching, and Market Pricing (13-8). Each of these types of rationalities are named for the social networking relationships (i.e., the ecological niche) within which they arise and are given here in the order of the degree to which symmetry is more highly valued over asymmetry.

The differences between relational and non-relational cognition, therefore, constitute the metaphysical foundation for the respective differences between Chinese and Western rationalities, such as the differences in the Chinese culture's preference for the cognitive styles of dialectic, holistic/associative, implicit/intuitive/heuristic, low cognitive control/system-one, and implicit code thinking versus non-relational Western preferences for analytic/rule-based, high cognitive control/system-two, and explicit code thinking. The result, as Sundararajan concludes in chapter one, is that "in a nutshell, China and the modern West constitute upside-down universes to each other" (17).<sup>5</sup>

Throughout part two of her book, Sundararajan fills in her framework with detailed accounts of how the kind of cognition that underlies Chinese emotions leads to the rise of heart-aching love (*teng*) (chapter 5), intimacy (chapter 6), adorable petulance (*saijiao*) and gratitude (chapter 8), and what it means to be "free for emotions" (Sundararajan 2015: 112) (chapter 7), thereby constituting the ideal state of harmony for rationalities that highly value symmetry, in contrast to non-relational Western notions of emotion regulation or the top-down cognitive control of reason over emotions.

An underlying theme that holds all these chapters together, and which can be related back to the central argument of her book, is the illustration of how the relational cognition that underlies Chinese culture gives rise to an ethics that places emotions at the center of ethical decision-making, in contrast with non-relational Western rationalities, which privilege what one might take to be more "cognitive" decision-making processes. Emotion-based reasoning (i.e., the rationalities of relational cognition), such as those of heart-aching love, intimacy, adorable petulance, and gratitude, all highlight the significance of mind-to-mind interactions that are rooted in intuitive, heuristic, System 1 processes rather than System 2 processes, which typically characterize utilitarian calculations and analytic, rule-based reasoning (i.e., rationalities of non-relational cognition). Sundararajan also beautifully illustrates the utility of the extended mind hypothesis through her notion of protoconversation, which constitutes the ontogenetic foundation of relational cognition.

In part three, Sundararajan adds additional complexity to the details of her framework through a discussion of Chinese creativity. She touches upon the epistemic differences that arise from the distinctions between relational and non-relational cognitions (chapter 9). One passage that illustrates this difference is in Sundararajan's statement that the "Chinese privilege art, whereas the West science, as the primary venue for creativity" (143). She also provides an account of how System 1 processes can be further developed and refined into gist thinking through higher levels of awareness (chapter 11).

Through her discussion of the life of a hermit (chapter 9), savoring (*pin wei*) (chapter 10), and emotional transformation as a consequence of embracing the Buddhist notion of emptiness (*kong*) (chapter 11), these chapters parallel the discussions in the previous part regarding ethics and what it means to be free for emotions. The difference, however, is that the discussions in these chapters address emotional experiences that occur at a higher level of awareness that is rooted in a more sophisticated notion of System 1 processes.

### 3 Critiquing the Presupposed West-East Binary

Although Sundararajan's book makes a valuable contribution toward thinking about the differences between relational and non-relational cognition, as well as System 1 and System 2 processes, I question one of the implications from the use of the terms "Western" and "Eastern": that these differences are what ground the differences between Chinese and western cultures, and overly emphasize the actual differences between these cultures. My main concern has to do with Sundararajan's initial move, in which she reinterprets the individualism-collectivism hypothesis into a distinction between Western non-relational versus Eastern relational rationalities (15). As she states, "I propose to replace individualism-collectivism with an explanatory model that casts the East and West difference in cognitive styles as [a] difference in rationality" (5).

This is at least one of the moves she makes in order to challenge one of the tenets of mainstream Western psychology. Sundararajan's primary motivation for doing so is to provide a clearer explication of the notion of collectivism. As she continues, she states that "while this model gets individualism right, its formulation about collectivism is overly vague and sometimes misleading (Harb & Smith, 2008; Voronov & Singer, 2002)" (5). Yet, given the ambiguous use of "Western" and "Eastern," she *seems* to unquestionably accept the claim that the individualism-collectivism hypothesis accurately tracks the difference between western and eastern cultures, and herein lies the problem.

