

“My hypothesis: the coming together of Western and Eastern perspectives brings wisdom and wholeness. We need to understand better how to hold two seemingly opposing ideas at the same time whilst still functioning productively.”

Wholeness in Integration of West/East Perspectives

By Wendy Tan

Is Western Management Thought dying? I asked 15 conference attendees this question. Thirteen from Asia said no. Two said yes; both were from the West.

Western Management Thought has reigned for the last 80 years. This way of thinking has emphasized rationality, efficiency, and technical processes as the primary means of getting results. A recent IBM study (2012) involving 1,700 global CEOs suggests that as the world gets increasingly more connected, traditional thinking about competitive advantage such as optimization of processes and supply chains will no longer be sufficient. Instead, there is a call for greater collaboration, partnership innovation, and engagement of customers as unique individuals. These all point to relationships as a source of competitive advantage, rather than technical processes.

At the same time, the global economic crisis, plus the rising importance and confidence in Asia have resulted in a quiet search for alternatives in management thought. Whilst Asia has benefitted from Western thought tremendously, there is also an increasing interest in the wisdom from ancient Chinese philosophy. China alone has much to offer from its 5000 years of history.

All these suggest that perhaps a time for an integration of West and East perspectives is near. This article focuses on three questions:

1. What are the West and East perspectives?
2. How are these two perspectives different?

3. How can integrating the two lead to wholeness?

I will use my experience to describe and contrast the West and East perspectives, and subsequently describe ideas of its integration. My hypothesis: the coming together of Western and Eastern perspectives brings wisdom and wholeness. We need to understand better how to hold two seemingly opposing ideas at the same time whilst still functioning productively.

Organization development practitioners operating in cross-cultural contexts, especially in Asia, may find this article useful in adapting Western management ideas in Eastern environments. To OD practitioners in general, it is hoped that this reflection on West and East perspectives will help us draw on the wisdom of both.

Being Chinese, raised in Singapore, and schooled in Western thinking, I need to qualify that when referring to the West I mean the United States and Europe. When I say East, I primarily refer to countries with strong Confucian influence such as China, Hong Kong, and Singapore.

Western Perspectives in Management

Just as Western meals usually proceed in a step-by-step manner (soup, main dish, dessert, and coffee or tea), so does Western Management Thought. Leaders define strategy, key performance indicators are set, departments receive priorities, employees develop work plans, and we measure obsessively. Balanced scorecard, management by objectives, and business

process re-engineering form the backbone of modern organizations.

Reducing the whole to parts and then managing parts is a hallmark of how Western Management Thought works. An output is systematic structure and processes to achieve results efficiently. These enable continuous improvement and have paved the way for the development of the present mega multinational corporations. At the same time, this mechanistic and reductionist approach assumes control and predictability over outcome.

A CEO remarked that every year after the (stretch) targets are set, we work like mice on the treadmill to meet the numbers. We achieve the numbers. We start all over again. We are like a machine within a large machine. You may be familiar with his experience.

What is the result of all this focus on efficiency? Some leaders tell us about their disenchantment, disempowerment, and disengagement. Some high level executives feel trapped in their roles. Statistics show increased stress levels and reduced engagement. Training and books to increase resilience, engagement, and a sense of meaning are proliferating.

But rather than dethroning Western Management Thought, this article urges the coming together of Western and Eastern perspectives. Let us look into the Eastern perspectives.

Eastern Perspectives in Management

In a Chinese meal all the dishes are placed in the middle. People are given a bowl of rice and from the dishes in the middle, they take what they want, the amount they want and when they want it. In contrast to sequential dishes in traditional Western meals, without a systematic process comes space for flexibility and emergent responses.

Chinese thinking is flexible and emergent, rather than linear and logic-based. The Chinese phrase 摸石头过河 (pronounced as mo shi tou guo he) is to cross the river by touching the stones. The book *Thirty-Six Strategies of the Chinese* (三十六计, pronounced as san shi lui ji) shows the flexibility of Chinese thinking that guides

actions in murky situations where black and white solutions are untenable.

