

Homegrown emotions

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Louise Sundararajan, *Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture: Thinking through Psychology*. New York, NY: Springer International, 2015, 210pp. ISBN 9783319182209 (hbk).

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This is a book written by a Chinese scholar about Chinese emotions that honors wisdom from both ancient Chinese sources and supportive Western research. A rare combination indeed. Sundararajan's indigenous perspective is in the tradition of Virgilio Enriquez (1994), Ignacio Martín-Baró (Martín-Baró, 1994), and Richard Shweder (2008). The "melting pot of cultures" approach is not her *modus operandi* but, like Shweder, she seeks "[T]o discover other realities hidden within the self, waiting to be drawn out into consciousness" (Shweder, 1991, p. 69). By examining emotions carefully in China she hopes to add a missing piece to the puzzle in understanding the human mind.

From a Chinese perspective, emotion may be perceived quite differently than in the West. From Plato onwards, emotions were deemed suspect in that they distorted reality but Sundararajan suggests that in Chinese culture emotion (*qing*) "discloses something that is true about the person and the world" (p. 192). Emotions, she proposes, are not only responses to external stimuli and thus always in need of being regulated. As an "ensemble of undulating affective states, *qing* (emotion) is the manifestation of the human capacity to be impacted affectively (*gan*)" (p. 200). So in Chinese wisdom emotions resonate intersubjectively with the moods of others, resulting in greater emotional refinement and discrimination. While in the West adults experience discrete emotions related to the goals they seek (anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, and surprise), Sundararajan thinks Chinese begin with the preverbal, expressive, infant–mother emotional dyad where the child learns "intents, moods, and desires" (p. 200).

Sundararajan's book is replete with examples of distinctive Chinese emotions. For instance, the feeling of harmony is less about protecting sacred personal space as it is the "pleasure derived from attaining multiple goals at once" (p. 21), that intimacy serves not so much to firm up self-confidence and individuality but to generate a greater sense of communal identity, "we-ness," and that seemingly painful or immature feeling can induce virtuous emotions such as love and gratitude. Emotions were intentionally and carefully chosen by Sundararajan to create a mental space broad enough to conserve the original flavor of Chinese emotions for the readers not only to recognize them, but also to experience and savor them. Through uncovering a distinctive Chinese take on emotions, the author's work challenges us to consider a different understanding of culture.

Sundararajan proposes that we understand culture as a repository of emotional knowledge, not simply or only the beliefs, attitudes, and practices of a bounded people. She eschews macro binaries of individualism and collectivism to describe cultural differences because they lack explanatory power. While Western definitions of individualism appear to be an accurate description of their own culture, the construal of collectivism appears to be a projection on non-Western cultures of what Americans think is the cultural opposite of individualism (conformity, lack of self-awareness, emotional inexpressivity, etc.; see Fiske, 2002).

Thus Sundararajan uses a variety of categories to develop her understanding of differences between cultures: strong vs. weak ties; communal sharing vs. market relations, symmetry breakdown and restoration, synergy, and scarcity; mind-to-mind vs. mind-to-world transactions; inner vs. outer; and cognitive orientations that are implicit, holistic, relational, and heuristic cognitive styles vs. explicit, analytic, non-relational, and rule-based. Applied to Chinese emotions, Sundararajan understands Confucianism as focused more on the emotional bonds that come from communal sharing than from relationships that are more instrumental and market driven. Traditional Confucian communities have strong ties constructed on the basis of emotional loyalty, proximity, and obligation which contrast with those cultures or communities that have weak ties that are more temporary (Granovetter, 1973).

It is with these broad, multidimensional cultural frames that Sundararajan provides enough conceptual space and complexity for readers to explore and to savor the original flavor of Chinese emotions, such as harmony (*he*), intimacy (respond in kind, *gan-lei*, and stimulation-responding, *gan-ying*), freedom (the romantic spirit, *feng-liu*), heart-aching love (*xin-teng*), immaturity (being spoiled rotten, *sajiao*), and emptiness (*kong*). And her explanatory framework expands the meaning of the Chinese emotions she focuses on. Harmony in the West has more to do with not encroaching on the sacred individual space of the other. Sundararajan challenges the Western stereotype of harmony in collective cultures as prizing homogeneity and conformity.

