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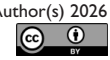

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Of love and loss: Negotiating masculinity and care in families of autistic children in China

Kefan Xue
University of Oxford, UK

Xiaorong Gu
University of Suffolk, UK

Abstract

Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are underdiagnosed, underprivileged and under-supported in China. Families, particularly parents, often become primary caregivers, but research on fathers' caregiving experiences remains sparse compared to mothers'. Understanding fathers' roles is critical for promoting shared caregiving responsibilities and family well-being. This study analyzes publicly available we-media data of 33 family stories written by 23 fathers of autistic children. Drawing on Bridges and Pascoe's hybrid masculinities framework, the study explores three interconnected processes: fathers' emotional responses to their child's diagnosis, the redistribution of caregiving within families and the emergence of 'carer-intervener' identities. By centering fathers' own accounts in a Global South context, the article contributes new empirical insight to disability and care scholarship, extends theorization of hybrid masculinities by tracing discursive distancing and boundary-fortifying practices in caregiving and highlights policy implications for supporting fathers of children with ASD without reinforcing gendered double standards.

Keywords

Autism spectrum disorder, caregiving, China, fatherhood, hybrid masculinity, special needs children

Corresponding author:
Xiaorong Gu, School of Business, Arts, Social Sciences and Technology, University of Suffolk, Waterfront Building, 19-21 Neptune Quay, Ipswich IP4 1QJ, UK.
Email: x.gu@uos.ac.uk

Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition characterized by persistent deficits in social communication and interaction (American Psychological Association (APA), 2024). In China, prevalence was long underestimated, but a 2019 study confirmed rates comparable to Western countries (Sun et al., 2019), estimating more than 3 million children with autism. This underscores the urgency of research on the lives and needs of these children and their families. Parenting children with ASD presents greater challenges than raising neurotypical (NT)[1] children, including reduced parenting efficacy, increased stress, and mental and physical health difficulties, particularly for families of children with lower-functioning ASD who face lifelong caregiving responsibilities (Hartley et al., 2014).

As in many Global South settings, underdeveloped medical and social support systems in China place the bulk of caregiving and intervention duties on parents, creating heavy physical, mental, and financial burdens (Clark et al., 2019). Families of children with ASD often face greater employment and financial challenges compared to those with NT children, as ASD treatment is not covered by the national healthcare system, and children with ASD are excluded from the 'special education' category (Ou et al., 2015). This results in difficulties accessing both public education and specialized schools, further exacerbated by limited teacher expertise in ASD (McCabe, 2013; Zhang and Spencer, 2015).

Alongside the need for comprehensive policy and social support tailored to ASD families, partner support is crucial in alleviating care burdens. While studies worldwide show that fathers' involvement benefits child development, research on parental involvement with children with ASD has focused mainly on mothers, neglecting fathers' experiences and perspectives (Braunstein et al., 2013). This limited understanding risks excluding fathers from services and interventions, thereby widening gender disparities in caregiving (Potter, 2017).

Fathers of children with ASD also face unique challenges compared to fathers of NT children: increased caregiving demands, financial and emotional costs of interventions aimed at 'curing' or improving ASD (Clark et al., 2019; Ou et al., 2015), and stigma associated with disability (Yu et al., 2020). In China, these pressures conflict with cultural expectations of men as economic providers rather than primary caregivers (Choi and Peng, 2016). Fathers may feel socially and emotionally constrained as they navigate caregiving responsibilities and the cultural pressure to maintain traditional masculine identities (Akoğlu and Cankurtaran, 2023; Koltai et al., 2025). Targeted research on fathers of children with ASD is therefore essential to understand their perceived roles, caregiving experiences, and support needs. Doing so may facilitate more equitable sharing of responsibilities with mothers and improve family well-being.

To bridge these gaps, this article examines how fathers of children with ASD in China negotiate caregiving and masculinity. Drawing on publicly available we-media (or '*zi meiti*') sources[2] from 23 fathers, and guided by Bridges and Pascoe's (2014) hybrid masculinities framework, this study explores how fathers of children with ASD confront emotional rupture, redistribute caregiving within families, and develop public identities as 'carer-interveners'. By focusing on fathers' own accounts in a Global South context, this study contributes new empirical insights to disability and care research, a field still

dominated by Northern and maternal perspectives. It also extends theorizing on hybrid masculinities by showing how discursive distancing and boundary-fortifying processes operate in caregiving for children with ASD.

Literature review

Research on fathers of children with ASD in China is scarce. The limited quantitative work, largely from public health, examines both parents' experiences (Hu et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2020). Wang et al. (2020) show that a traditional gender division of labor persists: 88.6% of fathers versus 52.9% of mothers are in paid employment ($n = 210$ couples), echoing studies in the United States and the United Kingdom (Hartley et al., 2014; Potter, 2017). Fathers in China are increasingly aware of the importance of caregiving, yet often position themselves as 'helpers' while viewing partners as the main carers (Wang et al., 2020). This small body of work is valuable but lacks qualitative, sociological analyses of how gender and care intersect in special-needs contexts.

Internationally, research on fathers of children with ASD has expanded (Akoğlu and Cankurtaran, 2023; Koltai et al., 2025). These studies document gendered differences in raising children with ASD and show how dominant ideals of masculinity and fatherhood shape men's practices. Fathers frequently report failure and disappointment at not fulfilling culturally idealized roles as primary providers, protectors, or authority figures (Akoğlu and Cankurtaran, 2023; Pelchat et al., 2009). Compared to mothers, who more often express emotions openly, fathers tend to suppress negative feelings, avoid discussing their child's disability with colleagues, and receive less social support (Pelchat et al., 2009). These studies resonate with the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), which refers to the 'culturally exalted form of masculinity' (Carrigan et al., 1985: 592), often performed by the dominant male group, such as white middle-class heterosexual men in contexts Connell and colleagues first theorized about. Situated at the top in a hierarchy of masculinities and femininities in society, hegemonic masculinity emphasizes and reinforces male authority and dominance over women, and is also used as the benchmark for measuring all men's behaviors and practices, which often contributes to the legitimization and perpetuation of patriarchy (Connell, 2005). In a sense, fathers raising autistic children – while confronted with substantial financial, emotional, and caregiving demands – must actively negotiate their gender identities and practices vis-à-vis the hegemonic masculinity in context, which shapes the coping strategies and routines they adopt.

