

# Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture by Louise Sundararajan

Reviewed by Steven Bindeman, Ph.D. (Philosophy)

Louise Sundararajan is in an especially strong position to write a book on Chinese emotions not only because she holds doctorates in both psychology and in comparative religions, but she is also native-born Chinese. In her book *Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture: Thinking Through Psychology* (Springer 2015) she approaches her subject by insisting that the best way to understand emotion in Chinese culture is to begin by learning empathically to see the world through Chinese perceptions. Her work, she explains, is about “lived experiences in search of a correct name.” This suggests that a central problem for understanding Chinese emotions is the gap between mainstream western scientific terminology and indigenous Chinese psychology.

Sundararajan defines culture as the repository of emotional knowledge by which a civilization collectively and periodically renews its vision of the world. In other words, culture teaches us what to feel. Since members of different civilizations learn to feel in different ways, it may sometimes seem as if the distances between these differences are incommensurable. For example, the culture gap between east and west is perpetuated by the idea that there is a strict opposition between western individualism and eastern collectivism. Sundararajan points out in response that far from being collectivist, the Chinese emphasize harmony between self and other rather than subsuming one to the other. In place of the binary opposition of self and group, she places an emphasis on variations between culturally accepted styles of thinking.

Assuming that these cognitive models are adaptive systems shaped by life experience, she distinguishes between Chinese mind-to-mind transactions based on relational cognitions focused around similarity, and western mind-to-world transactions best served by non-relational cognitions which capitalize on difference. This leads to the insight that Chinese cognitive styles are more holistic and associative while Western cognitive styles are more analytic and rule-based.

Related to this distinction is the Chinese concept of *lei*. Although its literal meaning is “category,” it holds the connotation of affinity, and this means that for the Chinese the mind relates to the world as its equal, as another mind. This in turn leads to a central theme in Chinese painting and poetry, that humans are capable of finding a deep affinity with nature, even to the extent of finding a responsive heart in rocks and stones.

Similarly, we find the Chinese notion of *he* which means “harmony.” This is a term which is derived from themes relating to musical instruments and to the cooking cauldron, referring in both cases to the harmonizing of diverse ingredients so that the spirits and man might be brought together in equilibrium.

The prevailing polarity between the inner (yin) and outer (yang) yields yet another aspect of harmony, namely that it has a two-tiered structure of outer appearance and inner reality. For example, the Chinese custom to “obey publicly and defy privately” refers to the social importance of maintaining harmony by neutralizing the effects of difference. While a westerner might perceive this as an “either/or” scenario, the Chinese would holistically recognize how it actually introduces a new order of harmony which has the capacity to encompass — without resolving — the contradictoriness of the two orders. In this case, maintaining the relationship between the opposites is considered more important than resolving the difference between them.

In a later chapter Sundararajan tells the Taoist story from the works of Chuangzi of a carpenter who is asked by his friend to slice off a speck of plaster from his nose. Letting his ax fall instinctively, the carpenter does so while leaving his friend’s nose completely unharmed. When a powerful lord hears of this he asks that the same be done for him but the carpenter responds that he no longer does this sort of thing because his “chopping block” died long ago. Not only does the story illustrate the perfect coordination of body, mind, and action which is so prized in Taoism, it also presents a snub to

authority that is in addition an example of mind-to-mind social dexterity because it illustrates a creative individualism which manages to avoid the dangers of competition and hostility.

*Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture* is filled with such stories, since it is through them and their like that the legacies of Confucianism and Taoism are best communicated. Such songs, sayings, poetry and stories were intended as exercises of the mind in order to develop and share the emotions that form the structures of Chinese consciousness.

But Chinese emotional consciousness is not merely a blending system for different kinds of feelings; it is rather in the author's view a "particulate system" of nuanced experiences. Having dedicated the first part of her book to the conceptual spaces of ancient Chinese thought, she then turns to some of the details of Chinese emotional life that fill out these spaces. Accordingly, she focuses on emotions that are empathy-based (heart-aching love), resonance-based (the art of intimacy), freedom-based (Taoist recipes for authenticity and creativity), and indulgence/gratitude-based (being spoiled rotten).

In the third and final part of her book Sundararajan turns her attention to the phenomenon of Chinese creativity. She focuses in turn on the Taoist attention to *solitude* and self-reflection as the main source of creativity, to the aesthetic paradox of *savoring* as a form of engaged detachment and self-regulation, and to the Chinese Buddhist notion of *emptiness* as the result of the savoring of the negative experiences of life, an experience which has the power to lead to radical self-transformation.

This is a remarkable book, which can be turned to over and over for the vast amount of rich information and insight it provides into the emotional aspects of a complex and sophisticated culture from which we have much to learn and about which we cannot afford to remain ignorant.