

## Becoming a Moral Child amidst China's Moral Crisis: Preschool Discourse and Practices of Sharing in Shanghai

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**Abstract** This article explores the moral development of Chinese children through the discrepancies between the ideologies and practices of adults and children. School educators and parents promote an egalitarian norm of sharing—"share with everyone"—in the hope of cultivating altruism and cooperation, values seen as a corrective to China's universally deplored "moral crisis." By contrast, young children spontaneously engage in strategic sharing—"extend favors so others can help you"—in their everyday interactions. Such practices resonate with the adult norm of *guanxi* (exchange of favors) that is the object of ambivalent attitudes in modern Chinese discourse. This study combined ethnographic and experimental methods to examine children's spontaneous choices and their implication in current discourse, showing how the anthropology of childhood may contribute to a finer-grained understanding of contemporary Chinese cultural dynamics as well as the conversation between psychological anthropology and developmental psychology on the emergence of prosocial dispositions in cultural processes. [morality, early childhood, one child policy, *guanxi*, education, China]

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On December 31, 2011, a little boy named Chengcheng celebrated his third birthday with his classmates and teachers during regular class hours. After singing a "happy birthday" song in both Chinese and English, the teachers divided the cake brought by the parents, first giving Chengcheng a big piece, then distributing the rest of the pieces equally to all the other children. From repeated observation, I was familiar with the script of such occasions which supposedly are to cultivate altruism through sharing practices, as both parents and teachers are concerned that Chinese children born under the one-child policy are much too selfish and materialistic. In particular, it operated under the ideology of "egalitarian sharing," that one should share equally with the entire class. It was all going on as expected until Chengcheng saw the school director walking past the classroom. The child came up to his teacher and asked: "Hey, Ms. Xiaoru, didn't you see [the director]? Why don't you give her a piece of cake too? You know you should cotton up to your boss (*tao jinbu*, 套近乎)." The teacher was dumbfounded at this and so she made a nickname for him, "Evil Kiddo."<sup>1</sup>

This kind of contrast between ideologies and practices, with its occasionally comic incongruities, is what motivates the present study. Teachers and parents, committed to teaching a egalitarian norm of sharing and busy conveying that norm through (among other activities) ritualized birthday parties, do not generally expect a three-year-old child to be so scheming (*xinji*, 心机). Networking skills are supposed to be a hallmark of adult attitudes. But the tension between the egalitarian norm and the strategic motivation, particularly in the domain

of social exchange and sharing, is not confined to such occasional *faux-pas*. It reflects a deep concern with moral cultivation in contemporary Chinese social life, in particular, the panic of raising “selfish” children under the one-child policy, at the height of a perceived “moral crisis.”

By examining the discourse, beliefs, and practices of sharing in a Chinese preschool, my ethnographic work builds on the moral socialization literature in anthropology, engages with recent findings in developmental psychology, and calls attention to the importance of understanding the complex relationships between psychological dispositions and cultural dynamics in child development.

Specifically, the psychological literature reveals early dispositions for cooperation, including motivations to be fair on the one hand and maintain profitable exchanges on the other hand. Recent experimental studies provide evidence that such dispositions emerge much earlier than assumed in, for example, classic theories (Kohlberg 1984; Piaget 1997[1932]). Fifteen-month-old infants expect things to be distributed equally, that is, equality serves as a default model of fairness (Schmidt and Sommerville 2011), and 12–18-month-olds evaluate agents’ fairness based on their distributive actions (Geraci and Surian 2011). Twenty-one-month-olds take into consideration contextual information in determining whether an equal distribution is fair (Sloane et al. 2012). Preschoolers develop more complex thinking about what distribution is fair and display negative emotions to unfair distributions (LoBue et al. 2009). Such studies would show that children are sensitive to fairness concerns in their sharing behaviors. However, other studies suggest that children exert subtle judgment in the choice of who should be the target of sharing. They take into account various factors, such as social distance and relatedness, a reputation of fairness (Olson and Spelke 2008), friendship (Moore 2009), merit (Baumard et al. 2012), and whether the context is competitive or not (Shaw et al. 2012). These intuitions of infants and young children indicate an early propensity to reserve resources to valuable social partners, rather than extend them indiscriminately among one’s group.

Despite an increasing interest among developmental psychologists in examining the nascent dispositions for cooperation in infancy and early childhood, little research has been done to explore how these different prosocial motivations emerge in children’s daily experiences and how the transmission of local cultural values mediate such developmental dynamics through educational processes at school, family, and in society more broadly.

Psychological anthropologists, on the other hand, have devoted great efforts to document and explain the complexity of moral socialization processes across the world. Moral discourse “saturates the everyday lives of families” (Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik 2007:9), and moral evaluative force is imbued in child-rearing practices universally (Quinn 2005). At the same time, moral socialization displays rich cultural variability manifested in multiple aspects including agents involved in moral socialization, moral values, ideas about the socializability of moral values, and techniques (Fung and Smith 2010). Anthropologists have offered in-depth ethnographic insights into various forms of interactions and dynamics of moral socialization

in early childhood (for a review, see Fung and Smith 2010) see, for example, the emotional education of three-year-old Inuit girl Chubby Maata (Briggs 1999), the education of shaming in Taiwanese families (Fung 1999), the daily cultivation of responsibility in various cultural communities (Ochs and Izquierdo 2009), and the language socialization of sacrifice in Vietnamese culture (Shohet 2013), among others.

While psychologists have yet to pay attention to ethnographic works on the everyday moral socialization and enculturation processes, anthropologists have yet to engage with the exciting line of psychological research in examining the various prosocial motivations emerging in infancy and early childhood. This study aims to address this critical disconnect between anthropology and psychology in the emergence of different prosocial dispositions in specific cultural dynamics, through in-depth ethnographic analysis that integrates multiple methods including interview, participant observation, survey, and field experiment.

