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## Psychometric properties of the Chinese version of Autism Spectrum Quotient- Children's Version (AQ-C)

# Psychometric Properties of the Chinese Version of Autism Spectrum Quotient-Children's Version (AQ-C): A Sex-Specific Analysis

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**Running head:** The Chinese version of the AQ-C

**Acknowledgements**

**Conflict of interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest in this work.

**Abstract**

A Simplified Chinese translation of the Autism Spectrum Quotient-Children's Version (AQ-C) is needed for research in mainland China. Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) is a condition that differs in presentation and prevalence by sex. Thus, evaluating the psychometric validity of the AQ-C in males and females is an important step in its validation. The present study aims to develop a Chinese translation of the parent-report AQ-C, and test its psychometric properties among Mandarin Chinese speaking boys and girls. A total of 1020 non-clinical children and 134 children with ASD were assessed. Factor analyses were performed for the whole sample, as well for girls and boys separately. A 30-item, 5-factor model (the Chinese AQ-C) showed adequate goodness of fit (RMSEA=0.037; CFI=0.907; TLI=0.901) for the whole sample. According to parents' reports, non-clinical boys had significantly higher scores than non-clinical girls on the Chinese AQ-C. Sex-specific factor structures were identified resulting in a 4-factor model with 32 items for girls (the Chinese AQ-Girls), and a 4-factor model with 34 items for boys (the Chinese AQ-Boys). The cut-off scores of the Chinese AQ-C, AQ-Girls and AQ-Boys were 44.5, 42.5 and 46.5 respectively. These three Chinese versions of the AQ-C all showed satisfactory internal consistency ($\alpha$=0.786-0.840) and concurrent validity with the Social Responsiveness Scale ($r$=0.789-0.814) for the total scale. Differences have been found in the sex-specific factor structures of the AQ-C which would be more reliable to use for future research when measuring autistic traits in the general population.

**Lay Summary:** This study developed Chinese versions of the Autism Spectrum Quotient-Children's Version (AQ-C) in Chinese boys and girls together and separately. The AQ-C showed good psychometric properties in boys and girls together and separately. There were differences in sex-specific factor structures of the AQ-C. These results suggest that the sex-specific Chinese versions of the AQ-C provide reliable and valid measurement of autistic traits.

**Introduction**

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a heterogeneous neurodevelopmental condition characterized by persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction as well as stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, or activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Previous studies have suggested that autistic traits are normally distributed in the general population, while ASD represents the higher quantitative extreme of this neurodevelopmental continuum (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001; Robinson, 2011; Bralten et al., 2017). Individuals with high autistic traits were found to be at higher risk for psychological disorders (e.g., anxiety and depression) (Liew et al., 2015), and behavior problems (e.g., social problems and withdrawn behavior) (Hoekstra et al., 2007). It is important to identify children who may be at risk for ASD to allow for early identification and support and better subsequent emotional or behavioral outcomes (Saito et al., 2017). Therefore, there is a growing demand for reliable instruments to quantify autistic traits and screen for high-risk children. However, there are few such instruments available in mainland China, which is the world's most populous country with 12.9% of the global child population (United Nations, DESA, Population Division, 2017).

One of the most widely used instruments for quantifying autistic traits in non-clinical populations is the Autism Spectrum Quotient-Children's Version (AQ-C) (Auyeung et al., 2008). The AQ-C is a parent-report instrument consisting of 50 items and measuring autistic traits across five theoretical domains (social skills, attention to detail, attention switching, communication and imagination) (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001; Auyeung et al., 2008). Although

this scale was originally developed using data from a sample from the United Kingdom (UK), it was found to show good reliability and validity across cultures, including in Japan and India (Wakabayashi et al., 2007; Rudra et al., 2014), which provides strong support for the validity of the AQ-C in Eastern cultures. Nevertheless, differences in scoring patterns on the AQ-C were found between Eastern and Western cultures, with Japanese children scoring lower than UK children on the AQ-C total score, as well as all subscales except for the Social Skills subscale (Wakabayashi et al., 2007). In the Japanese sample, there were also some items that were reported to have poor discrimination (Wakabayashi et al., 2007). This raises the concern that the construct validity and latent structure of the AQ-C may differ between Eastern and Western cultures. In the UK, Auyeung et al. (2008) examined the factor structure of the AQ-C using Principal Components Analysis (PCA) and found a 47-item, four-factor solution (consisting of mind-reading, attention to detail, social skills and imagination). However, no existing factorial studies of the AQ-C included Eastern samples and the AQ-C has not been validated in mainland China to date. Thus, the first aim of this study was to examine the factor structure and psychometric properties of the Chinese version of the AQ-C among a sample of Mandarin Chinese Speaking children.

Furthermore, whether there are sex differences in the factor structure and psychometric properties of the AQ-C remains unclear. Previous studies found boys scored higher than girls on the AQ-C in a general population-based samples from different cultures including the UK, Japan and India (Wakabayashi et al., 2007; Auyeung et al., 2008; Rudra et al., 2014). Studies have also found sex differences in the patterns of autistic traits in the general population (Williams et al., 2008; Sun et al., 2014). Furthermore, the prevalence of ASD shows a male bias (male-female ratio ≈ 4:1)(Adak & Halder, 2017), with a similar trend was found in a population with high autistic traits (Constantino & Todd, 2003). Consequently, diagnostic and assessment tools utilized to evaluate ASD or autistic traits have typically been developed based

on samples containing more males. This may lead to a bias of the results towards the male autistic phenotype. Lai and colleagues (2015) have argued that current measures may not be sensitive enough to identify the female autistic phenotype (Lai et al., 2015). However, to our knowledge, no previous studies have examined whether there are sex differences in the psychometric properties of the AQ-C. If the psychometric properties of the AQ-C differ by sex, it would be more reliable to use the sex-specific versions of the questionnaire in future research.

