Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture: Thinking Through Psychology. Louise Sundararajan. London: Springer. 2015. vii-210.

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In recent years, cultural anthropologists have been engaged in a radical rethinking of the relationship between nature and culture in what has been called the “ontological turn.” What the implications are for psychological anthropology is not yet entirely clear, because the relationship between the two camps remains ambiguous if not tense. Enter Louise Sundararajan’s book, *Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture: Thinking Through Psychology.*

At one level, the book may be read as a case study of one particular culture’s folk theory of emotions. Not unlike Catherine Lutz’s classic *Unnatural Emotions* (1988), Sundararajan’s project challenges established ideas about human emotion in the West – i.e. that they are internal states, the same across cultures, and inferior to deliberative reason. As a psychologist writing a theoretical book, however, Sundararajan employs different source materials. One will not find long passages of ethnographic prose, or descriptions of the social contexts in which emotion theory and practice is situated. Instead, Sundararajan’s arguments emerge out of the conversation she creates by assembling diverse forms of evidence, including studies by experimental psychologists, the philosophy of mind, neuroscience, cognitive science, classical Chinese poetry and Daoist philosophy.

Readers from anthropology will have difficulty getting past the author’s unwitting essentialization of culture. The use of “China” and “Chinese” in some parts of the text, the stark contrast drawn between Chinese versus Western rationality, are problematic from an anthropological perspective. When Sundararajan claims that “China and the modern West constitute upside-down universes to each other” (17), a reader may wonder why the literary tradition gets to stand in for “China,” when, to give just one illustration, the vernacular practices of different farming communities in a vast, multi-ethnic country complicate what it means to be Chinese.

But if the reader can look past this issue, there is much to be gained. Far beyond providing just another case study, *Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture* may be read as a productive challenge against the foundations of Western thought and ways of being. A major theme in the book consists of the contrast between mind-to-world transactions versus mind-to-mind transactions. While mind-to-world transactions involve a subject making distinctions between objects in the world so as to better navigate and control that world, mind-to-mind transactions involve subjects relating to other subjects as equal participants in the greater process of things. While the former is associated with science, the latter is associated with the arts. Mind-to-mind transactions detect similarity rather than difference, Sundararajan explains, in an effort to return to what has been called “ultra-symmetry” (15). Such transactions may be found between a caregiver and a child, a poet and a reader, even a human and a rock. For in symmetry, differences co-exist without transforming a given system (12-3). All potentials are superimposed, right on top of one another (66).

An illustration Sundararajan gives comes from a Tang poet (701-762 AD): “Never tired of looking at each other – Only the China-t’ing Mountain and me” (9). Now, a reader may chalk up this instance of mutual gazing as mere animism or anthropomorphism, a human

representation of an object in the world. But if read alongside critiques of the ontological dualisms that undergird much of anthropological theory, such an explanation will not do. The stakes in how we interpret the claims of non-Western "others" are both epistemological and political. Consider Tim Ingold's argument with respect to the Melpa's belief that repeated acts of intercourse contribute to the development of a fetus: "they are certainly right, where 'scientific' genetics is wrong, in recognizing that the human organism does not initially receive its form as an injection, but rather that such form is generated and conserved only within the total relational context…" (1991:369). Ingold's point is part of a broader argument that demonstrates how the separation between biology and culture in the anthropological division of labor frees cultural anthropologists from having to deal with the fact that the Melpa have gotten biological "facts" wrong.

Sundararajan's book can be thought of as part of a global intellectual movement--the Division 32 Task Force on Indigenous Psychology of the American Psychological Association--to decolonize the field of psychology. The book aims to demonstrate "how folk theories of non-Western cultures can function as potential competitors…" (xi). Although more could be said about the folk-iness of Western psychology, the book succeeds in presenting Chinese theories as being "right" about relationality. In Chinese arts the emotion term *gan-lei,* or "responding in kind" (95), is the paradigmatic mind-to-mind transaction that works toward the restoration of symmetry. Believing a mountain could respond may get "basic facts" wrong, but the claim is not a claim about the mountain itself. Instead, "Never tired of looking at each other" enacts a sympathetic universe in which all forms, human and non-human, are bound together in dynamic relationships of mutual affect and response.

The world-historical consequences of ontological dualism require no comment here. *Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture* is notable for presenting a cultural critique that has therapeutic implications. Related to the idea that in states of symmetry, differences co-exist without making a difference is an account of the significance of solitude and savoring in Chinese thought. In savoring *(pinwei*), the mind-to-mind transaction is found in the relationship a self establishes to the self, in practicing the art of savoring, which, the author explains, does not refer to bringing awareness to an experience but rather the experience of an experience. Inherently paradoxical, savoring involves differences that make no difference. It consists of immersion in the experience--affections that have lingered on, but also detachment in observing for subtleties.

The therapeutic implications of this analysis lie in Sundararajan's point that savoring does not merely apply to enjoyment but to the longing that comes with loss and grief. Best practiced in solitude, savoring facilitates holding "in juxtaposition positive as well as negative ramifications of absence" (154). Savoring redefines what it even means to have a relationship and what may count as a companion--memory, nature, and inanimate objects are all viable candidates. Holding up the hermits of classical poetry as exemplars for the design of mental habitats (*jingjie*) that facilitate savoring and work to hold loneliness and depression at bay, Sundararajan offers a different understanding of human creativity.

Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture (in parts) would be appropriate both for courses in the anthropology of emotion and psychological anthropology. While the book does not problematize the category of "Chinese culture," the picture Sundararajan sketches of certain emotion systems and genres is highly nuanced and provocative. As a whole, the book provides a refreshing source of inspiration for any reader keen on experimenting with how we conceptualize the connection between mind and world, ontology and the art of living.

References Cited

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Lutz, Catherine A. 1988. *Unnatural Emotions: Everyday Sentiments on a Micronesian Atoll & Their Challenge to Western Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.