



Flexibility of Moral Judgment Standards in Chinese Rural Society

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How to cite this paper: Xinran Hu. (2024) Flexibility of Moral Judgment Standards in Chinese Rural Society. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 8(6), 1526-1530.
DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2024.06.039

Received: May 12, 2024
Accepted: June 8, 2024
Published: July 5, 2024

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Abstract

This article thoroughly explores the flexibility of moral judgment standards in Chinese rural society, conducting a comprehensive analysis from multiple dimensions including historical background, traditional culture, and social structure. In Chinese rural society, the scale of moral judgment is not fixed but influenced by multiple factors such as social relationships, individual status, and power distribution, demonstrating a certain degree of flexibility. The article meticulously compares this elastic moral standard with various phenomena in contemporary society, paying particular attention to the phenomenon of "double standards". It points out that the prevalence of "double standards" not only reflects the deep-seated desire for fairness and justice among Chinese youth but also reveals inherent selfish tendencies in human nature. After in-depth analysis, the conclusion is drawn that there are subtle similarities between the contemporary phenomenon of "double standards" and the flexibility of traditional rural Chinese moral judgment standards, both of which are closely linked to individual interests.

Keywords

Rural society, Hierarchical structure, Moral judgment standards, Double standards

This article delves into how the moral judgment standards in Chinese rural society are flexible and evolve with the times. By examining historical, and cultural backgrounds, and various social factors, we observe their shaping and influence on moral standards. It's noteworthy that this change is not isolated but reveals profound shifts in the entire social structure and values. Additionally, the article compares current moral judgment phenomena with the past, attempting to uncover the intrinsic connection between contemporary youth values and the evolution of these moral standards. However, it's important to clarify that the flexibility of moral standards referred to here does not imply "ethical relativism," where moral standards vary due to differences in nation, ethnicity, culture, and social customs. The focus is on Chinese rural society, where, despite having individual moral scales, standards adjust based on various factors when evaluating different subjects. To better illustrate this phenomenon, the article deeply explores the practical situations in China.

1. The Relationship Between the Social Structure of Chinese Rural Society and Traditional Moral Standards

The unique social structure of Chinese rural areas creates an environment for this phenomenon. Mr. Fei Xiaotong named the social structure of Chinese rural society "hierarchical structure." It is this network of social relationships centered on oneself and overlaid with personal connections that lead to the significance of social morality only in private contacts in traditional society (Fei, 2017). Prominent symbols in Chinese traditional culture such as filial piety, loyalty, righteousness, propriety, integrity, and a sense of honor are mostly relevant to closer social circles, such as parents, siblings, and rulers. The moral judgment standards existing within intimate social relationships are influenced

by various factors such as social hierarchy and social relationships. In other words, individuals with specific roles and power are inclined to hold lenient attitudes towards themselves and their peers, relaxing judgment standards, while they tend to adopt stricter attitudes towards others outside the circle of relatives, neighbors, and marginalized people. The differing moral evaluation standards are influenced by social relationships, social status, and power, as well as the instinct of self-protection, i.e., using different standards to protect one's interests. Chinese morality depends on the relationship between the recipient and oneself, with a certain degree of flexibility (Zhang, 2016).

2. Social and Cultural Factors Affecting the Flexibility of Moral Judgment Standards

The existence of divergent value judgment standards exhibits distinct Chinese characteristics, gradually developing within the deep-rooted background of Chinese rural society. In Chinese rural society, the relatively single structure of rural industries, mainly dominated by agriculture, leads to slow income growth for farmers and exacerbates the risks faced by each household. These risks add more uncertainty for families that already have a certain social status, potentially causing further disorder in internal family dynamics, such as the phenomenon of "wives refusing to weave and sisters-in-law refusing to cook." Consequently, moral judgment standards based on personal relationships such as kinship, geography, and blood ties become more cautious and complex. The flexibility and elasticity of these judgment standards largely depend on the closeness or distance of the relationship between the judge and the judged.

There is a significant difference between moral criticism and ritual governance. Ritual governance embodies a society's norms and control over individual behavior, where "ritual" is widely accepted as a behavioral guideline and an important means of maintaining social order. In contrast, moral judgment exhibits more informality in its process and impact. Individuals, when subjected to moral criticism, are more deeply concerned about becoming the focus of discussion within their geographical relationship networks. This public opinion pressure may negatively affect their family's status in the local society, leading to long-term self-isolation or avoidance of social interactions in extreme cases. It is this informal nature of moral judgment that makes it more common and far-reaching in hierarchical social relationships.

