"Ancient" Wisdom: When East Meets West

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The heart of the wise, like a mirror, should reflect all objects, without being sullied

Confucius

Do not apply reasoning to what is unthinkable. The mark of the unthinkable is that it is above all material causes.

Purnanas

Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom

Aristotle

The term “ancient wisdom” evokes powerful imagery--the influences of great philosophers and religious icons, ideas, values and spiritual traditions that have withstood the test of time. And yet, its meaning is also ambiguous, and its impact on our day-to-day lives and actions can be difficult to articulate. Is “ancient wisdom” for each of us the same “ancient wisdom” for us all? More specifically, as negotiation teachers and scholars with cultural connections to and work experience in Hong Kong, India, Singapore, China, the European Union institutions, the Middle East, and the United Kingdom and United States, the authors of this Essay were curious whether “Eastern” and “Western” conceptions of ancient wisdom differ as popular belief might suggest, or whether they are really closer than they appear – perhaps one and the same?
Understanding the meaning of “ancient wisdom” is both an academic and a colloquial pursuit. One can examine it as a form of “intellectual archaeology” (Takahashi 2000: 218) or as an expression of our own individual lived experience. The authors of this essay find both pursuits interesting and useful. We thus examine the concept of “ancient wisdom” in three parts. First, we examine the historical influences on the evolution of ancient “wisdoms” in both the East and the West. Second, we discuss what ancient wisdom means to each of the authors as negotiation teachers and scholars. Finally, we reflect on the “so what” question: what can we take away from this examination of ancient wisdom that helps us to be better negotiators in a world where the lines between East and West, ancient and modern, have become ever-increasingly blurred?

The “Intellectual Archeology” of Ancient Wisdom

In his book *A History of Knowledge*, Charles Van Doren (1991) describes the wisdom of the ancients as evolving from before the time of written history, and as influenced by a variety of major ancient civilizations including Aztec, Chinese, Egyptian, Incan, Indian, and Mesopotamian. In addition, the wisdom of the ancients also evolved from major religious traditions including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. Building upon these ancient civilizations and religious traditions, Van Doren argues that human history also has experienced two major “knowledge explosions” that have influenced our sense of “wisdom” today. The first began during the sixth century B.C.E. in Greece and spread across the entire “known world” (Van Doren 1991: 29). This first explosion added important new knowledge in the way we conceive of
economics, ethics, philosophy, physics, psychology, sociology, and “what can and cannot be reasonably said about human nature and the good life” (Van Doren 1991: 29). Van Doren argues that a second knowledge explosion began just over 500 years ago and continues today. In 1500, the global population stood at about 400 million people. Between 1500 and 1800 the population doubled, doubling again by 1900, yet again by 1960, and yet once more by 2000 (Van Doren 1991: 168). This massive population growth, together with the re-awakening of the renaissance and enlightenment in the West and other influences from the East, vii influenced an explosion of global trade – and with it the trading of ideas (Van Doren 1991: 178).

While Van Doren’s recounting of our “universal” intellectual history reflects a particular and, in our view, decidedly Western-centric and modernist orientation toward the development of knowledge, the concept is still a useful one. The global movement of ideas did not begin with the East, the West or the internet. Rather, knowledge has developed and evolved from countless sources and cultures around the world. As humans have traveled, traded and communicated across distance and time, these different facets of knowledge have been shared, debated and absorbed by countless other cultures. Thus, from this perspective, one can trace an emergent, singular (universal) pool of knowledge. As human civilization has developed and ideas have spread across the world, certain major influences have taken root and have contributed to a collective human “wisdom.” As Van Doren suggests, when taken as a whole, the history of mankind is the history of progress and development of a universal knowledge “that humanity has acquired at various epochs and added to the growing store” (Van Doren 1991: xvii).
This view of knowledge as a universal story describes an evolution of ideas that informs a concept of wisdom. We share the view that much of what we “know” is the result of ideas that have both literally and figuratively traveled the globe, picking up depth, shape and broader recognition along the way. In this sense, we all share in the common and universalized knowledge of the millennia – contributions to an “ancient wisdom” that do not distinguish between “East” and “West.”