China provides a perfect testing ground to examine this question. First, there is a widespread sense that China is in the midst of a “moral crisis,” often phrased in terms of lost, supposedly traditional, moral values. Second, education is seen by most as a crucial element in the edification of a better, more moral China. Third, the one-child policy of the last decades has resulted in a generation of single children with distinctive moral experiences, very different from those of previous generations. Taken together, these factors contribute to establish children’s moral development as a contested and strategic domain in China. But, as I will try to show, preschoolers’ practices suggest that Chinese children are constructing their own moral universe that differs markedly from both adult norms (of a return to classical values) and adult fantasies (of essentially amoral, selfish “little emperors”).

In what follows, I will first introduce the broader sociocultural contexts where Chinese children’s moral development unfolds and present an overview of my field site and methodology. I will then delve into the ideologies of sharing promoted by teachers and parents and how such ideologies are transmitted in daily educational processes. After that, I will provide an in-depth description of children’s own practices of sharing and a fine-grained analysis of their underlying motivations, which stand in stark contrast with the “official” ideologies and norms. Finally, I will explain where this contrast between egalitarian sharing ideology and young children’s strategic sharing practices come from, and I will discuss its theoretical implications in anthropology.

## **Moral Development in China**

Cultivating morality has become a critical national challenge in today’s China, as a looming “moral crisis” amidst China’s rapid social transformations in the globalizing world has ignited enormous anxieties in the society. Chinese newspaper and magazine articles, television shows, and Internet blogs all highlight these popular anxieties associated with the “moral crisis” in China by reporting problems that have become visible in public and private life, such as a decline of social trust, pervasive corruption, extreme materialism and money

fetishism, and a lack of love and altruism in social interactions. In both public discourse and daily conversations, these problems are typically moralized in the sense that personal moral quality and collective moral norms are seen as the ultimate roots and solutions of social crises and governmental problems. For example, a general discourse of moral decay pervades both state discourses and ordinary discussions of specific social incidents and public events. Such incidents and events range from scandals of high-level officials such as the former political leader Bo Xilai (薄熙来) who was convicted of corruption, embezzlement, and abuse of power (Denyer 2013) to ordinary people's tragedies, such as the "Xiao Yueyue" (小悦悦) incident (Wines 2011) in which a toddler was hit by a car twice and died because none of the passers-by would rescue her. Yunxiang Yan has provided insightful analysis of some "immoral" behaviors that perceptions of a looming moral crisis focused on, such as cases in which the Good Samaritan is extorted by the person being helped (Yan 2009). He argued that these perceptions actually reflect the changing moral landscape amidst China's rapid social transformations, i.e., from an obligation-based collective society to a right-based individualistic society (Yan 2009, 2011), and called for more ethnographic analysis of the various aspects and dimensions of the changing moral landscape.

Education and socialization is a critical domain of the changing moral landscape in China. On the one hand, cultivating the moral child bears the potential to solve the moral crisis and shape a better society in the future. As Børge Bakken perceptively observed, morality focusing on personal virtue, education as self-cultivation, and the politics of disciplining people are seen as a coupled whole in Chinese culture: "Moral education has to do with the upholding of moral and social order, and in China the discourse on moral education touches more directly on sociological aspects than in perhaps any other culture" (2000:86). Chinese moral cultivation in the sense of self-perfection has its deep historical roots. The contemporary Neo-Confucian philosopher Tu Wei-Ming summarized the fundamental belief of moral self-development in Chinese thinking: "Although existentially human beings are not what they ought to be, they can be perfected through self-cultivation" (1985:25). In particular, early education has been seen as crucial to the cultivation of a full-fledged moral personhood, a key notion in Chinese educational and moral philosophy since two thousand years ago, in keeping with Confucian thinking (Kinney 1995). Imprints of this tradition are still visible in contemporary education policies (Cheng 2000) and parenting goals (Wu 1996). The well-known studies about "the Chinese learner" demonstrates that the belief of perfecting oneself morally/socially as the primary purpose of learning is still prevalent in China today (Chan and Rao 2009; Watkins and Biggs 2001) and cultural differences in beliefs of learning emerge in early childhood. For example, Chinese children as young as four years old talked more, on average, about self-improving morally (becoming a good child) than American counterparts (Li 2010:60).

On the other hand, educating the child is also inevitably impacted by the broader social and structural dynamics. Anthropologists have just started to examine the specific negotiations and contradictions in educational settings as part of China's changing moral landscape (Hansen 2013), but the emerging studies on China's moral transformations have not yet

paid attention to moral development in early childhood, under the unique context of the one-child policy.

Moral development of Chinese children has become an intense national concern in the aftermath of the one-child policy launched in 1979. Education of “the child” is closely intertwined with future development of “the nation” in China. Chinese children, seen as the country’s “only hope” (Fong 2006), are also denounced as “little emperors” (*xiao huangdi*, 小皇帝) as they enjoy excessive attention and resources from the whole family (Anagnost 1997; Han 1986). Anxiety focuses on whether singleton children will become too self-centered and socially incapable. Yet, over the recent decades, scholarly debates have produced no conclusive responses to such public anxieties (for a review, see Settles et al. 2013). In recent years, concerns about the “little emperors” are exacerbated under the newly emerging “4:2:1” family structure, that is, four grandparents, two parents, and one child, as singleton children enter reproductive age (Wang and Fong 2009). But so far virtually no ethnographic studies have examined moral development of this special generation of children at the crucial stage of early childhood.

## Fieldwork in a Chinese Preschool

My study of young children’s moral development is situated in this unique Chinese context where cultivating morality in early childhood has become a national challenge under the one-child policy and the perceived “moral crisis.” The fieldwork for this study took place in Boya Preschool, in China’s largest city, Shanghai.<sup>2</sup> It was located in a middle-class neighborhood, and most of the students come from families living in this or some nearby neighborhoods. The school comprises eight classes in four grades, with a total of 120 children, ages 2–6.