Whereas Sundararajan questions the utility of the individualism-collectivism hypothesis in terms of its portrayal of eastern cultures, I question the accuracy of this hypothesis in terms of its depiction of western cultures. More specifically, the individualism-collectivism hypothesis seems to monolithically characterize western cultures as being individualistic, as I discuss in the following paragraph. In doing so, it fails to appropriately recognize the significance of western cultures that are non-individualistic. Sundararajan may respond by noting that the methods of cross-cultural research aim at noting what is prevalent within a culture or across cultures, while acknowledging the complexities within a culture or across cultures. My point, however, is that when one considers the prevalence of a characteristic within a culture or across cultures, an important factor is what one takes to be a sample of such a culture or cultures.

For example, Vivian L. Vignoles makes a similar argument against the individualism-collectivism hypothesis as mapping onto what she refers to as the "individualistic/independent/Western/North American" versus "collectivist/interdependent/Eastern/East Asian" "cultural binary" (Vignoles 2018: 337).<sup>6</sup> She refers to this hypothesis as the "common view," initially named by Yohtaro Takano and Eiko Osaka (1999),<sup>7</sup> and she argues that "in their values, models of self-hood, and cultural practices, U.S. samples are not representative of Western cultures" (Vignoles 2018: 340). This is especially evident in the findings of Schwartz (2006),<sup>8</sup> which Vignoles cites in support of her claim.

Western cultures are typically identified as those cultures of North and South America, Europe, and Australia. Yet, according to Schwartz's study of seventy-six cultures around the world, rather than a cultural binary, these cultures reveal seven distinct transnational cultural groupings, along seven cultural dimensions (intellectual autonomy, affective autonomy, embeddedness, hierarchy, egalitarianism, mastery, and harmony): Western European, English-speaking, Latin American, Eastern European, South Asian, Confucian-influenced, and African and Middle Eastern cultures (Schwartz 2006: 157; also refer to figure 4, Schwartz 2006: 156).

The above evidence alone may be taken as presenting a considerable challenge to Sundararajan's conclusion, but even more weight may be added when we consider the evidence

which suggests that at least some western cultures, such as Brazil's, share a cognitive style that is more closely aligned with Chinese rather than American (U.S.) culture (de Oliveira and Nisbett 2017).<sup>9</sup> This evidence suggests that the consequence of unquestionably accepting a cultural binary, as implied by dichotomies like “Western” versus “Eastern,” may have deeper implications that can directly challenge Sundararajan's conclusion regarding the difference between Chinese and Western rationalities. A second reason is that it also suggests the possibility of similar findings across other western cultures, such as those identified by Schwartz as Latin American, Western European, and Eastern European. Of course, these are merely suggestions, and further studies would be required in order to make any definitive claim.

Yet, regardless of this criticism, Sundararajan also makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of both Chinese and western cultures, especially with respect to Chinese emotions and western cultures in contrast with Chinese emotions. Furthermore, her framework may only require a slight adjustment in order to properly respond to my criticism. For example, Sundararajan can restrict her conclusion to a claim about Chinese and English-speaking cultures. Alternatively, Sundararajan can suggest that her framework more readily tracks a division between something like Jonathan Haidt's (2013)<sup>10</sup> distinction between liberal and conservative cultures, which can be more readily mapped onto a division between individualist and collectivist cultures while foregoing a cultural “East-West” binary. In either case, her argument would be more precise and therefore more sound.

#### 4 Conclusion

I hope I have given readers an idea of how relational cognition differs from non-relational cognition, according to Sundararajan. Sundararajan's main claim regarding the differences between Chinese and what she refers to as “Western” cultures (Sundararajan 2015: 3) rests primarily on this distinction. I also hope that this review is able to give some readers some insight into the kind of alternative resources to problem-solving that Sundararajan's book brings to light, especially for English-speaking cultures, while also highlighting how her book can be helpful for those pursuing research in the 4E tradition.

