Embodying disciplinarian practices: examples from Chinese kindergartens

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My PhD-project on disciplinarian practices in Chinese kindergartens is based on 11 months of ethnographic fieldwork (participant observation and interviews) among children (5-6 year olds) and their teachers in two urban kindergartens in Shanghai, China (2011-2012). I approach discipline as relational everyday social practice, and Bourdieu’s concepts field, habitus and capital constitute an analytical frame for capturing both the social and historical conditions of such practices, as well as how agents perceive and partake in them. Disciplinarian practices are understood as practices of control, regulation or guidance in the kindergarten everyday life, including elements of self-discipline and the forming and controlling of own habits. In this presentation, I explore how values of order and control, 'correct' behavior, evaluation, and the public character of discipline were practiced, expressed and communicated on a daily basis, in relationships between teachers and children in the two kindergartens. Through emphasizing particular forms of field-specific embodied cultural capital (kindergarten, guan and guai) I furthermore show how children themselves engaged in disciplinary practices. These practices were not only present in teacher-child relationships, but also significant in relations between children, both in everyday life as well as in assigned tasks involving practices of domination in the classroom, exemplified through the tasks of duty children, little teachers and team leaders. The children did however, not have equal opportunity to dominate others due to their differential endowment with and use of capital, and thus their position in social space. A relational (interdependent and differential) aspect is thus part of the children’s practical sense (habitus) (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) of discipline, along with a form of situational sensitivity and a seizing of opportunities for secrecy and play, including the challenging of field values.

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