Parents and teachers come from a diverse population. More than half of the families are “new Shanghainese,” highly skilled people from other regions who managed to obtain secure jobs and settled in Shanghai. Of the “old (native) Shanghainese” families, some are well-educated upper middle class, while others are relatively less educated lower-class people who benefited from a government housing-compensation project, aimed at developing Pudong District. The majority of the couples works full-time and lives with in-laws who help with child care. Some even hire a nanny to complement the grandparents’ help. A few families only have a nanny to help with child care. In some families, the mother has quit her job to take care of the child on her own.

The 20 teachers of the preschool are all young women in their twenties, none of them native Shanghainese. In addition, there are a group of helpers called “aunties” (*Ayi* 阿姨), who perform lower-level tasks to assist the teachers, such as cleaning the classrooms, helping with keeping class order, and assisting children during meal time, bedtime, potty time, and so on. Most of these “aunties” are native Shanghainese who retired from menial-labor jobs and work in the preschool for extra income.

During my fieldwork, I spent the daytime in the preschool on a daily basis and conducted participant observation in various settings, including the classroom, the playground, school parties, and special activities. I administered questionnaire surveys to 90 families, ran five rounds of field experiments with 80 children, and conducted in-depth interviews with 40 parents, teachers, grandparents, and nannies. My dual role as a researcher and a mother is worth mentioning. My son Wandou was admitted to the youngest class, the 2- to 2.5-year-olds, in that school, and as a parent, I had unique opportunities to gain rapport with parents, teachers, and children.

### **The Norm of Egalitarian Sharing in Boya Preschool**

Sharing is widely encouraged by Chinese educators and parents. It is seen as the first step for the promotion of sociality and generosity, given the pervasive fear that single children will become or remain too selfish. Teachers and parents strongly emphasize the virtue of “sharing” (fen xiang, 分享), and in particular, “equality” (ping deng, 平等) in sharing, in order to promote altruism and self-sacrifice, a heritage of collectivistic ethics in the socialist era that paradoxically gained new momentum in educating the one-child generation. The standard teaching of parents and teachers is that the child should share equally and indiscriminately with all of his or her classmates.

Data from the child-rearing questionnaires shows that the value of generally sharing with other children rather than targeting specific individuals is strongly shared by the children’s parents. In the beginning phase of my fieldwork, I conducted the “Child-Rearing Questionnaire” surveys with 90 families at Boya Preschool. The questionnaire had 20 questions clustered in three sections, including family socioeconomic information, reproduction values, and children’s social moral development. The “children’s social moral development” section consisted of 10 questions probing caretakers’ evaluations and attitudes about children’s morality in general, the roles of parents, school, and other people, intergenerational similarities and differences in child-rearing values, as well as the desirable and nondesirable moral characteristics of children. There was a question on sharing: “Do you think children should share toys and snacks with others?” Respondents could select from four possible answers, “A. Yes”; “B. It depends on who the target people are”; “C. It depends on the specific situation”; and “D. No.” Among the 88 families who responded out of the 90 families to whom I sent the questionnaire, 79 chose “Yes” (90%), 3% chose “It depends on who the target people are,” and 7% chose “It depends on the specific situation.”

Teachers and parents coordinate and cooperate together to cultivate the egalitarian sharing among young children. At the beginning of each new semester, teachers meet with parents to discuss specific educational goals. During these meetings, “sharing” was routinely voiced as a common educational goal in the domain of social skills amongst various domains including literacy, motor skills, artistic skills, and so on. For example, the head teacher of class K1B, age range 2–2.5, explained: “Our goal is to educate the children so that they become willing to share with other children, things like snacks and toys.” The head teacher of an older class,

age range 3.5–4, went one step further: “Our goal is to cultivate in children the willingness to share with others. You (parents) can encourage them to buy things in the store, and let them choose what they want to share.”

Sharing is a common theme in the “Family-School Communication Book,” especially in regard to the younger children. The book is a weekly collection of teacher reports and parental feedback on children’s activities, progress, and problems, and it plays an important role in facilitating teacher-parent cooperation. For instance, Yueyue was a strong-willed 3-year-old girl who never shared anything with others. Her mother put her concerns in Yueyue’s book: “Yueyue never allows others to use her things. The other day I got a fever, and used her thermometer. She was so upset at this, and insisted on getting her thermometer back. I am wondering if similar things happen at school. How generous is she, compared to other children?” The teacher responded: “Such things happen at school too. Yueyue is strong-willed, and she seldom lets others use her stuff. I think you can prepare for her some little things to share with other children at school. It will get better gradually.” A few days later the mother put some chocolate in Yueyue’s backpack, and she brought it to school to share with her class.

The norm is not just sharing, but sharing equally with *everyone* in the group. Children are encouraged to bring enough pieces of candy to share with all other students. If they forget to do so, the teacher will remind them to bring more the next day. For instance, one day Xiaobei brought 10 candies to class, but there were 13 children; the next day, he brought three more to make sure each child would get one. Some children do not need to be reminded. For instance, Qiaoqiao, a very intelligent and sensitive girl, always brought exactly enough items to share with all other students, no more, no less.

In addition to the daily routines of bringing snacks and other items in the morning to share with all classmates, teachers enacted various other special programs to promote “egalitarian sharing,” such as the “Sharing Day” and birthday parties, illustrated in the following vignettes.

### **Vignette 1: “Sharing Day.” (Class K1C; age range: 2.5–3)**

In the morning, children brought a variety of snacks to class, everyone with a big pack, e.g., chocolate, crackers, and candies. In this class, there are six children, two teachers and one *Ayi* (“auntie” assistant). Xiaoshi, the head teacher, is instructing children how to “share” step by step.

*Step one:* T (teacher) calls one child, and that child comes up to her. She tells the child to open his own pack and get the snacks out.

*Step two:* T calls another child, and this child comes up to her. She tells the first child to give one piece out of his pack to this second child.

