

From “Growth” to “Healing”: Emotional Communication Strategies in Dad in Charge (Baba dangjia) Season 5

Jiaqi Guo ^{1, *}

Received 26 July 2026

Revised 4 September 2026

Accepted 25 September 2026

Published 30 September 2026



ISSN 2759-8764 (Online)
ISSN 2760-330X (Print)

© 2026 The Author(s)
Published by Jandoo Press Co., Ltd.

This article is licensed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license:
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Abstract: In 2026, Mango TV aired the fifth season of Dad in Charge under the theme “Dad in Charge: Give Yourself a Hug.” While retaining the growth narrative of men learning through childrearing, the season reweights emotional communication within that narrative, adding to the validation of fathers’ parenting competence a new emphasis on accepting parental exhaustion and imperfection, a shift in emotional register this study describes as a turn toward a healing narrative. Taking the documentary footage, observation-studio segments, and danmu comments concerning the season’s four families as its objects of analysis, this study examines the narrative configuration and communication mechanisms underlying this shift. It finds that, through differentiated family samples—dual-income households, a large extended family, and a cross-cultural sojourning family—the program offers viewers four affective positions: guilt, uplift, clumsiness, and ease. Through affective triggering in the documentary footage, mirroring guidance in the observation studio, and social diffusion via danmu comments, the program completes a communication chain that runs from individual emotion to public discussion. The healing turn responds to the emotional needs of childbearing-age families in a low-fertility context and performs a function of sociocultural mediation; media consolation, however, cannot substitute for resolving structural difficulties in childrearing, and the healing narrative also risks the superficialization of emotion.

Keywords: Observational reality show; Parent-child variety show; Emotional communication; Healing narrative; Empathy

Introduction

Beginning around 2018, observational reality shows proliferated, expanding from dating/romance and solo-living subject matter into such vertical domains as family, parenting, and the workplace, and forming a dual-layer viewing structure that combines documentary filming with commentary from an observation studio. Unlike celebrity outdoor, game-based parent-child variety shows such as *Where Are We Going, Dad?*, observational parent-child reality shows turn their cameras on the everyday parenting lives of ordinary, non-celebrity families, set no competitive tasks, and present household divisions of labor and approaches to childrearing and education through prolonged observation. From *Newborn Diary* (Xinsheng riji) to *My Little Tail* (Wo de xiao weiba), the subject matter has been increasingly subdi-

vided, and the social function of these programs has shifted from entertainment to the public discussion of parenting values.

Dad in Charge, launched by Mango TV in 2022, is a representative work of this kind. As China’s first observational reality show centered on full-time fathering, it follows four stay-at-home fathers through 100 days of parenting, exploring the possibilities of men’s deep involvement in childrearing and patterns of gendered division of labor in multi-child families. Across the first four seasons, the program unfolded around the core narrative of men’s growth in parenting competence: in each season, the four fathers moved from initial helplessness to easy command, completing a remedial course in gender roles as they learned to care for children, while viewers, following this growth curve, updated their understanding that “men, too, can be good full-time fathers.”

¹ School of Journalism and Communication, Tianjin Normal University, Tianjin 300387, China.

* Corresponding author. Email: 757180453@qq.com.

This narrative resonated strongly with the social topic of restructuring the household division of labor under the three-child policy, and the program performed an exemplary function—breaking the stereotypical assumption that childrearing is women’s natural calling and offering reference samples for the division of labor in multi-child families.

Themed “Dad in Charge: Give Yourself a Hug,” the fifth season in 2026 shifts its narrative focus from competence growth to emotional reassurance. Rather than centering the suspense of “whether Dad can do a good job,” it increasingly leaves room, within the continuing storyline of growth, for fathers’ exhaustion, guilt, and self-doubt, catching viewers’ emotions with a stance that “permits imperfection.” This shift in the weight of emotional communication, from a growth narrative toward a healing narrative, is closely bound up with the current social context of persistently low fertility and spreading parenting anxiety among dual-income families.

