

A Relational-Reflective Approach to Competence in Social Work Education: Integrating Chinese Cultural Values and Reflective Practice

Pengfei Li*

School of Social and Public Administration, Lingnan Normal University, Zhanjiang 524048, Guangdong, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

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Abstract: The global expansion of competence-based social work education has carried with it deeply embedded Western individualist assumptions, which clash with the relational ontologies of non-Western societies. This paper argues that genuine indigenization in Chinese social work education demands not merely the addition of cultural content to imported frameworks, but a fundamental reconceptualization of what it means to be a competent practitioner. Drawing upon Chinese Confucian ethics of the relational self and the Western tradition of reflective practice, this conceptual paper proposes a “relational-reflective competence” framework comprising four interconnected dimensions: ethical presence, contextualized discretion, integrative embodied knowing, and symbiotic growth. The framework seeks to shift the educational paradigm from the acquisition of demonstrable skills to the cultivation of the practitioner as a moral and relational subject. The paper discusses the macro-level implications of this framework for curriculum redesign, pedagogical transformation, and the educator’s role, while also critically reflecting on the tensions between this ideal and institutional realities. It concludes that such a cultural-epistemological grounding is essential not only for the relevance of Chinese social work education but also for its potential to foster a more pluralistic global social work knowledge base by drawing on Eastern epistemological traditions.

Keywords: Social work education; Indigenization; Cultural competence; Chinese cultural values; Reflective practice; Relational self

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, Chinese social work education has undergone a dramatic process of institutionalization. From experimental programs in a handful of universities to the establishment of hundreds of degree-granting schools, the expansion of educational scale has been accompanied by an urgent demand for standards of professional competence. In this process, Western competence-based education

models—exemplified by the competency frameworks of the American Council on Social Work Education and the British national occupational standards—have been transplanted into Chinese classrooms with little critical scrutiny^[1]. These standards meticulously enumerate the competencies required of social workers—from ethical decision-making and diversity awareness to critical thinking—and seek to measure them through behavioral indicators. Yet, the persistent experience of frontline educators and students is that these seemingly universal competence indicators, when transposed into the Chinese cultural context, often fall into a state of aphasia, a sense of fundamental mismatch. This is not simply a problem of inadequate translation or insufficient student preparation; it is an existential tension rooted in the encounter between two profoundly different ways of understanding the human person and the nature of effective helping.

This tension is by no means unique to China. Scholars of postcolonial social work, from India to Africa, have long argued that globalized professional standards are in fact carriers of Western modernity, particularly the individualistic rationalism born of the Enlightenment^[2,3]. The specificity of the Chinese case, however, lies in the profound Confucian civilizational heritage that has cultivated an entirely different schema for understanding the “person,” a schema still deeply embedded in the everyday practices and moral intuitions of Chinese people. When a social work classroom teaches the absolute primacy of “client self-determination,” what may arise in a student’s mind is the deep involvement of children in their parents’ medical decisions under the norm of filial piety. When an instructor emphasizes “professional boundaries,” a student in a field placement may discover that refusing a service user’s gesture of *renqing* (human feeling) could inadvertently destroy the hard-won trust. These recurring tensions suggest that the root of the problem lies not at the level of operational techniques, but in the cultural presuppositions underpinning the fundamental question: What does it mean to be a competent practitioner? The imported frameworks operate on the assumption that the practitioner is a bounded, autonomous agent whose primary task is to apply universal ethical principles and technical skills to a client who is similarly conceptualized as an independent decision-maker. In the Chinese context, however, both worker and client are always already embedded in dense webs of relational obligation, mutual expectation, and intergenerational continuity, which fundamentally alter the meaning of professional action.

Current discourse on social work indigenization in China, while having accumulated rich achievements in the localization of curricular content and service models, largely remains within the mental framework of “Western theory, Chinese verification.” The substance of such “indigenization” often involves selecting certain Chinese cultural elements—such as *renqing*, *mianzi* (face), and *guanxi* (relationships)—and inserting them as variables into Western-dominated theoretical models, without shaking the epistemological foundations of those models themselves. The consequence is that Chinese culture is forced into fragmentation, becoming a supplementary seasoning, while the fundamental challenge that its holistic worldview poses to the very concept of competence is gently set aside. What is needed, we argue, is a willingness to interrogate the ontological assumptions underlying the notion of competence itself, and to reconstruct it from within a Chinese cultural logic rather than merely decorating it with local cultural motifs.

This paper seeks to take up this long-suspended challenge. Its core argument is that genuine indigenization of social work education must proceed from a Chinese cultural ontology and redefine professional competence accordingly. This is not merely an academic exercise in conceptual play; it bears directly on the question of what kind of social worker we aim to cultivate: a technician proficient in a Western toolkit, or a practitioner deeply rooted in the Chinese ethical world, capable of prudent reflection and

creative synthesis between Chinese and Western values? To this end, following the approach of conceptual analysis in the social sciences ^[4,5], the paper first deconstructs the individualistic presuppositions embedded in Western competence-based education, then distills the Chinese cultural way of “becoming a person” together with reflective theories from the West that can serve as dialogic intellectual resources, and finally endeavors to construct a “relational-reflective competence” framework, exploring its macro-level implications for paradigm transformation in education.