*Step three:* T tells the second child to say “thank you.” The “giver” child replies “you’re welcome,” and the “recipient” child goes back to his or her seat with the snack. T then



calls another child and repeats steps one through four. This sequence goes on and on until every child distributes [the] candies to the other children. (Field notes, March 2012)

Note that K1C is the youngest grade—a new class with children who first enrolled during spring, 2012. The “Sharing Day” is a new practice to them. It is set up with the explicit goal of familiarizing them with the routines of sharing. Once they get used to this routine, teachers will encourage each sharer to distribute the items to other children by himself or herself.

### **Vignette 2: “Birthday Party.” (Class K3B; age range: 4.5–5)**

Today is Xiaobao’s birthday. He brought birthday cake to share with classmates. Usually parents would bring a whole big birthday cake, but this time his was a set of identical small cakes. Several children spontaneously asked: “Why is it such a small cake this time?” The girl sitting across Xiaobao, named Ciccy, added a comment with a look of disdain: “Mine is always a BIG birthday cake!” Xiaobao responded reluctantly: “How would I know? It’s my mom who bought it, not me!” Ciccy didn’t give in; instead, she said in a more provocative way: “When I celebrated my birthday, my mom let ME choose the cake!” Seeing Xiaobao frustrated, I stepped in and answered Ciccy: “This small cake is perfect! You see: one for each exactly, and you don’t even need to cut it into pieces.” Xiaobao nodded promptly. Then, the teacher said: “There were only 10 students who came to class yesterday, so I told Xiaobao’s mom to prepare 10 pieces. But today we have more students than expected, and we don’t have enough cakes. Can we redistribute them, so that everyone gets half of a small cake?” Children answered: “Yes!” Meanwhile, the teacher explained to me: “Sharing is good. Xiaobao isn’t a stingy child. This morning actually his mother prepared enough pieces of cake to share with 12 students. But when he came to school, he first gave one to Mr. Zhao (the driver of the school bus), and then to Miss Zhang (the nurse who does morning-check when children enter the school building). So Xiaobao is quite generous.” (Field notes, February 2012)

This scenario points out the normative and moral dimensions of the children’s and teachers’ understanding of “sharing.” Through previous experiences, children have acquired a sense of normativity about birthday cake sharing: it should be a whole big cake, and everyone should get a piece. Also, teachers emphasize not only the action of sharing but also the intention of generosity. In this case, Xiaobao had a good excuse for not bringing enough to share, because he already generously gave to other people he knew at school. What is implied in the teacher’s comments is Xiaobao’s mother should not be blamed either.

Notice that teachers considered Xiaobao’s sharing behavior with school driver Mr. Zhao and school nurse Miss Zhang as a form of “generalized altruism,” that Xiaobao was willing to share with whoever he met, even with adult staff in a lower social status within the school hierarchy. This made an interesting contrast with the scenario presented in the beginning of this article, that Chengcheng proposed to share a piece of cake with the school director who just passed by without noticing the birthday party in the classroom. They considered Chengcheng as “scheming” (*xinji*, 心机) and Xiaobao as “pure” (*chunzhen*, 纯真)



because Chengcheng was trying to appeal to superiors but Xiaobao was just being generous to people who saw him bringing a cake. Moreover, such a distinctive judgment was not based on occasional incidents but on their familiarity with these different children through previous interactions. What follows was that Xiaobao's "generous" motivation compensated for inadequate resources to share, whereas Chengcheng's "strategic" move earned him a bad impression and an unfavorable nickname.

Tracking children's sharing behavior helps teachers not only to judge children's generosity but also to discern their parents' generosity and moral quality in general. Teachers further believe that parents' behaviors directly influence children's generosity. The story of Tiantian's parents is an apt example. One day, Tiantian's mom wrote in the Family-School Communication Book: "One of the things that we are proud is Tiantian is very willing to share his food with us in the family, although he is not even three-year-old. We are curious about how he is like at school." Teacher Xiaoru laughed at it when she read it because she thought Tiantian's parents were not generous at all as they seldom brought snacks to share with class. She wrote back in a rather sarcastic way:

Tiantian often has said to me: "Teacher Xiaoru, I will bring snacks to share in class tomorrow." He has said it so many times, but never has done it, so eventually I told him: "You lied to me!" Xiaoru told me she didn't like Tiantian's parents: "Once I told children to bring some snacks to class, instead of always eating others' snacks (free-riding) and Tiantian repeated it to his parents at home. The next morning, when his maternal grandmother dropped him off, she gave a whole piece of candy (in a small house shape) to me: 'Tiantian only needs a tiny little portion, and the rest of it you can distribute to the other children!' But it's only one candy, and how can you divide it evenly into pieces enough to share with all children?"

Teacher Xiaoru did not distribute it. She kept it and later asked Tiantian to take it back.

Children use the language of "sharing" very early on. My son Wandou enrolled as the youngest child in this school right at the earliest stages of learning the norms of sharing. One day, right after school, Wandou was playing in the playground when his teacher came to him, gave him a piece of candy, and walked away. He immediately blurted out the slogan, "We should share with our little friends!" (*xiaopengyou*, 小朋友). I was stunned. He had just started school life two months before, at a time when he could not speak a single word. Now, this 20-month-old boy was spontaneously stating the standard doctrine of his school. Despite this impressive command of the discourse, Wandou did not in fact bother to share with the other two children who were playing right next to him. Wandou once exclaimed "(We) should share things with little friends" in the middle of taking his bath, but he stopped for a moment to think and then uttered a firm protest, "I won't share with 'little friends'!" Sharing seemed more like a ubiquitous threat in his daily school experience that he would instantaneously protest even in the absence of being requested to share. He would suddenly say, "I *won't* share my little sports car with others," when he was happily playing on his own.