Although hegemonic masculinity has wide applicability across patriarchal societies (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), we should also account for context specificity when discussing the parameters and characteristics of ideals of hegemonic masculinity in particular cases. China's enduring Confucian familism and rapid socioeconomic change have shaped distinct ideals of masculinity, which we explore in the next section.

Contextualizing hegemonic masculinity and fatherhood in China

Confucianism has long shaped Chinese gender norms (Ho, 1987). Kam Louie (2002) conceptualizes Chinese hegemonic masculinity through the *wen/wu* (literary/martial)

dyad, combining refined, scholarly and moral qualities with physical strength, discipline, and authority (Song and Hird, 2014). Although developed from elite literary sources, this model highlights how male power in traditional China was multidimensional and publicly oriented, while domestic responsibilities and childrearing – what contemporary social science calls reproductive labor – were relegated to women in line with Confucian ideals of the wife as her husband's 'internal person' *(nei'ren)*.

Historical studies confirm that fathers' domestic involvement was limited and selective. Their unchallenged authority as economic providers and disciplinarians was captured in the term 'household head' (*huzhu*) across society (Ho, 1987). Daily caregiving and emotional labor were typically delegated to mothers (Ho, 1987; Li and Jankowiak, 2016). Fathering emphasized discipline, moral instruction, and role modeling rather than warm, nurturing interactions (Ho, 1987). These historical patterns have influenced institutional and family arrangements, continuing to shape contemporary expectations and practices around fatherhood and masculine identities (Li and Jankowiak, 2016).

The 20th century brought substantial social transformations that challenged traditional gender norms and patriarchal values. During the Maoist era, in line with the Marxist gender ideology and under the slogan 'women hold uphalf of the sky' (*fu nv neng ding ban bian tian*), the party-state passed a new marriage law in 1950 that promoted gender equality, opened the formal economy to women, and expanded girls' educational opportunities, though the dual burdens women shouldered at work and home remained naturalized (Fong, 2002; Li and Jankowiak, 2016).

Since the late 1970s, market reforms have produced contradictory shifts in gender norms. Rapid urbanization and integration into the global economy promoted a neoliberal discourse that emphasizes individualism, professionalism, equal opportunities and the open market (Pun, 2005: 11), narrowing gender gaps in education and employment and weakening the patriarchal Confucian family as the One-Child Policy reduced family size and son preference (Gu and Yeung, 2021). At the same time, gender traditionalism has re-emerged, reinforcing 'men out, women inside' roles (Sun and Chen, 2015). Neoliberalization dismantled the 'iron rice bowl', intensified competition, eroded urban job security and welfare, and incorporated millions of rural migrants as precarious laborers in a two-tiered citizenship structure. These transformations have profoundly reshaped how people negotiate gender identities and roles.

Men now balance intense pressure for economic provision with new domestic responsibilities. Marriage squeezes caused by sex-selective abortions in the early One-Child era have increased the cost of 'marriage packages', reinforcing provider roles for men (Jones and Gu, 2024). Meanwhile, an intensive parenting culture, shaped by imported Western middle-class ideas emphasizing children's agency and heightened by widespread anxiety and competition in an unequal society (Gu, 2021a), frames childrearing as a family project. Popular culture such as the reality show titled 'Where Are We Going? Dad' (2014) promotes a new father image as both provider and nurturer. Yet this 'new father' usually remains a secondary figure in a 'parenting coalition' led by the mother as 'education agent' and supported by grandparents or hired help (Goh, 2011).

Empirical research reveals that the new hegemonic masculinity is unequally achievable for different groups of men in society, depending on their socioeconomic status

(SES), family circumstances, and other factors. For example, urban middle-class fathers are found to blend traditional masculine traits with nurturing behaviors, providing financial support, expressing affection, and engaging directly in caregiving (Wang and Keizer, 2024). In contrast, rural fathers, especially those facing economic insecurity or involved in migrant labor, often prioritize provider and disciplinarian roles, limiting hands-on caregiving and emotional engagement, which Choi and Peng (2016) characterize as 'masculine compromise' in their study of migrant fathers in South China.

Little is known about how fathers of children with ASD negotiate masculinity and fatherhood. Their children's needs impose heavy emotional, financial, and caregiving demands, intensifying pressure to provide economically while increasing care obligations. In a cultural context that prizes birthing 'healthy' and 'well-educated' children (Greenhalgh, 2003), these fathers may feel they have failed to produce a 'quality child' (Gu, 2021b), heightening stress and inadequacy. Stigma surrounding disability (Yu et al., 2020) further complicates their roles, as they reconcile caregiving with traditional expectations of provision and authority (Louie, 2002). This study addresses that gap by examining how fathers of children with ASD in China construct and practice masculinity and fatherhood under these conditions.

Hybrid masculinities: an analysis framework

This study draws on the theoretical framework of hybrid masculinities (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014) in a growing literature on sociology of men and masculinities. Building on and critically engaging R. W. Connell's influential work (Connell, 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), particularly her theorization of hegemonic masculinity, this framework offers a relational perspective on how new hegemonic ideals emerge through dominant men's appropriation and adaptation of subordinate groups' gender practices (discursive or affective) (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014).