Therefore, the objectives of the current study are to: 1) explore the factor structure of Chinese version of the AQ-C and assess its psychometric characteristics in mainland China; 2) examine sex differences in the Chinese version of the AQ-C, including factor structure and psychometric properties.

**Method**

*Participants*

Participants were drawn from two samples: a school-based sample of non-clinical children from mainstream schools (mainstream group) and a clinically based sample of children with ASD (clinical group).

The mainstream group was recruited from kindergartens and primary schools in Guangzhou and Shenzhen cities. A total of 1300 questionnaires were distributed to parents of children aged 4-10 years. Of these, 1226 (94.3%) were returned. Twenty-three of the 1226 returned questionnaires were discarded due to missing data on more than two items. The other 1203 questionnaires were retained. Of these retained questionnaires, thirty-one had one or two blank items, which were replaced by the individual child's mean scores of the non-missing items. Among the 1203 children corresponding to the retained questionnaires, 206 were excluded as they had the follow conditions: ASD (n=10), ADHD (n=108), language delay (n=35), hearing difficulties (n=24), physical disability (n=4) and epilepsy (n=2). Diagnostic information was

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collected using a checklist administered to parents of children from mainstream schools (see Methods section in the Online Supplement for further details). Finally, a sample of 1020 non-clinical children (496 girls, 524 boys) were included. The mean age of the mainstream group was 6.36 years (SD=1.56, range=4-10 years).

The clinical group consisted of 134 children with ASD (21 girls, 113 boys). They were recruited from the Women & Children's Health Care Hospital in Luohu district of Shenzhen city. Their mean age was 6.95 years (SD=1.47, range=4-10 years). These children all had an existing diagnosis of ASD made by pediatricians in this hospital. Diagnoses were re-confirmed by two professional experienced child psychiatrists (Jin Jing, Wenhan Yang) using the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Revision (DSM-IV) criteria.

*Materials*

**The Autism Spectrum Quotient- Children's Version (AQ-C)**

The Chinese version of AQ-C was revised and used in current study. The AQ-C is a parent-report questionnaire developed to quantify autistic traits in children aged 4-11 years. It comprises 50 items divided into five subscales. Items were rated on 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (definitely agree) to 3 (definitely disagree). Some items were reverse-keyed (item 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 12, 13, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 26, 33, 35, 39, 41, 42, 43, 45 and 46). The total score of AQ-C is in the range of 0-150, with higher score indicating more autistic traits (Auyeung et al., 2008).

The translation of the AQ-C followed the forward and backward procedure (Hall et al., 2018). First, two of the authors (Lizi Lin and Meixia Dai) translated the AQ-C items from English into Chinese independently, discussed and resolved the differences arise during the translation. Then the Chinese items were checked by a Chinese-English bilingual developmental and behavioral specialist (Jin Jing) for whether they corresponded with the original items and for

culture adjustment. Some items were adjusted based on Chinese culture. For example, item 13 ("S/he would rather go to a library than a birthday party") was changed as "My child prefers to go to libraries or book shops rather than go to birthday parties", because in China, preschoolers may not be taken to a library but a book shop. After that, the Chinese items were back translated into English by an English-Chinese bilingual translator. The translated English items were checked by the authors for whether they corresponded with the original English items. Finally, the Chinese version of the AQ-C was modified via discussion with the original author (BA), and the final version was agreed.

**Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS)**

In order to examine the concurrent validity of the AQ-C, the Mandarin Chinese version of SRS was used in the present study. The SRS is a 65-item questionnaire developed to assess autistic traits and social communication in children aged 4-18 years. The SRS was designed to be completed by parents, teachers or other key caregivers. Each item is rated on 4-point Likert scale, with total scores ranging from 0 to 195 (the higher score indicating more autistic traits). A previous study has found that the reliability and validity for Mandarin Chinese version of SRS were satisfactory to good (Cronbach's $\alpha$=0.89), supporting it as a reliable instrument for children in mainland China. (Cen et al., 2017).

*Procedure*

Questionnaire packs were distributed to parents through the schools in the mainstream group. Each questionnaire pack contained a consent form, a demographic information sheet (collecting data including children's birth date and sex, only child (yes/no), paternal and maternal educational level), a Chinese version of AQ-C and a Mandarin Chinese version of SRS. Parents were asked to complete and return the questionnaire packs within three days. As for children with ASD, their parents were invited to the University to re-confirm the ASD

diagnosis of their children. Because the standard diagnostic instruments (e.g., ADOS and ADI-R) have not been validated in China, the diagnoses of ASD were confirmed by experienced child psychiatrists to meet the DSM-IV criteria for ASD, based on parent interviews and direct interaction with these children. Questionnaire packs were completed by parents during their visit. To examine the test-retest reliability, parents of 56 children completed a second copy of Chinese version of the AQ-C eight weeks after the first completion (sample size calculation can be found in the Methods section in the Online Supplement). Written informed consent was obtained from parents of all participant children and the protocol was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Sun Yat-Sen University.

*Statistical analysis*

Data analysis was conducted using the SPSS22.0 for Windows (SPSS Inc, Chicago, IL) and the AMOS 24.0 software. Item-total correlations were explored for item analysis. Items were discarded if their scores were negatively correlated with the total score of the AQ-C (Hwang, 2000). The construct validity of the AQ-C was explored by principal component analysis (PCA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The mainstream sample was equally and randomly divided into two subgroups for PCA (n=510) and CFA (n=510) respectively. To identify the underlying factor structure of the scale, PCA was conducted with promax rotation, assuming that the latent factors of the AQ-C would be correlated. To test the model fit of the identified factor structure, CFA was then conducted among the other half of the mainstream sample using the maximum likelihood estimation (MLE) procedure. Although MLE is not typically a justifiable method for items on a four-point scale, we prefer to use it over categorical estimation procedure because it is better at handling of missing data (Little & Biometrika, 1985). A bootstrapping procedure was also adopted considering the non-normal distribution of multivariate data (Bollen & Stine, 1992). Acceptable model fit was defined as: root mean

square error of approximation (RMSEA)≤0.05(MacCallum et al., 1996), comparative fit index (CFI)≥0.90 and Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) values≥0.90(Byrne, 1998; Brown, 2006).