2. Deconstruction and critique: The “hidden individual” in Western competence-based education

To move beyond Western competence discourse, one must first understand its constitution. Competence-based education is not a value-neutral tool; it carries specific cultural anthropological assumptions that, when made visible, reveal a highly particular conception of the self, knowledge, and ethical action.

2.1. History and epistemological presuppositions of competence-based education

Competence-based education first emerged from the behavioral education movement in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, emphasizing the decomposition of complex professional practice into a series of clear, specific, observable behavioral units, evaluated through standardized performance indicators. The original impetus was to ensure accountability and to make professional training transparent and demonstrably effective. Although later integrative approaches incorporated composite dimensions of knowledge, skills, and values, their shared epistemological cornerstone remained unchanged: competence is defined as a stable set of attributes possessed by an individual, attributes that can be transferred and reproduced across different contexts. Such a seemingly technical definition contains at least three layers of cultural presupposition: first, the practitioner is a bounded, self-directed individual; second, effective practice depends on the rational application of a set of universal rules by that individual; and third, these rules can be learned and assessed in abstraction from concrete relational networks and lifeworlds. What is obscured in this formulation is the way in which knowledge and skill are not merely possessed by an individual but are co-constructed within relationships, and that the very meaning of a competent act may vary according to the cultural and relational context in which it is performed.

Within social work, this presupposition is directly embodied in the formulation of the nine competencies in the CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards. Take the competency of “Ethical and Professional Behavior” as an example. It requires students to make ethical decisions in their professional roles, applying ethical principles and critical thinking. On the surface, this endows the practitioner with considerable autonomy. Upon deeper examination, however, this formulation implicitly conceives the ethical subject as a rational calculator standing outside the situation, who imports a set of ethical rules from the outside (such as the NASW Code of Ethics) and applies them to a specific client. The ethical weight of the practitioner’s own embeddedness in a particular moral community, the subtle affective bonds that emerge in helping relationships, and the culturally shaped intuitions about what is right and good are all relegated to the margins because they resist measurement through behavioral indicators ^[6]. The result is a competence model that prizes a kind of disembodied, decontextualized rationality, which may serve well in bureaucratic accountability systems but struggles to capture the lived complexity of ethically saturated practice in culturally dense settings.

2.2. Cultural pathology: The isolated self and instrumental rationality

The above presuppositions are not accidental missteps of education but are the inevitable products of the deep structures of modern Western culture: the “individualistic view of the self” and “instrumental rationality.” Liang Shuming, in his seminal work *Zhongguo Wenhua Yaoyi* (The Essential Meanings of Chinese Culture), incisively pointed out that Western society takes the individual as its fundamental unit, with everything proceeding from the concept of individual rights, whereas Chinese society is based on ethical relationships, seeing the person as a being-in-relations^[7]. For Liang, the Western self is essentially a rights-bearing entity whose social existence is negotiated through contracts and voluntary associations, while the Chinese self is constituted through its roles and responsibilities within a network of kinship and quasi-kinship ties. This difference in cultural origin fundamentally determines two different understandings of what a person can do and should do. Extensive cross-cultural research has demonstrated that East Asians tend to perceive the world in terms of relationships and contexts, whereas Westerners tend to focus on discrete objects and their attributes. This cognitive divergence extends to moral reasoning: for the relational self, ethical action is less about the application of universal principles than about the sensitive navigation of competing obligations and the preservation of relational harmony.

The cornerstones of Western social work ethics—such as client self-determination, informed consent, and confidentiality—are all built upon the image of a highly autonomous individual capable of making rational choices for themselves. This image possesses historical legitimacy within its own cultural context, representing a liberatory response to the paternalism and authoritarian oppression that once characterized Western societies^[8]. However, when universalized and extended to the family-centered, deeply interdependent Chinese society, it reveals a profound lack of fit. In the everyday ethics of Chinese people, a major personal decision is often not the rational choice of an independent “I” but is deeply embedded in a long history of interactions, mutual indebtedness, mutual love, and struggles among family members. A decision about an elderly parent’s end-of-life care, for example, is rarely a matter of individual preference; it is a family affair, laden with filial duty, social face, and the unspoken negotiation of shared guilt and gratitude. A competent practitioner, therefore, is not one who forcibly “liberates” an individual from these relationships but one who must navigate this intricate web of emotion and obligation with discernment and care. In such a context, the Western framework’s view of competence, which treats the “client system” as an environmental variable, appears exceedingly thin.

