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Article abstract

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Beyond the Competencies Agenda in Large-Scale International Assessments: A Confucian Alternative

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This article examines a Confucian conception of competence and its corresponding response to the competencies agenda that underpins international large-scale assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). It is argued that standardised transnational assessments are undergirded by a technical rationality that emphasises proficiency in discrete skills for their instrumental worth at the expense of moral cultivation and personal mastery. Challenging the competencies agenda, this paper draws upon a relational model of competence proposed by Jones and Moore (1995) that views competence as essentially communal, situated within social practices, and manifested through tacit achievement. Building on their work, a Confucian notion of competence is advocated wherein skills are predicated on the virtue of ren *(humanity) and demonstrated through appropriate judgement in everyday settings. A Confucian perspective offers an alternative to the behaviourist and generic notions of performance in global assessments by highlighting the interpersonal, cultural, and ethical dimensions of competence.*

Introduction

The enactment and global reach of international large-scale assessments such as the Project for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) have played up the *skills and competencies agenda* (Tsatsaroni & Evans, 2014) across the globe. PIAAC measures adults' proficiency in and application of skills in literacy, numeracy and problem solving; PISA evaluates 15-year-old students' competencies in literacy, mathematics and science as well as skills such as collaborative problem solving. The skills and competencies agenda presupposes 'trainability,' which refers to "the shaping of particular forms of dispositional and cognitive capabilities of social actors, in particular: 'the ability to profit from continuous pedagogic reformations', complying as and when required" (Tsatsaroni & Evans, 2014, p. 170). Supporting the skills and competencies agenda are so-called 21st century skills or competencies frameworks, such as the *21st Century Skills and Competences for New Millennium Learners in OECD Countries* by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Framework for 21st Century Learning* by Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and *Key Competences for Lifelong Learning* by European Parliament and the Council of the European Union. Despite their differences, all the frameworks underline the following core skills/competencies: creativity, critical thinking, innovation communication, collaboration, Information and Communication Technology-

related competencies, and social and/or cultural awareness (Voogt & Roblin, 2012, p. 308).

An oft-cited critique of the skills and competencies agenda is its over-emphasis on *technical rationality*, which focuses on technological and scientific know-how for routines and specifications (Avgerou & McGrath, 2007; Barnett 1994; Grant 1999; Jordon & Powell, 1995; Roberts, 1996; Schön 1983, 1987; Schultze & Leidner, 2002). The attention here is on the extrinsic or instrumental value of learning for economic development and success rather than on the cultivation of ethical values and intrinsic motivation. Underlying these frameworks is a human capital approach that seeks social return from investment in people through measures such as helping them to obtain (further) academic credentials, professional qualifications, and on-the-job training. The skills and competencies agenda is promoted through the development and utilisation of disaggregated skills and quantifiable standards of performance (Jones & Moore, 1995). The end result is the creation of an 'instrumental skill shopper' whose self-regulation is externally oriented. Such a person "monitor[s] the skill requirements of changing skill niches and 'skill[s] up' accordingly" (Muller, 1998, p. 190). It is interesting to note that OECD has defined competencies to include not just "cognitive skills and the knowledge base" but also "other aspects such as motivation and value orientation" (PIAAC Numeracy Expert Group, 2009, p. 10). But what the 'motivation and value orientation' are and how they can be fostered are not adequately spelled out in the existing 21st century skills/competencies frameworks.

Challenging the skills and competencies agenda, this article explores an alternative version through a Confucian conception of skills/competencies. A Confucian paradigm is illuminating as it illustrates an approach to skills/competencies that foregrounds the practitioner's motivation and value orientation. It should be clarified at this juncture that the term 'Confucianism' is not approached in an essentialised manner; there is no claim or assumption of a singular form of Confucianism (Cheng, 1998). Since its genesis in the sixth century BCE, Confucianism has been transformed substantially down the ages. What is offered here is a (not 'the') formulation of Confucianism that testifies to the diversity within the Confucian philosophies and traditions. The first part of the paper introduces the definitions and types of skills/competencies as well as the theoretical framework for the article. This is followed by a Confucian interpretation of competence based on the teachings of Confucius and Mencius. The last section discusses a Confucian response to the skills and competencies agenda that is propagated by international large-scale assessments.