The two narratives require clarification before the analysis proceeds. The growth narrative, as developed across the first four seasons, treats parenting as a learnable skill: staged tasks drive the story forward, the father moves along a curve from “unqualified” to “qualified,” and the emotional landing point is placed on the validation of competence and the updating of cognition. The healing narrative instead centers on emotional acceptance, leaving room for the exhaustion, guilt, and clumsiness that arise in parenting rather than screening them out; its emotional landing point is not competence confirmed but tiredness and awkwardness seen and understood. The two do not stand in a relation of replacement. The fifth season retains the growth storyline, and what changes is the weight of emotional communication, as the acceptance of imperfection is layered onto the continuing process of growth. Healing here is an added register within the growth narrative rather than a new paradigm that supplants it.

Methodologically, this study conducts a qualitative textual analysis of a single case. The primary material is the complete fifth season of *Dad in Charge*, broadcast on Mango TV from May 18 to August 24, 2026, including the documentary footage of the four families, the observation-studio discussion, and the post-hoc interviews woven through the program. Audience material is drawn from publicly available sites of three kinds, namely danmu streams on Mango TV, the short-review section of the program’s Douban entry, and comments under related clips on short-video platforms and the program’s social-media accounts, collected during the broadcast and in the weeks following the finale. The collection followed the storylines of the four families rather than a fixed sampling interval and retained both highly endorsed comments expressing resonance and comments voicing disagreement. The analysis proceeded in two steps, first sorting the narrative configuration of each family and the affective theme it carries, then tracing how emotion moves through the three links of triggering, confirmation, and diffusion. No statistical word-frequency analysis or viewer interviews

were conducted, which sets a boundary on the claims made below.

From “Growth” to “Healing”: The Logic of the Shift in Emotional Communication Strategies

The growth narrative of the first four seasons worked because viewers were curious about the process by which novice fathers move from clumsiness to proficiency. Parenting was framed as a matter of skill, so the program could drive its narrative forward through staged tasks: each time a father mastered a parenting skill, he won affirmation from his wife and from the observation studio, grew more adept at getting along with the children, and ultimately completed the identity transformation from “unqualified” to “qualified.” The core appeal of this narrative can also be read in the evolution of its promotional slogans. The first season’s “Dad in Charge: Give Mom a Break” centered on releasing mothers’ emotions; the second season’s “Dad in Charge: Hang in There a Little Longer” encouraged fathers to keep investing in parenting practice; the third season’s “Dad in Charge: Put Yourself in Her Shoes” advocated mutual understanding between husband and wife; and the fourth season’s “Dad in Charge: Slow Down the Pace” signaled a transition from growth toward companionship.

The social problem confronting the fifth season is no longer “whether men can parent.” More than four years after the implementation of the three-child policy, fertility rates have fallen short of expectations, and the core anxiety of childbearing-age families has shifted from skill deficits to material realities: the economic costs of childrearing, the time poverty of dual-income families, and the inertia of the gendered division of labor within households have transformed the roots of the predicament from parenting skills into structural problems. This shift is also reflected in casting logic. The families selected for the first four seasons had relatively distinctive occupations and identities—Olympic champions, sailors, singers, and so on—professions that naturally carry a degree of dramatic tension; the fifth season stays closer to everyday life, focusing on ordinary families. Zhou Youjun’s identity as a medical worker, Yan Han’s as a figure-skating coach, and Fate’s as a chef all approximate the daily experience of ordinary viewers. Accordingly, while the fifth season retains the format of fathers temporarily leaving work to experience life as full-time dads and preserves the basic storyline of “dads learning and growing through parenting,” it no longer treats “whether they can take good care of the children” as the sole narrative goal. Moreover, in recent years variety shows have increasingly taken “emotional value” as their core selling point: from 50km Taohuawu to Happy Old Friends (*Kuaile laoyouji*), viewers’ expectations of variety television have shifted from obtaining information and entertainment toward seeking emotional resonance and psychological comfort; viewers no longer need to be educated but to be understood. Slow variety shows have thus

begun to perform a function of sociocultural mediation, becoming an important medium through which viewers leading high-pressure lives find emotional outlets.