Furthermore, instrumental rationality, as the dominant mode of thinking in modern society, reduces practice to a means-ends calculation. Under the impetus of managerialism, this increasingly directs social work towards standardized procedures, measurable outcomes, and risk management. The competency indicators in education often encourage students to seek universally effective best practices, while neglecting the most central component of practical wisdom: the capacity for prudent deliberation and even paradoxical action in concrete situations^[9]. Schön’s critique is particularly apt here: he argued that the problems of real-world practice are not well-formed problems to which a technical solution can be applied, but are messy, uncertain, and value-laden. To handle such problems, what is needed is not rule-following competence but artistry, the kind of knowing-in-action that allows the practitioner to improvise responsively within a specific situation.

2.3. Limitations of existing indigenization discourse

Recognizing these limitations, Chinese social work academia has engaged in nearly two decades of

discussion on indigenization. Broadly speaking, these discussions can be divided into two categories. The first is the “cultural sensitivity model,” which advocates increasing sensitivity to Chinese cultural customs within the generalist social work process. This type of work is undoubtedly valuable, but it has not moved beyond an additive mindset. Culture is still treated as a “factor” to be considered, rather than as the very substrate that constitutes practice ^[10,11]. The deep logic of the helping process itself remains unchanged, and the fundamental assumptions about the worker-client relationship, the nature of problems, and the goals of intervention remain rooted in a Western individualistic framework. As a result, the cultural elements added are often perceived as exotic supplements rather than integral components of competent action.

The second category is the “theoretical dialogue model,” which seeks to bring traditional Chinese cultural concepts such as *ren* (benevolence), *li* (ritual propriety), and *zhongyong* (the doctrine of the mean) into conversation with professional social work values. Such efforts have been quite profound, but most outcomes still focus on demonstrating that resources compatible with Western social work values exist within Chinese culture—in other words, proving that “we have them too”—without further interrogating whether the entire edifice of Western competence concepts needs to be rebuilt if Chinese cultural views of the self and action are truly taken as the foundation. Put differently, we have been using *guanxi* and *renqing* to supplement self-determination and boundaries, but we have seldom reflected on the validity of self-determination and boundaries themselves as core frameworks. The implicit hierarchy remains: Western concepts provide the architecture, while Chinese concepts supply the decoration. This lacuna is precisely the step this paper aims to take: to begin constructing a competence framework from within a Chinese cultural logic, using the Western tradition of reflective practice not as a master framework but as a methodological bridge that can facilitate the translation of indigenous wisdom into professional educational practice.

3. Theoretical foundations: Two intellectual resources for reconstructing competence

To transcend the Western individualistic imagination of competence, we must return to the depths of civilization to seek the intellectual roots capable of supporting a different vision of competence. At the same time, we also need to draw upon intellectual tools from within Western theory that possess self-transcending potential, which can serve as bridges for local innovation. This section outlines two such resources: the Chinese Confucian conception of “becoming a person” through relational self-cultivation, and the Western reflective practice tradition that can provide a compatible pedagogical language.

3.1. The way of “becoming a person” in Chinese culture

The Confucian tradition’s conception of competence never starts from isolated individual skills. It probes a deeper question: How does a person become fully human? This process of “becoming a person” is, in essence, a practice of self-cultivation unfolding within human ethical relationships ^[12]. In contrast to the Western model, which often views competence as a set of externally acquired tools, the Confucian model views genuine ability as the outward expression of inner moral development, achieved through a lifelong process of learning, reflection, and the refinement of one’s character.

Relationalism and the Ethics-Based Orientation. The “self” in Chinese thought is a relational existence. Fei Xiaotong famously described the structure of Chinese society using the concept of “differential mode of association” (*chaxu geju*), vividly illustrating how each individual is the center of concentric circles

radiating out from their social relations ^[13]. Unlike the Western model of distinct, equal individuals forming associations, Fei's image captures a self that is constituted by the differing intensities and qualities of its ties to others—closest family at the innermost circle, then friends, community, and so on. This does not imply that Chinese people lack a self, but rather that this self is constructed through ethical bonds with others—parents, siblings, friends, and rulers. The self is always a self-in-relation, and one's identity, dignity, and sense of purpose are inseparable from the fulfillment of role-based responsibilities. Liang Shuming further elucidated that an ethics-based culture is fundamentally a relation-based culture ^[7]. In such a society, the meaning and value of life are realized through the management and fulfillment of these relationships. Consequently, the “competence” of a Chinese person is inevitably not an abstract skill for independently solving problems detached from these relations, but an integrated performance of “being reasonable, affective, and righteousness-minded” within concrete interpersonal relationships. For instance, a capable rural mediator's competence is not demonstrated by a thorough knowledge of legal statutes but by an acute ability to grasp the nuances of emotion and reason among all parties, to calibrate precisely when to advance and when to retreat, ultimately restoring relationships to a state of harmony. The mediator's authority does not derive from procedural expertise alone but from the community's perception of his or her moral character and deep understanding of the local social fabric. Translating this relational ability into the professional social work imagination implies a shift from emphasizing the professional boundary of the “worker-client” relationship toward cultivating a “professionalized intervention that is both affective and ethical”—one in which the worker's own moral presence is integral to the helping process.