Indigeneity is not synonymous with sectarianism or provincialism. In support of her understanding of harmony in strong-tie societies, Sundararajan marshals evidence not only from the sayings of ancient Confucian and Daoist masters, but also from research from the West. She finds support for her definition of harmony in the work of Mourey, Oyserman, and Yoon (2013) who report that in a blocked choice experimental paradigm, those coming from individualist perspectives respond differently in their pursuit of goals from those that emerge from collectivists. Those primed with an individualistic mindset easily switched to sequential goal pursuit choosing one goal at a time, whereas those primed with a collective mindset could address multiple goals at the same time, that is, concurrent goal pursuit.

In Chinese thought on emotions, harmony is not homogenization. The yin and yang polarity points to the intrinsic plurality in harmony. Both *yin* and *yang* contain each other. Confucius stated it clearly: "Exemplary persons seek harmony not sameness; petty persons, then, are the opposite" (Analects, 13/23, as cited in Sundararajan, p. 31). Harmony is establishing a dynamic equilibrium between multiple extreme emotions. A dynamic equilibrium is equal to the principle of the golden mean. The original state is one of symmetry (equilibrium) but emotional episodes stir the calm waters and result in symmetry

breakdown. The recovery of the golden mean is restored emotional symmetry. This may occur by savoring the weak emotion or through neutralizing extreme emotions. Harmony in a family with a wayward son can be restored simply by saying, “*mei guanxi*.” It does not matter, he is family.

There are unique cognitive styles that flourish in cultural niches with strong ties, communal sharing, and an emphasis on symmetry maintenance and restoration. She finds support in the well-established finding that cultures differ in cognitive styles such that some Eastern cultures function cognitively more in a holistic, contextually sensitive mode (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). Emotions then emerge in the context of other emotions to harmoniously yield something new. In Chinese history, harmony is a term derived from musical instruments and the cooking cauldron. Harmony is like soup with its many flavors brought into unity. Similarly, eight instruments that are in good accord raise the spirits of humanity. Harmony is multiplicity and diversity.

Sundararajan challenges what we have assumed to be true of Chinese society in terms of individuality, freedom, and emotional suppression/regulation. First, for those who think there is no role for individual subjectivity and emotionality in Chinese society, Sundararajan points to Daoism that affirms freedom and authenticity in emotions. Second, there is a well-established tradition of nonconformity and independent thinking among Daoist hermits in Asia. Those who believe that the Chinese suppress emotion forget that the cultivation of emotion was, for Confucius, the goal of education. Third, in the West we seek to regulate emotions while for the ancient masters, she argues, the goal is the refinement of emotions, the discrimination between emotions.

There may well be those who have disagreements with Sundararajan. For instance, although Confucianism has long been considered the official ideology for the government in Chinese history, we cannot ignore the fact that Legalism, first implemented in the Qin dynasty, has played a critical role in Chinese society alongside Confucianism. Sundararajan does not address the role of the Legalists in shaping an understanding of emotion. But that is not Sundararajan’s focus—her theory of culture is more about the aesthetic, mental world, rather than the material one. Hence she intentionally chose Confucianism and Daoism, i.e., the high culture, as her focus on emotions in Chinese culture. Second, some detractors may argue that distinctions between East and West are too categorical and that these cultures at times are construed as essentialist. Finally, there may be those who say the book is not an accurate description of emotions in contemporary, hybridic Chinese society but Sundararajan is not giving us her take on contemporary Chinese psyche. Rather, her tactic is more aspirational: what could be the basis of renewal. The impact of the Cultural Revolution on Chinese emotions is not her focus. However, the book does provide a theoretical structure that can serve as a heuristic for analyzing contemporary Chinese life.

Sundararajan bears witness to ancient Chinese thought about good culture, a culture characterized by valuing harmony, diversity, emotional refinement, savoring, and self-emptying. However, for the past three decades, Western psychologists have been inundating China with theories that vary from classic psychoanalysis to positive psychology, family systems therapy, and cognitive behavioral approaches. It is not the cultural *telos* of emotions implicit in these psychologies that Sundararajan proposes is indigenous but the *telos* implicit in Chinese high culture: the wisdom of Confucius and Lao Tze

regarding emotions. This wisdom could, after all, be lost. On average, every year three languages—and, by implication three cultures—go extinct. If there is no record of their indigenous thought, history, or common life, it is a loss for humanity.

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