It is against this backdrop that the fifth season adopts the slogan “Dad in Charge: Give Yourself a Hug.” Unlike the slogans of the earlier seasons, which pointed toward the household division of labor, this one addresses the father himself: “giving yourself a hug” means acknowledging exhaustion before speaking of growth. The program does not reject growth; rather, it redefines growth as a process of self-reconciliation achieved through companionship. Fathers are no longer placed within an assessment framework in which they must continually prove themselves; instead, they are allowed to display vulnerability, confusion, and clumsiness in the real everyday work of parenting. This tolerance for imperfection likewise constitutes the program’s basic stance toward its audience.

Differentiated Emotional Narratives of the Four Families

The casting of the four families in the fifth season displays pronounced differentiation, evident not only in occupational identities and geographical distribution but, more importantly, in the diversity of their family structures, parenting stages, and emotional predicaments; together, the four families constitute a set of differentiated affective samples. The Zhou Youjun family corresponds to the time poverty and guilt of urban dual-income couples; the Fate family, to the ease and warmth of a large ethnic-minority extended family; the Yan Han family presents a novice father learning through clumsiness; and the Wang Yonghong family displays a mode of parenting that has largely reached self-coherence. Each family carries a distinct emotional experience, covering different facets of viewers’ emotional needs.

The Zhou Youjun family: A dual-income household

Zhou Youjun is a pediatrician of traditional Chinese medicine, and his wife, Huang Cunzhi, is a nurse. The documentary segments on this family possess a distinctive texture of companionship: professional identity is directly converted into a way of parenting. In early episodes showing Zhou caring for the children alone, he takes his son and daughter to a medicinal-herb market to buy the ingredients needed for herbal meals, and as they shop he quizzes the children on the names of the herbs, so that they naturally acquire traditional Chinese medical knowledge while answering. For him, medical knowledge does not form a barrier between work and family; instead, it becomes a tie connecting his professional identity with his identity as a father, showing that, despite a heavy workload, he has found a way of accompanying his children that is high in quality and rich in content.

Later in the program, in a post-hoc interview after a family outing, Zhou Youjun and his wife Huang Cunzhi recount:

“Actually, for all these years, because of our work schedules, we’ve never had a photo of the whole family out having fun together—it’s either Dad with the two kids or Mom with the two kids.” The program does not portray Zhou as an absent father; on the contrary, the documentary footage makes his devotion unmistakable, yet the couple still express guilt in their interviews. Here the dual-layer textual structure of observational reality shows produces a distinctive expressive effect: the documentary scenes and the retrospective interviews alternate and mutually confer meaning. Having seen Zhou’s care, viewers know him to be a conscientious, responsible father—only to hear him immediately reproach himself for spending too little time with the children. The discrepancy between the images and the spoken account is itself the most affectively charged link in this family’s narrative.

This guilt is rooted in the structural predicament of dual-income families. Zhou Youjun feels guilty not because he does not know how to care for the children or is unwilling to spend time with them, but because work carves up family time beyond what individual effort can repair. At the same time, today’s dominant parenting ideology imposes extraordinarily high demands on parental involvement; the notion that parents must be constantly present and handle everything flawlessly makes parents inclined, whatever they actually achieve, to feel that they have done too little and done it poorly. The more responsible parents are, the more prone they are to guilt; the more diligently Zhou tries to make amends, the more representative his self-reproach in the interviews becomes, for this contradiction is not unique to his family but is the condition shared by contemporary urban dual-income parents.

Watching the full season, Zhou Youjun’s personal transformation is clearly visible. Early on, shaped by professional habit, his speech—in both the interviews and the documentary segments—remains rigorous and restrained, rarely revealing his inner softness or apologies directly. As the season progresses, through the accumulation of repeated family interactions and parent-child conversations, he begins to try expressing emotion more directly. In a mid-season karst-cave exploration scene, noticing that Qingqing, as the older sister, is used to bottling up her feelings and straining to be a sensible child, he seizes the moment to tell her: “Dad hopes you won’t always sulk alone. If something’s bothering you, talk to Dad more, okay?” In the post-hoc interview he likewise reflects that, in the quiet of the cave, he begins to wonder whether he usually plays with the children too little and is too strict, so that the child does not dare speak first; he reminds himself to make the most of his time to be with them from then on. In the third phase, when visiting Fate’s family, he deliberately sets aside his reserve and joins the lively atmosphere of the ethnic-minority household. He begins to move from a father striving to meet a standard toward a father able to take pleasure in companionship itself. Unlike the skill-based growth of fathers in earlier seasons, this transformation is the character’s emotional reconciliation with

himself, and it gives this season's theme of "giving yourself a hug" a visible trajectory.