In order to explore the potential sex difference in the factor structures, we also divided girls and boys into two equal subgroups and performed PCA (girls, n=248; boys, n=262) and CFA (girls, n=248; boys, n=262) separately for each sex, following the same procedure mentioned above.

The internal consistency of the AQ-C was assessed by Cronbach's $\alpha$ coefficient for the whole mainstream sample, as well as for each sex. A Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.7$ is considered good (Nunnally, 1978). Test-retest reliability was evaluated using intra-class correlations (ICC). An ICC $\geq 0.75$ indicated excellent reproducibility. A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between the scores of the AQ-C and SRS. The association between scores of the AQ-C and age was explored by Spearman correlation analysis. To test the discriminant validity of the AQ-C, Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used to compare AQ-C scores between the mainstream and clinical groups after controlling for age and sex. Sex differences were also explored using ANCOVA after controlling for age. Receiver-operating-characteristic (ROC) analyses were conducted in boys and girls together and separately, and cut-off scores were chosen based on maximum Youden's index (sensitivity+specificity-1) (Lai et al., 2012). Since age was shown to have no significant effect on predicting ASD diagnosis by logistic regression, ROC analyses were conducted not controlling for age and sex.

**Results**

*General characteristics of participants*

Demographics were shown in **Table 1**. The proportion of males was significantly higher in the clinical group than in the mainstream group [$\chi^2(1154)=52.017$, *P*<.001], which was consistent with the male-bias in the prevalence of ASD (Adak & Halder, 2017). Children in the

clinical group were slightly but significantly older than those in the mainstream group [$t$(1154)=-4.254, $P$<.001]. There were no significant differences in the proportion of only children and parental educational levels between mainstream and clinical groups (all $P$s>.05). Girls and boys in each group were comparable in age, proportion of being an only child, paternal and maternal educational levels (all $P$s>.05).

Insert **Table 1** here


*Item analysis*

To assess the validity of each item, item-total correlations were explored in the whole mainstream sample, as well as in non-clinical girls and boys separately (**Supplemental table 1**). For the whole mainstream sample, there were two items (items 30 and 43) whose scores were negatively correlated with the total score. These items could not help to quantify the target components of autistic traits and were excluded in subsequent factor analysis for the whole mainstream sample. Similarly, three items (items 29, 30, and 43) and one item (item 12) were excluded in the subsequent factor analysis for non-clinical girls and boys respectively.


*Factor analysis of the AQ-C*

To investigate sex differences in the factor structure of the Chinese AQ-C, factor analyses were performed for the whole mainstream sample, as well as for non-clinical girls and boys separately. Diagnostic checks were conducted and showed that the AQ-C data were suitable for factor analysis for the whole mainstream sample, as well as for non-clinical girls and boys: all the Kaiser–Meyer–Oklin values were higher than 0.700 (0.847, 0.805 and 0.776 respectively) and all the Bartlett's Tests of Sphericity were significant ($\chi^2$=6408.81, $df$=1128, $P$<.001; $\chi^2$=3788.58, $df$=1081, $P$<.001; $\chi^2$=3657.84, $df$=1176, $P$<.001).

The remaining items after item analysis were subjected to PCA. A five-factor solution was

chosen for the whole mainstream sample based on the eigenvalues of components and was confirmed by the scree plot which revealed a clear break after the fifth component (**Supplemental figure 1, a**). In the present study, items with factor loadings lower than 0.30 were eliminated. However, item 16 was retained in the analysis for the whole mainstream sample since it was conceptually congruent with the theme of its designated factor (Attention Switching). As shown in **Table 2**, a 30-item, five-factor model (named the Chinese AQ-C) was derived in the whole mainstream sample which accounted for 44.45% of the total variance, including Socialness (13.64%), Social Communicative Competence (15.70%), Imagination (4.83%), Patterns (6.08%) and Attention Switching (4.20%) in the whole mainstream sample. The total score of Chinese AQ-C is in the range of 0-90.

We also conducted factor analyses in non-clinical girls and boys separately (**Table 2**). Scree plots for different sex were shown in **Supplemental figure 1, b and c**. In non-clinical girls, PCA derived a 32-item, four-factor model (named the Chinese AQ-Girls) which accounted for 41.55% of the total variance, including Socialness (19.48%), Social Communicative Competence (11.60%), Imagination (5.31%) and Patterns (5.16%). The maximum score of the Chinese AQ-Girls is 96. As for boys, PCA yielded a 34-item, four-factor model (named the Chinese AQ-Boys) accounting for 37.55% of the total variance, including Socialness (5.75%), Social Communicative Competence (15.91%), Imagination (4.74%) and Patterns (11.15%). The maximum score of the Chinese AQ-Boys is 102. **Table 2** also shows eigenvalues of each rotated factor.

Insert **Table 2** here

The results of CFA for the previous factor models (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001; Auyeung et al., 2008) and our three models are shown in **Table 3**.The CFA confirmed that the goodness of fit of the current five-factor model (the Chinese AQ-C) was satisfactory, and better than those for the previous factor models (RMSEA=0.037, CFI=0.907 and TLI=0.901)**.** Accordingly, the 30-

item, five-factor solution (the Chinese AQ-C) was much more suitable for the Chinese sample. CFA also showed adequate goodness of fit for the Chinese AQ-Girls (RMSEA=0.032, CFI=0.934 and TLI=0.933) and the Chinese AQ-Boys (RMSEA=0.031, CFI=0.921 and TLI=0.913) **(Table 3)**.