The moral judgment standards within the hierarchical structure also resemble the spreading pattern of ripples in water. When a stone symbolizing the "self" is thrown into the water, the ripples of social relationships spread outward from this center. Generally¹, moral judgment standards become stricter as they approach the center of the self. For example, individuals usually impose higher moral demands within closer kinship relationships because failing to do so may endanger their own interests. In rural areas, many cases of domestic violence reflect men's higher moral standards imposed on their wives and children, as they believe certain behaviors of family members tarnish their reputation within informal groups. Traditional concepts such as "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" and "Seven Outs and Three Not Go" also serve as norms for behavior between parties in closer kinship relationships. However, when the scope of examination is slightly expanded, the situation changes. At this point, we discuss a more loosely connected social relationship state between intimate relationships and distant groups. This type of social relationship influences individuals and is affected by more complex social connections, making the moral judgment standards at this level more intricate and uncertain. They are influenced by multiple factors such as relative social status, social relationships, the current social environment, public opinion, and authority. However, the commonality lies in the core of judgment, which is the relationship with the "self," i.e., whether it benefits the self and to what extent it affects self-interest. This stems from the deeply ingrained "self-centeredness" in traditional Chinese thought, where all values revolve around the self. As the ripples continue to expand to a certain extent, the consideration shifts from the specific individual's impact on the self to the height of the ethical system of human relations. At this point, the judgment extends to the entire society, and the discourse resembles an idealized value system. Due to the idealized pursuit and longing for concepts such as filial piety, loyalty, righteousness, and benevolence, people unconsciously raise their moral judgment standards when considering a broader scope, believing it to be beneficial for social development. This moral judgment concept developed within informal groups also subtly promotes the subsequent development of "ritual governance."

3. Interactive Analysis of the Flexibility of Moral Judgment Standards in Social Structure and Cultural Factors

Individuals in rural communities, due to long-term living in relatively stable and closed environments, have formed

¹ The term "Generally" here refers to a normal state where there is no involvement in any moral crisis. It differs from the situation mentioned earlier, where individuals tend to be more tolerant towards themselves and their peers under the influence of social status in relationships.

unique moral concepts and behavioral norms. These concepts and norms are not fixed but constantly adjusted and improved with the growth of individuals, the expansion of social interactions, and the changes of the times. From the perspective of social psychology, the flexibility of moral judgment standards in rural communities reflects the process of self-adjustment and cognition of individuals in social interactions. When facing different social relationships, individuals adjust moral standards based on their own interests and role positioning to adapt to different social situations. This process of adjustment is both compliance with social rules and maintenance of self-interests. In addition, with the acceleration of urbanization and the advancement of globalization, traditional rural social structures are gradually disintegrating, leading to significant changes in people's moral concepts and behavioral norms. However, even in modern society, the moral traditions of rural communities still play a role to some extent, especially in rural areas and among the elderly. For a deeper understanding of the flexibility of moral judgment standards in rural communities and their modern evolution, comprehensive analysis from interdisciplinary perspectives is needed. For example, exploration of the impact mechanisms of different factors on moral judgment standards can be conducted from fields such as sociology, anthropology, and psychology. Additionally, empirical research on the flexibility of moral judgment standards, combined with specific social phenomena and cases, is needed to verify the accuracy and effectiveness of theoretical analysis.

4. The Evolution of Modern Moral Judgment Standards: Interpretation of the "Double Standard" Phenomenon

Building on the discussion of how moral judgment standards in hierarchical societies are influenced by complex social relationship factors, I will now further explore the evolution of the flexible moral standards in Chinese rural society and the values they reflect in modern society.

As society continues to change and time progresses, moral concepts and judgment standards also continue to evolve. The term "double standard" became widely popular on the internet around 2021, referring to using different criteria to measure two or more items, events, or individuals. So why are people today so sensitive to the phenomenon of double standards? This can be traced back to the individualism inherent in traditional values. Similar to the judgment standards in rural communities, many standards in modern society are closely related to individual interests. Phrases such as "one rule for the ruler, another for the ruled" or "strict with oneself, lenient towards others" actually reflect the existence of double standards (Nian, 2013). However, when it comes to deep-seated personal interests, people's attitudes towards judgment standards will change.