The resonance generated by the Zhou Youjun family does not come only from dual-income viewers in the same situation. Zhao Wuzhou has characterized this effect of parent-child reality shows on viewers as "self-confirmation": the tasks, events, and situations presented in the program provide viewers with a frame of reference for self-evaluation, as they reflect on themselves through comparison and thereby adjust their own beliefs and conduct. For viewers who are likewise medical workers or likewise dual-income couples, the figure of Zhou Youjun—devoted yet still self-reproaching—provides precisely such a reference point; comparing themselves, they discover that their guilt is not a personal failure but a predicament shared by this type of family. The comment sections also contain many viewers in quite different circumstances, moved not because they see their own lives in the program but because they see a kind of family relationship they have never experienced yet are willing to believe in. Commenting under the program's social-media account, one viewer wrote that the show "lets us recognize what love looks like at the right age, know that not every marriage is a failure, and recognize the warmest face of family affection," adding that it had led more fathers to realize that "parenting is never the mother's job alone." For these viewers, the reference the program offers extends beyond parenting methods: the way Zhou Youjun and Huang Cunzhi work staggered shifts yet always back each other up, Qingqing's gestures of comforting her parents in turn, and the emotional expressions that are never treated as shameful all compensate for what is missing from their own experience. The unreserved expression of love in reality shows can compensate for the sense of ritual eroded in viewers' everyday lives, and this is even more pronounced among the fifth season's viewers. Ming Aiqing, the program's producer, likewise noted when discussing the show's original intention that she hoped, amid declining marriage and fertility rates, to make viewers long for family again. For these viewers, then, healing does not mean having their own grievances named; it means seeing what happiness concretely looks like. Only when one first believes that ordinary family life is worth investing in can the act of "giving yourself a hug" take root.

The fate family: Childrearing uplifted by the extended family

Fate is an entrepreneurial chef from Tacheng, Xinjiang. His wife, Mila, formerly served as an Army signal-corps soldier and a criminal-police detective; after leaving the service, health reasons made her a semi-full-time stay-at-home mother. Their son is called Fafa. Besides its ethnic-minority identity, the most striking feature of this family is the vast kin network behind Fate. Fate grew up enveloped in the love of an entire family: his parents, grandparents, and aunts took part throughout his upbringing. He recalls on the show that when he fell ill as a child, his aunts scraped together the money to send him to the hospital, and when he grew up it

was an aunt who arranged through contacts for him to train as a cook. His parents, too, were remarkably open-minded, wanting him to grow up happily and determined that, however hard things were at home, he should never feel deprived. In Fate's lived experience, therefore, childrearing is not the business of the two parents alone but a responsibility shared by the whole extended family.

This pattern continues in his relationship with his son Fafa. Combined with his identity as a chef, the kitchen becomes the central scene of his parenting practice, and food an important vehicle of this family's affection. When Fate organizes family meals, he has Fafa join him in prepping ingredients and cooking, and he also takes him to cook for the village elders, letting the child learn to give through serving others. When hosting Yan Han's family, he calls his aunts and friends over ahead of time to help, each preparing one dish, and arranges the menu according to the guests' tastes; the grandfather lights the stove at dawn, and when the guests arrive the whole family greets them at the door. For this family, cooking and hosting are not mere housework and etiquette but ways of expressing that they care. Immersed in this environment, Fafa has grown accustomed to the same mode of expression: seeing his maternal grandmother or his young aunt in tears, he spontaneously wipes the tears away for them, and he expresses his love directly—when picking up his mother, he has a heart-shaped cake ready and says, "Mommy, I love you." These are emotional expressions naturally acquired through family interaction, and the continuation of this family's love in the next generation.