Insert **Table 3** here

*Concurrent validity*

The total scores of the Chinese AQ-C, the Chinese AQ-Girls and the Chinese AQ-Boys were all highly correlated with the total scores of SRS ($r$=0.789, $P$<.001, n=695; $r$=0.795, $P$<.001, n=266; $r$=0.814, $P$<.001, n=429; respectively), indicating the great criterion-related validity for these three versions of the scale.

*Internal consistency and test-retest reliability*

The Cronbach's $\alpha$ coefficients for total scale and subscales of different versions of the AQ-C are shown in **Table 3**. The Chinese AQ-C demonstrates adequate internal consistency for the total scale ($\alpha$=0.765), acceptable for Attention Switching ($\alpha$=0.588) and good internal consistency for the other subscales ($\alpha$=0.733-0.807). As for the Chinese AQ-Girls and the Chinese AQ-Boys, all total scales and subscales showed good internal consistency (all $\alpha$>0.700). In general, the three Chinese versions of AQ-C all showed better internal reliability than the original and the UK factor models (**Table 3**). The test-retest reliability of the Chinese AQ-C was satisfactory with ICC ranging from 0.536 to 0.791 (**Supplemental table 2**).

*Sex differences*

The scores of total scale and subscales on the Chinese AQ-C for mainstream and clinical groups by sex are shown in **Table 4**. The ANCOVA showed that non-clinical boys scored

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significantly higher than non-clinical girls on the total scale of the Chinese AQ-C [$F(1020)$=40.470, $P$<.001] after controlling for age, as well as on subscales including Social Communicative Competence [$F(1020)$=9.609, $P$=.002], Imagination [$F(1020)$=19.654, $P$<.001] and Pattern [$F(1020)$=30.539, $P$<.001]. The scores of the other subscales (Socialness and Attention Switching) in non-clinical boys were also higher than non-clinical girls, even though the differences were non-significant ($P$s>.05).

In clinical group, as compared with girls, boys scored significantly higher on subscale Patterns [$F(134)$=7.777, $P$=.006] but lower on Social Communicative Competence [$F(134)$= 4.191, $P$=.043]. There were no significant sex differences in scores of total scale and the other three subscales within the clinical group.

Insert **Table 4** here

No significant association between age and the total score of the Chinese AQ-C was found in the mainstream ($r$=0.036, $P$=.251) and clinical ($r$=0.083, $P$=.341) groups. Similarly, within boys, the Chinese AQ-Boys scores were not significantly correlated with age in both mainstream ($r$=0.041, $P$=.524) and clinical groups ($r$=0.040, $P$=.677). Even though the Chinese AQ-Girls score was positively correlated with age in non-clinical girls, the association was mild ($r$=0.112, $P$=.012).

*Discriminant validity and Cut-off score*

The clinical group scored significantly higher than the mainstream group on all the total scale and subscales of the Chinese AQ-C after controlling for age and sex (all $P$s<.05) (**Table 4**). The similar pattern of group differences was also found in boys on the Chinese AQ-Boys (**Supplemental table 3**). Total and subscale scores of the Chinese AQ-Girls was higher in ASD girls than in non-clinical girls, even though the difference was not significant on the Patterns subscale probably limited by the small sample size of ASD girls. Diagnostic validity of the

Chinese AQ-C, AQ-Girls and AQ-Boys were analyzed using the ROC analysis. The areas under the ROC curves (AUCs) were 0.968 (95% CI: 0.955–0.981) for the Chinese AQ-C, 0.990(95% C.I.: 0.981–1.000) for AQ-Girls, and 0.964(95% C.I.: 0.948–0.960) for AQ-Boys (**Figure 1, a, b and c**), indicating good ability of these scales to correctly classify children with and without ASD. **Table 5** shows the candidate cut-off scores for the three scales derived through ROC analyses, and their corresponding sensitivity and specificity values. An appropriate cut-off should maximize both sensitivity and specificity (Hajian-Tilaki, 2013). Accordingly, a cut-off of 44.5 was selected for the Chinese AQ-C, which showed both high sensitivity (94.0%) and specificity (88.2%). As for the Chinese AQ-Girls and AQ-Boys, the cut-off scores were chosen to be 42.5 and 46.5 respectively, both with high sensitivity (100% and 96.5%) and specificity (91.7% and 83.0%).

Insert **Figure 1** here

Insert **Table 5** here

## Discussion

This study examined the factor structure and psychometric properties of the Chinese version of the Autism spectrum Quotient-Children's version (AQ-C) among boys and girls together and separately in mainland China. We found that 1) factor analysis indicated a 30-item, five-factor structure (the Chinese AQ-C) with a good fit for the whole sample; 2) there were sex differences in the factor structure. Though a four-factor structure was obtained for both sexes, the item patterns corresponding to the factor structures were different: 32-item for girls (the Chinese AQ-Girls) and 34-item for boys (the Chinese AQ-Boys), and 3) all these three Chinese versions of AQ-C showed satisfactory reliability, concurrent validity and discriminant validity.

*Factor structure of the Chinese AQ-C*

To our knowledge, there is only one previous study that has explored the factor structure of

the AQ-C, which supported a 47-item, four-factor solution in UK sample (Auyeung et al., 2008). Inconsistent with this study, the Chinese version of AQ-C was successfully reduced to a 30-item, five-factor solution, which accounted for a moderate amount of the total variance in our study. CFA demonstrated a good fit for our five-factor structure, while both the original five-theoretical-component (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001) and four-factor structure obtained in UK sample (Auyeung et al., 2008) did not fit well in our whole Chinese sample. The difference in factor structures of the AQ-C could be attributed to the culture differences between China and UK. Previous studies have reported differences in autistic traits between Western and Eastern cultures (Daley & Sigman, 2002; Bernier et al., 2010). Another possible explanation for the difference may be the heterogeneity of the sample (e.g., age distribution and sex ratio) and distinct analytical procedures in the two studies.

