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# Expressing Sexuality in Silent and Weep: Experience of Chinese People With Intellectual Disabilities and Parents

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Sexual well-being significantly impacts the overall quality of life for individuals with and without intellectual disabilities. Notably, parents play a pivotal role in influencing their children's sexual development, and their attitudes towards this topic are shaped by Chinese sociocultural values.

**Methods:** This study employed Interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore the experiences and attitudes of five individuals with intellectual disabilities and seven parents/caregivers regarding the sexual needs of their adult offspring with intellectual disabilities.

**Results:** The findings revealed participants' experiences and concerns, often navigating the challenges posed by traditional Chinese cultural restrictions through responses characterised as 'Silent' (avoidance of discussion) and 'Weep' (deep-seated psycho-emotional burden).

**Conclusions:** This research emphasises the importance of a pluralistic society and advocates for promoting sexual autonomy among individuals with intellectual disabilities. The findings have implications for future practises and highlight the need for a more inclusive and compassionate approach to their sexual well-being.

## 1 | Introduction

The concept of human sexuality encompasses individuals' understanding, beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviours related to sex (Greenberg, Bruess, and Oswalt 2017). People with mild or moderate intellectual disabilities possess the same desires as individuals without disabilities and are capable of forming sexual and intimate relationships (Fitzgerald and Withers 2013; Schaafsma et al. 2017; Carter et al. 2022). Research suggests that they are more likely than the population with severe/profound intellectual disabilities to live in the community and can also engage in open discussions about sexual intercourse as a mutually enjoyable experience with their partners (Baines et al. 2018; Fitzgerald and Withers 2013). The medical model of disability

frames intellectual disabilities through a deficit-based perspective, emphasising limitations and perceiving individuals as sexually vulnerable (Turner and Crane 2016; Kirby 2017). People with intellectual disabilities, from childhood through adulthood, have been found to evoke fears and concerns among parents (Dean et al. 2021). They often face restrictions and overprotection, which limit their opportunities for sexual expression (Kramers-Olen 2016; Parchomiuk 2022). Despite the emphasis on the ideology from the social model of disability, the belief in the global context still found that people with intellectual disabilities are perceived as incapable of understanding and controlling their sexuality. A study from Germany revealed that even though some young people with intellectual disabilities have had relationships, they may keep their relationships

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‘underground’ to avoid potential restrictions from their caregivers (Retznik et al. 2022). In South Africa, caregivers prioritised their own needs over the right of people with intellectual disabilities to freely talk, experience, and develop sexuality (Kahonde, Mckenzie, and Wilson 2018). In brief, a recent review revealed that people with intellectual disabilities lack support from family regarding sex education (Bathje et al. 2021; de Wit, van Oorsouw, and Embregts 2022). However, none of the papers reviewed focus on the Chinese population.

Parents play a crucial role in shaping the sexual health of young people through communication, monitoring and surveillance practises (Lam et al. 2021). However, a study in the United Kingdom found that parents feel unprepared to provide sex education to their children with intellectual disabilities (Tamas et al. 2019). In another European study, caregivers were found to impose regulations to ensure people with intellectual disabilities are safe from sexuality-related threats (Rojas, Haya, and Lázaro-Visa 2016). In the Chinese context, discussions about sexuality between parents and adolescents are also infrequent (Liu, Dennis, and Edwards 2015). The cultural environment in China is believed to influence this phenomenon significantly. First, Chinese sexual attitudes are generally more conservative compared to non-Chinese cultures (Vuuren and Aldersey 2020). This conservative outlook contributes to a reluctance to discuss sex openly. Secondly, Chinese culture emphasises collectivism, emphasising interdependence, and upholding personal dignity and ‘face’ in front of others (Oh, Kim, and Lee 2014). Chinese parents tend to exert greater control over their children, promoting conformity within the family and respecting authority. This cultural norm leads to a more cautious and paternalistic approach when discussing matters related to sex, particularly concerning individuals with intellectual disabilities as vulnerable (Correa, Castro, and Barrada 2022; Liu et al. 2017).

To promote sexual health and rights for individuals with intellectual disabilities, providing direct assistance and training to these individuals is more effective than relying solely on caretakers to address their needs (Ginn 2022). However, in the Chinese population, people with intellectual disabilities face significant barriers from parents’ restrictions and societal norms, which greatly limit their opportunities to develop intimate relationships and progress towards a positive sexual identity (Chou, Lu, and Pu 2015; Chou et al. 2020).