The incident echoed a number of other instances recorded in my field notes, in which children would spontaneously use the standard phraseology of “sharing,” while being reticent to share anything. This raises the question: to what extent and in what sense does the egalitarian sharing propaganda actually result in what parents and teachers both expect, i.e., a sense of generalized altruism? Alternatively, are children’s understandings of these norms and their grasp of social exchange and reciprocation actually more sophisticated than generally assumed?

## The Practices of Strategic Sharing

Although egalitarian undifferentiated sharing is presented as a self-evident positive norm, children do not actually experience it that way, nor are they really motivated by generalized altruism. Teachers point out that instead of being truly generous with others, children are driven by social satisfaction and reputation, in particular getting praise (*biao yang*, 表扬) from teachers and respect from peers. As Xiaoru stated: “Most children, or even most adults, do not want to give to others. But children are really motivated by adults’ positive acknowledgment. When you commend him for sharing things with others, he feels so good. Even if in his innermost he doesn’t want to give, he would still overcome it and make the move of sharing.” Furthermore, the child feels so satisfied when the teacher praises him in front of all his peers, and as the grandmother of Yuanyuan said: “You know why she is willing to bring snacks to share with class? She just feels so good when the other kids say ‘thank you’ upon receiving her gift.” From this perspective, the routines of egalitarian sharing are more like a collective performance or ritual instead of intrinsically altruistic actions.

Indeed, besides the “educational techniques of commending” (Bakken 2000:174), teachers at Boya also use “shaming” (Fung 1999) to motivate “selfish” children to share. In many cases, the ways teachers shame children reveal an implicit belief in reciprocation—you share because “what goes round comes around.” This belief is, of course, distinct from the norm of undifferentiated generosity. The following story provides a vivid contrast between the goal of promoting undifferentiated generosity and the practice of shaming.

### Case 1: Yueyue, the Spoiled Brat (Class: K1A; age: 41 months)

This bright little girl is the star of class K1A and the teachers’ favorite. But she is also known for her strong-willed self-centeredness. It was a “book donation” day, and children were supposed to bring some books to school for a donation. The intended recipients were children in China’s Xinjiang province, an underdeveloped ethnic minority region. According to Teacher Xiaoru, Yueyue had a really hard time the previous night. She didn’t want to donate her book to any unknown children at all and protested: “If you force me to do so, I definitely will have a nightmare tonight!” Indeed, she screamed out in the middle of the night: “Don’t give my books to others! Don’t give my books to others!” So that morning, she didn’t bring any books. Teacher Xiaoru asked her: “Why didn’t you bring books?” Yueyue almost cried out: “No, I won’t!” Xiaoru asked: “Where is your love (aixin, 爱心)? Since you

won't give your books to others, we won't give you any food, OK?" Yueyue screamed: "No!" Actually, Teacher Xiaoru had just talked with Yueyue's grandma, and they agreed to punish her in order to correct her selfishness. At 10 a.m., reading time, every child got a book to read, except Yueyue. Yueyue cried to her teacher, but she received only a cold reply: "You don't give to others, so you won't get anything." Yueyue gave in: "Xiaoru, please forgive me! I promise, I will never do this again! I will bring my books next time!" Teacher Xiaoru did not reply. A while later, the teacher asked the whole class: "Who didn't donate books today?" Some child announced: "Yueyue!" This poor little girl felt ashamed for the first time since she came to this school because previously she was considered the smartest child in class and the teacher's favorite. According to Teacher Xiaoru, Yueyue later on explained to her family why she didn't want to donate books: "I don't know those children in Xinjiang at all. If I have to, I'd rather share with children in Fuzhou (her father's hometown), because I know them." (Field notes, June 2012)

Here we see the tension between the dominant ideology—that one should care about all people including those one does not know and be willing, for example, to donate a book to poor children—and particularistic logic—Yueyue only wanted to share with people whom she knew. Another layer of this story is that the teacher used a shaming technique, which was based on children's motivation of getting praise from teachers and peers as well as on a fear of being criticized and excluded. The teacher emphasized reciprocation, although she initially wanted to cultivate a generalized altruism in Yueyue. What happened later proved that such techniques did have some effects: after this book-donation incident, Yueyue started to bring snacks and stickers from home to share with other children.

To children, sharing is often intended to gain reciprocal favors and cultivate relationships. Indeed, "underground" sharing activities frequently occurred in the classroom context, which generally went against the teachers' rule of "egalitarian sharing." First, children's own sharing activities seem to involve clear differentiation of whom to share or not share with and a well-calculated distribution of how much to share. For example, Congcong (class: K4A; age: 6) always brought some candies in his pockets, and he shared secretly with the three children he liked most. Usually he made careful calculation of how many pieces he planned to give to each of his friends. Also, sharing is a convenient way to expand one's network and gain access to a new social group. For example, when Yichen (class: K4A; age: 6) first came to this school after his family moved to Shanghai, he tried very hard to build connections with his classmates. Yichen's mother told me: "He is willing to pay a cost for it. He would save the snacks and toys I gave him to share with the ones he wanted to be friends with." Yichen eventually built his social circle and became an active member of his new class. On the other hand, turning down others' favors is a signal of terminating a relationship. Xinyi (class: K3A; age: 6) was a special child whose motor development was delayed slightly. When she was three, she liked Xiaoman very much, and her parents suggested that she bring snacks to Xiaoman in order to build a friendship. At first, this strategy worked, and these two girls became friends. But gradually Xiaoman found Xinyi was "abnormal," and nobody played with her. Xiaoman intentionally distanced herself from Xinyi. During the second year of

preschool, Xinyi was trying to save this friendship, but the same sharing strategy didn't work, and Xiaoman rejected her favors.