Confucian Self-Cultivation as “Learning for Oneself.” When interpreting the *Analects* tradition, the New Confucian scholar Tu Weiming introduced a crucial concept: *tizhi* (embodied knowing) ^[12]. Unlike cognition in Western epistemology, which typically separates the knowing subject from the known object, embodied knowing is a holistic engagement of body and mind in experiencing and comprehending, transforming external knowledge into internal virtue and intuition ^[14,15]. It is not merely intellectual understanding but a form of knowledge that is felt in the body, expressed in spontaneous action, and manifested in the quality of one's being. In the Confucian view, genuine learning is “learning for oneself” (*xue yi wei ji*), the purpose of which is the transformation of one's temperament and the perfection of one's character, not the mere acquisition of livelihood skills. The aim is to become a *junzi*—an exemplary person whose moral cultivation is evident in every aspect of daily conduct. The saying “the exemplary person is not a vessel” (*junzi bu qi*) precisely emphasizes the primacy of personal cultivation over specialized professional ability: a vessel has a limited function, but a cultivated person has a flexible, all-encompassing capacity to respond appropriately to the myriad situations of life. The *Great Learning's* program of “investigating things, extending knowledge, making intentions sincere, rectifying the mind, cultivating oneself, regulating the family, ordering the state, and bringing peace to the world” depicts a continuous path from inner cultivation outward to encompass family, state, and world. Taking this as a mirror, the cultivation of social work competence is not merely the mastery of interview techniques or policy knowledge but is, first and foremost, a process of “self-cultivation”—the worker must constantly reflect inwardly, refining their moral sensitivity and emotional texture, in order to be able to bear, with an integral personality, the weight of the helping relationship. This inward-directed dimension, virtually absent in Western competence discourse, is the very core spirit of Chinese indigenous competence. It suggests that the social work educator's task is not simply to transmit skills but to facilitate a process of personal formation, in which the student gradually internalizes professional

values and transforms them into a durable ethical disposition.

3.2. The reflective turn in Western theory as a bridge

It is neither possible nor necessary to completely reject Western theory. In fact, a powerful current of self-critique has always existed within Western professional education, namely the theory of reflective practice, which can serve as an excellent bridge for integrating the Chinese tradition of self-cultivation. This tradition shares with Confucian thought a suspicion of purely technical rationality and a recognition that the most important professional knowledge is often tacit, situational, and personally transformative.

In his seminal work *The Reflective Practitioner*, Donald Schön sharply criticized the hegemony of technical rationality^[9], pointing out that excellent practitioners, when faced with complex “swampy” problems, do not mechanically apply established scientific theories but rely on “reflection-in-action”—the process of instantaneously noticing, testing, and restructuring their own cognitive frameworks while acting. This insight opened a new window on the concept of competence: competence is not a rigid, fixed set of components but a form of wisdom continuously generated in dialogue with the situation^[16]. Schön’s detailed case studies of architects, psychotherapists, and engineers showed that the artistry of practice lies in the practitioner’s ability to reframe problems, to see situations in new ways, and to draw upon a repertoire of past experiences without being constrained by them. This emphasis on improvisation, situational responsiveness, and the integration of personal experience resonates deeply with the Confucian emphasis on flexible judgment and the cultivation of a responsive, well-tempered character.

Following Schön, critical reflection theory went a step further, bringing social structures and personal life histories into the scope of reflection^[17]. Practitioners are required to reflect not only on “what method did I use?” but also on “why do I view this problem in this way? How have my identity and power position shaped my understanding?”^[18,19]. Critical reflection thus becomes a process of examining the unexamined assumptions—cultural, biographical, institutional—that shape professional perception and action. This deep-level reflection is precisely capable of accommodating the introspective spirit of “seeking the cause within oneself” (*fan qiu zhu ji*) from the Chinese tradition of self-cultivation, extending it from the private moral domain to the examination of professional power relations. When a Chinese social work student is guided to reflect critically on why they feel uncomfortable imposing “self-determination” on an elderly client whose family expects collective decision-making, they are engaging in a process that is both a Western-style critical reflection on power and a Confucian-style self-examination of their own moral intuitions. This convergence is where indigenous wisdom and professional learning can meet.

Therefore, using reflective practice as a methodological link, we can transform the relational ethics and self-cultivation concepts of Chinese culture from classical discourse into conceptual tools that can be connected with contemporary professional education. This point of connection is the theoretical anchor for constructing our new framework. Reflective practice provides a pedagogically viable language for what the Confucian tradition has long advocated: the cultivation of a self that is deeply attentive to its own inner states, sensitive to the nuances of relationships, and capable of wise, contextually appropriate action.

4. Conceptual construction: A “relational-reflective competence” framework

Based on the above discussion, this paper proposes a “relational-reflective competence” framework comprising four dimensions, intended to replace Western decontextualized competency lists. These four

dimensions are not behavioral indicators but conceptual lenses pointing to the practitioner's inner qualities and action orientations, each responding to aspects missing from Western competence views: ethical relationality, situational discretion, the unity of knowledge and action, and symbiotic growth. Taken together, they represent a shift from viewing competence as a possession to viewing it as a mode of being-in-relationship.