Eastern perspectives on business and management tend to be broad and principle based. The word *business* in Chinese is 生意 (pronounced as sheng yi, which is meaning of life). From this perspective, business is a means to life and does not take on a life of its own. Tao Zhu Gong (陶朱公), a highly successful Chinese businessman in 500 BC, defined the Chinese perspectives on business management (Wee, 2001). Applying the right principles at the right time and in the right way to achieve a higher purpose represents wisdom in Chinese thinking.

As such, the Eastern tradition does not lay out a process in sequential steps. Instead broad philosophical guidance in business gives scope for flexibility, and success is more dependent on the depth of wisdom of the individual leaders. This also means more grey areas to navigate and weaker emphasis on defined systems and processes. This in turn reduces efficiency and makes global scalability of traditional Chinese businesses challenging.

We can further compare Western and Chinese heroes and ways of exercise to understand the Western and Eastern views of the world.

Western and Chinese Heroes

Who are the heroes in Western movies? Characters such as Rambo, Terminator, James Bond, or perhaps Transformers—Optimus Prime come to mind. These heroes: 1) all use weapons, especially guns, 2) are strong and muscular in a bulky way, 3) convey a sense of hardiness, the ultimate being Transformers with its metallic body, and 4) are invincible.

What about heroes in Chinese movies? Characters such as Yip Man (叶问), Bruce Lee, Taiji Zhang San Feng (张三丰), and Hong Fei Hong (虹飞鸿) come to mind. These Chinese heroes typically: 1) fight with their fists and use less explosive weapons, such as long poles and swords, 2) are lean and nimble, 3) convey a sense of fluidity and flexibility, and 4) have a mixture of strength and vulnerability.

The images of Western and Chinese

12 Golden Standards by Tao Zhu Gong

(Adapted by Wee)

- Be a good judge of character
- Be customer oriented
- Be single-minded
- Be captivating in your sales promotion
- Be quick to respond
- Be vigilant in credit control
- Be selective to recruit only the best
- Be bold in marketing your product
- Be smart in product acquisition
- Be adept in analyzing market opportunities
- Be a corporate model
- Be far-sighted in developing a total business plan

heroes have stark differences. Perhaps metal with its well-defined, hard and strong characteristics represents these Western heroes suitably. On the other hand, water seems to represent Chinese heroes well with their fluid, flexible, and nimble characteristics.

Western and Chinese Ways of Exercise

Before a recent illness, I exercised in the gym 4 times a week—cycling on stationary bikes accompanied by loud music and a heart rate monitor that indicated the training zones (fat burn, interval, and anaerobic). Intimidated by the complex exercise machines and lured by the salesperson's promise of quick results, I engaged a personal trainer. The 7 sessions



Figure 1. Western and Chinese Heroes

cost \$900. I learned to build muscle mass to increase my resting metabolic rate, thereby burn more energy. At the end of each session, I felt exhausted and breathless but psychologically satisfied that I had burned off excess calories. That was not all. Accompanying diets were complex with high protein, low carbohydrate, and whole grains. After spending \$2,000 for a gym membership over two years, along with Nike shoes and gear, I was trimmer. And worn out!

After an illness, I turned to Taiji and Qigong to rebuild my health. Both focus on breathing and movement of chi (气) within the body. This barely feels like exercise. The muscles are relaxed. I do not pant nor perspire. However, its power becomes evident when I feel renewed energy each time. I practice every morning and the only gear I need is a pair of \$8 cloth shoes. My master, in his 80s, had learned from other masters whose lineage can be traced back to the founders of these arts. As his disciple, I give him a monthly red packet (with money of any amount) in appreciation for his teaching.