The online environment provides people with a relatively anonymous and less regulated space, allowing them to express their thoughts more freely. In this environment, the influence of complex social relationships is greatly weakened, and people are more inclined to speak their minds, with less consideration for potential consequences. Additionally, while individual values are relatively fixed, the influence of the broader environment on individuals is undeniable. The prevalent herd mentality among Chinese people means that even those with clear values may be influenced by the broader cultural environment and social norms. Information overload and fragmentation in the online environment may lead people to become more emotional and extreme, sometimes even breaking moral constraints and altering their standards.

The phenomenon of "double standards" in modern society bears significant similarities to the flexibility of moral judgment standards in traditional Chinese rural society, as they both arise under similar conditions of influence. However, in the contemporary context, the relationships between judgment subjects and individuals become relatively loose, and the influence of complex social factors diminishes. At the same time, the uncertainty in the online environment leads to more arbitrary moral judgment behavior, as the ripples of social relationships under hierarchical patterns² are pushed outwards. Nonetheless, the ultimate judgment standards still revert to individual interests. The popularity of the modern term "double standard" not only reflects the desires and pursuits of fairness among Chinese youth but also reveals the inherent selfish tendencies and instincts of humanity to seek advantage and avoid harm.

5. Strategies and Suggestions for Addressing the Phenomenon of Double Standards

The phenomenon of double standards, wherein different standards are applied to different objects, has gradually become a significant issue in contemporary society. With the rapid development of society and the advent of the

² The levels generated by the ripple effect of social relationships pushing outwards in a hierarchical order refer to the uncertainty of distance from the "self" center.

information age, people are increasingly prone to exhibiting double standards in complex social phenomena, undermining social fairness and justice, as well as affecting trust and harmony among individuals (He, 2019). To effectively address the phenomenon of double standards, it is necessary to formulate systematic solutions from multiple dimensions.

Firstly, it is essential to deepen moral education and cultivate a moral consensus throughout society. Moral education is the foundation for addressing the phenomenon of double standards. Through extensive and in-depth moral education, people can be guided to establish correct moral concepts, clarify moral standards, and consciously abandon the practice of double standards. This education should permeate through family education, school education, and social education, enabling people to understand the importance of fairness and justice from an early age and learn to maintain consistent moral standards when facing different objects.

Secondly, efforts should be made to strengthen the construction of laws and regulations to regulate and restrain double-standard behaviors. Law is the ultimate safeguard for social justice, and for blatant double standard behaviors, punishment and correction should be carried out through legal means. By formulating and improving relevant laws and regulations, clarifying the legal responsibilities of double standard behaviors, this behavior can be effectively curbed. At the same time, law enforcement agencies should intensify efforts to crack down on double-standard behaviors, ensuring the authority and fairness of the law.

Furthermore, the media plays an important role in guiding public opinion and shaping societal values. The media should strengthen supervision and criticism of the phenomenon of double standards, expose the harm and nature of double standard behaviors through in-depth investigation and reporting, and guide people to establish correct moral concepts. Meanwhile, the media should actively promote positive moral stories, promote core socialist values, and create a favorable public opinion environment for the harmonious development of society (Wu, 2013; Lu, 2016).

In addition, it is necessary to enhance citizens' moral self-awareness and self-restraint. Every citizen should consciously abide by moral norms and not change their moral standards due to different objects. In daily life, we should maintain an attitude of introspection and self-discipline, ensuring consistency between words and deeds. At the same time, we should actively participate in social welfare activities, use our practical actions to spread positive energy and promote the harmonious development of society.

Finally, to more effectively address the phenomenon of double standards, it is necessary to establish an effective supervision mechanism and encourage public participation. The government, media, and social organizations should work together to build a multi-party participation supervision system. The government can establish specialized supervision agencies to investigate and deal with behaviors that violate morals and laws; the media can play its role in public opinion supervision by timely exposing and criticizing unethical behaviors; and social organizations can actively participate in social supervision to speak up for vulnerable groups (Luo, 2011; He, 2019; Chen, 2015). Public participation is also crucial, as their effective supervision can enhance the strength of the entire supervision system, promote the democratization of society, and advance social fairness and justice.

6. Conclusion

The moral judgment standards in Chinese rural society exhibit a certain degree of flexibility, influenced by factors such as social relationships, status, and power. This flexibility of moral standards is rooted in China's unique social structure and cultural traditions, manifesting as variations in moral requirements and standards among different social relationships. The prevalence of the "double standard" phenomenon in modern society is closely related to individualism in traditional values and the influence of the modern online environment. Both this phenomenon and the flexibility of moral judgment standards in traditional Chinese rural society arise under similar conditions, ultimately reverting to self-interest as the final criterion.

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