Another thing I wanted to convey to all readers is my emphasis of Sundararajan's notion of relational cognition in Chinese emotions and how this notion is related to a more sophisticated concept of System 1 processes compared to its characterization in the received, mainstream, Western conceptions of dual-process theories. I refer to this understanding of Sundararajan's book as my image beyond the image of Sundararajan's *Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture*.

The notion about an image beyond the image is also something I learned from Sundararajan's book, and it exemplifies the type of sophisticated, relational, System 1 reasoning that she associates with the experience of savoring in aesthetic, artistic experiences. Sundararajan conveys this concept through a citation of a poet (Tai Jung-chou) by another poet (Si-Kong Tu), which is now one of my favorite passages of all time:

Tai Jung-chou said, “Poets' scenes, such as ‘At Lan-t'ien [Indigo Field] when the sun is warm, from fine jade arises smoke,’ can be gazed at from afar but cannot be placed in front of one's eyebrows and lashes.” *An image beyond the image*, a scene beyond the scene—can these be verbalized? (Yu, 1978, pp. 96-97, emphasis added) (166)

As suggested in the passage quoted above, an image beyond the image cannot be verbalized, and one might question as to whether or not my image beyond the image of Sundararajan's book is in fact an image beyond the image since I seemed to have verbalized it within this review. This review, however, is not a verbalization of my image beyond the image of Sundararajan's book. It is a description of my image beyond the image. As observed by Si-Kong Tu, an image beyond the image cannot be verbalized. It might be shared, however, and perhaps the best way for readers to share my image beyond the image of Sundararajan's book is to first read her book.

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- 1 Throughout her book, Sundararajan also uses the terms “Eastern” and “Western” not as simple descriptive terms, but in a way that connotes primarily English-speaking cultures and Confucian-inspired cultures, while also making a general claim about western and eastern cultures. This is why I maintained her uses of these terms, wherever appropriate, throughout this review, including her capitalization of each term. I discuss the problems that arise with her use of these terms later in this review, but Sundararajan has subsequently acknowledged in a personal email exchange that her use of these terms was “unfortunate.”
  - 2 According to such theories, cognitive processes can be divided into two distinct kinds: System 1 and System 2 processes. System 1 processes are typically characterized as heuristic processes that are fast, automatic, associative, implicit, emotional, and difficult to control, whereas System 2 processes are typically characterized as slower, serial, effortful, relatively flexible, potentially rule-governed, and more likely to be consciously monitored and deliberately controlled (Kahneman 2013).
  - 3 For a review which does so, read Gerald C. Cupchick, “Book Review: Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture: Thinking Through Psychology,” *History of the Human Sciences*, (2016).
  - 4 Louise Sundararajan, “Wither Indigenous Psychology?” *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology* 39, no. 2, (2019): 81–89. <https://doi.org/10.1037/teo0000115>.
  - 5 Also refer to figure 1.1 and 1.2 (16).
  - 6 Vivian L. Vignoles, “The ‘Common View,’ the ‘Cultural Binary,’ and How to Move Forward,” *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 21, no. 4, (2018): 336–45. doi: 10.1111/ajsp.12346.
  - 7 Yohtaro Takano and Eiko Osaka, “An Unsupported Common View: Comparing Japan and the U.S. on Individualism/Collectivism,” *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 2, no. 3, (1999): 311–41. doi: 10.1111/1467-839X.00043.
  - 8 Shalom H. Schwartz, “A Theory of Cultural Value Orientations: Explications and Applications,” *Comparative Sociology* 5, no. 2-3 (2006): 137–82. doi: 10.1163/156913306778667357.
  - 9 Stephanie de Oliveira and Richard E. Nisbett, “Beyond East and West: Cognitive Styles in Latin America,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 48, no. 10, (2017): 1554–7. doi: 10.1177/0022022117730816.
  - 10 Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 2013).