The state of the Fate family forms a pointed contrast with that of the Zhou Youjun family. Zhou and his wife can only manage childcare through staggered shifts between the two of them, the time they share cut into fragments by work, and their overall condition is one of tension; behind Fate, by contrast, an entire kin network shares the burden, producing a state of ease. The difference lies not in the two fathers' sense of responsibility but in family structure. As Yang Xue (2017) observes in her analysis of family structure in reality shows, family structures in modern society have become increasingly nuclear and small-scale, and the nuclear family has displaced the extended family as the dominant living arrangement, which is precisely why previous parent-child reality shows almost always took parents and children as their unit and rarely brought in intergenerational kin. In the fifth season, the entire kin network behind Fate becomes the true subject of the narrative: grandparents, aunts, and uncles all appear together, in effect bringing back before viewers a family structure that has been gradually retreating from urban life. The program also captures what happens when the two structures meet. When the Zhou family visits, Fate's family hosts them warmly, deliberately preparing Changsha-style dishes, and, as it is the Corban Festival (Eid al-Adha), the elders also prepare red envelopes for the visiting Zhou family. Huang Cunzhi recounts in the observation studio that her mother died when she was young and she was raised by her uncle and aunt, so that even a family portrait was a luxury for her; Zhou Youjun, in his post-hoc interview, sums up

the visit by saying that Fate's family had given him and Huang Cunzhi "a complete piece of the puzzle of the big family."

Viewer responses confirm how widespread this form of compensation is. In Douban's short-review section, one viewer writes: "The emotional bonds among Fate's whole big family are something I really envy; such harmonious kin relations are rare and precious." On short-video platforms, viewers likewise say they see in this family "the transmission across three generations," judging the cohesion of the large family "scarce nowadays." Most viewers who voice such feelings do not themselves live in extended families; what they confront is precisely the atomized urban nuclear family, in which parenting is borne independently by the two parents while kin networks grow ever more distant, geographically and emotionally. Media can compensate for what is missing from viewers' real lives, and the Fate family offers exactly such compensation: it lets viewers see a family way of life that is receding, while believing that such mutually supportive relationships still genuinely exist. If the Zhou Youjun family lets viewers in the same situation confirm their guilt, the Fate family offers something different, placing the possibility of another family structure before viewers. For this family, "giving yourself a hug" also implies embracing the close bonds between people.

The Yan Han and Wang Yonghong Families: The starting point of growth and the endpoint of self-coherence

Yan Han is the father who most closely approximates the growth narrative of the first four seasons. A retired figure skater who became a coach and thereafter spent almost all his daytime hours at the ice rink, he cannot, in the early episodes of solo parenting, tell sesame oil from soy sauce; his cooking is disparaged by his son Leyou, and he seems distant even from his young daughter Yi'an. He asks his mother-in-law how to cook and writes down every single step, while those around him watch his flustered efforts with unflinching smiles. Leyou even looks after him in turn: however badly his father cooks, he insists on finishing it all, and says in earnest, "Dad, you've worked so hard." Yan Han's real growth lies not in cooking but in identity transition. His wife, Liu Lu, had always regretted that injury forced his retirement and that he could not keep shining on the ice; in the program he rents an ice rink and skates a program solely for Liu Lu, then says in a post-hoc interview that he feels no regret: "My previous life is over, and I have a new life to begin. Right now, my home, my wife, and my two children matter more than continuing to skate." Where the growth narrative of the first four seasons answered the question of whether men could take good care of children, the production team's portrayal of Yan Han this season asks whether a man can serenely lay down a former identity and reconcile himself to the new identity of father.

Wang Yonghong is a "graduate" family from previous seasons; this season he returns as a regular cast member, mov-

ing with his Swedish wife Mili and their two children from the city to sojourn in Dali. The program does this so that viewers can see what a father looks like after growth is complete. His parenting in Dali does not keep the children sheltered at his side but takes them directly into nature and into the company of others. Shortly after arriving in Dali, he takes Sansan and Li'an, along with Qinghai specialties, to visit the neighbors door to door; on ordinary days he takes the children with a grandmother from next door to dig taro in the fields and pick pea shoots, letting them experience in person the textbook ideal of "rising at dawn and resting at dusk." He also has the two children sell vegetables at the morning market; when no one buys and the children are deflated, he encourages them to call out their wares once more, loudly, and when they are refused he stands beside them cheering them on like the sun, letting them get used to being rejected. This kind of ease differs both from Zhou Youjun's tension and from Fate's liveliness; it springs from a deliberate choice to slow down. For Yonghong, parenting is not a task that must be completed but a process to be continually experienced together with the children. It is the most direct, character-level illustration of this season's theme of "giving yourself a hug."