4.1. Ethical presence

Within Western competence frameworks, there is typically a competency termed “use of professional self,” emphasizing the worker's conscious use of their personality and experience to facilitate the helping process. Yet, the “professional self” remains a deliberate deployment of the individual self, implying an instrumental relationship of “I use myself.” The self is still a tool, a resource to be strategically deployed, rather than a moral presence that is inherently part of the helping encounter. In contrast, we propose “ethical presence,” meaning that the practitioner shows up as a whole person in the helping relationship, and that this presence carries a profound ethical awareness of the “person-to-person relationship.” This presence is not about technique; it is about the quality of being that the worker brings into the room.

Concretely, a social worker with ethical presence will not shrink behind a professional mask in their work. They allow themselves to be touched and even changed by the service user to an appropriate degree. At the same time, they do not imagine themselves and the client as two independent atoms, but constantly perceive some ethical bond that already exists or is being generated between them. Consider a scene in a Chinese community center: a young social worker is visiting an elderly widow who lives alone. The Western-trained worker may focus on assessment, risk factors, and the client's stated goals. But as the visit progresses, the worker notices that the elderly woman, despite her physical frailty, insists on making tea, offers a small gift of homemade pickles, and speaks of the worker as a “young person with a kind heart.” In a purely professional frame, these gestures might be politely refused or gently discouraged to maintain boundaries. However, a worker embodying ethical presence would recognize these gestures not as boundary violations but as the natural expression of a relational world in which care is mutual and informal. The worker would accept the tea, receive the gift with genuine gratitude, and allow herself to feel the warmth of the connection, while also remaining reflectively aware of the professional responsibilities this connection entails. The key is not to eliminate the natural ethical sentiments that arise—the respect for elders, the reciprocity of small kindnesses—but to transform them, through reflection ^[9,17], into a clearly perceived and responsibly utilized “presence.” In this way, the worker navigates a third path between rigid professional distance and over-involved familial affection—a path that is “both affective and ethical,” where the helping relationship is enriched rather than threatened by the worker's genuine humanity.

4.2. Contextualized discretion

Western competence education emphasizes “generic practice skills”—such as empathy, questioning, and assessment—assuming these skills can be replicated with any client and in any setting. However, seasoned practitioners know well that genuine professional action is always context-bound, especially in Chinese society where *renqing*, *mianzi*, and *guanxi* intertwine, and the appropriateness of an action is highly dependent on the specific configuration of persons in the here-and-now ^[13]. A skill that is perfectly appropriate in one situation may be deeply offensive in another; what counts as competent behavior is not a

fixed repertoire but a context-sensitive responsiveness.

We borrow the Confucian concept of *zhongyong* (the doctrine of the mean) to articulate “contextualized discretion.” *Zhong* does not mean a mediocre eclecticism but, as Zhu Xi explained, “neither excessive nor deficient”—striking the matter’s core perfectly ^[14]. *Yong* emphasizes that this appropriateness is realized in everyday practice, not in lofty moral pronouncements. The *zhongyong* ideal is not a compromise but a dynamic, ever-renewed achievement of balance, a hit in the center of a moving target that requires constant attentiveness and adjustment. Applied to professional competence, contextualized discretion is a kind of practical wisdom for finding the most fitting course of action within a complex web of emotion, reason, and law. It is the capacity to read a situation in its full cultural and relational complexity and to act in a way that honors the multiple, sometimes conflicting, goods at stake.

For instance, when facing a person with mental health difficulties who refuses hospitalization but has an obvious risk of self-harm, Western ethics might require the social worker to strictly adhere to self-determination, supplemented by risk assessment procedures. However, in a Chinese family context, family members may strongly urge the social worker to join them in persuading, or even using a “white lie,” to get the person to the hospital. The family’s request is not necessarily a violation of the client’s rights from their perspective; it is an expression of their deep concern and their culturally shaped sense of responsibility for the family member’s well-being. A social worker with contextualized discretion will neither rigidly recite the self-determination dogma nor simply become a conspirator with the family. They will deeply assess the family’s motivation for involvement, the worker’s own role position, the urgency of the risk, and the ethical meaning of being “one family” in Chinese culture. They might spend time understanding the family’s fear, exploring the client’s own unexpressed wishes through the family network, and gradually building a consensus that preserves both safety and the integrity of the family unit. They will not see the family as an obstacle to the client’s autonomy but as a vital context within which autonomy is exercised and given meaning. This kind of moment-to-moment deliberation and adjustment cannot be pre-written into an operational manual, yet it is the core manifestation of indigenous competence.

4.3. Integrative embodied knowing

The Western view of competence treats learning as the separate acquisition of knowledge and skills: theoretical courses teach knowledge, practice courses train skills, and an integrative discussion finally brings them together. This logic of “first separate, then combine” often leads to a disconnect between knowledge and action, where students can articulate ethical principles but struggle to apply them in the fluid, emotionally charged moments of practice. The traditional Chinese concept of *tizhi* (embodied knowing) offers a different path of integration, one in which knowledge is not merely stored in the mind but absorbed into the body’s way of being ^[12,15].