The Notions of Skills, Competencies and Competences

At the outset, it is important to be clear about the meanings of 'skills', 'competencies,' and 'competences'. A 'skill' basically refers to the capacity to perform a task proficiently by overcoming the technical difficulties efficiently (Wallace, 1978). Stalnaker (2010) identifies three main types of skills: skills of production such as creating crafts; skills of performance such as dancing; and processual skills such as editing prose. A 'competency' goes beyond a skill to encompass other attributes, as defined by OECD:

> A competency is more than just knowledge and skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilising psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context. For example, the ability to communicate effectively is a competency that may draw on an individual's knowledge of language, practical IT skills and attitudes towards those with whom he or she is communicating (Ananiadou and Claro, 2009, p. 8).

In another document, OECD defines competencies as "internal mental structures, i.e., abilities, capabilities embedded in the individual" that include "cognitive skills and the knowledge base" and "other aspects such as motivation and value orientation" (PIAAC Numeracy Expert Group, 2009, p. 10). Given that 'skills' are subsumed under 'competencies', this paper shall henceforth use 'competencies' to denote both competencies and skills.

Although the terms 'competency' and 'competence' are sometimes used synonymously (see Ananiadou and Claro, 2009), there is a crucial difference between them. 'Competency' is a count-noun that is applied to an infinite number of discrete abilities. For example, a company can justify hiring or not hiring potential applicants based on whether they possess the x number of core competencies required to perform a job. 'Competence', on the other hand, is a collective noun that refers to a capacity in general terms. We do not speak of a person having 'a competence' in something but of that person's competence in a broad domain such as teaching or cooking. This distinction between 'competency' and 'competence' is critical when we contrast a Confucian conception of competence with the competencies agenda, as we shall see later.[1]

More can be said about the salient characteristics and scope of 'competence'. Different scholars have put forward various conceptions of competence. Xiao and Chen identify two types of competence: "the ability to follow the regulative rules to meet the demands of certain human relationships and situations involving interactions," and "the ability to exploit the constitutive rules so as to construct a status and situation that favour one's position in an interaction" (2009, p. 68). Jones and Moore (1995) distinguish between a behaviouristic model that pivots on empirically defined performance standards, and a structuralist model that foregrounds the foundational and generative capacity of competence. Gonczi (1994) outlines three basic formulations of competence: behaviourist, generic, and integrated. Briefly, the behaviourist conception is linked to 'competencies' by being task-based and focusing on direct observation of performance (Gonczi, 1994). The generic conception goes beyond discrete behaviours that evidence the accomplishment of atomised tasks by calling attention to the general qualities of the practitioner. According to the generic notion of competence, personal attributes such as knowledge and critical thinking ability are perceived to be transferable and context-independent. Finally, the integrated or holistic conception

> seeks to marry the general attributes approach to the context in which these attributes will be employed. This approach looks at the complex combinations of attributes (knowledge, attitudes, values and skills) which are used to understand and function within the particular situation in which professionals find themselves. That is, the notion of competence is relational. It brings together disparate things — abilities of individuals (deriving from combinations of attributes) and the tasks that need to be performed in particular situations. Thus competence is conceived of as complexing [sic] structuring of attributes needed for intelligent performance in specific situations (Gonczi, 1994, p. 29).

Extending Gonczi's (1994) integrated conception, Jones and Moore (1995) propose a *relational model of competence*. Such a model is 'essentially cultural' by situating competence within localised contexts. As Jones and Moore put it, "cultures are the essential, historical repositories of competencies" (1995, p. 90). This model is comprised of three main features. First, it contains a strong *communal dimension* by

[1] I thank Lauren Bialystok for suggesting this distinction between competency and competence.

emphasising the relationship between the inner (the person) and the outer (the social). The focus is on "how the person both acquires and demonstrates the capacity to be publicly acknowledged as an accepted ('competent') individual — as a member of a group or community" (Jones and Moore, 1995, p. 87). A competent person is one who demonstrates a sensitivity towards culturally embedded norms and processes that qualify that person as a competent member of the social group in which he or she belongs. The second characteristic is the *social practice* for the cultivation, attainment, and transfer of competence. A relational conception of competence takes place within informal, routinised, and contextually located activities. Human social practices go beyond attaining relevant technical skills to conform to "intrinsic standards of excellence that are systematically extended over time through practice and reflection" (Stalnaker, 2010, p. 410). Finally, a relational model of competence underlines *personal mastery* by interpreting competent performance as spontaneous, natural and non-reflexive. Stressing tacit achievement, a competent person transcends external regulation and discrete skills to possess internal regulation and creative integration of knowledge, values, dispositions and actions. As Jones and Moore put it, "the processes whereby the outer becomes inner and the social constitutes the individual as a social being are realised in the routine exercise of tacit skills in the everyday world (competence)" (1995, p. 88).