At the same time, we see “wisdom” as more than “knowledge” alone. Wisdom also includes the deeper and more enduring shared or “common” sense, judgment and insight of what is good and true that can only come from the crucible of long-lived and shared experience. As Confucius said, “By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.” Lived experience is of necessity particular to time, place and culture. In this sense, then, wisdom cannot be universal. While the foundations of Eastern and Western philosophies and religions may include important shared “knowledge,” each culture also generates its own particular knowledge; and even where knowledge is shared, it can hold profoundly different meaning as it is understood through the particular social context and lived experience of a given people (see, e.g., Fox 2009). In this sense, “wisdom” is an inseparable part of any given culture: it is the ideologically grounded way a people view “reality.”

As Jeffrey Nealon and Susan Searls Giroux have noted, every culture has an integral ideology that is inseparable from knowledge:

For a culture to produce ideas (or new ideas), for example, there has to be some consensus on what the present material conditions mean, a kind of common
agreement about the way things are. … For there to be any knowledge at all, there has to be ideology in this sense: there has to be some preexisting agreement concerning what will count as knowledge… . So ideology, as a network or consensus of interconnected ideas, is in some sense both the source of cultural discourse and their outcome” (Nealon and Giroux 2003: 85-86).

Even the question of what constitutes “knowledge” (whether universal or particular) begs a deeper examination of the cultural context from which the very concept of knowledge emerges. This, too, suggests that East and West are not the same.

Finally, as a growing number of scholars from across many disciplines point out, “knowledge” itself has many dimensions beyond the intellect and world of ideas. There are multiple ways of “knowing”: cognitive, emotional, spiritual, imaginative, and even physical (Alexander and LeBaron 2013; Fox 2014). This broader frame has been called “embodied knowledge” (Alexander and LeBaron 2013; Fox 2014; LeBaron 2013). We suggest that wisdom is also “embodied” – carried with us in multiple ways through generations of lived experience. It follows, then, that wisdom, too, must also be culturally (and ideologically) bound. And, as a consequence, in addition to universally shared ideas, “Eastern” and “Western” wisdom must also emerge from different and particular cultural discourses.

Masami Takahashi (2000) has published a cogent narrative of the historical roots of Eastern and Western conceptions of “wisdom,” suggesting important differences between the two worlds. Western accounts of wisdom are often traced to ancient Egypt, Greece and the development of the Abrahamic religious traditions of Judaism,
Christianity and Islam. Takahashi suggests that this Western tradition “tends to take an analytical approach” to wisdom, which

[g]enerally speaking . . . breaks down human experience into its simplest terms or elementary qualities and examines the nature of their inherent ‘part-to-part relationship’. . . . [t]his reduces wisdom-related experience to specific information processing capacities. . . . This is an instrumental or procedural dimension of wisdom directed toward attaining practical goals in life (e.g. solving problems, making judgments) (Takahashi 2000: 218-19).

In contrast, Eastern accounts of wisdom are often traced to India, China, Japan and Korea, drawing upon Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Taoism. This Eastern tradition is more inclusive, incorporating not only the analytical aspect of wisdom but also a “synthetic” aspect as well. The synthetic domain of wisdom regards human experience as an integrated “whole-part relationship” which is not derivable directly from an analysis of individual elements. It is concerned with the dialectic nature of the human mind that involves both momentary and developmental conditions. . . . From the synthetic perspective, wisdom-related behavior is viewed as an ‘expressive activity’ reflecting an advanced form of integration of psychological processes [internal citations omitted] (Takahashi 2000: 219).

The Eastern notion of “synthesis,” or a holistic conception of the world, is noteworthy. Western traditions (and particularly Western religious traditions) generally view the world in distinct, separate and often dualist terms: For example, Western religious traditions see darkness/light; heaven/earth; humans separated from God the creator who
is “all wise, all powerful, and the incarnation of Good” (Takahashi 2000: 222). Calling on Western philosophy, and Descartes in particular, the West embraces the notion that the soul and the body are separate (Descartes 1642).