As Bridges and Pascoe (2014) and Yang (2020) note, Connell herself sought to move beyond a static conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity in her earlier work by emphasizing that it always exists in relation to femininities and marginalized masculinities (Connell, 2005). Yet much scholarship still cites her earlier formulation of hegemonic masculinity as 'the culturally exalted form of masculinity' (Carrigan et al., 1985: 592), prompting critiques of its limited capacity to capture the dynamism of changes in gender norms. Empirical studies show that hegemonic masculinity is continually reshaped through incorporating practices from non-dominant groups, such as adopting emotionally expressive behaviors coded as feminine (Messner, 1993, 2007), assimilating elements of gay male culture into heterosexual masculinities (Demetriou, 2001), or appropriating styles associated with ethnic minorities (Rodriquez, 2006).

Within this trajectory, Bridges and Pascoe (2014) propose hybrid masculinities to explain how privileged men incorporate elements associated with marginalized or subordinated identities into their gender performances. White, heterosexual, middle-class men may adopt styles, discourses, or affective practices linked to femininities, gay masculinities, or working-class cultures while still reasserting dominance in the gender hierarchy. In particular, they outline three hybridization strategies:

1. Discursive distancing: Men position themselves as morally superior to traditional or subordinated masculinities while still benefiting from gender hierarchies. For example, claiming not to be 'sexist' or 'emotionally closed off' yet continuing to enjoy gendered advantages.
2. Strategic borrowing: Selectively incorporating elements from marginalized masculinities or femininities without compromising privilege. For example, endorsing egalitarian discourse while retaining control in relationships and workplaces.
3. Fortifying boundaries: Maintaining symbolic distance from subordinated groups even while borrowing from them, such as a heterosexual man adopting fashion practices associated with gay men but emphasizing his heterosexuality to retain privilege.

It is worth noting that Bridges and Pascoe (2014) underscore that these hybridization practices do not dismantle gender hierarchies. Instead, they often reconfigure and reinforce them, allowing privileged men to appear progressive or emotionally sensitive while maintaining structural advantages. Hybrid masculinities thus represent a mode of hegemonic negotiation rather than its erosion.

This framework provides a powerful lens for examining how men navigate shifting cultural expectations in specific sociohistorical contexts. It directs attention to how men draw from and distance themselves from traditional scripts of gender power, mobilize alternative or marginalized practices to authenticate their identities, and reproduce or reconfigure patriarchal privilege. In this study, we use the concept of hybrid masculinities to investigate how Chinese fathers of autistic children negotiate gender identities through care practices and parenting experiences. By tracing how they incorporate and reinterpret gender practices and rhetorics, we uncover the complex, ambivalent processes through which fatherhood, masculinity, and care are renegotiated in families raising autistic children in contemporary China.

Methodology

Data

Data for this study are drawn from a social media dataset gathered by our research project – Parenting Special Needs Children in China, which has been approved by the institutional ethics review committee of the University of Suffolk. This project gathers publicly accessible we-media (or '*zi meiti*') data, which comprises content and information created, shared, and disseminated by ordinary people across online platforms such as WeChat.[3] Meanwhile, we also include observation from Chinese TikTok (*Douyin*). We use secondary we-media data for two reasons. First, field access in China has become increasingly difficult for overseas scholars due to restrictive policies and censorship (Tan et al., 2023). Second, we-media has become a major source of information for Chinese people (Tang and Huang, 2020, as cited in Fang, 2022). Autism advocacy groups actively use these platforms to raise public awareness. For example, *Dami & Xiaomi*, our major data source, is a WeChat public account that has promoted ASD awareness and interventions since 2014. By October 2024, it had published nearly 2900 posts, featuring over 110 families in its 'family stories' category.

Sampling strategy

We collected 'family stories' shared on Dami & Xiaomi to examine how families navigate a child's ASD diagnosis and develop support strategies. Stories were selected based on two criteria: (1) a narrative structure that provides a detailed account of the child's developmental trajectory and the family's experiences, and (2) narrators' perspectives on managing ASD in China, emphasizing caregiving, education, support, and access to resources.

Sample characteristics

Table 1 summarizes the 23 sampled families. Our broader dataset shows that care in Chinese families of children with ASD remains highly gendered: of 110 family stories collected by October 2024, only 23 were contributed by fathers, with the vast majority written by mothers (Gu, under review). This study therefore captures fathers who are more involved within the broader autism community.

The focal children are on average 16 years old, with all but one being boys and an average diagnosis age of 3.6 years. We adopt a generational rather than biological-age approach, treating 'children' as a relational category. Fathers' caregiving narratives therefore reflect ongoing roles regardless of the children's age, and many include childhood experiences of adult children, allowing us to examine a longer trajectory of an autistic child's needs and parental practices.

Most families, except for four, reside in China's first-tier cities or provincial capitals, and two fathers currently live overseas. Of the 23 fathers, 10 are primary caregivers and another 10 share main caregiving with their partners. Employment varies: nine 'full-time fathers', seven professionals, and four in blue-collar jobs such as security guard, cleaner, or self-employed food supplier. Sixteen of 21 fathers report being married. Overall, the sample is skewed toward families with higher socioeconomic backgrounds, urban elites in more developed areas, and some transnational households.

Data analysis

We conducted a collaborative thematic analysis (Charmaz, 2006), emphasizing reflexivity and dialogue, to develop a nuanced understanding of fathers' caregiving roles in families with children diagnosed with ASD in China. The analysis proceeded in three stages.

First, we immersed ourselves in data from 23 families, reading interview transcripts and performing open coding to capture all aspects of fatherhood and caregiving. Initial codes addressed fathers' emotional responses, changing perceptions of their children's diagnoses, shifts in caregiving roles, and intersections of masculinity and care, allowing us to map how fathers navigated and adjusted to these roles.

Second, after coding independently, we compared and refined our codes through extensive discussion. We consolidated them into broader categories such as 'emotional adaptation', 'redistribution of caregiving', and 'masculine identity negotiation', which highlighted how fathers redefined their roles in response to caregiving demands.