Although Jones and Moore (1995) have conceptualised a relational model of competence that highlights not just discrete capabilities but also the agent, community and social practices, it remains unclear how the notion of "the outer becomes inner and the social constitutes the individual as a social being" can be realised in the "routine exercise of tacit skills in the everyday world" (Jones and Moore, 1995, p. 88). In other words, how can a practitioner acquire and exhibit a sensitivity towards culturally embedded norms and processes, develop and achieve competence within informal, routinised, and contextually located social practices, and finally obtain tacit achievement by being spontaneous, natural and non-reflexive? To give a specific example: how can a computer analyst go beyond being merely skillful in coding to being inspired by and consequently display one's appreciation of information technology in human life and contribute one's professional expertise to human progress? What is still lacking is an elaboration of Jones and Moore's relational model of competence that shifts our attention from (more) behavioural and generic skills to the value orientation and associated motivation that constitute and shape the desired competencies. In what follows, this paper proposes one such conception that is situated within the Confucian traditions.

A Confucian Conception of Competence

A Confucian conception of competence is a virtue-centric model. Following Stalnaker (2010), virtues refer to "not just tendencies to think, feel, and act in certain ways, but also educated capacities, that is, cultivated skills." (p. 421). The thesis of this article is that the defining virtue for a Confucian conception of competence is *ren*, usually translated as humanity or benevolence (Tan, 2013, 2018a). *Ren* encompasses all desirable qualities such as reverence, sincerity, empathy, tolerance, trustworthiness, diligence and generosity (*Analects* 12.1, 17.6). Commenting on the *ren* nature of the sage Yu, Mencius notes, "Yu thought that if there were anyone in the world who drowned, it was as if he had drowned them himself" (*Mengzi* 4B29.4, as cited in Van Norden, 2008).[2]

[2] All citations of *Mengzi* cited in this paper are taken from Van Norden, 2008.

A Confucian framework of competence reflects the three key features of the relational model of competence identified by Jones and Moore (1995). First, the *communal dimension* is given prominence in a Confucian approach to competence. This means that there is an interdependent relationship between the inner (the person) and the outer (the social). A competent person, according to Confucius, is one who helps others in the community: "In desiring to reach a goal, one helps others to reach the goal" (*Analects* 6.30).[3] Such a person also influences others to "become their best, not their worst" (*Analects* 12.16). The communitarian component of a Confucian conception of competence is witnessed in the practitioner displaying a sensitivity towards culturally embedded norms and processes. Alluding to the communal aspect of competence, Ames (2011) describes *ren* as "relational virtuosity" (p. 192) or "a cultivated virtuosity in role-specific dispositions" (p. 181; also see Tu, 1989). *Ren* requires the practitioner to think, feel and act virtuously based on one's social roles and through social practices. As elaborated by Ames (2011):

> human actions become 'virtuous' by reference to how they come together within a specific dynamic context rather than by being 'virtue-in-themselves.' Whatever we call virtue, then, is nothing more or less than a vibrant, situated, practical, and productive virtuosity (p. 181).