In contrast, the Eastern notion of “synthesis” does not stand on dualism or separation. It is a view of the world that is holistic in important ways. For example, in certain Buddhist traditions, “the world, including the self, is understood as Buddha him/her/itself and as the only one” (Takahashi 2000: 222). The traditional Eastern conceptualization of self and its relation to society is also holistic. For example,

[i]n Hinduism, unlike the normative Western notion of the self as an autonomous organism independent of a larger collective (i.e. society), the self is understood as a position in a system of social network. Similarly, in Japanese culture, which has been profoundly influenced by Buddhism and Confucianism, establishing a socially autonomous self is deemphasized. Instead, the self is generally regarded as a relational matrix constantly shifting its emphasis, depending on the situational needs, between society-oriented mode (‘omote’) and self-oriented mode (‘ura’). … In other words, the self and society are viewed as a part of [a] relational system and simply represent two axes of a unified whole or the universe (Takahashi 2000: 223).

Two other qualities emerge from Eastern cultures that inform this view of “wisdom”: “void” and “relatedness” (Takahashi 2000: 223). “Void” (‘sunyata’) refers to a belief in the radical devaluation of the world as we experience it. Everything, “no matter what it may be, is believed to be transitory and uncertain and to eventually perish.” (Takahashi
This fundamental difference between a world that is transitory and a world that is permanent influences everything about how we experience and interpret our lives.

The concept of “relatedness” states, quite simply, that everything, including the self and the world, is related. Confucianism and Taoism refer to this as “compassion or man-to-man-ness”. Buddhism refers to this as “compassionate fellow-feeling for all creatures.” In both senses, attaining wisdom must include the understanding “that everything is related and mutually dependent and that the universe is indeed one” (Takahashi 2000: 225). This Eastern view stands in stark contrast to the Western (Newtonian-Cartesian) worldview which represents the universe as a mechanical system that is infinitely intricate.

“In the Western view, only objectively observable and measurable phenomena are considered real. In contrast, Eastern disciplines generally acknowledge a complete hierarchy of realities, ranging from those which are manifest to those which ordinarily are hidden” (Sheikh and Sheikh 1989: xiv).

While we believe there exists a certain common body of knowledge between East and West, we also believe they reflect different conceptions of “ancient wisdom” in important ways: a Western emphasis on the intellect, on duality between mind and body, a leaning toward claims of absolute “truths”. In contrast, the East tends to embrace a holistic sense of self in relation to a temporary, ever-changing universe. We also believe that as “ancient” wisdoms have carried forward through time, historical, political and technological changes have turned the simple “East”/ “West” dichotomy into an overly simplistic caricature. The wisdoms that carry into the present are a complex blend of beliefs that have intermingled and evolved across the globe.
The Colloquial Pursuit of Wisdom in Negotiation Teaching and Practice

One way to test the currency of this intellectual archaeology is to examine the particular lived experience of the authors. Here, we describe our own conceptions of “wisdom” and explore how these differences reveal themselves in negotiation practice. Two of the authors have strong cultural roots in the West and two have strong cultural roots in the East. We examine here whether our particular lived experiences agree with or differ from the more abstract discussion of wisdom above.

Two views from the West

Ken grew up and has lived most of his life in the Western and Upper Midwestern United States. He is the product of a fairly traditional middle-class American family. All four of his grandparents emigrated from Central Europe at the beginning of the 20th century to flee prejudice and to seek a new beginning in a new world that rewarded hard work and individual initiative. His father was a business entrepreneur and his mother a civically and politically engaged home-maker. He grew up with three brothers in the type of suburban Southern California community one sees on American television, each of the four choosing their own very different professional paths. He was educated in the American public school system. His university studies focused on rhetoric and philosophy, with a particular interest in Western classical (i.e., Greek and Roman) philosophy. He later studied law. His disciplines of choice scrupulously followed a traditional Western view of history, humanity and “truth.” As a result, Ken grew up to embrace a fairly typical American worldview.
Stephanie was born in England but grew up in the United States, as an emigrant at a young age. Her childhood was inspired by tales of the great British engineers and the industrial revolution, which began in the north of England where she was born and where her family roots can be found. She was brought up to treasure books and learning and was the first in her family to obtain a university degree. Before studying law, she studied Chinese history, with a focus on the periods from the Han through the Tang dynasty, during which there was a very active trade of not only goods, but of ideas, peoples and religions along the many paths making up the ‘Silk Road.’ At the same time as her academic studies, she participated in what may also be a rite of passage for many American youth, comparing religious experience of different faiths and congregations. She later married into a Chinese family and spent a decade each living and working in Asia and Europe.