This paper aims to explore and reveal how Chinese individuals with intellectual disabilities and parents perceive sexuality and the interaction of these groups in that context. From a social constructivist perspective, the concepts of ‘individual’ and ‘society’ are intricately linked (Billett 2006). The formation of attitudes cannot be attributed solely to personal inclinations or individual characteristics; rather, they emerge through interactions with others within the social milieu (Bidjari 2011). Therefore, it is appropriate to use qualitative research, which allows individuals to articulate their own categorizations and perceived connections and provides researchers with insights into their perspectives. Considering the unique culture in the Chinese context and its interconnected dynamics between personal experiences, attitudes, and practises, this paper adopts an ‘emic’ perspective (Ungar, Knaak, and Szeto 2016). Drawing from this perspective, the researcher can delve into and present

the findings of a qualitative study that elucidates the dynamics between Chinese parents and individuals with intellectual disabilities regarding the handling of the sexual needs of individuals within this community.

## 2 | Methods

### 2.1 | Design

To explore the sensitive topic of sexuality in individuals with intellectual disabilities and their parents, this study employed semi-structured qualitative interviews analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA incorporates a dual analytic focus: both a thematic orientation—the identification of themes across cases (participants)—and an idiographic approach—interest in and focus on the particular and unique details of each case, understanding and interpreting how human beings experience and make sense of the world (Braun and Clarke 2021). IPA is found particularly effective in exploring the meaning and sense-making of a phenomenon within both people with intellectual disabilities and parents (Neergaard et al. 2009; Smith and Osborn 2008). IPA enables researchers to examine participants’ lived experiences by working with small groups of individuals who share common experiences and cultural backgrounds. This ensures group homogeneity, which supports more detailed and nuanced analysis. Additionally, IPA emphasises the researcher’s active role in interpreting these experiences (Smith and Osborn 2008).

### 2.2 | Ethics Statement

The Human Research Ethics Committee of Tung Wah College, Hong Kong (REC2019049) granted the study approval, following the ethical guidelines given in the declaration of Helsinki (Pietilä et al. 2020). All the participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could terminate it without any reason at any time. For individuals with intellectual disabilities, they signed the consent form, which was witnessed by a family member or the case social worker. All study materials were handled with strict confidentiality and compliance of the institution’s policy on research data management. Interviews were conducted using simplified language and visual aids to enhance accessibility for participants with intellectual disabilities. This interview methodology for individuals with intellectual disabilities was carefully designed following scholarly guidance for research with vulnerable population (Wark et al. 2017).

### 2.3 | Participants

In this qualitative research, two distinct groups of participants were interviewed. The initial group included individuals diagnosed with mild intellectual disabilities who were age 18 or older and had no physical disabilities, to ensure the focus remained on intellectual disabilities and cultural factors. The second group consisted of parents who met the criteria of having adult children with mild intellectual disabilities (also without physical disabilities). An additional critical criterion for selection in both groups was that they were of Chinese ethnicity, aiming to

explore and understand the influence of Chinese culture on individuals' perceptions and understanding of sexuality.

Tables 1 and 2 provide general background information about the participants. The two groups in this study were independent of each other, with no familial connections. Table 1 details the individuals with intellectual disabilities, consisting of three males and two females aged between 21 and 50. Two participants were employed in the catering industry, while others received day training services or attended vocational training. One participant lived with his parents, and the others lived in supported hostel accommodation provided by a social services agency. Three participants reported having previous romantic relationships.

Table 2 provides details of the parent group. The group consisted of five mothers, one father, and one aunt who have been the child's primary carer since birth. Among the children with intellectual disabilities, one was 18 years old and still in a special school, while the others were over 20 and engaged in various daily activities. Participants reported that all children with intellectual disabilities were able to independently manage their

daily living activities and commute to their school or workplace. At the time of the interview, no parent participant needed to provide significant support for their child with intellectual disabilities in either daily living activities or school-related tasks.

