



Harmony, Symmetry, Entropy: Emotional Experiencing Compared East to West

A Review of

Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture: Thinking Through Psychology

by Louise Sundararajan

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Reviewed by

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Intercultural Inquiry Into Experiencing Emotions

Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture by Louise Sundararajan is an elegant account of the ways in which emotions are experienced by Chinese people, and the book uses this discussion to enrich the Western psychological study of emotion. It is not intended to be a definitive account of affect and emotion; instead, it is an open contribution to the conversation concerning emotion that “cross-fertilizes” the Chinese cultural utilization of key categories of emotion with Western psychological affect theory (p. xii). The author systematically and ingeniously relates current psychological literature to Chinese culture’s holistic, categorical approach to emotions.

The author’s intended audience includes psychologists with an interest in affect theory, international psychologists, those with multicultural interests, general interdisciplinary investigators with multicultural interests, sociologists, and linguists. Some acquaintance with the large literature referred to by the author would be helpful; although, it would be difficult to be acquainted with all the literature the author cites. A serious general reader would probably follow the text with reasonable effort, as the writing is clear, and the author does achieve the scholastic transparency for which she strives. This transparency is consistent with her general goal of enriching, broadening, and furthering the transcultural conversation of emotional experience. More specifically, the author aims to contrast the Eastern and Western experience and understanding of emotions and then move the psychological inquiry of emotions to a more balanced and broader holistic frame.

Those psychologists who have experienced a professional struggle with the reductionism that seems to characterize much of current psychological science may find this presentation

particularly useful. The author's goal, however, is not to dissociate or free holistic inquiry of emotional concepts from psychological science, but rather to integrate it into psychological scientific inquiry.

Naturalism and Emotion

Placing cognitive processes, including emotion, in the cultural environment is not novel (see Gallagher, 2013; Kirschner & Martin, 2010; Mead, 1934). What is innovative is the effort to show how emotions, in this instance the emotions associated with Chinese culture, are related to and fit into, or not, Western psychological literature. The author creatively demonstrates that Western psychological literature contains some important concepts that can help us understand the Chinese experience of emotion.

Sundararajan's comparison of Western and Chinese cultures is interesting and consistent. She presents the Eastern and Western cultures as mirror images that reflect two different "upside-down" universes (pp. 15–18). She introduces the concept of cultural symmetry as an analogical application of entropy to culture. Symmetry presents a minimum of information so that "harmony" consists of a dialectic process of symmetry and symmetry breaking (pp. 11–13) that is a relatively delicate dance of restoration and breaking of harmony (pp. 32–35). Sundararajan describes two distinctive cognitive styles consisting of relational and object-centered, or nonrelational, cognition (pp. 4–7). Every culture, according to the author, necessarily incorporates both styles but privileges one over the other.

Asiatic cultures, and specifically Chinese culture, privilege relational thinking, while Western European culture privileges object-centered or nonrelational rationality. In turn, relational rational cultures privilege holistic thinking while the West privileges cause and effect, rule-governed rationality. The author refers to relational rationality as "mind-to-mind" transactions, and she describes cause-effect rationality as "mind-to-world" transactions (pp. 7–9, 52, 98). Rationality, conceptualized ". . . as a functional mindset that operates in a particular ecological niche for which it is evolved," is linked with the notions of heuristic thinking and bounded rationality (pp. 4, 8–9, 176–178).

This book provides a conceptual toolbox for approaching, understanding, and comparing diverse indigenous cultures. This is done with confidence that what is discovered fits into the naturalistic world of science and, in particular, psychological science (see Baker, 2013, for an account of nonreductive naturalism). The benefit from cultural comparisons is that aspects of the self not discernible in one particular culture are revealed when exposed to another culture. In this way, it is possible in the author's view to be more open to nondominant ideas within and without the ". . . field of affective science. . ." to benefit the possibility of increased creativity (p. 201).

Self-Refinement and Solitude

Four chapters describe several concepts specific to the Chinese culture that illustrate what the author is careful to describe as "nuanced emotional states," in contrast to "monochromatic" blended emotional states (pp. 77–80). Emotions comprise, according to the author, a system in which separate positive and negative emotions maintain distinctive

identities in concurrent comparison in an emotional aggregate. Several important Chinese language terms necessary to understand their emotional experience include *teng*, *xin-teng*, *gan-lei*, *gan-ying*, *xing*, *sajiao*, *pin wei*, and other terms that are not amenable to simple English translations.

Three chapters explore Chinese creativity, which, in the author's account, takes the form of refining one's emotional experience. Chinese creativity is inseparable from solitude (pp. 145–151) and central to creativity is achieving emotional refinement, or an ideal mental state (p. 147). The concept of savoring, or *pin wei*, is particularly important (pp. 114–116). Savoring can be specific to a culture, and the author contrasts Indian and Western practices with their Chinese counterpart. The author states, “. . . Chinese savoring computes multiple emotional states to capture a particular affective brew,” and “. . . [it] is an affirmation of the individual self with its taste, values, and memories as a sole measure of what is worth savoring” (p. 158). Savoring is part of a Confucian “program” of self-regulation and social harmony. Important to the Confucian program, if not crucial, is the clear demarcation of a person's public and private space (for example, pp. 45–50, 146–147). The creative effort in transforming the mixed and diverse emotions experienced leads to an ideal mental state and emotional refinement. This is the essence of Chinese creativity.

Summary

Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture offers a rich network of complexly nuanced ideas. These ideas, some extracted from psychological literature, are then employed to make the Chinese experience of emotion intelligible to mainstream psychology. The concepts discussed are only representative and are presented to communicate the breadth and complexity of the author's overall theme. This is an eloquently constructed book that addresses difficult but important issues holistically within the context of naturalistic science. There are probably not many who would attempt such a task.

References

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