Table 1. Participants' profile.

Family no.	Father's pseudonyms	Child's birth year	Child's gender	Child's age of diagnosis	Child's schooling	Full-time father experience	Main caregiver	Residence	Father's employment status	Fathers' occupation	Parent marital status
1	Mr Peng	2012	Male	4	Mainstream school	No	Others	Zhengzhou, Henan	Employed	Editor-in-chief	Divorced
2	Mr Wu	2005	Male	4	Special education	Yes	Parents	Guangzhou, Guangdong	Unemployed	Full-time father	Married
3	Mr Hu	2006	Male	2	Home intervention	No	Father	Haikou, Hainan	Employed	NGO founder	Married
4	Mr Liu	2016	Male	2	Mainstream school	Yes	Father	Lanzhou, Gansu	Unemployed	Full-time father	Divorced
5	Mr Fu	2004	Male	10	Special education	No	Mother	Changzhou, Jiangsu	Employed	Pastry chef	Married
6	Mr Gu	2012	Female	3	Mainstream school	Yes	Parents	Qingdao, Shandong	Unemployed	Full-time father	Married
7	Mr Liang	2012	Male	2	Mainstream school	Yes	Father	Tongling, Anhui	Employed	NGO chairman	Married
8	Mr Kong	2003	Male	2	Special education	No	Father	Daqing, Heilongjiang	Employed	Security guard	Divorced
9	Mr Ni	2000	Male	3	Special education	No	Parents	Xining, Qinghai	Employed	NGO founder	Married
10	Mr Sun	2002	Male	2	Special education	No	Mother	Shenyang, Liaoning	Employed	Cleaner	Married
11	Mr Xu	2008	Male	1.5	Home intervention	Yes	Father	Chengdu, Sichuan	Unemployed	Full-time father	Married
12	Mr Chang	1981	Male	15	Others	Yes	Father	Dalian, Liaoning	Unemployed	Full-time father	Others
13	Mr Chen	2007	Male	2	Mainstream school	No	Parents	Hongkong	Unemployed	Full-time father	Married
14	Mr Yong	2009	Male	3	Others	No	Father	Chongqing	Employed	self-employed food supplier	Divorced
15	Mr Yu	2015	Male	3	Mainstream school	Yes	Parents	Changchun, Jilin	Unemployed	Full-time father	Married
16	Mr Wang	2016	Male	3	Mainstream school	Yes	Father	Shenzhen, Guangdong	Unemployed	Full-time father	Others
17	Mr Du	2017	Male	2	Home intervention	Yes	Father	Canada	Unemployed	Full-time father	Divorced
18	Mr Ming	2020	Male	2	Home intervention	Yes	Parents	N/A	Employed	Programmer	Married
19	Mr He	2009	Male	1	Special education	Yes	Father	Beijing	Employed	Screenwriter	Married
20	Mr Jun	2005	Male	3	N/A	No	Parents	Zhengzhou, Henan	Employed	Vice-president of a Chinese national organization	Married
21	Mr Wen	1998	Male	3	Mainstream school	No	Parents	Chengdu, Sichuan	Employed	N/A	Married
22	Mr Tong	2017	Male	2.5	Special education	No	Parents	Beijing	Employed	N/A	Married
23	Mr Rui	2014	Male	4.5	Mainstream school	No	Parents	Los Angeles, US	Unemployed	N/A	Married

Finally, we synthesized these categories into key themes that show how fathers of children with ASD in China adapt identities and negotiate traditional gender expectations. These themes, not yet fully formalized, guided the final analysis and discussion.

Throughout, we practiced reflexivity by considering how our own positionalities shaped our interpretation. This helped keep the analysis grounded in the data while addressing the complexities of fatherhood and masculinity in the Chinese sociocultural context. All participant names are pseudonyms.

Findings

Becoming an autism father: stages of emotional responses

In China, where the biomedical model of disability dominates (Shakespeare, 1995), autism is not regarded as a form of neurodiversity but as a lifelong and severe disability defined by its deficits vis-à-vis 'normal' developmental trajectories. As such, the diagnosis of ASD is often perceived by families as a life sentence, shattering expectations of a 'normal' childhood, dimming the family's future prospects, and prompting a sense of doom, as the following quotes show.

> All expectations and all the meanings of life have collapsed. (Mr Liang, father of a 12-year-old son with ASD)

> I even wanted to strangle my son and finish everything. (Mr Liu, father of an 8-year-old son with ASD)

> When the diagnosis was made, every night before going to sleep, I kept praying to God, asking Him to make my child better. I was willing to sacrifice anything for that. (Mr Wang, father of an 8-year-old son with ASD)

Among the many emotions – shock, disbelief, pain, despair – a profound sense of shame surfaced repeatedly. Mr Ni and Mr Hu, quoted below, shared their experiences of grappling with this sense of shame upon their sons' diagnoses.

> When my son was first diagnosed, I was reluctant to take him out of the house, not to mention explain his condition to others. This sense of shame was like a blunt knife . . . It made me, 'a man of steel', who had served in the army for 15 years, bawl when I was confronted with the fact that my son was autistic! (Mr Ni, father of a 24-year-old son with ASD)

> 'Normal' fathers, besides work, can hang out, smoke, and drink with friends. However, at that time, I wasn't strong enough to talk to my friends about my child's autism condition. So, I just refused to go out to socialize. . . . I went to counseling once, and the therapist was shocked to see me because in his ten-year experience as a therapist it was extremely rare to see the father of an autistic child. (Mr Hu, father of an 18-year-old son with ASD)

As these two cases show, fathers' shame is multilayered. It stems from the cultural stigma attached to disability (Yu et al., 2020), which produces feelings of inferiority that weaken men's connection to and identification with their disabled children. Mr Ni initially

regarded his son's autism as a deeply shameful 'condition', making disclosure socially difficult and prompting reluctance to take him outside the home.