As we think of the “ancient wisdom” passed on to us, Ken and Stephanie are reminded of the influence of our American education system and culture, which is largely founded on ancient Greek and European Enlightenment-era philosophy. The inspirational figures of our youth were great engineers, explorers, inventors, and scientists – those who had built the earliest railways, crossed countries, undertaken experiments that would change the course of society, business and life in general. Stephanie remembers a cherished parental possession, a book won as a school prize by her father, showing the “Wonders of the World, Ancient and Modern,” classifying and illustrating just such achievements.

We thus came to believe: Humans are individual rational actors who can use the power of reason, individual agency, and free will to understand our physical,
psychological, social and spiritual world, negotiate social relationships, address and overcome the challenges of life and attempt to grapple with the existence of, and comprehend, a (singular) Divine which holds the answers to questions of ultimate truth. The body, mind, and spirit are separate and each can be developed independently of the other. Our education focused primarily on developing the mind and, specifically, our critical thinking abilities so as to better analyze our world and solve problems. Wisdom tells us that people are individually self-interested but capable of cooperating where it serves our own needs. As a result, as negotiators, we believe there is the possibility for mutual gain and collaboration, even with strangers.

As we look at our own beliefs about what is “true and good,” we notice how closely they reflect what Takahashi describes as the Western conception of wisdom. While perhaps sobering, we find that what we have come to take as “ancient wisdom” is a wisdom of the West.

Two views from the East

Joel grew up in Singapore. While one might initially conclude that his views are “Asian” or from the East (whatever these terms might mean), the truth is that Singapore is an interesting meld of East and West. It is a modern metropolis where any Western-oriented person could easily feel at home. Education, infrastructure and governance have their roots in British colonization and English is the language of business. Movies and television are filled with MTV and programmes from the West. Put another way, Joel’s early life can be characterized as being extremely Western in orientation, down to being
educated in Singapore, New Zealand and the United States. Not so different from Ken or Stephanie.

However, Joel became more sensitive to an alternative way of looking at the world when exposed to the wisdom embodied in Buddhism, the new-age movement and quantum science. Through these influences, Joel began to question “Western” ideas of duality and separateness. Buddhism professed that separateness, inter alia, was an illusion. Everything is interconnected. This is best encapsulated in the Zen metaphor that water can be poured into a large glass or a small glass. The water is the same, comes from the same source and will return to the same place. The glasses simply provide the illusion of separateness. This idea is also professed by the new-age movement (which some would argue is simply a repackaging of Eastern wisdom). Interestingly enough, the field of quantum science also supports this view that separation is an illusion. The myth of separation is often propagated in scientific circles. Expressed simply, the observer is separate from, and therefore does not affect, what is being observed. Quantum science turned this on its head as a result of the now well known “double –slit” experiment. Prima facie, this experiment demonstrated that light can display characteristics of both classically defined waves and particles. More earth-shaking is the proposition that whether light manifests as a wave or particles is dependent upon how the observer chooses to measure light. If it is measured as a wave, it behaves as a wave. If it is measured as a particle, it behaves as a particle. Put simply, the act of observation will change what is being observed. This has been referred to as the observer effect, and can be said to contradict the idea that an observer is separate from what is being observed. Put simply, we can never be separate from what is being observed. Expressed another
way, everything is interconnected. This worldview is, of course, very different from the views espoused in the West.