## 2.4 | Data Collection

The study adopted a convenience sampling approach, which was deemed suitable given the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The first author contacted Hong Kong non-governmental organizations (NGOs) providing services for people with intellectual disabilities for recruitment, but in the time of the social distancing measures in place, only two agreed to participate in the study. NGO staff facilitated recruitment by contacting parents and individuals with intellectual disabilities via phone and promoting the study during organised activities. Interviews were conducted in private rooms to ensure participants felt safe and comfortable discussing sensitive topics. Participants with intellectual disabilities could be accompanied by family members or social service personnel if desired.

**TABLE 1** | Background of participants (individual with intellectual disabilities).

Participants, age	Day placement	Living condition	Self-reported romance relationship
Man with ID, 40	Open employment in a western restaurant	With Family	One
Woman with ID, 30	Day activity centre	Hostel	One
Man with ID, 25	Open market (fast food restaurant)	Hostel	None
Woman with ID, 40	Sheltered workshop	Hostel	Three
Man with ID, 21	Student in vocational training	Hostel	None

**TABLE 2** | Background of participants (parents with adult offspring with intellectual disabilities).

Parent participants	Occupation of offspring	Offspring functional level described		
		ADL	Cooking	Commuting
Mother with sons with ID at the age of 30 and 20	Half-time support worker in NGO (elder son)	Independent		Independent to workplace
	Working in family business (younger son)			
Mother with a son with ID at the age of 18	Final year student at special school	Independent		Independent to school
Father with a son at the age of 24	Sheltered workshop trainee	Independent		Independent to workplace
Auntie caring for a girl with ID at the age of 32	Sheltered workshop trainee		Independent	Independent to workplace
Mother with a son with ID at the age of 32	Part-timer courier	Independent		Working as courier and able to travel to various locations independently
Mother with a son at the age of 35	Day activity centre trainee	Independent		Independent to training centre
Mother with a son at the age of 33	Sheltered workshop trainee		Independent	Independent to workplace

However, only one participant chose to have a brother present during the interview. Considering sex is a sensitive topic in Hong Kong (Ma and Loke 2019), a female clinical psychologist with experience working with people with intellectual disabilities had standby to assuage any concerns about a male interviewer discussing sex with participants. Participants received an information sheet and a consent form, both of which were explained verbally to ensure comprehension, particularly for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Participants with intellectual disabilities were asked to sign the consent form as witnessed by their case social workers, with one exception witnessed by his brother of adult age. Interviews, lasting between 50 and 75 min, were audiotaped with participants' consent. Breaks were allowed to ensure participants' comfort throughout the sessions. Participants were given an identifier (e.g., 'A man with ID, 40, for people with intellectual disabilities'; and 'A mother of a son with ID, 35', for parents) to ensure anonymity.

The semi-structured interviews employed the 'funneling technique,' a methodological approach that transitions gradually from general to specific topics. This approach enables a thorough and culturally sensitive examination of the subject matter. By providing a structured yet flexible framework, the technique facilitated the collection of rich, detailed data while ensuring consistency across interviews (Noon 2018). The strategy of the funneling technique requires that the interview first starts with broad and completely neutral questions, for instance, a conversation with people with intellectual disabilities about their daily lives in a sheltered workshop or hostel. Subsequently, as the relationship between the first author and participants was established, the interview gradually delved narrowly into specific topics such as romantic encounters or the sexual experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities (O'Sullivan et al. 2020).

## 2.5 | Data Analysis

To preserve the details of the conversation, the audiotaped interviews were transcribed verbatim. A three-stage approach was employed for data analysis (Smith and Osborn 2008). In Stage 1, repeated readings of the transcripts allowed the first author to inductively identify initial themes. These themes were refined and validated collaboratively by the first and second authors, who both were qualified sex therapists with bilingual backgrounds in Stage 2. Stage 3 involved developing the thematic structure and English descriptive labels, with all labels finalised through consensus among all authors.

The staged thematic approach aligns with the epistemological underpinnings of IPA, emphasising an inductive orientation and a focus on semantic meaning (Clarke et al. 2015). In the aforementioned stages, the analysis provided breadth, while the subsequent implementation of IPA offered depth, resulting in an organised thematic structure that interpreted both explicit and implicit meanings within the participants' experiences (Braun and Clarke 2021; Harper and Thompson 2012). The first author served as the 'primary analyst', intuitively probing for meaning, reading between the lines, and uncovering insights within the Chinese cultural context (Roxburgh 2023; Shinebourne 2011; Smith and Osborn 2015). Verbatim transcriptions were meticulously reviewed and analysed multiple times to uncover deeper

perspectives rooted in the participants' Chinese cultural experiences. Thematic notes with English labels were generated, incorporating descriptive, conceptual, and linguistic comments, alongside observations of the participants' tone, stance and summaries (Larkin, Shaw, and Flowers 2019). This approach supports the exploration of thematic notes for nuanced meanings, enabling the phenomenon of interest to remain closely tied to the participants' context (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009).