Yan Han and Wang Yonghong constitute the two ends of growth in the program. Yan Han is growth in the making, letting flustered first-time parents see that clumsiness can be accepted and that children's love is not conditional on parental perfection; Wang Yonghong is the state after growth, letting exhausted parents see concretely what reconciliation with imperfection looks like. The time poverty of the Zhou Youjun family, the uplift of the Fate family, Yan Han's clumsiness, and Wang Yonghong's ease—four samples corresponding to four contemporary conditions of parenting. It is through these four different family stories that the program's message of "giving yourself a hug" is conveyed to viewers.

From Triggering to Diffusion: Three Mechanisms of Emotional Communication

The three links of triggering, confirmation, and diffusion form the analytical chain of this study. The three theoretical resources invoked below are each assigned to one link. Deleuze's account of affect addresses how documentary footage triggers emotion at the bodily level, Lacan's mirror stage addresses how the observation studio confirms and names that emotion, and Fiske's levels of the television text address how viewer-produced danmu diffuse it into public discussion. They are not three parallel frameworks but three moments of a single chain, and the division of the chain itself draws on and revises the framework of the empathy effect and its triggering mechanisms proposed for observational reality shows by Zhao Yu and Shen Xinyi (2020).

Affective triggering through documentary footage

Deleuze understands human emotion as continuous variation that ceaselessly flows and becomes; the impressions

produced when the body comes into contact with external things, together with their variations in intensity, constitute affect, which is born first at the level of perception, prior to rational judgment. The fifth season's documentary footage triggers viewers' emotions at precisely this level, relying mainly on two textual arrangements.

The first arrangement is the presentation of everyday objects and life scenes, where the function of emotional triggering is carried by the most ordinary things: the medicinal herbs in Zhou Youjun's home, the ingredients on Fate's stove, the vegetables at Wang Yonghong's market stall, and the condiments Yan Han cannot tell apart in his kitchen. These objects carry no drama in themselves, but when they are combined with concrete parenting situations, viewers with comparable life experience recognize the life on screen at a glance; bodily memory is activated, and emotional immersion takes place before understanding.

The second arrangement is the close-up of the intensive face. In *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, Deleuze proposes that "the affection-image is the close-up, and the close-up is the face," and he distinguishes two kinds of facial close-up: the still, clearly outlined "reflecting face," and the "intensive face," whose outline dissolves and which presents affect in the process of becoming; the latter expresses not qualities but pure force. It is precisely the intensive face that the fifth season uses extensively. As Fate recounts his upbringing, the camera moves in turn across his mother and aunts, their eyes reddening; when Huang Cunzhi says in the observation studio that she has never had a family portrait, the emotion she can no longer suppress on her face is retained on screen in full. These faces carry no narrative information; they only present emotion in the process of occurring, and before viewers have time to judge, emotional sharing has already taken place.

The alternation of documentary segments with post-hoc interviews then carries immediate emotional triggering toward understanding: viewers first see the fathers' concrete actions and then hear their explanations and reflections on the same events. The gap between the two textual layers is left for viewers to fill in with their own judgments, while also leaving room for the studio's guidance.

Empathetic guidance in the observation studio

The emotions triggered at the primary site are vague and bodily; viewers know they have been moved but cannot necessarily articulate what that stirring means, and the function of the observation studio is precisely to complete, on viewers' behalf, the confirmation and naming of emotion. In his account of the mirror stage, Lacan argues that the infant, by identifying with the intact body image in the mirror, recognizes itself for the first time as a unified self; the ego is established through identification with the image of the other. The on-screen observation studio performs an analogous mirror function for viewers: the tears, silences, reassurance, and discussion that the observers offer in real time convert viewers' vague bodily feelings into recognizable expressions. By identifying with the observers' reactions, viewers con-

firm what they felt a moment before and learn how such feelings should be understood.