Children keep good track of “sharing” histories in order to distinguish countable from uncountable social partners, and they make wise decisions to build up their own reputation. Children feel indebted to give back favors they received and recognize the importance of reputation in facilitating future interactions. For instance, Mingming, a popular boy in class K2A (age: 4) who always received small gifts from his classmates once expressed the concern to his mom that he had received too much but gave back too little, so his mother encouraged him to reciprocate by giving more. Children also hold detailed, affect-laden memories of sharing episodes. Sometimes these are positive occurrences when favors were paid back and relationships strengthened, but many memories are about transgressions, in which the balance of fairness becomes lopsided, or the chain of reciprocation breaks down. In such cases, children not only remember the situations of transgressions, they also rely on their detailed memories of sharing histories to evaluate good and bad social partners. The story of Kailin and Junyi, narrated by their teacher, provides an example of how moral evaluations are imbued in incidents of sharing, evaluations that are not only enacted by the children themselves, but also endorsed, albeit implicitly, by teachers.

**Case 2: Teacher Report on Kailin and Junyi, the Innocent versus the Sneaky (Class: K3A; age: 60 months)**

Kailin is an “innocent and pure” child (*tianzhen*, 天真), and she often shares her toys with friends. At first, she liked Junyi very much, a girl who I think is sneaky and scheming (*xinji*, 心机). She often invited Junyi home and shared all her toys, even her favorite ones, with Junyi. But as time went by, Kailin realized that Junyi was not as generous as she was. Once she complained: “Junyi never shared her favorite toys with me.” But this innocent little girl, Kailin, didn't think about it too much until something happened at her April birthday party. That day, Kailin brought a beautiful birthday cake with some special decorations on it: a cute heart shape and some colorful little balloons. I told Kailin to help divide the cake into even pieces and that she could decide who gets these special decorations. She gave that beautiful heart shape to Junyi immediately, without any hesitation. But Junyi was not satisfied and requested the balloons. Kailin replied: “Sorry, I can't. This is my mom's gift for me.” I didn't want them to have a conflict, so I asked Kailin: “Can you give just one balloon to Junyi?” She thought for a while and then gave one to Junyi with some reluctance. After the birthday party when Kailin got ready to take the balloons back home, I couldn't find them. Then, when I helped the children put on their clothes, I found the balloons in Junyi's pocket. Apparently, Junyi “stole” them. But her first reaction was to find an excuse for herself: “Miss Karen, I took these balloons to give to Kailin.” She lied, and it was not the first time she took small items from class and lied to me about it. Although Kailin didn't say anything, thereafter they were no longer best friends (Interview with Teacher Karen, June 2012).

Sometimes, a transgression of reciprocal sharing rules would not only result in the termination of a friendship or a dislike for the transgressor but would also ignite the children's

vengeful emotions and actions. For example, during my interview with Sicheng (class: K3B; age: 5.5), he explained why Tony was the person he liked the least among all his classmates. Sicheng often brought a small box of candies to the classroom, and he asked Teacher Xiaoling to keep it as a reward to give to those children who performed well in class. Tony was not good friend of Sicheng. Actually, Tony was not a popular boy, because he was not good in school performance, and he was often viewed as a self-centered child. One day, Sicheng found out that Tony had stolen candy from his box. So the next morning, he brought an empty candy box to trick Tony. Sicheng's account evinced his anger: "Tony often steals from my small box of rainbow candies, that's why I hate him!" But when he described how he took his revenge, he burst into laughter: "Today I brought an empty box in order to fool him, and he ended up getting nothing!"

### **Revealing Strategic Motives: Experimental Evidence**

Shanghai preschoolers, while fluent in the ideology of egalitarian sharing, are often reluctant to follow its imperatives. To many parents, most teachers, and perhaps most outsiders, there would be a simple interpretation to this reticence in terms of "selfishness" or, to be less normative, of self-interest. However, children's motivation seems less simple and more interesting as it is often focused on whom to share their things with rather than a refusal to share at all. What seems to be at stake here is less selfishness than a proper understanding of the potential benefits and pitfalls of reciprocation.

To verify this interpretation, one needs to go beyond mere observation and use more controlled instruments. That is why I conducted three rounds of field experiments with preschoolers, the aim of which was to disentangle a general sense of sharing and equality from concerns relating to reciprocation and cultivating valuable relationships. I ran these simple protocols with 80 children, ages 2-6 (for detailed methods and results, see Xu and Boyer, n.d.). The advantage of field experiments in this research is twofold: (1) while most classroom sharing occurs in a collective setting, the field experiment creates a window to "interview" individual children privately in a naturalistic environment (their own classroom) where they feel comfortable; and (2) while natural sharing situations all differ in many different ways, experimental protocols have the same format to enable reliable comparisons.

The basic protocol went like this: I asked a child to play a game, gave him or her two candies as a reward, and asked whether he or she wanted to share one candy with another child. If the child was willing to share, I asked whether he or she wanted to use a signed envelope ("this comes from . . . [name of the participant]") or an anonymous envelope ("this comes from a child in your school") to wrap their gift when it was sent to the recipient. Also, the children had a choice between two possible recipients. One was presented as a new student who would arrive at the school the following day, while the other was described as a child who would visit the school for only a day. The rationale for these alternatives was that a commitment to generalized sharing and a strategic motivation would predict different choices. If the goal is to make everyone equal, a visitor and a student are similar—a signed and an anonymous

donation have the same result. If by contrast one is motivated to cultivate relationships, then it matters that one's gifts should be signed and that the recipients should be valuable partners and in a position for future reciprocation. I also asked the children to justify their choices and used the opportunity to chat with them about their social life, in particular their experiences of sharing, friendship, and social exchange.