A Confucian conception of competence also links competencies to *social practice* for the nurture, attainment, and transfer of cultivated skills. Stressing that *ren* takes place within informal, routinised, and contextually located practices, Ames (2011) avers that *ren* is "not *a* 'good' but an efficacious 'good at, good in, good to, good for, good with' that describes a relational dexterity within the unfolding of social experience" (p. 182, emphasis in original). Concurring with Ames is Slingerland (2000) who maintains that the chief occupation of early Chinese thinkers is not theory but a practical question of how to become good. Going beyond technical skills, a Confucian worldview of competence supports Aristotle's point on the need to uphold intrinsic standards of excellence that are incrementally acquired through application and self-examination (Stalnaker, 2010).[4] Underscoring the practical and situated notions of knowledge, or what he calls 'skill-knowledge', Slingerland (2000) posits that "the early Chinese conception of knowledge should be seen in terms of mastery of a set of practices that restructure both one's perceptions and values" and that produces "an ideal of perfectly skilled action" (p. 295). Significantly, Book 10 of the *Analects* is devoted to the social practices of Confucius in his responses to people and circumstances that play up his cultivated skills. For instance, *Analects* 10.1 records: "In Confucius' home village, he was most deferential, as though at a loss for words, and yet in the ancestral temple and at court, he spoke articulately, though with deliberation" (Ames and Rosemont, 1998). The seemingly inconsistent and puzzling behaviour of Confucius can be understood when we realise that Confucius had customised his responses to suit contextual needs and reflect his moral character: quiet reverence in one's ancestral home and sincere participation in the ancestral temple and at court. His conduct exemplifies the centrality of ritualistic practice that engenders appropriateness and deference in Confucian thought. In the specific

[3] All translations from the *Analects* are mine unless otherwise stated. To read the original text in Mandarin, see Gushi wenwang, 2019.

[4] It is beyond the scope of this article to compare the views of Confucius and Aristotle. Suffice it to say that both their ideas fall under the ethical theory of virtue ethics. A number of scholars have highlighted the similarities between Confucian and Aristotelian ethics, such as the Confucian notion of judgement and Aristotle's concept of *phronesis*. For further reading, see Sim, 2012; Slingerland 2001; Yu 1998, 2007.

context of education, an understanding of competence as social practice explains why particularly concrete internalisation of behaviours for the learners rather than a theoretical or discursive approach is preferred in Confucian pedagogy.[5]

Thirdly, a Confucian conception of competence values the quality of *personal mastery* in a relational model of competence. On the one hand, cultivating proficiency in skills is paramount in the Confucian traditions. *Ren* is not bestowed on human beings but acquired through a lifelong quest to improve one's capabilities, dispositions and performances. R*en* is exhibited through 'cultivated skills' (Stalnaker 2010) which stem from one's moral tendencies to think, feel and act in certain ways. The expert demonstration of *ren* in one's everyday conduct requires deliberate and continuous growth through *li* (rites or normative behaviours). That *li* permeates all aspects of human life is noted by Confucius in the *Analects* 12:1: "Do not look unless it is in accordance with *li*; do not listen unless it is in accordance with *li*; do not speak unless it is in accordance with *li*; do not move unless it is in accordance with *li*". More than performing religious sacrifices, *li* covers all domains of human activities, from social and political systems to etiquette, relationships, roles and modes of communication (Hall, 1998).

The development and mastery of skills are facilitated by learning that is fundamentally moral in nature. As a virtue-centric model, cultivated skills must be coupled with the tendencies to think, feel and act ethically. When sharing his learning philosophy, Confucius denies that he is the kind of person who has learnt widely and remembered it all; instead, his approach is simply to "bind it all together with one thread" (*Analects* 15.3). The 'one thread', as elaborated on *Analects* 4.15, is the ethical principle of doing one's best (*zhong*) and demonstrating empathy and reciprocity (*shu*). Confucius' point is that he integrates skills and virtues into a coherent whole through personal reflection. Likewise, Mencius gives accent to the primacy of self-cultivation and personal mastery, as seen in his example of learning archery:

> When the master archer Yi instructed people, they had to set their will on drawing the bow to the full. Those who learn must also set their will on 'drawing it to the full' (*Mengzi* 6A20.1).

Here Mencius compares moral perfection to the unusual strength that hits targets that are faraway, thereby affirming the need for skills to be developed and perfected (Stalnaker, 2010).

But the realisation of *ren* is not limited to the possession of cultivated skills and moral inclinations. Instead, a Confucian viewpoint of competence includes personal mastery where the practitioner does not perform a task in a self-conscious or mechanical manner but spontaneously, naturally and non-reflexively. Not defined or circumscribed by a strict set of rules, *ren* is evinced through the practitioner's sensitivity to the specific context, person(s) involved and issue(s) presented. It follows that what qualifies as a virtuous act in one instance may not be so in another instance. As Ames (2011) explains,

> what would transform an act of boldness into one deemed courageous would be the way in which the action is situated relationally and how it plays out in terms of both motivations and consequences. Whose interest is the action on the behest of, whose interest does it serve, and what is the quality of relatedness it enhances? (p. 182).