These reactions must also be situated within China's post-reform eugenic culture of reproduction (Greenhalgh, 2003; Gu, 2021b), where intense competition, policy-induced low fertility, and steep inequality have created a parenting ideal centered on a prototypical child who is 'emotionally priceless and educationally achieving' (Gu, 2021a).

Raising a disabled child thus disrupts not only an imagined 'normal' childhood but also 'normal' parenthood. Both Mr Ni and Mr Hu incorporated their children's autism – framed as disability and marked by perceived deficiencies – into their own fatherhood identities. Mr Hu, for example, drew a sharp line between 'normal' fathers entitled to social life and himself as an 'abnormal' father and social outcast. This internalized shame eroded pride and masculine self-worth, the 'blunt knife' Mr Ni described cutting into dignity and identity.

Confronted with diagnosis, many fathers experienced moral and gendered dislocation – unable to enact traditional provider masculinity yet unsure how to reconstruct paternal identity. Some responded by immersing themselves in caregiving, trying to 'take off the autism hat' through home-based interventions. For example, Mr Yu, the father of a 9-year-old ASD boy, recalled: 'I was too obsessed with designing intervention games during that time'.

For Mr Yu, even plasticine or eggshells became tools to engage his son. These efforts reflected paternal agency that reworked the breadwinner role into an interventionist model of fatherhood. By becoming lead strategists in their children's care, fathers sought to reclaim authority and competence, though their ultimate goal often remained 'restoring' normative development.

However, for most of the families, years of exhaustion, combined with exposure to new discourses such as 'co-existing with ASD', prompted some fathers to reassess what counts as good fatherhood. Rather than striving to 'normalize' their children at all costs, they began to define success through emotional presence, patience, and self-cultivation, blending self-sacrifice with moral discipline and relational connection. As Mr Chen, who quit his acting career to become a full-time caregiver, put it: 'My son has made me a better person'. Mr Hu also shared his emotional journey:

> I have fantasized that as long as I worked hard enough, I could take off the 'autism hat' [from my child]. Until I heard the concept 'co-exist with ASD'. I then changed my social media nickname from 'the dad of an autistic child' to my real name. I let myself go. (Mr Hu, father of an 18-year-old son with ASD)

Such recalibration often involved personal sacrifice, such as quitting smoking or drinking, to maximize time and presence with their children, which reinscribed masculinity through discipline and endurance even as it departed from patriarchal detachment.

Nonetheless, as fathers redefined their paternal roles, structural constraints continued to shape the limits of these transformations. A major site of this tension was education. Only 9 of 23 children attended mainstream public schools, and fathers had to temper ambitions for academic excellence, prioritizing emotional well-being and inclusion instead. Mr Peng explained,

> The happier he is, the less problematic his behavior is, and the more his teachers and classmates will like him. (Mr Peng, father of a 12-year-old son with ASD)

Mr Peng's philosophy illustrates how fathers compromised traditional masculine markers such as children's academic success for relational outcomes (Choi and Peng, 2016; Gu, 2021a). In doing so, they engaged in a form of masculine compromise that extended the emotional toll of autism fatherhood.

Becoming an autism father thus entails more than coping with a child's diagnosis; it requires reworking masculine identity in the face of stigma, emotional rupture, and shifting expectations. Fathers in this study moved from shame and despair toward hybridizing emotional presence, caregiving, and moral self-discipline in reconfigured paternal roles – transformations shaped and bounded by broader social structures. The next section examines how they negotiated the everyday labor of caregiving within the family.

Caring fathers: helpers, substitutes, or saviors?

A child's ASD diagnosis often forces families to renegotiate the division of care work. For the fathers in this study, assuming primary or intensive caregiving meant navigating entrenched gender expectations. Within China's patriarchal culture, daily caregiving remains coded as maternal, emotional, and subordinate (Ho, 1987; Li and Jankowiak, 2016), while masculinity is anchored in public success, rational authority, and economic provision (Louie, 2002). Men's increasing involvement in childrearing, especially for disabled children, can thus disrupt alignment with hegemonic masculinity. We examine how fathers adopted roles as reluctant helpers, pragmatic substitutes, or moral saviors, and how they negotiated masculinity through these roles using strategies of hybrid masculinities (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014). These negotiations were shaped by gender ideology, class, marital status, and family support.

Fathers with greater economic and social capital; for example, Mr Chen, a celebrity who quit acting to become a full-time father and could hire helpers, or fathers running small businesses that incorporated their children's activities, experienced buffers that reduced daily strains. By contrast, lower-SES fathers improvised ways to combine wage work with constant presence, such as Mr Sun bringing his autistic son to his cleaning job or Mr Yong working alongside his son. Single fathers, lacking spousal support, narrated more intense isolation and fewer avenues for respite. These differences highlight how structural inequalities intersect with stigma to shape autism fatherhood.

Many fathers became caregivers not by choice but by constrained circumstances. In dual-earner families, caregiving decisions often rested on relative earning power. Several men became primary caregivers because they were seen as less competitive in the labor market. For them, caregiving was a gendered compromise (Choi and Peng, 2016), framed as economic failure. Mr He expressed this tension:

> In fact, I really want to make money because, after all, I'm a man! To be honest, if I made money, I could avoid daily caregiving for my children, but the fact is I didn't make any money, so I had to take care of my child. (Mr He, father of a 15-year-old son with ASD)

Mr He's narrative shows the strain of falling short of the breadwinner ideal. Using what Bridges and Pascoe (2014) call discursive distancing, he acknowledges caregiving but frames it as reluctant and morally inferior to provision. His masculinity is preserved rhetorically even as he performs feminized labor. More broadly, fathers in this study used hybridization strategies: many positioned their caregiving as morally superior and emotionally enlightened compared with 'traditional' or absent fathers, adopting practices associated with femininity yet retaining symbolic authority. In this way, they reconfigured but did not dismantle gender hierarchies, appearing emotionally open and progressive while continuing to direct key decisions about care, finances, and schooling.