Western exercises get consumers to spend money through a host of commercial industries (exercise gear, exercise

In Eastern thinking, Yin/Yang represents wholeness. Yin/Yang is the co-existence of opposite but complementary forces that shift constantly in search of balance. In Taiji practice, at any one time, one force is stronger than the other (70:30). This imbalance requires the other force to emerge to achieve balance. Balance is achieved over time in the longer term. It is circular and dynamic. This imbalance and rebalancing gives energy, Chi or life. Therefore wholeness can be conceived as the imbalance and balancing of opposing forces over time to give life.

machines, personal training, and gym memberships). A personal trainer and trainee relationship, also commercial, ends promptly at the appointed time. Western exercises are also highly scientific right down to heart rate, body composition, and diets. Most significantly, Western exercise focuses on expending energy.

Eastern ways of exercise generate energy. They are relatively simple, cost little, and do not rely on fancy gear and machines. Taiji and Qigong are more spiritual and imprecise. No machines measure the level of energy or chi (气) generated, but you feel it in you. The relationship with my master is also more personal.

How are Western and Eastern Perspectives Different?

Comparing the Western and Eastern notions of meals, heroes, and exercises sheds light on the contrasts between Western and Eastern perspectives (Table 1).

Integration of Western and Eastern Perspectives

F. Scott Fitzgerald said, “the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function” (*The Crack-Up*, 1945).

Of course, these two perspectives are not as distinct as I have portrayed them. However, clarity about the integration of these two perspectives helps us act wisely. What does this integration look like?

This question led to the idea of wholeness and the search for associated images. Various came to mind:

- » A baby sleeping blissfully, clear about her needs, oblivious of how others think of her, and certainly void of worries.
- » Leonardo da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man with his arms outstretched touching the circle suggesting expansiveness and space.
- » A circle with no start or end point going round continuously with no bias for any part of the circle.

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Table 1. Comparison of Western and Eastern Perspectives

| Western | Eastern |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Hard and defined like metal | Soft and flexible like water |
| Process oriented; step by step | Emergent; order in chaos |
| Use of physical force | Strength in softness |
| Commercial oriented | Relationship oriented |
| Focused on external form | Focused on internal depth |
| Concrete tools and process based | Philosophical and principal based |
| Scientific and exact | Spiritual and inexact |
| Consumes energy | Generates energy |
| Promise of quick results | Foundation for longer term results |
| Competitive focus on winning | Non-competitive focus on living |

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This notion of balance differs from the typical notion of a weighing scale or the scales of justice. On a weighing scale, when one side is up, the other is necessarily down. When one side wins, the other loses. It leads to either/or thinking, and is static and short term. Fifty:fifty, the other common notion of balance means “a bit of both.” In Taiji, this is not equilibrium but a deadlock with net negative outcome. If you push your hands against each other with equal force (50:50), what would you notice? You probably expend quite a bit of energy, feel tired, and yet have no results.

Seeking Wholeness: Integrating West and East Perspectives

The Western ideas of process, efficiency, and commercial focus, complemented with Eastern perspectives of flexibility, relationship, and restoration gives life for a sustainable world. Wholeness is the coming together of these opposing but complementary ideas. What does this notion mean in life and business? As I tried to bring these ideas together, I found these three As to be useful:

- » **Awareness of the dynamics.** Sensing the situation or the person: Yin or Yang.
- » **Acceptance without judgment.** Approaching the situation or person with neutrality.
- » **Action with wisdom.** Acting with wisdom by integrating seemingly opposing perspectives.

Awareness of Dynamics

Awareness of the dynamics informs us of the unique context of a situation, so that we are not caught in any dogmatic ideology. It requires stepping back to see the situation

as it is in order to recognize the interrelationships, driving forces, and needs of the various parties.

Drawing on my personal experience, I had advocated adamantly that two partners in conflict have a conversation. This is a direct and Western approach. Books such as *Difficult Conversations* (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 2010) and *Crucial Conversations* (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2011) detail skills to resolve conflicts.