Interestingly, most children across age groups (almost 100% across all tests) were willing to share with others and used the standard "normative" language to justify this, e.g., "Because it is good to share"; "Because one should share"; and so on. This reflects the fact that these preschoolers, as mentioned above, can readily express the norms fostered by parents and teachers. However, the children's choices revealed interesting preferences that deviate from the normative imperatives. First, most children (more than 90% across all tests) did not want to be anonymous givers. They wanted the recipient to know who was being generous with them. Second, most of the younger children (74%) chose to give to a child who would stay in their school rather than to one who would not. Finally, 60% of the children (especially the older ones) said they expected to become friends with the recipient to whom they had given the candy, suggesting that they did see sharing as a way to cultivate a longer-term relationship. Indeed, with regards to the second point, although the older children did not show a clear preference for choosing the child who would leave versus the one who would stay, a closer look at their justifications revealed an interesting picture. The older children who preferred to give a candy to the child who would leave justified this choice in terms of cultivating new relationships and expanding their social network. For example, quite a few said, "I want to share with someone who will not stay, because the gift is like a souvenir and the child will remember me." This contrasts with the results in a recent experimental study (Smith et al. 2013), the first study that systematically examines why young children endorse egalitarian norms of sharing but end up acting in contradiction to those norms. While this study suggests that it is because the weight children attach to the egalitarian norm increases with age, my study presents a more complex picture. Instead of increasingly endorsing the egalitarian norm, my field experiments reveal that as children get older, they become more sophisticated in strategic sharing. Their understandings of potential friendships and connections are more complex than younger children, and there is more variability in their reasoning and decisions of whom to give to, which is compatible with my ethnographic evidence.

### **Normative Fairness, Strategic Cooperation and *Guanxi***

The tension described here between the educational norm and the children's own strategies is, of course, not specific to Shanghai preschools or even to China. As I already show in the beginning of this article, developmental psychologists have identified different motivations in human cooperation emerging early on in life. However, an intriguing question remains: why is it that despite the ideological bombardment of an egalitarian norm in educational settings, strategic favors pervade children's sharing practices? What does the cultural and educational context have to do with this tension? In what follows I try to demonstrate that

the early development of different prosocial motivations is highly sensitive to and constantly shaped by the ongoing cultural and educational dynamics.

Cognitive psychologists, evolutionary biologists, and economists have reflected on these contrasting aspects of human cooperation. To use the jargon, one should distinguish between altruistic and mutualistic understandings of cooperation and exchange. The former suggests that people are motivated to share simply because they prefer a situation in which all are equal, and they see inequality as potentially divisive and costly. This is the way some scholars interpret the results of many economic game studies in which people prove much more generous than self-interest would warrant (Boyd et al. 2003). Altruism here is a technical term that simply means that people are prepared to incur costs to benefit others. But there is another possible interpretation of such generous behaviors in terms of a motivation to build mutually advantageous, reciprocal, longer-lasting exchange relationships (Baumard et al. 2013).

Such tension in human cooperation takes on a highly specific intensity and moral overtone in the Chinese context. No discussion of exchange, trust, reciprocation, and morality in modern China can avoid considering the omnipresent practices, norms, and debates surrounding *guanxi* (关系), a hallmark of Chinese social interactions. Chinese social interactions are pervasively imprinted with the signature of *guanxi*, the practice of reciprocal gifts and favors in establishing personal connections. The main assumptions of *guanxi* are that one should always extend favors when possible and cultivate mutual goodwill, that reciprocation is expected, and that connections are useful. Most Chinese people find this motivation to create, calculate, manage, and foster relationships entirely natural and essential to social life. The nuanced social sensibilities encapsulated in the *guanxi* norms include (1) *xinji* (心机), prudence and sophistication in making decisions of sharing; (2) *renqing* (人情) (Yan 1996), a sense of moral obligations to maintain the flow of reciprocity; (3) *ganqing* (感情) (Kipnis 1997), human sentiments and good feelings that emerge out of and simultaneously drive the practices, and (4) *renxin* (人心) (Chang 2010), the pivotal role of the creativity of “human heart” as agentive, flexible, and future oriented (Liang 1984) in the constant transformations of different social relationships. Far from a static cultural essence, *guanxi* is resilient and dynamic, continuously adapting to new social transformations as well as shaping them (Kipnis 1997; Yan 1996; Yang 1994, 2002). The notion of relationships as strategically cultivated and fluid is well expressed in the Chinese term “*la guanxi*” (拉关系), literally meaning “to pull the connection.”

*Guanxi* is a subject extensively examined in China studies across social science disciplines, but what is new in this ethnographic study is what *guanxi* practices in the adult world might have to do with young children’s social interactions.

First, children at Boya Preschool spontaneously adopt strategic attitudes to cooperation. Such strategic attitudes resemble, although in a fairly rudimentary way, the requirements of *guanxi*. They assume that partners are valuable, and generosity creates partnerships, but they also realize that not all partners are equally valuable and that one should expect and monitor



reciprocation. Also, children's sharing practices integrate both cognitive calculation and emotional intensity in fluid ways. As noted above, memories of past exchanges and incidents support moral evaluations of partners' accountability as well as one's own "indebtedness," similar to what Oxfeld (2010) found in Chinese rural life.

Second, it would be naïve to assume that young children are unaffected by the *guanxi* practices in the broader social world. In the age of the "moral crisis," sharing is intended by caregivers as a way to cultivate a sense of altruism among the spoiled "little emperors" in a perceived "immoral" era. However, their own *guanxi* practices inevitably contribute to the amplification of "moral crisis" of which corruption is an important theme. Such practices are visible to young children in subtle ways. The culture of bribery in the Chinese education system is notorious (Levin 2012). In the preschool where I conducted my research, parents tried in every possible way to cultivate a relationship with the teachers so that their child would be favored, or at least not ignored. They sent various gifts to the teachers in private, including expensive performance tickets, gift cards to major shopping malls, or skin-care products from Hong Kong or the United States. Parents sometimes invited teachers to have dinner with their family as a way for the child to develop a personal relationship with teachers outside of the school setting. Favoritism is present in the classroom, as teachers felt indebted to some parents' favors and obligated to pay more attention to their children, e.g., assigning certain children better seats in the classroom or giving them a leading role in class performances. Parents also prepared small gifts, such as snacks, for their children to bring to teachers, just as they told the child to use "sharing" as a means to cultivate friendship with particular children. It is not unusual to see a three-year-old chatting with the teacher secretly and giving her some small snacks to signal a special fondness for the teacher. Nor is it rare to see a teacher giving a particular child some candy as a special favor without being noticed by other children.