To further understand the nature and practice of *ren*, it is helpful to recall the two types of competence expounded by Xiao and Chen (2009): the ability to follow regulative rules and the ability to exploit the

[5] I thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.

constitutive rules. The two basic types of rules–regulative and constitutive–are derived from Searle (1969). Briefly, regulative rules inform a participant on the do's and don'ts of an activity and are usually expressed in the form 'If X, do Y'. The behaviours ordered by regulative rules are independent of these rules. Xiao and Chen (2009) point out that "[t]he rules of eating and drinking, for example, regulate our ways of eating and drinking, but we eat and drink in any case regardless of a given set of rules" (p. 68). Constitutive rules, in contrast, 'constitute' or are part of the forms of behaviours structured by these rules. Typically formulated in the form 'X counts as Y', an example is 'You are playing chess when you do X' where X is open to many possibilities such as moving a pawn or reacting to a check (Xiao and Chen, 2009). Xiao and Chen (2009) apply both rules to Confucius' experience in the Grand Temple:

> [H]e entered the Grand Temple and asked questions about everything. Someone remarked, 'Who said that the son of the man from Tsou understands the rites (*li*)? When he went inside the Grand Temple, he asked questions about everything'. On hearing this, the Master said: 'The asking of questions is in itself the correct rite'. Asking about everything must not have been the custom in that area. Otherwise, someone could have seen its relevance to the practice of *li*. Clearly, the *li* to which the one who made the remark was referring was not the *li* of Confucius. The former concerns following the *regulative rules* of interaction inside the Temple, whereas the latter concerns the creative application of the *constitutive rules* of *li*. Only those who understand the spirit and the constitutive rules of *li* can appreciate Confucius' real intention here (p. 70, emphasis added).

The reason why Confucius asked questions about everything was not because of his ignorance, but because of his desire to display the virtues of respect for *li* and humility (Tan, 2013). The above episode shows that *ren* surpasses regulative rules to "a process of personal articulation: the cultivation and expression of an elegant disposition, an attitude, a posture, a signature style, an identity" (Ames 2011, p. 174).

Mencius also puts an emphasis on the significance of using constitutive rules that demand individual discernment and deviation from regulative rules if necessary. Stressing the importance of discretion, Mencius asserts that "if one holds to the middle without discretion, that is the same as holding to one extreme" (*Mengzi* 7A26.3). A classic example recorded in *Mengzi* is the scenario of a man's response upon seeing his sister-in-law drowning. Despite the convention in ancient China that a man should not touch his sister-in-law, Mencius reasons:

> Only a beast would not pull out his sister-in-law if she were drowning. It is the ritual that men and women should not touch when handling something to one another, but if your sister-in-law is drowning, to pull her out with your hand is a matter of discretion (*Mengzi* 4A17.1).

Commenting on this event, Xiao and Chen (2009) note that a Confucian model of competence must "assume at least some degree of freedom and creativity, and that freedom and creativity can be gained only from their own state of moral and sincere cultivation" (p. 70). The 'freedom and creativity' is encapsulated in the notion of *yi* (rightness or appropriateness) that reflects *ren* in informal and specific settings. Mencius avers that great people are distinguished not by their faithful words or resolute actions but by their *yi* (*Mengzi* 4B11.1). Confucius asserts that what is important in one's dealings in the world is not a rigid and simplistic "for or against anything" but to "go with what is *yi*" (*Analects* 4.10). *Yi* includes but is not confined to regulative rules because it cannot be performed mechanically or unthinkingly. Rather, as explained by Hall and Ames (1984), "*yi* acts involve the deriving or bestowing of meaning in

such a way as to realise novel patterns uniquely suited to each concrete circumstance" (p. 18; also see Cheng, 1972). A related point is that the exercise of *yi* does not mean that existing social norms and cultural practices are unimportant or jettisoned. Instead, *yi* and, by extension, *ren* are cultivated and manifested *within* the confines of a specific tradition. As posited by Yu (2006), "when the inner appropriateness [*yi*] determines whether the rites [*li*] are applicable or need to be adjusted, its aim is to make the rites [*li*] more appropriate, rather than abandoning the fundamental efficacy of social rites (p. 340).