The fifth season's observation studio consists of three kinds of people: the three wives, who as relatives watch their own husbands' everyday lives; observers such as Li Ai, Wei Chen, Xie Yilin, Han Geng, and Ying Caier, most of whom are already parents; and the parenting educator Zhang Yalian, who performs the function of professional explanation. Different positions correspond to different ways of looking and also offer viewers multiple points of entry into the text. The observers' reactions are not neutral commentary; most of them are likewise in the parenting phase of life, and what they offer is emotional projection charged with their own experience. This is especially true of the wives' tears. When Huang Cunzhi sees the reunion scenes of Fate's family, she breaks down sobbing; speaking of her mother's early death and of family portraits as a luxury, what she sees is both another family and her own unfulfilled lack.

The most conspicuous change in this season's observation studio is the retreat of the judging posture and the foregrounding of an accepting posture. The studios of earlier seasons more closely resembled a remote assessment: whether a father's actions were appropriate and whether his tasks were completed drew explicit evaluation from the observers and wives. Fifth-season observers, by contrast, rarely rush to judgment. Zhang Yalian reminds viewers that the influence of the family of origin is no monstrous menace and should not be over-amplified; Li Ai likewise directs discussion toward what individuals can control, arguing that what lies wholly within our grasp is how we view everything around us. When a father on screen is flustered, what the studio offers first is reassurance, not judgment; what viewers read is not a pre-set viewpoint but genuine emotional fluctuation, so the guidance does not feel like preaching.

Social diffusion through danmu comments

In *Television Culture*, John Fiske divides the television text into three levels: the program itself is the primary text; the news, publicity, and criticism surrounding the program are secondary texts; and the content viewers produce after watching—through conversation, letters, and online postings—constitutes tertiary texts, created by viewers on the basis of their own reactions, circulating among viewers and combining with the first two levels to form a continually growing producerly text. Danmu streams and comment sections are the most concentrated sites of the tertiary text for observational reality shows. The danmu (bullet-screen) messages and short reviews accumulated during the fifth season's broadcast allow the program's meanings to overflow the text set by its creators and enter into viewers' self-expression.

The most striking feature of the fifth season's tertiary texts is the high degree of synchronization in emotional expression. The comments surrounding the Fate family, for instance, display a distinct orientation: viewers repeatedly write "envious," "scarce," and "transmission across three generations," collectively sighing over the receding way of

life of the large family. Gathered together, these scattered, repetitive, unpolished expressions present precisely the shared condition of today's childbearing-age population: exhaustion, guilt, and longing for close family ties, originally dispersed across individual private households, are given common names and a venue for public expression by the program, through which individual emotions acquire a collective shape.

Tertiary texts do not always remain consistent with the primary text. After the episodes on the Zhou Youjun family aired, marked disagreement emerged: in danmu, some viewers repeatedly complained about how often medicinal meals appeared, and in the clip in which Qingqing splashes water they accused him of inadequate supervision; other viewers produced videos specifically in rebuttal, arguing that the critics kept insinuating against the father without understanding the circumstances of dual-income families. Fiske points out that viewers rewrite the meaning of the text according to their own social positions and life experience; when a text evokes not identification but resistance, this rewriting takes an oppositional form. The controversy over Zhou Youjun shows precisely that the dual-income predicament the program presents genuinely strikes at the experiential differences among viewers. The disagreement itself expands the publicness of the issue: how parenting responsibilities should be allocated and how the quality of companionship should be measured are continuously debated amid the clashing danmu messages, exceeding what a single episode can contain.

From the bodily triggering of documentary footage, through the naming of emotion in the observation studio, to the public divergence in danmu comments, the fifth season completes an emotional communication chain running from the individual to the collective. The emotions viewers initially undergo alone in front of the screen ultimately flow into public discussion about family, parenting, and self-reconciliation—precisely the landing point of the healing narrative.