## 3 | Results

This section presents the key findings from interviews with individuals with intellectual disabilities and the parents, focusing on their experiences and perspectives regarding sexuality and relationships. The perspectives of both groups were heard and categorised into two main themes. From the viewpoint of individuals with intellectual disabilities, the theme centres on their experiences, focusing on 'what we have been doing and what we have been looking for,' which relates to their sexual encounters and expresses desires for intimacy and relationships. On the other hand, from the parent's perspective, the theme reflects 'what we have to concern about and what we would not allow happening,' emphasising their concerns regarding their children's sexual needs and the actions they have taken to prevent them from engaging in sexual or relational experiences.

### 3.1 | People With Intellectual Disabilities and Sexuality: 'What We Have Been Doing and What We Have Been Looking For'

Research reported that some people perceived people with intellectual disabilities as not needing loving or intimate relationships or portrayed them as asexual or even sterile innocents (Björnsdóttir and Stefánsdóttir 2020; Sitter et al. 2019). Through dialogues with individuals with intellectual disabilities, a contrasting picture emerged:

I met a girl. We had dinner and we hung out at the shopping mall. (Man with ID, 40)

I felt so good to go out with the boy. I met him in the same sheltered workshop. He kissed me. When we were in a park, or at home but our parents were out, we hugged each other. (Woman with ID, 30)

The boy said he loved me, I felt so happy. We had jobs in the same sheltered workshop. But I stopped our relationship because he attempted to touch my body, which I knew was no good. (Woman with ID, 40)

Sexuality encompasses both psychological attraction and physical interaction, ranging from solitary actions like masturbation to activities involving another person, such as kissing and hugging. Like their counterpart without disabilities, people with intellectual disabilities also shared their experience in doing masturbation and having some sexual contact with others:

I used my cell phone watching porn movie after all they (roommates) are asleep. I would keep the volume down. So, nobody would notice this. (Man with ID, 25)

I like watching porn videos and touching my penis. But I am hesitant. It is because people say that masturbation is a bad thing. Men doing this because they are lecherous. (Man with ID, 21)

He kissed me and touched my body. He also asked me to pet him. But I rejected him. It is so ugly. (Woman with ID, 30)

He touched my thigh. He even wanted to kiss me. I said no. Finally, we broke up because he had another girl. (Woman with ID, 40)

The interviews explored in-depth discussions on sexuality and romantic relationships. Participants expressed a clear desire for romantic and sexual relationships, despite facing significant barriers from societal and familial expectations. Although none had experienced what they considered a 'successful' or 'long-term' relationship, either in the past or currently, their desire for such relationships was still evident throughout the conversations.

I expressed to my dad and elder sister that I would like to date a girl. But they said no. They said that I should be single, which can help to protect me from being cheated. (Man with ID, 40)

He hugged me and kissed me. I felt happy. But I was afraid that it would be discovered by staff and my parents. They would not allow me to have a relationship. (Woman with ID, 30)

I think making love is great. But I should not have a relationship. My dad does not allow me to have one. (Man with ID, 25)

A boy in the hostel wants to date me. He is good. But I should get permission from my dad. But I know, he won't allow it. (Woman with ID, 40)

I know a girl; she is so pretty. But my parents and the staff in the hostel say that it is dirty to have a girl image in my mind. I think I should stop it. (Man with ID, 21)

The dialogue above shows a pattern: people with intellectual disabilities clearly expressed their yearning to have a relationship, but their parents did not grant permission for that. Living under this disagreement or 'family rule', throughout all the interviews, none of the participants expressed overt resistance or attempted to negotiate with their parents regarding these restrictions.

### 3.2 | Parental Perspective: What We Have to Concern About and What We Would Not Allow Happening

Parents participating in this study acknowledged the sexual needs of their children with intellectual disabilities, yet expressed significant concerns and imposed restrictions on their sexual and relational autonomy. On one hand, they expressed that it is normal for everyone to have sexual desire. On the other, parents expressed their concerns and the ways in which they responded to the sexual desire of their child(ren) with intellectual disabilities.