Overall, a Confucian framework of competence is one that guides and motivates the practitioner to gain personal mastery in culturally embedded norms and processes that show up the virtue of *ren*. By locating competencies within social practices, roles and relationships, a Confucian model propounds tacit achievement that transcends behavioural and generic skills. Tacit achievement is exhibited when a practitioner goes beyond external regulation and discrete skills to achieving personal autonomy through synthesising one's knowledge, values, dispositions, and actions.

A Confucian Response to the Phenomenon of International Large-Scale Assessments

Based on the Confucian conception of competence elucidated in the foregoing, this section discusses a Confucian response to the phenomenon of international large-scale assessments. On the one hand, our Confucian conception supports the objective of international large-scale assessments such as PIAAC and PISA to focus on knowledge and cognitive skills such as numeracy, literacy, numeracy and collaborative problem-solving. Textual study and content mastery have a long tradition in Confucianism, tracing back to Confucius himself, who instructed his students in the ancient arts of rituals, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy and mathematics, as recorded in the *Analects*. The fostering of cognitive skills is also stressed by Confucius who declares: "Learning without thinking leads to bewilderment; thinking without learning leads to perilousness" (*Analects* 2.15). I have elsewhere argued that Confucius and neo-Confucian philosophers such as Zhu Xi see no contradiction between advocating memorisation and critical reflection (Tan, 2015, 2018b, in press). Confucius points out the folly of relying on either learning or thinking: "I once went without food the whole day and without sleep the whole night by focusing on thinking; that was not beneficial; it is better to spend the time learning" (*Analects* 15.31). Furthermore, skills and competencies, in themselves, are not disparaged in the Confucian worldview; rather, they are integrated into a virtue-centric model, as mentioned earlier. The egalitarian tenor of the global assessments in preparing all youth and adults regardless of socioeconomic status for the globalised and modern world also strikes a chord with Confucius. The latter is famous for championing and practising "teaching without distinction" (*youjiao wulei*) by being willing to instruct anyone regardless of the person's home background and social class (Tan, 2013).

Despite recognising the merits of international large-scale assessments, our Confucian conception of competence objects to the de-emphasis of the social, cultural and ethical dimensions of competence in global assessments (Tan, 2019). Transnational evaluation systems such as PISA focus primarily on appraising an individual's competencies such as literacy and problem-solving in formal testing conditions in a particular point in time. Such assessments fail to capture the virtues–moral tendencies and cultivated skills–of the practitioner in authentic situations and over time. I have elsewhere argued that

"competencies", as used and implied in ILSAs and related policy documents, are predicated on behaviourist and generic notions of performance (Tan, 2019). In both the behaviourist and generic approaches to competence, a person's abilities are tested and measured by a set of externally determined and 'objective' performance standards. Framed by the behaviourist and generic approaches to competence, the design and implementation of international large-scale assessments such as PISA's Global Competence Framework has inadvertently downplayed the ethical, communal, cultural and real-life contexts in which skills are deployed. In contrast, our Confucian conception of competence shows the moral, social and practical aspects of competence through the virtue of *ren* and its attendant qualities of *li* and *yi* that mark a competent person. So important is *ren* as the overarching ethical quality for Confucianism that Confucius claims that "the common people need *ren* more than water and fire" (*Analects* 15.35) and that we should be prepared to "give up life to achieve *ren*" (*Analects* 15.9).

Another critique of international large-scale assessments is that they do not place sufficient importance on the role of contextualised social and cultural factors and conditions. It is noteworthy that the classical Chinese language does not differentiate 'knowledge' from 'wisdom'. Knowledge, from a Confucian position, must be acted out in authentic and communal problem-situations for it to qualify as knowledge (Ames, 2011). The Confucian notion of wisdom includes "the ability to attend to and discern all the relevant factors in some morally challenging situation, along with the ability to 'weigh' these different factors in one's deliberations about what to do" (Stalnaker, 2010, p. 421). Eschewing mere knowledge transmission and rote learning, Confucius places the ethical, communal, and personalised attributes at the heart of teaching and learning. Rather than external regulation and extrinsic motivation, a Confucian approach to competence values the practitioner's internal regulation and intrinsic motivation to learn. Far from simply adhering to the performance standards set by the organisers of international large-scale assessments, a competent person, from a Confucian standpoint, seeks to achieve *ren* by demonstrating appropriate behaviours and judgements in all aspects of one's life.