Similar to the original model (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001), the Chinese AQ-C agreed on an Imagination factor and an Attention Switching factor. However, the conceptual constructs of the AQ-C have been refined in the Chinese version. Some items from the original Communication and Imagination subscales formed a new factor, named Social Communicative Competence. Another factor, Socialness, was essentially a subset of the Social Skill subscale in the original model. Nevertheless, the "socialness" factor places more emphasis on social motivation which is distinctive from the competency in social interaction. A similar adjustment can also be found in the adult version of the AQ based on a Chinese sample (Lau et al., 2013). Furthermore, the Attention to Detail factor in the original model was replaced by Patterns, which integrated two stereotyped characteristics of autistic traits (the abnormal focus to details and the highly restricted interests with unusual objects). The concept of Patterns first emerged as Details/Patterns in Austin's (2005) work on the adult version of AQ and has since often appeared in subsequent research using the adult AQ (Hurst et al., 2007; Stewart & Austin, 2009; Lau et al., 2013).

*Sex difference in the Chinese AQ-C and sex-specific version of the AQ-C*

Our study showed that non-clinical boys scored higher than non-clinical girls on the total scale and subscales of the Chinese AQ-C, which is in line with the results of previous studies based on UK and Japanese samples (Wakabayashi et al., 2007; Auyeung et al., 2008). Similar patterns of sex differences were reported in other instruments measuring autistic traits, including the SRS and the Childhood Autism Spectrum Test (CAST) (Sun et al., 2014). Our study adds evidence that there are sex differences in quantitative autistic traits in the general population. As for the clinical group, although there were no differences in total score of the Chinese AQ-C between boys and girls, we found different patterns of scores, in that boys scored significantly higher on Patterns but lower on Social Communicative Competence than girls. Consistent with our findings, previous studies found that in children with ASD, boys had more stereotyped and repetitive behaviors than girls while girls showed more social-communication problems (Hartley & Sikora, 2009; Szatmari et al., 2012). Researchers suggested that the sex difference in autistic traits may due to the current measures potentially not being sensitive enough to identify the female autistic phenotype (Lai et al., 2015). Therefore, exploring the psychometric validity and factor structure of the AQ-C in different sexes is urgently needed.

In our study, the factor models fit in the sexes separately (the Chinese AQ-Girls and the Chinese AQ-Boys) both contained four factors (Socialness, Social Communicative Competence, Imagination and Patterns), whereas subtle differences have been found in item patterns corresponding to the two models: 1) the Chinese AQ-Girls comprised 32 items with a maximum score of 96, while the Chinese AQ-Boys comprised 34 items with a maximum score of 102; 2) the items contained in each factor were different between the two models. These findings indicated that there were sex differences in behavioral phenotype, although the core features of autistic traits may be common in boys and girls. For example, circumscribed interests of girls tend to be more social in nature than boys, and are more likely to be animals,

dolls, pop-groups and so on (Kopp & Gillberg, 1992; Wolff & McGuire, 1995). Acknowledging these differences in measures of ASD is essential for ensuring that the condition is not under-recognized in girls.

In this study, we found no significant association between autistic traits and age in the non-clinical group and in the ASD group. These results are consistent with the findings in previous studies based on UK and Japanese samples (Auyeung et al., 2008; Wakabayashi et al., 2007). Similar results were also reported in study using other instruments, for instance, the SRS (Cen et al., 2017). A significant and positive correlation was found between the scores of the Chinese-AQ-Girls and age. It does not necessarily undermine the validity of the Chinese-AQ-Girls if it correlates with age. Instead, it may reflect genuine increases of autistic traits in girls. Similar results have been found in previous research, reporting that girls are more likely than boys to experience an escalation of autistic traits (Mandy et al., 2018).

*Internal consistency and test-retest reliability*

Our study showed that the Chinese AQ-C had adequate internal consistency and test-retest reliability as a whole with the exception of the Attention Switching subscale (Cronbach, 1951). Nevertheless, the reliability of the subscales of the Chinese AQ-C was radically improved compared with previous models (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001; Auyeung et al., 2008). As for the Chinese AQ-Girls and the Chinese AQ-Boys, all total scale and the subscales demonstrated excellent internal reliability.

*Concurrent validity*

Previous studies reported strong correlations between the total scores of the AQ-C and SRS in children with high-functioning ASD (Armstrong & Iarocci, 2013). Consistent with this, our study found that the total scores of the Chinese AQ-C and SRS were highly correlated both in mainstream and clinical samples. In addition, high correlations were also found between the total scores of the Chinese AQ-Girls, Chinese AQ-Boys and SRS. These results indicate that

all three Chinese versions of AQ-C have good concurrent validity.

*Discriminant validity and cut-off score*

Our results showed that children with ASD scored higher than non-clinical ones on the total scale and all subscales of the Chinese AQ-C, the Chinese AQ-Girls and the Chinese AQ-Boys. These results were in accordance with the findings obtained from UK, Japanese and Indian children (Wakabayashi et al., 2007; Auyeung et al., 2008; Rudra et al., 2014). Taken together, our findings add evidence for the discriminant validity of the AQ-C across cultures. In addition, similar score pattern that ASD sample scored higher than general population was also found in research using adolescent and adult versions of the AQ (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001; Baron-Cohen et al., 2006; Sonie et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2016), indicating the discriminative power of AQ scales across ages.