Similarly to Joel, Vasudha also grew up in Singapore, but as a child of Indian immigrants. She is Singaporean by nationality, Indian by heritage and a Hindu by religious denomination. Due to the pervasive Eastern influence on her life, it may be easy to presume that her worldview is heavily steeped in Eastern philosophy because of her cultural background. While true to some measure, Vasudha also developed her Eastern worldview through careful deliberation.

Being a product of the Singaporean education system meant that Vasudha was exposed early on to the Western mode of knowledge gathering – analytically breaking down ideas into elements, following a prescribed method of logical reasoning to analyse and present those ideas in a structured format. This mode of thinking was reinforced when she chose to study law. Singapore, being a former British colony, adopted the common law as the basis of its legal system, which meant that much of the jurisprudence was based on the “Western idea” of rational thinking. However, this was Vasudha outside of home. Inside the home, her thinking was very much shaped by her culture and religion, which is very much Eastern. As a child of Indian immigrants who were conscious to inculcate the values and culture in which they had grown up, she had the opportunity to compare and contrast Eastern and Western philosophies every step of her life (albeit, not always consciously.) Attempting to analyse and rationalise everything did not necessarily provide satisfactory conclusions to many of life's bigger questions. As a result, the philosophy of the East stepped in to bridge that gap.
When one strips away the individual ego and identifies with a larger entity than oneself (see Takahashi 2000: 223), there are two types of awareness that arise: The first is that our identities are actually related to the roles that we take on relative to our social context (i.e., mother, daughter, sister etc.) and there is an unshakeable core, the Self, that exists through these roles; second, at the same time, as the Self is progressively placed in a larger entity than itself (individual $\rightarrow$ family $\rightarrow$ society $\rightarrow$ state $\rightarrow$ country $\rightarrow$ earth $\rightarrow$ universe), one realizes that we are all interconnected at the root. These societal concepts create illusory barriers and exist to help us rationalise our relationship with the cosmos. The Self, when stripped from its relative identities, is actually the same within all of us. Specifically in Hinduism, there is the concept of Dharma, which in English can be loosely translated as duty. Hence, if one has a duty that extends beyond his own needs, automatically, the Self opens up to encompass a larger base. This broad-based thinking allows one to deal with problems in a less ego-centric way and casts a more humanitarian (rather than utilitarian) perspective on problems. In other words, it is not my problem or yours, it is our problem.

Because she grew up in Singapore with her particular family background, Vasudha has also observed how easy it is to oversimplify “Eastern” wisdom. The East gets lumped into one big category, when in reality there are subtle differences in the many different philosophies that comprise “Eastern” philosophy. While largely more concerned with the whole rather than the parts, Oriental philosophies also tend to be more secular, removing the concept of God which is so often intertwined in Hinduism and the Judeo/Christian/Islamic traditions. However, these differences do not take away from the fundamental understanding that there exists a whole larger than the parts. Singapore is a
manifestation of this – while it is composed of distinct and diverse cultures, they nevertheless are bound by the commonality of being Asian.

As Joel and Vasudha look at their own notions about “interconnection” and “duty” or “obligation”, it is striking how they track what Takahashi describes as the concept of “relatedness.” It is also interesting to note because they grew up with their “Eastern” culture in a “Western” society, it is arguably easier for Joel and Vasudha to appreciate and accept both the “Western” and “Eastern” views in the same space than it might be for those whom “Western” duality is a fundamental concept.

_Implications for Negotiation_

We recognize that our intellectual “excavations” here are abbreviated and our comparisons simplistic, and yet they reveal important insights about the enduring influence of ancient wisdom. As professionals who work and travel regularly across the globe, many may believe that limitless information, instant communication and ease of jumping from one continent to another have diminished – if not completely erased – the impact of our cultural roots and different ancient wisdoms. Many may also believe that our globalized “professional culture” supplants our own individual indigenous ways of seeing the world. We believe they do not.

