LEARNING "MERIT" IN A CHINESE PRESCHOOL [1]


Moral development in early childhood has recently raised heightened interest across social sciences. Integrating controlled methods into ethnographic fieldwork, this article investigates how Chinese preschool children develop their understanding of “merit,” an important fairness principle in resource allocation, through socialization of biaoxian hao. Whereas the experimental data taps into distributing reward based on how much one contributes to collective work, a standard attribute of “merit” in psychology literature, ethnographic analysis reveals how children's understanding of merit is mediated by the cultural discourse of biaoxian hao, a significant moral framework in contemporary China that refers to self-presentation in authority-evaluation contexts, with a hierarchical dimension. Ethnography further demonstrates the developmental trajectory of learning biaoxian hao and the powerful disciplinary mechanism of overt social comparison and moral evaluation. By showing how two basic moral concerns, sensitivity to fairness and inclination to impress authority, intersect in early development in cultural contexts, this mixed-methods research provides a direction for cultural anthropology to contribute to the interdisciplinary study of moral development. [merit, fairness, biaoxian, moral development, China]

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