In other cases, fathers became default caregivers because extended family support failed. Contrary to the idealized '4–2–1' model of urban childcare (Goh, 2011), autism parenting often provoked intergenerational conflict and abandonment. Mr Yu recounted how his parents rejected his child's diagnosis due to stigma and cost. Mr Yong's father urged him to abandon his autistic son and remarry. Mr Kong recalled being told his child's condition was karmic punishment. Such narratives show how ASD disrupted family scripts, leaving fathers to fill the care vacuum and transforming caregiving into both practical responsibility and a moral test of fatherhood.

While these men positioned themselves as stepping up for the child, they also fortified gendered boundaries (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014). Differentiating themselves from older generations, especially grandfathers, they performed a 'new' fatherhood: hands-on, emotionally engaged, scientifically informed, yet still coded as morally superior and rationally controlled. These strategies adapted gender performance while sustaining masculine authority.

A small group framed their takeover of care in gender-essentialist terms common in Chinese discourse, which depicts women as too emotional to handle stress and too passive to master specialized knowledge such as ASD interventions. Early 'failures' were often attributed to mothers' emotionality or inability. Fathers described initial reluctance to be main caregivers because caregiving might compromise masculinity but portrayed their final decision as rising to the occasion when (ex-)wives 'could not fulfill' the role, echoing traditional ideologies of men's authority in significant matters (Wang and Keizer, 2024):

> My son was cared for by his mother and my mother-in-law at the beginning (upon his diagnosis), and our relationship fell apart quickly because of their limited literacy and cognitive abilities to handle the stress. (Mr Peng, father of a 12-year-old son with ASD)

> The primary caregiver in charge of the intervention has to be the one who can keep learning and bear immense psychological pressure. It was too much for my wife. I had to step up. (Mr Hu, father of an 18-year-old son with ASD)

These narratives illustrate what Bridges and Pascoe (2014) term fortifying boundaries. Fathers take on feminized tasks but frame themselves as uniquely rational and resilient, negating women's 'emotionality' or 'lack of capacity'. Rather than borrowing subordinate practices to appear progressive, they reinforce symbolic distinctions between masculine authority and feminized care, converting feminized labor into a credential of superior fatherhood. This strategy reconfigures and consolidates patriarchal power:

men become savior-like caregivers who 'step up' where wives and mothers are depicted as failing.

Several fathers drew on educational and professional credentials to authenticate their caregiving legitimacy. Mr Du is a graduate of a leading university; Mr Liu was a company director managing over 200 staff; Mr Wang held a master's degree from a global firm; Mr Ming was an IT manager. These credentials were invoked to justify taking on the 'carer-intervener' role. By presenting themselves as competent, analytical, and morally responsible, they reframed caregiving as professional excellence. Mr Hu explained, 'Why did I insist? When I think about it, I can only say it's an inherent responsibility and a father-son bond'. Mr Yu, who designed home-based intervention games, similarly stated, 'He calls me "Dad", so I can't leave him alone. If I don't love him, who else will accept him?'

Yet even here gendered divisions persisted. Mr Yu acknowledged that his wife continued primary care for their ASD son and younger NT daughter. He framed his own role as not only intervening for his child but also supporting his wife, reinforcing an image of care that remained intertwined with masculine authority: 'I don't just intervene in my child's coping with ASD; I also intervene to support my wife. I give her more encouragement and support'.

These accounts show how caregiving labor was reframed through the moral language of paternal duty and affective bonds – the 'labor of responsibility'. Even as fathers claimed central roles, many retained discursive and structural dominance, drawing on hybrid masculinity to re-legitimize their authority.

Conflicts over caregiving also strained conjugal relationships. Among the 23 families in this study, five fathers were divorced; all attributed their caregiving role to the mother's abandonment of responsibilities or inability to support the child's daily needs. Mr Li, a former boss who quit his job and sold his car to become the sole caregiver, described his wife and mother-in-law as unable to meet caregiving demands. Mr Kong recounted how his wife left, leaving him with full responsibility for their autistic son. These narratives, often infused with frustration or grief, legitimized fathers' caregiving authority while recasting marital dissolution as a precondition for responsible fatherhood. In most Chinese custody cases, children go to mothers by default (Gu, under review); the fathers here gained custody only when the mother formally relinquished rights. This legal and social context amplifies the gendered stakes of caregiving, framing men's assumption of care as not only exceptional but also heroic.

The next section examines how some fathers build an authoritative image by sharing 'successful' stories of their work as 'care-interveners' of children with ASD, effectively professionalizing their fatherhood and reshaping masculinity.

From reluctant carers to legendary dads: professionalizing fatherhood

While many fathers first narrated caregiving as reluctant compromise or moral duty, a distinct group presented it as expert knowledge and public authority. Rather than disclosing vulnerability, these men spoke in persuasive, tutorial-like tones on platforms such as Chinese TikTok or parenting forums like Dami & Xiaomi. Their posts ranged from coexisting with ASD and home-based intervention skills to shaping public opinion

and lobbying for services. By circulating such 'success stories', they created a professional 'carer-intervener' image that distanced them from the feminized identity of full-time caregivers, whose masculinity might otherwise appear compromised.