Woven among the fibers within each of us are elements of our own ancient wisdom. They may not be apparent in everything we do. Yet, when faced with challenging negotiation situations, we often reach deep within ourselves to make sense of our situation and find a way forward. It is in these times that our ancient wisdoms awaken and guide our understanding and decisions – for good or ill.
We do not want to oversimplify the elements of Eastern and Western wisdoms that are part of our lives. Nor do we want to become overly romantic about the impact of ancient wisdoms, particularly as we seek to better understand the “other.” We still hold that people – and negotiators – everywhere face common human experiences and similar challenges. However, we believe that ancient wisdoms have a pervasive influence on how we understand and respond to those experiences, particularly because they dictate the frame in which we view those experiences. As a result, maintaining a conscious awareness of our own frame helps us to become more sensitized – “tuned in” – to the varied and nuanced undercurrents that influence our own, and other negotiators’, thinking, feeling, and being in relation to one another.

This can be illustrated by an admittedly stereotypical, but apt, example. Assume Stephanie and Ken represent a “Western” company in a negotiation with Joel and Vasudha, who represent an “Eastern” organization. The professional training and education of all four negotiators may teach them to approach the negotiation in similar ways – perhaps they are all graduates of Western negotiation training programs that have become so popular around the business world. At this level, they are all influenced and informed by a common professional culture and way of orienting themselves to the negotiation process. However, at a more subtle level differences may exist. Among other things, Stephanie and Ken might understand their role as having been individually empowered to carry out a specific task to make a particular deal that fits within a pre-determined and clear contractual framework. They might or might not be part of future deal implementation and so the agreement would need to stand on its own. In addition, they are aware that they will be held accountable for the success or failure of this deal.
In contrast, among other things, Joel and Vasudha may view their interactions with Stephanie and Ken in more relational terms, aware of establishing harmonious relations as people, as part of their larger organization, and further envisioning these relations as part of a much larger and complex network of other relations of influence (for example, the Chinese notion of *guanxi*) that may not be visible or apparent within the “presenting” negotiation. In other words, Joel and Vasudha might be attuned to the “systemic ecology” of what is forming as they interact in different ways than Stephanie and Ken are inclined to, with an awareness of and care for harmony and face (Lee and Teh 2009).

These oversimplified differences may not reveal themselves as the four representatives meet. However, the way they report back to their respective companies after concluding the negotiation could begin to reveal deeper differences. To Stephanie and Ken: “we locked down the deal.” To Joel and Vasudha: “we can work with them.” And as the deal/relationship moves forward through time, changing circumstances and inevitable problems will put stress on the deal/relationship, requiring each side to make sense of what is happening and to decide what to do about it. It is at this point that some “ancient wisdoms” may emerge.

Stephanie and Ken (and their company) may fall back on a Western way of thinking that calls for a clear analysis of the “deal” based on pre-established (and agreed upon) principles or rules and for assuming individual accountability. (Descartes would be proud.) Joel and Vasudha (and their organization) may fall back on an Eastern way of thinking that views the world as fluid and ever-changing and that understands this relationship in relation to a much larger whole of fluid relationships. From this point of
view, change is not only natural, it is inevitable. (Confucius is smiling.) And a conflict between ancient wisdoms is brewing.

Of course, there are other ways our example could play out. Not all “Western” systems are created the same – for example, Stephanie has observed large differences across European cultures, for example, where as someone with roots in English culture, she has analyzed a work system from a relational, conflict-averse point of view (“let’s find a way to work with them”), in contrast to someone from another part of Europe with a more “scientific” approach (“they are objectively wrong, there is only one answer here”).

In either case, this example may be stereotypical, but it does help reveal the practical impact of deeper philosophical influences that arise from “ancient wisdoms.” We make sense of our worlds – and by implication our negotiations – based on our constructs of what is “real.” Fortunately, negotiators share a vast amount of common knowledge, and a great deal of shared wisdom. At the same time, the ways we make sense of our world – and our deals – are not identical. We need to understand at a deeper level how we construct meaning so we can better understand how others construct meaning.