Integrative embodied knowing refers to the process whereby the practitioner, through continuous inner reflection, transforms professional theory, cultural values, and personal life experience into a bodily intuition and moral sensitivity, achieving a state of “unity of knowledge and action.” This is not mysticism but a competence dimension cultivatable through specific pedagogies ^[18]. It is the kind of knowledge that a seasoned musician has of their instrument—not a knowledge of facts about music, but a knowledge in the fingers, a feel for the right phrase, the right tempo, that cannot be fully articulated but is demonstrably present in the performance. Similarly, an experienced social worker who engages in continuous cultural reflection

has seemingly accumulated a set of internal “sensors” within their body. For example, when handling a child protection case, a novice social worker might have memorized all the risk assessment indicators but still feel at a loss at the scene because those indicators cannot tell them to what extent they should trust a mother’s plea for help when she says with tears, “I can’t manage,” and at what point they must firmly intervene. The experienced worker, by contrast, can read the quality of the mother’s distress, the tone of her voice, the condition of the home, and the subtle interplay of fear, love, and exhaustion in a single, intuitive grasp. This intuitive grasp is not magic; it is the result of countless hours of practice, reflection, and the internalization of professional knowledge until it becomes second nature. Moreover, such a worker can often articulate the basis of their judgment afterward, making their intuition available for review and learning—this “articulable intuition” is the manifestation of integrative embodied knowing.

Cultivating this competence requires the educational process to place great emphasis on “internalization.” Students must not only write reflective journals but also learn to connect case discussions and classical readings with their most immediate life experiences, repeatedly asking themselves: “If it were me, what would I do? Where is my cultural intuition leading me? How does this differ from professional requirements?” Through this constant internal dialogue, professional competence ultimately does not remain an outer layer of knowledge armor “grown onto” the individual but is transformed into the very fabric of their character ^[20]. In this sense, social work education becomes a form of modern-day self-cultivation, in which the student’s very personhood is the medium through which professional competence is realized.

4.4. Symbiotic growth

Finally, the unit of assessment in the Western competence view is always the individual worker. The improvement of the client is considered an outcome of service, not an aspect of competence itself. The worker’s own development and the quality of the relationship are regarded as secondary, if they are considered at all. In our framework, this is inverted: a worker’s competence cannot be defined in isolation from the quality of the helping relationship and the transformation of the client system. We name this “symbiotic growth,” emphasizing that the practitioner and the client grow together through their mutual engagement in the helping process.

This concept is deeply rooted in the Chinese ideal of “completing oneself and completing things” (*cheng ji cheng wu*). The *Doctrine of the Mean* states: “Sincerity is not simply completing oneself; it is that by which things are completed. Completing oneself is benevolence; completing things is wisdom.” For one who is truly sincere, their own self-realization must simultaneously manifest as the realization of others and the world. The cultivated person does not pursue self-perfection in isolation; their perfection is evidenced in the way they foster the growth of those around them. Within the social work relationship, this means that for a competent social worker, the working process is itself a process of growing together with the service user. While facilitating the client’s transformation and the repair of family relationships, the worker also gains a more settled understanding of their own life through the deep involvement in another’s life; their professional artistry becomes more rounded in resolving concrete predicaments; and their moral self-awareness becomes clearer in the mirror of the helping relationship. The client’s resilience teaches the worker about human strength; the client’s suffering deepens the worker’s compassion and humility. This mutual formation is not a byproduct but a central feature of competent practice.

This dimension transforms the evaluation of competence from a static, individually owned possession

into a dynamic, relational process of becoming. It rejects the burnout model that positions the social worker as an “inexhaustible emotional giver” and advocates for a professional life of mutual nourishment ^[8]. In a symbiotic growth model, the worker is not a depleted resource but a person who is continually replenished through meaningful connection. Accordingly, the assessment of social work education cannot merely ask students, “Which behavioral indicators have you achieved?” but must further inquire: “What real changes have occurred in your service users because of your presence? What new understanding have you gained about yourself in this process?” These questions shift the focus from the individual performance of the student to the relational impact of their practice, aligning assessment with the relational ontology that underpins the framework.

These four dimensions—ethical presence, contextualized discretion, integrative embodied knowing, and symbiotic growth—together form a mutually supporting whole. Ethical presence provides the relational ground; contextualized discretion supplies the wisdom of particular action; integrative embodied knowing ensures that knowledge is alive and responsive; and symbiotic growth guarantees that the entire enterprise is oriented toward mutual flourishing. They do not provide a behavioral checklist but offer a cultural-ethical-actional sense of direction, guiding educators and students along the path of reflective practice to gradually grow into professional subjects rooted in indigenous ethical wisdom.