In clinical practice, the AQ-C is mainly used to quantify autistic traits and identify the high-risk individuals for further diagnostic evaluation in the general population (Wakabayashi et al., 2007), thus requiring high sensitivity and specificity. Our data showed that the total score of the Chinese AQ-C could clearly distinguish children with ASD from those without ASD (AUC=0.968), which was similar to the result obtained from UK (AUC=0.99) (Auyeung et al., 2008). A cut-off score of 44.5 showed high sensitivity (94.0%) and specificity (88.2%) for screening children with ASD in general population. Caution should be taken when making a diagnosis with the cut-off; however, it may provide a useful screen to understand which children should undergo full diagnostic assessment. Considering the sex difference in the scores and factor structure in AQ-C, the discriminant validity of sex-specific versions is also of importance. Both versions showed satisfactory discriminant validity with a cut-off score of 42.5 for the Chinese AQ-Girls and 46.5 for the Chinese AQ-Boys.

*Limitations*

Several limitations should be noted. Firstly, this study did not use gold standard assessments

(e.g., ADI-R and ADOS) to confirm the diagnoses of ASD because these instruments have not yet been validated and widely utilized in mainland china. Nevertheless, the diagnoses of ASD in this study were confirmed by experienced pediatricians from a public hospital and re-confirmed by two professional child psychiatrists. Secondly, it should be noted that the cut-off score of the Chinese AQ-Girls may not be optimal due to the small sample size of girls with ASD, which was limited by the male-predominance in prevalence of ASD. Future studies with larger sample sizes are needed to verify the factor structure and psychometric characteristics of the AQ-C in females.

*Conclusion*

Our findings confirmed a 30-item, five-factor structure for the Chinese version of the AQ-C, demonstrating adequate internal consistency, test-retest reliability, construct validity, concurrent validity, and discriminant validity. More importantly, our study found sex-specific factor structures (the Chinese AQ-Girls and the Chinese AQ-Boys) with good reliability and validity. It may be more reliable for future research to use the sex-specific model when measuring autistic traits in general population. Future studies with larger sample sizes are warranted to test the effectiveness of the sex-specific versions of the AQ-C on screening children with ASD.

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**Table 1** Demographics and study population characteristics

| | Mainstream group | | | | Clinical group | | | | Group difference (P) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | All (n=1020) | Girls (n=496) | Boys (n=524) | P a | All (n=134) | Girls (n=21) | Boys (n=113) | P a | |
| Age (Mean±SD) | 6.36±1.56 | 6.21±1.56 | 6.50±1.54 | .003 | 6.96±1.47 | 6.57±1.29 | 7.04±1.50 | .186 | <.001 |
| 4 | 147 | 78 | 69 | | 8 | 2 | 6 | | |
| 5 | 191 | 117 | 74 | | 2 | 0 | 2 | | |
| 6 | 222 | 96 | 126 | | 53 | 9 | 44 | | |
| 7 | 165 | 76 | 89 | | 27 | 6 | 21 | | |
| 8 | 208 | 89 | 119 | | 20 | 2 | 18 | | |
| 9 | 80 | 39 | 41 | | 16 | 2 | 14 | | |
| 10 | 7 | 1 | 6 | | 8 | 0 | 8 | | |
| Only children | 489(48.5%) | 232(47.2%) | 257(49.7%) | .417 | 76(56.7%) | 12(57.1%) | 64(56.6%) | .966 | .073 |
| Paternal educational level | | | | | | | | | |
| Junior high school and below | 208(21.0%) | 98(20.4%) | 110(21.6%) | .436 | 21(15.7%) | 4(19.0%) | 17(15.0%) | | |
| Senior high school | 358(36.2%) | 167(34.8%) | 191(37.6%) | | 49(36.6%) | 5(23.8%) | 44(38.9%) | .417 | .305 |
| College and above | 422(42.7%) | 215(44.8%) | 207(40.7%) | | 64(47.8%) | 12(57.1%) | 52(46.0%) | | |
| Maternal educational level | | | | | | | | | |
| Junior high school and below | 303(30.4%) | 146(30.2%) | 157(30.7%) | .458 | 30(22.4%) | 6(28.6%) | 24(21.2%) | | |
| Senior high school | 336(33.8%) | 156(32.2%) | 180(35.2%) | | 43(32.1%) | 5(23.8%) | 38(33.6%) | .612 | .057 |
| College and above | 356(35.8%) | 182(37.6%) | 174(34.0%) | | 61(45.5%) | 10(47.6%) | 51(45.1%) | | |

Note: a difference between boys and girls.

**Table 2** Factor structures of the Chinese AQ-C, the Chinese AQ-Girls and the Chinese AQ-Boys

| Chinese AQ-C | | | | Chinese AQ-Girls | | Chinese AQ-Boys | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Item | Content | Factor loadings | Original subscale | Item | Factor loadings | Item | Factor loadings |
| Factor 1 Socialness | | | | | | | |
| VR=13.64%, EV=3.451 | | | | VR=19.48%, EV=4.778 | | VR=5.75%, EV=4.013 | |
| 11 | Finds social situations easy | 0.621 | SS | 10 | 0.424 | 11 | 0.589 |
| 17 | Enjoys social chit-chat | 0.616 | CO | 11 | 0.646 | 17 | 0.483 |
| 38 | Good at social chit-chat | 0.716 | CO | 17 | 0.643 | 28 | 0.412 |
| 44 | Enjoys social occasions | 0.693 | SS | 37 | 0.386 | 37 | 0.362 |
| 47 | Enjoys meeting new people | 0.756 | SS | 38 | 0.720 | 38 | 0.677 |
| | | | | 44 | 0.704 | 44 | 0.649 |
| | | | | 47 | 0.783 | 47 | 0.784 |
| | | | | 48 | 0.370 | 48 | 0.399 |
| Factor 2 Social Communicative Competence | | | | | | | |
| VR=15.70%, EV=3.586 | | | | VR=11.60%, EV=3.499 | | VR=15.91%, EV=4.060 | |
| 7 | Is impolite, even though s/he thinks it is polite | 0.384 | CO | 7 | 0.507 | 7 | 0.462 |
| 20 | Finds it difficult to work out the characters' intentions in a story | 0.618 | IM | 20 | 0.627 | 20 | 0.643 |
| 21 | Does not particularly enjoy reading fiction | 0.361 | IM | 22 | 0.586 | 21 | 0.424 |
| 22 | Finds it hard to make new friends | 0.55 | SS | 26 | 0.681 | 22 | 0.475 |
| 26 | Does not know how to keep up a conversation | 0.659 | CO | 33 | 0.597 | 26 | 0.619 |
| 33 | Does not know when it is their turn on the phone | 0.596 | CO | 35 | 0.777 | 33 | 0.624 |
| 35 | Often the last to understand a joke | 0.7 | CO | 39 | 0.471 | 35 | 0.610 |
| 39 | Keeps going on and on about the same thing | 0.516 | CO | 45 | 0.654 | 39 | 0.608 |