Sex is just normal. But luckily that my boys do not ask me about dating. And of course, I won't do anything to facilitate this happening. (Mother with sons with ID at the age of 30 and 20, respectively)

Everyone has sexual desires and so does my son. I knew sometimes he would masturbate in his bed, but I prefer my husband to talk to him about this. (Mother with a son with ID at the age of 18)

He would masturbate. I know he would watch YouTube or some websites. If no one knows, that's ok. But my wife does not accept my boy to watch YouTube or masturbate. (Father with a son at the age of 24)

It is normal for either boys or girls to have sex or dating. But I would teach my girl not to watch any scene on the TV about kissing or related to sex. (Auntie caring for a girl with ID at the age of 32)

In the morning, I saw his pants were wet. But ... I would not like to check it out. What if I confirmed that it is ...? Do you know what I mean? I would rather ask my husband to handle this. (Mother with a son with ID at the age of 32)

My boy shows me he feels envious about his cousin having a girlfriend. I know he wants it too. (Mother with a son at the age of 35)

I noticed he watched YouTube and some porn websites. I am scared that it would become his habit and out of control. I scolded him and he stopped. (Mother with a son at the age of 33)

Although parents recognised sexual desire as a natural aspect of being human, they imposed restrictions on this 'natural state' by exerting parental authority to ensure compliance (Wang 2022). There was a clear trajectory that they did not see eye to eye with their child(ren) with intellectual disabilities' sexual desire. In the latter part of the interview, parents were asked about an imagery scenario in which their child(ren) has sex or even a marriage with someone. Unanimously, all participating parents expressed their disagreement with this scenario:

Talking about sex is a burden and not a priority! We have to arrange a lot of training, such as self-care, vocational ... And I would not encourage my boys to have a marriage. I do not want my boys to have any relationships with women in the future. It protects them from being cheated ... I've contemplated pursuing sterilisation for my sons and have discussed this with several social workers. However, I've encountered resistance and blame from them. It often feels as though professionals don't fully grasp the challenges and dilemmas I'm facing. (Mother with sons with ID at the age of 30 and 20, respectively)

I have lots of tasks to train my boy, such as bathing, brushing teeth ... Sex is important, but is not priority. (Mother with a son with ID at the age of 18)

I doubt he fully understands the concept of marriage. As a man, I recognise the importance of intimacy in a relationship. However, if I were to permit him to engage in excessive masturbation, it could lead to a loss of self-control. This would be detrimental to both him and me. And the society has a line, and I don't want him to cross it. The best for him is to restrict his (sexual) need and behaviour before it becomes a problem. (Father with a son at the age of 24)

I know I am selfish. But what if she has a baby also has intellectual disabilities? I am sorry, I would not encourage her to have sex or marriage. (Auntie caring for a girl with ID at the age of 32)

I want my boy always to be a boy. It is easier for me. But he is now 32. I know he has the need. But I do not like to talk about it. And you know, who can't guarantee his offspring has no intellectual disabilities? (Mother with a son with ID at the age of 32)

You (referring to the first author) hypothesise that a girl would love him and marry him. He has intellectual disabilities. He is a boy who never grows up, which means he cannot achieve anything. True love? No kidding. No one would love my boy more than me. I don't believe he can find true love. (Mother with a son at the age of 35)

I don't trust my boy would know how to manage a relationship. I know I am selfish. But the storey of raising a kid with intellectual disabilities is just so painful. It should be ended here. (Mother with a son at the age of 33)

The dialogue above clearly illustrates the parents' disapproval of allowing their child(ren) to engage in romantic relationships or marriage. Notably, the interviewer did not observe any anger

or negative emotions behind the parents' decision to impose such restrictions. Additionally, there was no indication of family conflict surrounding this issue. However, the phrase 'the storey should end here' was not voiced by only one parent. During the discussion, the interviewer sensed that, though no visible tears were shed, the parents appeared puffy from weeping, revealing a deep-seated psycho-emotional burden.