So the feedback chain goes both ways between psychological and cultural processes. On the one hand, some early cooperative predispositions or capacities, identified in various psychological literatures, enable young children to recognize certain features and principles of *guanxi* practices they are exposed to; otherwise these things will be entirely opaque to them. This partly explains why they are not motivated as much by a generalized altruism. On the other hand, *guanxi* practices in the adult world as well as in certain educational contexts reinforce the "particularistic mutualism" logic and motivation among children, thus children's strategic sharing behaviors proliferate in their social interactions.

It is a typical Chinese way of gift exchange—sending gifts to one's superiors to gain favor in a hierarchical system (Yang 2002). But in this as in the broader context of Chinese social life, one should not be too quick to equate *guanxi* with bribery. In some cases, the relationship between parents and teachers is not merely a monetary, transactional one, but it evolves into sincere friendship. This positive feedback chain of favoritism has unintended consequences, however; children become aware of *guanxi* and the benefits it brings in. That is how the three-year old Chengcheng, the main protagonist of the vignette in the beginning of this article, could be aware of the need for a preschool teacher to "pull the connection" with her

boss. More amusingly, one can see the gap between a child-version strategic favor and the fully fledged *guanxi* practice in the adult world. This “Evil Kiddo,” although successfully gaining favors from Director Yuan in a series of occasions, was nonetheless not entirely cognizant about the complexities of the adult hierarchy, such as the status of the helper (*Ayi*, 阿姨). One day, Director Yuan gave him some candy, but he was puzzled by the fact that his beloved Auntie Zhang (an assistant in Chengcheng’s class) didn’t get a piece. He took Auntie Zhang out of classroom: “Why didn’t you ask Director Yuan for a candy? I know she is Teacher Xiaoru’s boss, and that’s why Xiaoru didn’t dare to ask her. But you are different. She is not your boss. I am taking you to see her and get a candy for you.” Auntie Zhang laughed at him and went away embarrassed. This kind of “liminal” moment in developing understandings of the social world, when the heuristics of social interactions begin to reveal themselves but are not fully transparent to the child, is crucial to decode the secrets of enculturation, and more broadly, the mystery of human sociality and morality.

### **Epilogue: Why Anthropologists Should Like Children**

The field of child studies is on the rise among cultural anthropologists (Bock et al. 2008), but the study of children is far from being influential in mainstream anthropology, despite the obvious fact that children’s cognitive capacities and mechanisms are crucial to enculturation and cultural transmission (Hirschfeld 2002). Robert LeVine proposed that “further theory building” (2007:256) in addition to ethnographic documentation of childhood is needed to engage with significant conversations within and outside anthropology.

An anthropological study of sharing among young children can have a fruitful conversation with developmental psychology and contribute to key issues in the study of human nature and culture. In recent years, scholars across social science disciplines have paid great attention to children’s “sharing” behaviors, not only because sharing is common among young children but also because the early forms and motivations of sharing can shed light on foundations of cooperation (Olson and Spelke 2008), dispositions for fairness (Fehr et al. 2008; Hamann et al. 2011), and the roots of human morality (Baumard et al. 2013). On the one hand, recent experimental works with infants reveal the early dispositions of sharing in infancy (Sommerville et al. 2013). On the other hand, the vast ethnographic literature reveals the richness of human cooperation and how it is embedded into diverse cultural forms and dynamic historical contexts (Benson 2011). What about the psycho-cultural processes through which our natural predispositions and capacities to navigate the social world flourish into culturally specific moral practices in its earliest forms? In order to fully understand the psycho-cultural processes in human development, ethnographic studies are much needed (Weisner 1997).

In addition to documenting and theorizing the psycho-cultural processes of childhood, ethnographic studies are positioned to provide a space where children are seen as social actors who play a unique and active role in shaping their own social world (James 2007). Noting the problems and pitfalls of “giving voice to children’s voices,” including questions of

representation, issues of authenticity, the diversity of children's experiences, and children's participation in research, Allison James pointed out the potential benefits of "revisiting a key theoretical tension within the field of childhood studies, noted at the outset: the relationship between 'childhood' as a social space, 'children' as a generational category, and 'the child' as an individual representative of that category and inhabitant of that space" (2007:270). Efforts to contextualize children's "voices" are crucial to explore how and what children's own perspectives can provide to our theorizing of human sociality.

This study is one such attempt. It focuses on a crucial phase for moral development—early childhood—where nascent moral dispositions generate a variety of cooperative behaviors. It is situated in the specific cultural context—contemporary China—where cultivating morality becomes a critical national challenge under the one-child policy in an era of "moral crisis." It integrates ethnographic and field-experimental methods in a mutually informative way that places children themselves in the center of analysis, reveals how sophisticated and active young children are in their moral practices and understandings, and contextualizes such moral practices and understandings in their daily experiences. By examining how children's psychological dispositions of cooperation are expressed and modulated in cultural dynamics, a study of early childhood may allow us to engage with key issues in psychological anthropology, the anthropology of childhood, and more broadly the anthropology of China.

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1. According to the teacher's comments and my own observations, Chengcheng's sophistication in carefully cultivating and managing the relationships with his superiors is visible in other occasions too. For instance, he liked tattling, to gain favor from the teacher by monitoring his peers and reporting their misbehaviors to the teacher. He also would seize any opportunity to talk to the school director, and he became one of her favorite children.

2. While the famous series of "Preschools in Three Cultures" (Tobin et al. 1991) and "Preschools in Three Cultures Revisited" (Tobin et al. 2011) featured two renowned public preschools in China, one in Kunming, Southwest, and the other located in the old center of Shanghai, Boya Preschool differs from them as a newly built private school located in the newly developed Pudong district, China's shining financial hub.

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