

Review of *Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture*

This book offers a systematic study of emotion in Chinese culture. Beyond that, it provides a theoretical framework that permits the reader to grasp the difference between the way emotion is treated in Western psychology and the approach to emotion that is taken in the East. Author Louise Sundararajan is not primarily concerned with validating ideas through empirical research, but with a cross-fertilization of ideas spanning cultures and diverse lines of psychological inquiry. At the same time, empirical research is included in a balanced way as part of the mix. The work promotes transcultural understanding both on a conceptual level and on the level of intuitive experience.

Part I of Sundararajan's carefully organized volume lays down the theoretical foundations for analyzing Chinese emotion. The first two chapters examine the concepts of symmetry and harmony, and these are followed by chapters that introduce Confucianism and Daoism. With the conceptual framework thus established, Parts II and III approach the psychology of Chinese emotion in a more concrete fashion. Here Sundararajan explores topics such as intimacy and love, authenticity and freedom, spontaneity and creativity. Special attention is given to the Chinese experiences of *emptiness (kong)* and *savoring (pin wei)*. In this portion of the book, the subtleties of Chinese emotion are brought out through empirical studies, nuanced description, and samples of poetry. As she proceeds, the author contrasts Western and Eastern mindsets in a lively, lucid, and illuminating fashion. The book concludes by returning to the fundamental and surprisingly elusive question of what emotion actually is. Some fascinating answers are proposed.

Sundararajan's deconstruction of Western stereotypes of Chinese culture was especially interesting to me. To give one example, we commonly hear that in Asian society the individual is subordinated to the collective. In dispelling this simplistic account, the author brings out that, in fact, Chinese culture holds as its ideal a harmonious interrelatedness in which diversity is encouraged.

Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture harmoniously combines qualities of writing seldom seen together: the "yang" of

meticulous organization, scrupulous definitions, and punctilious documentation; with the “yin” of a spontaneous flair and inventive humor that keeps the reader well engaged. The clarity of this book is further enhanced by effectively deployed redundancy, ample previews anticipating the structure and content to come, as well as summaries and concluding statements that help the reader consolidate what has already been presented. All this results in an eminently readable book, especially when you consider the subtle conceptual challenges posed by the work.

In short, Sundararajan’s book deepens our understanding of emotion, broadens the horizon of the psychology thereof, and promotes cross-cultural understanding in the process. I strongly recommend this book to any reader with an interest in exploring the depth and breadth of emotional experience.

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