However, the partners rejected this direct or yang approach. At that time, I thought this would lead to silent grudges

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and sub-performance. Relating this example to my Taiji master, he asked, “What happens when two knives strike at each other?” Both knives will be damaged.

I realized I had not sensed the dynamics in the situation. Both partners were yang; both had strong negative energies. Adding more yang through direct conversations would pour oil on the fire.

Rather, imagine a knife (yang) striking a soft pillow (yin). There would be little or no damage. Yin energy was needed in this situation. The Chinese term is 以退为进 (pronounced as yi tui wei jin), which means to advance by retreating. In this case, both partners retreated, giving space for reflection and emotions to calm. Over time, both partners resumed their conversations with some level of acceptance of the situation and each other.

Acceptance without Judgment

Awareness of the dynamics is the first hurdle. Acceptance without judgment is the next. Judgment takes the form of labeling a behavior, for example, “he is irresponsible, he is not committed and he is not entrepreneurial enough.” Instead approach the person or the situation with neutrality and curiosity. Accepting differences without judgment falls into the realm of love and wisdom. This necessary step creates the space to see the situation and people involved clearly.

Here is an organizational example. Samsung exemplifies West and East integration. From a low cost manufacturer in the 1990s, it is now a world leader in R&D, marketing, and design and a brand value surpassing Pepsi or Nike (Khanna, Song, & Lee, 2011). Seeing a need for Samsung to develop agility, innovativeness, and creativity, Lee Kun-Hee, Samsung’s chairman, introduced radical changes such as merit-based compensation and infusion of non-Koreans into the homogeneous workforce. Respect for tenure was infused with recognition of performance.

These changes had elements of opposing but complementary factors in a dynamic flux. The changes could be easily thwarted by internal politics and resistance to change. However, Khanna, Song, and Lee (2011) in their 7-year study of Samsung described Samsung’s change journey as the effect of steady water on stone. Lee,

Samsung's chairman, was aware of the dynamics and used both authority and consensus in the managerial ranks to ensure Samsung adopted the most appropriate practices in a way people could embrace. This helped employees accept the changes rather than let their judgment thwart the changes. Over time, Samsung had imported Western best practices related to strategy formulation, talent management, and compensation into Samsung's Confucian tradition.

Action with Wisdom

Awareness of the dynamics and acceptance without judgment create space for wise actions. Wikipedia defines wisdom as the judicious application of knowledge; that is, a deep understanding and realization of people, things, events, or situations, resulting in the ability to apply perceptions, judgments, and actions in keeping with this understanding.

This requires leveraging on seemingly opposing ideas in service of greater goals. It is not either the Western or the Chinese approach, but an integrated way that offers more wholeness.

Lim Boon Huat, managing director of Rhode and Schwarz Asia, blends opposing perspectives. Although trained as an engineer, he taps into emotions as the well-springs for inspiration and performance. While he drives for outcomes using Western management tools in everyday work, he knows there is no certainty and remains flexible to respond to the changing situations. He sees his role as providing the best nutrients and letting the journey unfold. This approach embodies both the Western oriented use of processes in pursuit of predictability and the Eastern perspective of non-intervention and making space for organic emergence.

In his opinion, wisdom lies in the space between two polarities. In any situation, he looks at the context, the circumstances, the people involved, the relationship between them, and their needs. He sees them as they are, without labeling them, and seeks to understand with curiosity. In the process of quieting

judgment, wisdom emerges. When that happens, there is inner conviction and a sense of comfort, knowing that one's decision is aligned to the greater good.

Being Whole: The Three As

These three As hold the possibility of wholeness as a human being. When in a situation that vexes you, consider these few questions:

- » Awareness of the dynamics: Are you aware of the dynamics of the situation?
- » Acceptance without judgment: Do you approach the situation with non-judgment?
- » Action with wisdom: Are you acting with wisdom?

Enjoy the journey in life with awareness, acceptance, and wise action.

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