Mr Kong, father of a 21-year-old son with ASD, exemplifies this shift. Over years of third-person tutorials, he urged new parents to become 'active learners and interveners' rather than try to 'normalize' their children. This use of the third-person narrative also helps him project a more formal, didactic tone, positioning himself less as a vulnerable parent and more as an expert or mentor. In doing so, he converts personal experience into generalized advice, reinforcing both paternal and professional authority:

> Don't force yourself to change children; change yourself first. . . . Mr Kong wishes that every 'new' ASD parent should not underestimate their capabilities but be active learners and interveners. Mr Kong wishes every parent to learn to understand, tolerate, and respect our children and stop trying to transform our children into 'normal' ones. (Mr Kong, father of a 21-year-old son with ASD)

Many ASD fathers in this study posted their experiences on social media, mainly on Chinese TikTok, and achieved celebrity status because fathers who take the caregiving rather than 'helper' role are rare in China. Mr Xu, father of a 16-year-old son, has more than one million followers. Even fathers not doing primary care but engaged in intervention work, such as Mr Yu, were celebrated as 'legendary dads'. This highlights a gendered double standard: men receive disproportionate praise for visible childcare (Wang, 2020), while women's extensive routine labor remains normalized and invisible.

Through public visibility, fathers moved from 'reluctant carer' to 'legendary dad', rebuilding masculinity. Mr Wang left a world-leading company to provide full-time intervention for his 8-year-old son and became known in the ASD community for articles about 'taking off the autism hat'. His expertise evolved into a quasi-professional role – designing customized intervention plans and tutoring over 100 families:

> I started submitting articles to more 'official' ASD platforms and earned thousands of yuan from writing. Meanwhile, more and more parents reach out to me and wish I could deliver an in-depth tutorial for them to carry out the home-based intervention. Moreover, some parents are taking flights to meet me in person. (Mr Wang, father of an 8-year-old son with ASD)

These practices reflect Bridges and Pascoe's (2014) mechanism of fortifying boundaries. Fathers borrow practices traditionally associated with women – nurturing and domestic presence – yet emphasize symbolic distinctiveness. They frame intervention work as rational, disciplined, and expert; circulate their stories in quasi-professional language; and underscore their exceptional status ('legendary dads') in contrast to ordinary mothers or caregivers. In doing so, they appear to transcend gender norms but actually reconfigure hegemonic masculinity for the autism context. By professionalizing fatherhood, these men convert feminized care labor into a masculine credential, gaining symbolic capital and public authority from what is still seen as women's work.

At the same time, fathers' influencer roles created new forms of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011) for the ASD community, projecting hope that the 'autism hat' can be

removed despite little evidence of complete transformation. Professionalized fatherhood thus elevates men's status while perpetuating unrealistic expectations for families.

Taken together, our findings show how fathers of autistic children in China negotiate masculinity across stages: confronting emotional rupture and stigma, redistributing caregiving labor within families, and professionalizing fatherhood in the public sphere. Drawing on Bridges and Pascoe's (2014) theoretical framework, we identify discursive distancing and fortifying boundaries as mechanisms through which these men hybridize gender performance without dismantling gender hierarchy.

Discussions and conclusion

This study examined 23 Chinese fathers' narratives of raising children with ASD, using Bridges and Pascoe's (2014) hybrid masculinities framework to analyze three themes: (1) fathers' emotional responses, (2) redistribution of caregiving labor, and (3) the professionalization of fatherhood. We show how men negotiate gendered parenting practices and redefine masculinity in the context of caring for children with ASD.

First, the analysis highlights the deeply emotional nature of becoming an 'autism father'. Diagnosis precipitated not only a reorganization of family life but also a crisis of masculine self-identity. Fathers described shock, grief, and shame rooted in disability stigma (Yu et al., 2020), the Chinese eugenic culture of raising 'quality' children (Greenhalgh, 2003; Gu, 2021b), and an intensive parenting ethos equating children's success with parental worth (Gu, 2021a). Unable to embody the breadwinner ideal or the emotionally restrained patriarch, many channeled their despair into disciplined efforts to 'take off the autism '. Over time, exhaustion and exposure to new discourses such as 'co-existing with ASD' prompted some to recalibrate paternal ideals, shifting from cure-oriented intervention to sustaining children's well-being and nurturing the father-child bond. This shift supplements but does not replace hegemonic masculinity: authority and provision are combined with patience, moral self-cultivation, and relational presence.

Second, caregiving arrangements were renegotiated within families. Some fathers took on more care responsibilities due to lower earning power, perceptions of partners' emotional incapacity to intervene effectively, and limited extended family support. Class position shaped coping: affluent fathers buffered strain through hired help or integrating children's activities into small businesses, while lower-SES fathers improvised ways to combine wage work with constant presence. Across contexts, men practiced discursive distancing – acknowledging feminized tasks but framing them as reluctant, morally superior, or tests of paternal duty, and fortified boundaries by adopting nurturing practices while negating women's 'emotionality' or 'lack of capacity' (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014). These strategies allowed fathers to appear progressive and hands-on while maintaining leadership over decisions and resources.

Third, some fathers 'professionalized' fatherhood by presenting themselves as ASD interveners rather than caregivers. On social media they circulated 'success stories' of self-designed interventions, influence among other parents, and policy commentary. This repositioned them from 'full-time fathers' to semi-professionals, reshaping masculinity and gaining symbolic capital. Such practices exemplify Bridges and Pascoe's (2014) fortifying boundaries: men borrow tasks associated with mothers but frame them as

rational, disciplined, and exceptional, contrasting themselves with ordinary caregivers. This reinforces a gendered double standard whereby men receive disproportionate credit for care work. Doing masculinity here involves balancing vulnerability with authority, which is a key dynamic in renegotiating fatherhood under ASD.

The article makes three contributions. Empirically, it centers fathers' perspectives in research on disability and care, providing a rare Global South account of how men negotiate gender identities and caregiving roles. It adds diversity to a field dominated by Northern and maternal narratives, showing how stigma, limited support systems, and classed family dynamics shape everyday practices. Theoretically, it applies and extends Bridges and Pascoe's (2014) concept of hybrid masculinities. Our analysis not only documents discursive distancing but also elaborates on the process of fortifying boundaries as a two-way process, simultaneously devaluing subordinate groups and elevating dominant ones. By tracing fathers' movement from shame to intervention to professionalization, the study enriches understandings of evolving masculinities in China beyond the Confucian patriarchal framework. From a policy perspective, it highlights the challenges and resilience of fathers raising autistic children in a society with limited public support, pointing to health and well-being implications and the need for interventions that support fathers without reinforcing gendered double standards.