5. Discussion: Macro-level implications and the possibility of paradigm transformation

The proposal of the “relational-reflective competence” framework is not merely a renewal of academic rhetoric; it carries the macro-level potential to reshape the paradigm of social work education in China and, potentially, to contribute to global debates on the nature of professional competence.

5.1. From “competence attainment” to “subject formation”

The basic paradigm of current Chinese social work education can be summarized as “attainment-based training”: schools set up courses one by one according to accreditation standards, and students prove through examinations and field evaluations that they have achieved each competency ^[1]. This paradigm is internally coherent, but its endpoint is a standardized, qualified graduate who possesses a specified set of attributes. The educational process is oriented toward the accumulation of demonstrable capacities, and the student’s interiority—their values, their moral sensibility, their relational wisdom—is relevant only insofar as it can be externally manifested and measured. Our framework points toward a “subject formation” education: the fundamental goal of education is not to produce a product that meets standards but to accompany the birth of a practitioner with cultural roots and professional self-awareness. This subject is not a container filled by external standards but an actor who, in continuous reflective practice, gradually integrates the core values of Chinese culture with professional knowledge and emerges from their own relational world. The shift is from what the student has to who the student is becoming.

This shift requires us to re-imagine the nature of educational assessment. Evaluation cannot be reduced to a behavioral checklist but should rely more on narrative assessment methods, such as growth portfolios, in-depth reflective essays, and ethical deliberations within teacher-student dialogues. A portfolio, for example, might include not only evidence of skills demonstrated but also a student’s account of a critical incident, their analysis of the cultural and ethical dimensions of that incident, and their reflections on how the experience

changed their understanding of themselves as a practitioner. These methods are capable of capturing the lively, fluid, relational qualities within the competence framework, rather than rigidifying them into a set of checkboxes. They honor the fact that the most important outcomes of social work education are not easily quantified but are no less real for that.

5.2. Reconstruction of curriculum and pedagogy

At the level of curriculum goals, we need to shift from cultivating “problem solvers” to cultivating “relational workers” and “ethical practitioners.” This means that all courses—whether casework or social policy—should be permeated with ethical reflections on “person-to-person relationships.” For example, a social policy course cannot merely teach the design of welfare institutions; it must also lead students to explore how a seemingly fair policy might produce unintended effects within the Chinese ethics of differential association, and how a practitioner can, in the fissures of policy, preserve a measure of human warmth for the concrete individual. Such a course would examine not only the technical aspects of policy but also the moral texture of policy implementation, asking how a policy designed for a society of autonomous individuals functions in a society of relational persons.

In terms of teaching methods, reflective practice becomes the axis running through everything. Conventional case analysis can be upgraded to “case deliberation,” where students are not asked to find a single correct answer but are invited to repeatedly present their own thought processes around an ethical dilemma, question and challenge each other, while the instructor, at key points, guides them to see the cultural assumptions behind their own thinking. The aim is not to arrive at a consensus but to deepen each student’s capacity for nuanced, self-aware judgment. Cultural reflective journals should not be merely extracurricular assignments but a “self-cultivation course” running through the entire training process, providing a structured space for students to monitor their own development over time. Additionally, selected readings of traditional Chinese classical texts can be introduced to a limited extent, not for the purpose of returning to antiquity, but to let these texts serve as a reflective “other,” stimulating students to consider their own distance from and connection to tradition. Engaging with a passage from the *Analects* or the *Mencius*, for example, can prompt rich discussions about the nature of a well-lived life and the place of professional helping within it.

The role of the educator also undergoes a profound transformation. In “subject formation” education, the teacher can no longer be content to act as a transmitter of techniques but must become a “cultural intermediary” and a demonstrator of their own self-cultivation. This means that teachers themselves must be reflective practitioners, willing to appropriately open up their own practice dilemmas, cultural struggles, and growth stories in the classroom, not positioning themselves as omniscient authorities but facing the unknowns of indigenization practice together with students ^[9,16]. The teacher’s authenticity and vulnerability become powerful pedagogical resources, modeling the kind of lifelong learning and ethical seriousness that the framework seeks to cultivate. This is undoubtedly a great challenge for teacher professional development, but it is also an indispensable path for social work education to truly possess a soul.

5.3. Theoretical contributions and reflexive critique

The framework proposed in this paper contributes first by systematically challenging the epistemological foundations of Western competence discourse and constructing an alternative concept from indigenous Chinese ethical philosophy and Western reflective theory. This can be seen as a theoretical attempt at the

globalization of social work education. Second, the four-dimensional framework both provides a directional ideal of value and can be connected with reflective methods in teaching practice, possessing the potential to be extended as a principle for curriculum design ^[4]. It offers a language for talking about aspects of practice that many Chinese social work educators and students have intuited to be important but have lacked the conceptual resources to articulate within the dominant competence paradigm.