Conclusions

This article has explored a Confucian conception of competence and its corresponding response to the competencies agenda that underpins international large-scale assessments. It is argued that standardised transnational assessments is underpinned by technical rationality that privileges proficiency in discrete skills for their instrumental worth at the expense of moral cultivation and personal mastery. Problematising the competencies agenda, this paper draws upon a relational model of competence proposed by Jones and Moore (1995) that views competence as essentially communal, situated within social practices, and manifested through tacit achievement. Expanding on Jones and Moore's (1995) model of competence, a Confucian notion of competence is advocated where skills are based on and reflect the virtue of *ren* (humanity) and demonstrated through appropriate judgement in everyday settings. Returning to the earlier example of a computer analyst, a Confucian conception of competence would require such a person to go beyond coding skills to learning, internalising, and evincing humane conduct continuously and spontaneously in the course of one's work and social interactions. In practical terms, a Confucian computer analyst is one who advances ethical standards and shared norms such as promoting digital literacy, preventing internet fraud, and exploring ways to utilise information technology for human progress. A Confucian perspective offers an alternative to the behaviourist and generic notions of

performance in global assessments by bringing to the fore the social, cultural and ethical dimensions of competence. With respect to the distinction between competencies and competence mentioned at the start of the article, the difference between the two terms reiterates the main argument of this paper concerning the deficiency of the competencies agenda. The fixation with instrumental discrete skills as proof of human ability under 'competencies' needs to be questioned and replaced by a Confucian interpretation of competence that goes beyond skills and techniques to broader humanistic and moral considerations and contributions.

It should be acknowledged that not all conceptions and manifestations of Confucianism are amenable to the more comprehensive and balanced notion of competence that is delineated in this paper. After all, Confucianism is both a cultural and political ideology, the latter being used as a means of control at both the macro and micro levels (see Kipnis, 2011). It is therefore ironic that a test-based education and the world's first large-scale assessment were initiated by Chinese emperors when they formalised Confucianism and the civil service exam. As a result of the politicisation of Confucianism, a large portion of the virtuosity, relational, and communal aspects were eliminated or undermined in the state-sponsored standardised tests. Confucianism was historically absorbed into the state apparatus and became a tool of technical rationality itself. But the political manipulation of Confucianism in ancient China does not mean that Confucianism *qua* Confucianism is necessarily or only aligned with the competencies agenda that dominates teaching and learning in modern times. What this paper has hoped to achieve is to provide an alternative reading of Confucianism: one that rejects the hegemony of the competencies agenda and shines the spotlight on the social, cultural, and ethical components of competence.

A major implication arising from our exploration of a Confucian notion of competence and critique of international large-scale assessments is a need for policymakers and educators to take a cautious approach towards the unconditional acceptance, impact and influence of global assessments. To be sure, standardised transnational assessments, with their wealth of data, resources, and expanding areas of assessments, could assist policymakers in improving their educational systems, especially in identifying performance gaps in gender, immigrant and non-immigrant populations, socio-economic status, and ethnic groups (Goldstein, 2004; Volante, 2017). However, the hegemony of global tests has also engendered a global educational governance and an audit culture (Kamens, 2013; Lindblad & Popkewitz, 2000; Lingard, Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2013). Shaped by the discourses of international tests, "good" performance is increasingly viewed and measured quantitatively and narrowly through international comparisons and global ranking. Rather than embracing international large-scale assessment almost unreservedly, policymakers and educators need to be aware of and interrogate the ideological positions and assumptions that undergird global assessments. It is a salient point that a number of researchers have criticised international large-scale assessment in terms of the utility and value of their assessment mechanisms, findings, data, and resources (Meyer & Zahedi, 2014; Tan, 2019; Volante, 2017). This article has not only drawn attention to the shortcomings of the competencies agenda in international large-scale assessments, but also provided an alternative understanding of 'competence.' A Confucian notion of *ren* (humanity) has a contribution to make in debates about the conceptions, teaching and assessment of competence. *Ren*, in short, offers a more all-encompassing perspective from which to reject the whole agenda of measuring a generic set of competencies as epitomised by ILSAs.

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