| # | Item | Loading | Cat | # | Loading | # | Loading |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 45 | Finds it difficult to work out people's intentions | 0.643 | SS | | | 45 | 0.611 |
| | | | | | | 46 | 0.462 |

### Factor 3 Imagination

| # | Item | Loading | Cat | VR=5.31%, EV=4.539 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| VR=4.74%, EV=3.501 | | | | | | | |
| 14 | Finds making up stories easy | 0.517 | IM | 1 | 0.444 | 3 | 0.475 |
| 31 | Knows how to tell if someone bored | 0.497 | CO | 3 | 0.771 | 8 | 0.595 |
| 36 | Finds it easy to work out feelings by looking at faces | 0.461 | SS | 8 | 0.788 | 10 | 0.470 |
| 40 | Enjoyed playing games involving pretending | 0.602 | IM | 14 | 0.527 | 14 | 0.377 |
| 50 | Finds it easy to play games that involve pretending | 0.573 | IM | 31 | 0.277 | 31 | 0.424 |
| | | | | 34 | 0.345 | 36 | 0.378 |
| | | | | 36 | 0.418 | 40 | 0.585 |
| | | | | 40 | 0.491 | 50 | 0.593 |
| | | | | 50 | 0.591 | | |

### Factor 4 Patterns

| # | Item | Loading | Cat | VR=5.16%, EV=4.176 | | VR=11.15%, EV=3.467 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| VR=6.08%, EV=3.632 | | | | | | | |
| 6 | Notices numbers or strings of information | 0.625 | AD | 6 | 0.768 | 6 | 0.631 |
| 9 | Fascinated by dates | 0.579 | AD | 9 | 0.607 | 9 | 0.619 |
| 12 | Notices details that others do not | 0.438 | AD | 12 | 0.554 | 13 | 0.540 |
| 13 | Would rather go to a library than a party | 0.645 | SS | 13 | 0.628 | 16 | 0.365 |
| 19 | Fascinated by numbers | 0.764 | AD | 19 | 0.682 | 19 | 0.752 |
| 23 | Notices patterns | 0.561 | AD | 23 | 0.489 | 23 | 0.642 |
| 41 | Likes to collect information | 0.498 | IM | 41 | 0.466 | 41 | 0.481 |
| | | | | | | 43 | 0.457 |

### Factor 5 Attention Switching

VR=4.20%, EV=2.772

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2 | Prefers to do things the same way | 0.713 | AS |
| 4 | Gets strongly absorbed in one thing | 0.686 | AS |
| 5 | Notices small sounds when others do not | 0.618 | AD |
| 16 | Tends to have very strong interests | 0.235 | AS |

Note. Chinese AQ-C: the Chinese version of Autism Spectrum Quotient-Children's Version; Chinese AQ-Girls: the Chinese version of Autism Spectrum Quotient-Girls' Version; Chinese AQ-Boys: the Chinese version of Autism Spectrum Quotient-Boys' Version; CO: Communication; SS: Social Skills; AS: Attention Switching; IM: Imagination; AD: Attention to Details; VR: variance; EV: eigenvalue.

**Table 3** Goodness of fit for previous factor models and the Chinese models of the AQ-C

| | # of items | # of factors | Cronbach's α | RMSEA | CFI | TLI |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| The original model | 50 | 5 | Social Skills (0.548)<br>Communication (0.568)<br>Imagination (0.364)<br>Attention to Detail (0.684)<br>Attention Switching (0.225)<br>Total (0.678) | 0.057 | 0.620 | 0.592 |
| The UK factor model | 47 | 4 | Social Skills (0.655)<br>Social Communicative Competence (0.655)<br>Imagination (0.594)<br>Attention to Detail (0.772)<br>Total (0.708) | 0.055 | 0.676 | 0.651 |
| Chinese AQ-C | 30 | 5 | Socialness (0.849)<br>Social Communicative Competence (0.807)<br>Imagination (0.737)<br>Patterns (0.733)<br>Attention Switching (0.588)<br>Total (0.800) | 0.037 | 0.907 | 0.901 |
| Chinese AQ-Girls | 32 | 4 | Socialness (0.825)<br>Social Communicative Competence (0.805)<br>Imagination (0.788)<br>Patterns (0.763)<br>Total (0.786) | 0.032 | 0.934 | 0.933 |
| Chinese AQ-Boys | 34 | 4 | Socialness (0.852)<br>Social Communicative Competence (0.800)<br>Imagination (0.813)<br>Patterns (0.715)<br>Total (0.840) | 0.031 | 0.921 | 0.913 |

Note. AQ-C: Autism Spectrum Quotient-Children's Version; Chinese AQ-C: the Chinese version of Autism Spectrum Quotient-Children's Version; Chinese AQ-Girls: the Chinese version of Autism Spectrum Quotient-Girls' Version; Chinese AQ-Boys: the Chinese version of Autism Spectrum Quotient-Boys' Version; RMSEA: root-mean-square-error of approximation; CFI: comparative fit index.