While the data source provides valuable insights, narratives shared on we-media platforms may be performative. Fathers can present themselves in idealized or positive ways, emphasizing caregiving successes while downplaying struggles that conflict with societal expectations of masculinity. As self-reports, these accounts risk bias toward more favorable portrayals. In addition, the sample may be skewed toward fathers with greater access to technology and social media, limiting representativeness.

In light of our findings, supporting families affected by ASD requires challenging societal stigma and increasing public awareness to improve fathers' mental health and self-perceptions. Research shows that social acceptance reduces parental isolation and stress. There is a critical need for targeted programs offering specialized educational support, therapy, mental health counseling, and social integration. Finally, public initiatives should empower parents with resources and information, facilitate community engagement, and promote collaboration between schools, healthcare providers, and social services.

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Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the University Staff Research Ethics Committee, University of Suffolk on 20 May 2024. Reference Paper No: RETH(S)23/062.

Consent for publication

All authors read and approved the final manuscript and consent for publication.

ORCID iD


Kefan Xue https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2500-1574

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Notes

1. Neurotypical (NT) children refer to children whose neurological development and functioning are considered typical or within the standard range, without any diagnosed developmental or cognitive disorders, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD).
2. We-media (or '*zi meiti*') data comprises content and information created, shared, and disseminated by ordinary people across online platforms.
3. WeChat is one of the most extensively utilized social media and messaging applications in China, with a diverse base spanning various demographics.

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Author biographies

Kefan Xue is a sociologist who received her DPhil in Area Studies from the University of Oxford. Her research focuses on childhood, family, care, gender, and education, with a strong qualitative and ethnographic orientation. Her doctoral research examines young carers' lived experiences and develops the concept of 'cruel interdependency' to theorize emotionally intense and morally

charged caregiving relationships within welfare-scarce contexts. She has published in leading journals including the *British Journal of Sociology*, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, and *Childhood*, and is involved in collaborative research on intergenerational care and children's time use.

Xiaorong Gu is a Senior Lecturer in Childhood Studies at University of Suffolk. Featured as Sociologist of the Month in April, 2023 by Current Sociology, she researches children's and youth's migration/mobilities, intergenerational relationships, transitioning to adulthood and their positioning vis-à-vis family, school and the nation-state, with a focus on China and Asian societies at large. She guest-edited two special issues, with *Child Indicators Research* (2021) and *Current Sociology* (2022) each, on the shifting valuation of children in contemporary Asian societies. She also co-edited *The Emerald Handbook of Childhood and Youth in Asian Societies (2023*, with Doris Bühler-Niederberger, Jessica Schwittek, Elena Kim).

Résumé

En Chine, les enfants atteints de troubles du spectre autistique (TSA) sont sous-diagnostiqués, défavorisés et insuffisamment soutenus. Les familles, en particulier les parents, deviennent souvent les principaux aidants, mais les recherches sur le vécu des pères en tant qu'aidants restent rares par rapport à celles consacrées aux mères. Or il est essentiel de comprendre le rôle des pères pour améliorer le partage des responsabilités en matière de prise en charge et le bien-être familial. Cette étude analyse les données de nouvelles publiées par des individus sur des plateformes indépendantes (*we-media*) sur 33 histoires familiales rapportées par 23 pères d'enfants autistes. À partir du cadre théorique des masculinités hybrides de Bridges et Pascoe (2014), l'étude s'intéresse à trois processus interdépendants: les réactions émotionnelles des pères au diagnostic de leur enfant, la redistribution de la prise en charge au sein des familles et l'émergence d'identités de « soignant-intervenant ». En se concentrant sur les témoignages des pères dans le contexte du Sud global, l'article apporte de nouveaux éléments empiriques à la recherche sur le handicap et la prise en charge, élargit la théorisation des masculinités hybrides en retraçant les pratiques discursives de distanciation et de renforcement des limites dans la prise en charge, et met en évidence les implications en termes de politique des pouvoirs publics pour soutenir les pères d'enfants atteints de TSA sans renforcer les traitements inégaux liés au genre.

Mots-clés

Chine, enfants à besoins spéciaux, exercice de la paternité, masculinité hybride, prise en charge, troubles du spectre autistique

Resumen

En China, los niños con trastorno del espectro autista (TEA) están infradiagnosticados y son un grupo desfavorecido que no recibe suficiente apoyo. Las familias, en particular los padres y las madres, suelen convertirse en los cuidadores principales, pero la investigación sobre las experiencias de cuidado de los padres sigue siendo escasa en comparación con la investigación sobre las madres. Comprender los roles de los padres es fundamental para promover la responsabilidad compartida del cuidado y el bienestar familiar. Este estudio analiza datos de noticias publicadas por individuos en plataformas independientes (*we-media*) sobre 33 historias familiares escritas por 23 padres de niños

autistas. Basándose en el marco de las masculinidades híbridas de Bridges y Pascoe (2014), el estudio explora tres procesos interconectados: las respuestas emocionales de los padres al diagnóstico de sus hijos, la redistribución de la prestación de cuidados dentro de las familias y el surgimiento de las identidades de 'cuidador-interviniente'. Al centrarse en los relatos de los propios padres en un contexto del Sur Global, el artículo realiza nuevas aportaciones empíricas a los estudios sobre discapacidad y cuidado, amplía la teorización sobre masculinidades híbridas al rastrear el distanciamiento discursivo y las prácticas de fortalecimiento de los límites en la prestación de cuidados y destaca las implicaciones de política pública para apoyar a los padres de niños con TEA sin reforzar el doble estándar de género.

Palabras clave
China, masculinidad híbrida, niños con necesidades especiales, paternidad, prestación de cuidados, trastorno del espectro autista