One path forward to deeper understanding is to look backward – to the wisdom of our ancients who shape our “world” today. By understanding how our ancient wisdoms influence the construction of our reality, we can take concrete steps to “walk a mile in their moccasins.”xiv This awareness and insight helps us understand our counterparts better and identify ways in which obstacles can be overcome.
Ultimately, whether we choose to adopt the ways identified by one or another wisdom to overcome obstacles (some of which may grate upon our world views and values systems) is another question entirely. Realistically, we may be limited in what we can do by our authority, our maturity and the level of our individual personal and spiritual development. But the simple knowledge that there may be other approaches and other perspectives than our own can nevertheless offer valuable tools to a negotiator. Rather than focus on categorizing oneself or the other parties around the table as “Eastern” or “Western,” or on pinning down difference in philosophy, our reflections suggest the most important point may be to ask these questions: What assumptions are at play here? What perspectives are we taking? What happens if I view the world from these other various perspectives? This awareness and understanding may assist parties to overcome an impasse that would otherwise seem intractable.

References


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2 Masami Takahashi (2000: 218) refers to this as “digging up bodies of ancient literature to discover their traditional meanings.”
Takahashi makes another important distinction between "practical" and "philosophical" wisdom. Practical wisdom refers to “a kind of common sense knowledge required for statesmen and lawgivers which is primarily concerned with prudent behavior” (Takahashi 2000: 220). In contrast, philosophical wisdom (or "Sophia") “is considered to be an ultimate form of virtue or knowledge about the true nature of things. A wise person is able to have an extensive knowledge base, be aware of its limitations, teach this knowledge to others, and grasp an understanding of the universal questions of human life” (Takahashi 2000: 221).

Because the frame for the Tan Pan symposium focused on East and West in broad terms, we do not explore here other, specific, - and equally important - conceptions of “ancient wisdom.” However, we note that there are innumerable and diverse sources of ancient wisdom. For example, Julian Kunnie and Nomalungelo Goduka (2006) have assembled a rich and diverse collection of essays on indigenous wisdom from across the globe including, among others: Aboriginal and indigenous wisdom from Australia, Canada, China, India, Japan, and from across Africa, the Caribbean, South America, and the Pacific (Kunnie and Goduka 2006). See also, Phyllis Bernard and Stephanie Mitchell’s (2013) discussion of the ancient principles in Sub-Saharan Africa; and Martin Bernal’s (1987) recounting of the Afro-asiatic roots of classical civilization.


It is important to note that the roots of Greece can be traced both to European and to Near Eastern (Egyptian, Phoenician and Eastern Mediterranean) peoples (Bernal 1987).

For example, some scholars have argued that Arabic-speaking cultures helped preserve, and advance, ancient scientific knowledge, fueling the European Renaissance (see, e.g., Al-khalili 2011).

Van Doren is far from alone. Through the ages, there have been a number of theosophical (“divine wisdom”) movements, each seeking to define and better understand universal truths. As Bruce F. Campbell writes, these movements seek to understand “the primeval source of all religions, the books of Hermes and the Vedas” and to give science evidence “of the truth of ancient philosophy and of the comprehensiveness of ancient science” (Campbell 1980: 29).

As Austen O-Malley once wrote, “Knowledge is flour, but wisdom is bread” (O’Malley: 164).

A worldview consists “of basic assumptions and images that provide a more or less coherent, though not necessarily accurate, way of thinking about the world. A worldview comprises images of Self and of all that is recognized as not-Self, plus ideas about relationships between them” (Kearney: 41).

Nadja Alexander and Michelle LeBaron (2013: 543) identify a number of fields that are exploring the multiple dimensions of “knowing.”

As a result, “attaining wisdom in this tradition generally implies a pursuit of knowledge held by the Creator” (Takahashi: 222).

We resist using the term “integrated” here (which is the antonym for “separated”) because that can suggest the Eastern view is the bringing together of parts. It is not. There are no separate “parts” to bring together. Instead, there is only one whole.

As an aside, it is interesting to note that a proverb counseling us to see things from the other person’s perspective has its origins with the Cherokee, one of the Native American peoples. Perhaps this is a timely
reminder that “Eastern” wisdom is also shared by many of the indigenous populations of the world and not just limited to the East.