**Table 4** Mean (and SD) scores of total scale and subscales on the Chinese AQ-C for the mainstream and clinical groups by sex

| The Chinese AQ-C | Mainstream group | | | | Clinical group | | | | Group difference |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | All (n=1020) | Girls (n=496) | Boys (n=524) | $P^a$ | All (n=134) | Girls (n=21) | Boys (n=113) | $P^a$ | $P^b$ |
| Total scores | 33.85±8.83 | 32.05±8.37 | 35.56±8.93 | <.001 | 57.18±9.27 | 57.57±8.45 | 57.11±9.44 | .836 | <.001 |
| Socialness | 4.31±3.05 | 4.16±3.04 | 4.45±3.05 | .307 | 10.81±3.23 | 10.43±4.06 | 10.88±3.07 | .54 | <.001 |
| Social Communicative Competence | 7.37±4.54 | 6.91±4.50 | 7.80±4.54 | .002 | 15.81±5.42 | 18.00±4.36 | 15.40±5.52 | .043 | <.001 |
| Imagination | 5.13±2.69 | 4.74±2.74 | 5.51±2.60 | <.001 | 10.88±2.97 | 11.14±3.57 | 10.83±2.86 | .737 | <.001 |
| Patterns | 9.93±3.97 | 9.27±4.04 | 10.55±3.81 | <.001 | 11.95±2.43 | 10.67±1.91 | 12.19±2.45 | .006 | <.001 |
| Attention Switching | 7.11±2.48 | 6.98±2.52 | 7.25±2.44 | .061 | 7.73±2.47 | 7.33±2.74 | 7.80±2.42 | .557 | .023 |

Note. [a] adjusted for age; [b] adjusted for age and sex; Chinese AQ-C: the Chinese version of Autism Spectrum Quotient-Children's Version.

**Table 5** Potential cut-offs, sensitivity, and specificity of the Chinese versions of the AQ-C

| Indices | Chinese AQ-C | | | Chinese AQ-Girls | | | Chinese AQ-Boys | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 43.5 | 44.5 | 45.5 | 41.5 | 42.5 | 43.5 | 45.5 | 46.5 | 47.5 |
| Sensitivity | 94.8% | 94.0% | 90.3% | 100% | 100.0% | 95.2% | 98.2% | 96.5% | 93.8% |
| Specificity | 85.7% | 88.2% | 90.3% | 89.7% | 91.7% | 92.9% | 80.3% | 83.0% | 84.9% |

Note. AQ-C: Autism Spectrum Quotient-Children's Version; Chinese AQ-C: the Chinese version of Autism Spectrum Quotient-Children's Version; Chinese AQ-Girls: the Chinese version of Autism Spectrum Quotient-Girls' Version; Chinese AQ-Boys: the Chinese version of Autism Spectrum Quotient-Boys' Version.
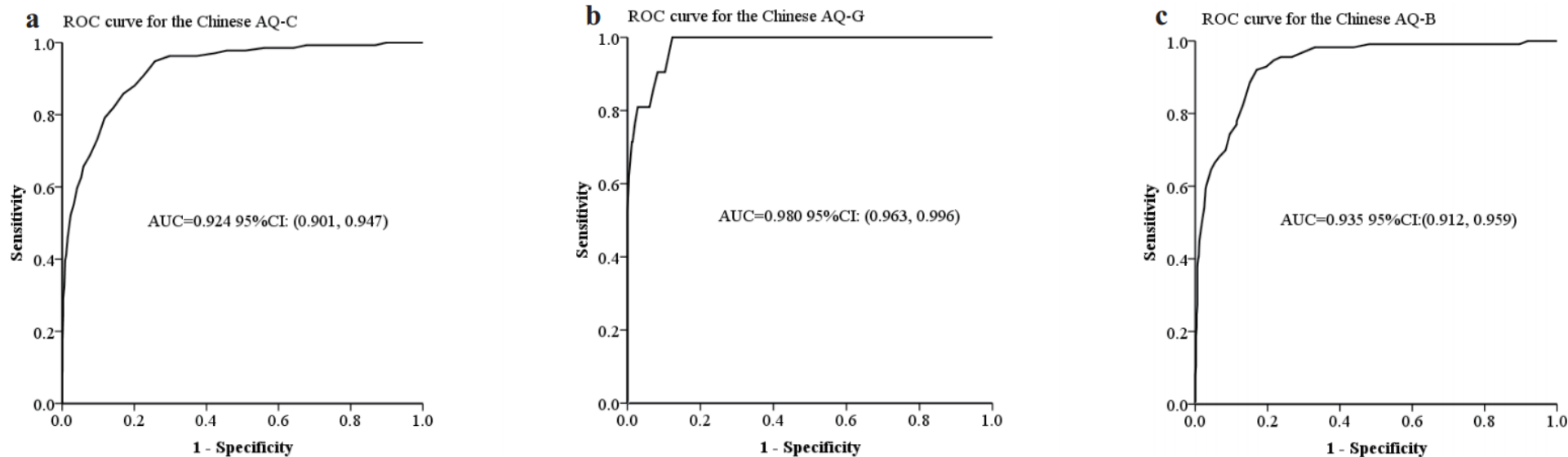
**Figure 1** ROC curves for scores of the Chinese AQ-C (a), the Chinese AQ-Girls (b) and the Chinese AQ-Boys (c)

Note. ROC curve: the curve of the receiver-operating-characteristic analysis; Chinese AQ-C: the Chinese version of Autism Spectrum Quotient-Children's Version; Chinese AQ-Girls: the Chinese version of Autism Spectrum Quotient-Girls' Version; Chinese AQ-Boys: the Chinese version of Autism Spectrum Quotient-Boys' Version; AUC: area under the ROC curve.