However, we must honestly confront the internal tensions and limitations of this framework. The greatest risk is cultural essentialism—reducing Chinese culture to a set of fixed, unchanging “core values” and then using them to re-chart everything. The “relational orientation,” “*zhongyong*,” and “self-cultivation” we emphasize are dynamic traditions constantly reinterpreted and contested over a long history, not immutable dogmas ^[14]. Contemporary Chinese society is itself a site of rapid change, cultural hybridization, and generational divergence, and any framework that treats “Chinese culture” as a monolithic entity risks reinforcing stereotypes rather than enabling genuine understanding. Therefore, when using this framework, one must always maintain reflexivity and openness to avoid creating new cultural dogmas. The framework must be understood as an invitation to dialogue, not a declaration of orthodoxy.

Another practical challenge comes from the institutional environment. When the evaluation indicator systems for government-purchased services still take behavioral indicators and quantitative outputs as the yardstick, and when the national social work licensure examination still takes knowledge memorization and simple application as its basic form, how the inner qualities advocated by “relational-reflective competence” can gain legitimacy and living space remains a suspended difficulty. The framework may be philosophically compelling, but practically marginalized if the surrounding institutional structures continue to reward a different kind of competence. This reminds us that the transformation of the educational paradigm cannot advance in isolation; it must form a synergy with the practice field and policy advocacy. Yet, as the starting point for cultivating future practitioners, taking the first step in conceptual reconstruction in education is itself part of the change. Over time, graduates formed within this new paradigm may become agents of institutional transformation in their own practice settings.

6. Conclusion

Chinese social work education stands at a crossroads. Continuing piecemeal indigenization efforts within Western competence frameworks may alleviate professional anxieties in the short term, yet it fails to answer a fundamental question: In an ancient civilization, what kind of personal qualities should a “helping profession” cultivate? When the Western competence-based model, with its claims to objectivity and measurability, dominates professional discourse, educators and students in Chinese social work often find themselves in a state of tacit aphasia—they can describe “what they can do” in technical terms, but struggle to articulate “who they become.” This predicament is not merely a matter of cultural resistance; it is an epistemological misalignment. The Western competence framework presupposes an atomized, bounded self that prioritizes cognitive skills, whereas the self in traditional Chinese culture is always a relational self—formed within ethical relationships, cultivated through practice, and adapted flexibly to context. If we continue to make piecemeal revisions within existing Western frameworks, we may produce more indigenous case studies and scale adaptations as ornaments, but we will fail to touch the soul of social work: the profound yet humble encounter between the helper and the helped.

This paper argues, from an epistemological level, for the necessity of cultural grounding—reconstructing the imagination of social work competence by starting from the Chinese ethics-based conception of the self and using reflective practice as a bridge. The “ethics-based conception of the self” does not refer abstractly to virtues such as filial piety, loyalty, or fidelity. Rather, it emphasizes that in the Chinese tradition, self-awareness is awakened, defined, and transcended always within a relational field of “two persons” or “many persons.” Confucianism teaches that “benevolence is what makes one human, and the greatest expression of benevolence is in loving one’s kin”; Daoism speaks of “moistening each other like stranded fish”; and folk wisdom urges us to “put ourselves in others’ shoes.” All these suggest that the core competence of a helping profession should not be, first and foremost, the richness of one’s individual knowledge base, but rather one’s capacity to perceive one’s position and responsibilities within ethical relationships. However, ethical awareness alone is insufficient—it can easily slide into moralizing or emotional enmeshment. Hence, we need reflective practice as a bridge: not problem-solving guided by technical rationality, but a deliberative process of turning back to examine oneself, questioning assumptions, and adjusting one’s stance in action. By integrating the ethical self with reflective practice, we propose a Relational-Reflective Competence framework, built on four interconnected dimensions: ethical presence, contextualized discretion, integrative embodied knowing, and symbiotic growth.

This framework does not claim to provide a manual. Its purpose is to open a space where educators and students can use language and concepts to discuss those dimensions that have always seemed important but were previously inexpressible. For example, in field supervision, we often hear students say: “Something feels wrong, but I don’t know how to say it,” or “I feel like I was taken away by the service user’s emotions, but I also think I shouldn’t feel that way.” These vague experiences are precisely the starting points for the growth of relational-reflective competence. If we can teach students to name these experiences, analyze their textures, and share them in a community, then social work education moves from skills training to character cultivation. When a student, after graduation, can say to her teacher: “I have learned how to accompany others with emotional reason, and in the process, I have also seen myself”—that may be the moment when indigenous social work education truly succeeds. The term “emotional reason” attempts to break the Cartesian dichotomy between emotion and rationality; it resonates with the Chinese tradition of *qingli* (feeling-reason), in which emotion contains reason and reason contains emotion, and helping is precisely the practical art of their integration.

From a broader perspective, this exploration may also contribute Eastern wisdom to the global social work knowledge base—not as a local validation of Western knowledge, but as an alternative fundamental imagination of human well-being and professional growth. The cultural grounding efforts of Chinese social work education do not aim to provide a closed alternative, but to offer a set of conceptual tools for dialogue. In an increasingly interconnected world, the cultivation of practitioners who can move thoughtfully between cultural worlds is not merely a Chinese need but a global one, and this framework may offer a modest but meaningful contribution to that larger project.

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