Conclusion

The fifth season of *Dad in Charge* does not abandon the growth storyline of the first four seasons, but it changes the landing point of emotional communication: the affirmation a father gains after mastering parenting skills is no longer the sole emotional climax, and moments of flustered exhaustion and guilt are likewise endowed with meaning. The slogan "Give Yourself a Hug" extends the program's addressee from fathers who must prove their competence to every ordinary person who feels the strain of parenting. The four families offer four affective positions that viewers can claim: the Zhou Youjun family presents the guilt of dual-income parents; the Fate family presents the uplift of the kin network; Yan Han is accepted in his clumsiness; Wang Yonghong embodies another kind of ease, found amid nature and neighborhood. Documentary footage, the observation studio, and danmu comments successively complete the triggering,

naming, and social diffusion of emotion, through which individual parenting feelings flow into public discussion.

From the perspective of cultural mediation, this turn responds to genuine social emotion. Rudolf Arnheim once observed that art's emergence as a means of healing arises not from any demand intrinsic to art itself but from the needs of people caught in predicaments. Low fertility, the high costs of childrearing, and the time poverty of dual-income families constitute the real condition of this generation of parents. Once the skill-level question of "whether one can take good care of children" is no longer the most pressing, "what the people who care for children endure" becomes the issue more capable of evoking resonance. The program gives public expression to the exhaustion and guilt originally scattered across private households; in the experience of being seen and understood, viewers confirm that they are not alone. This is precisely the sociocultural mediation function of healing variety shows.

The limits of media consolation, however, must be faced squarely. The time poverty of dual-income families, the economic pressure of childrearing, and the inertia of the gendered division of labor will not change because of what one program presents; if the resonance in danmu does not lead to real-world support, healing may stop at imaginary consolation. In her analysis of healing variety shows, Liu Ting warns that if the everyday writing of emotion relies excessively on objectified carriers, it easily dissolves cultural depth and renders emotional identification simplistic and superficial. This judgment applies equally to today's parenting variety shows: when "emotional value" becomes an industry-wide selling point, exhaustion itself risks being consumed, and acceptance of imperfection, if it remains only a posture, cannot genuinely respond to the predicaments of contemporary families. Taking a single season as its object, this study draws audience material mainly from publicly available danmu and comments; it lacks in-depth interviews with viewers and does not conduct a systematic cross-season comparison of the texts of all five seasons. These limitations await remediation in future research.

Generative AI statement: The author(s) declared that generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. Doubao was employed only to improve language clarity and formatting. All scientific content, analyses, and conclusions were produced and verified by the author(s), who take full responsibility for the final manuscript.

References

1. Zhao, W., & Wang, S. (2019). Compensation and substitution of mass media for children's family education: A case study of parent-child reality shows. *Youth Journalist (Qingnian Jizhe)*, (15), 71–73. (in Chinese)
2. Zhao, Y., & Shen, X. (2020). The empathy effect of observational reality shows and its triggering mechanisms. *Modern Communication (Xiandai Chuanbo)*, 42(12), 92–97. (in Chinese)

3. Yang, X. (2017). The modernity of family structure in reality shows. *Youth Journalist (Qingnian Jizhe)*, (35), 131–132. (in Chinese)
4. Wang, M., & Guo, X. (Eds.). (2016). *Production (Vol. 11): Deleuze and Affect* (p. 8). Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House. (in Chinese)
5. Deleuze, G. (2016). *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (Xie Qiang & Ma Yue, Trans.; p. 141). Changsha: Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House. (Chinese edition)
6. Lacan, J. (2001). *Selected Writings of Lacan* (Chu Xiaoquan, Trans.; pp. 89–97). Shanghai: Shanghai SDX Joint Publishing Company. (Chinese edition)
7. Fiske, J. (2005). *Television Culture* (Qi Ahong & Zhang Kun, Trans.; pp. 250, 285). Beijing: The Commercial Press. (Chinese edition)
8. Arnheim, R. (1994). *New essays on the psychology of art* (Guo Xiaoping & Zhai Can, Trans.; p. 345). Beijing: The Commercial Press. (Chinese edition)
9. Liu, T. (2019). A study on the emotional tension of healing variety shows from the perspective of cultural mediation. *China Television*, (6), 60–64. (in Chinese)