#### 4 | Discussion

This research paper presents the findings of interviews conducted with individuals with intellectual disabilities and a group of parents, exploring their personal experiences and perspectives concerning sexuality. Engaging in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis involves adeptly traversing the intricate layers of participants' personal experiences, revealing the deeper meanings hidden within their surface interpretations (Eatough and Smith 2017). This process can be likened to peeling away the layers of an onion, gradually exposing the core of their significant lived experiences (Lewis et al. 2016). On the surface, individuals with intellectual disabilities share similar sexual and romantic desires as those without disabilities. However, at a deeper level, despite the solid yearning that was found, all individuals with intellectual disabilities who participated in this study expressed a certain hesitancy to advocate for their sexual autonomy actively. Faced with disagreement from parents, people with intellectual disabilities chose to remain 'silent,' yielding to parental expectations and refraining from asserting their entitlement to explore and express their own sexual emotions. On the other, the parents who participated in this study revealed the emotional turmoil they experienced in caring for their child(ren) with intellectual disabilities. They held intense affection for their children, emphasised their unconditional love regardless of caring for a child with disabilities. Nevertheless, they nipped their children's desires for love and intimacy in the bud. For instance, parents acknowledged that restraining their children's longing for love or sexual experiences could be seen as detrimental or even selfish. However, they believed it might be the best course of action for their children with intellectual disabilities. Conversations on this plight with participating parents were emotionally charged, often tinged with a subtle undercurrent psycho-emotion of 'weep'.

The encounter of 'silence' and 'weeping' does not signify conflict between the two groups. Instead, the study reveals a shared consensus among participants that promoting the sexual autonomy of individuals with intellectual disabilities is not considered essential. This tendency towards 'cooperation' seems rooted in traditional Chinese cultural concepts of harmony and balance, symbolised by the Tai Chi (Dang, Xiao, and Yang 2024). The interplay of 'silence' and 'weeping' reflects a state of unity and natural duality rather than opposition. This 'harmonic cooperation' is shaped by a broader cultural context, influenced by two key values: filial piety and hierarchical family authority (Bedford and Yeh 2021), as well as the Chinese meritocratic social system (Tsang et al. 2022).

Filial piety serves as a moral framework within the parent-child relationship in Chinese families, aiming to foster

intergenerational harmony (Eklund 2018; Yeh et al. 2013). This framework encompasses two key dimensions: reciprocal and authoritarian (Yeh et al. 2013). In Chinese context, the reciprocal aspect entails children's psychological motivations to reciprocate the nurture and support provided by their parents. It involves showing respect, honouring and obeying parental demands (Eklund 2018), for instance, to achieve individual success in the marketplace for the purpose to honour one's family (Chen and Lau 2021; Liu 2019; Zhang 2020). However, individuals with intellectual disabilities encounter various limitations across different aspects of life (Shree and Shukla 2016; Ungurean 2021). When coupled with negative attitudes from the community, these limitations hinder social participation of people with intellectual disabilities and prevent them from establishing broader social networks as enjoyed by their non-disabled peers (Liu, Harkness, and Super 2020). Given these challenging circumstances, it becomes difficult for individuals with intellectual disabilities to achieve a high social status and subsequently to engage in the 'reciprocal return' or to repay the material debts they owe to their parents. Nevertheless, they can demonstrate their repayment through compliance with family rules. When it comes to the context of sexuality, people with intellectual disabilities frequently repress their desires, concealing their yearning, and adopt the role of a 'forever good child' within the framework of filial piety, to engage in 'reciprocal return' and to show gratitude to their parents.

Under the filial piety moral framework, participating parents are in the hierarchical position to exercise their paternalistic influence and disregard the desires expressed by their child(ren) with intellectual disabilities (Ebrey 2003; Eklund 2018; Yeh et al. 2013). Participating parents also expressed their concerns about their child(ren) having no capacity to understand the meaning of marriage and feared that the descendants will have disabilities as well. To resolve this kind of fear and concerns, the parents exercised their parental authority to restrict any possibility for their child(ren) to develop sexual and romantic relationships.

Filial piety in the Chinese community is closely tied to the concept of 'family face' (Yang and Wen 2021). Traditional Chinese culture holds the belief that 'Among all virtues, filial piety is the first'. This belief strongly links marriage, procreation, and filial duty. The notion that 'having no male offspring is the greatest form of impiety' emphasises the cultural expectation for individuals to marry and have children to continue the family lineage (Li et al. 2015). This Confucian focus on lineage has deeply influenced Chinese society (Zhu et al. 2022). However, these cultural norms contribute to the stigma against individuals with intellectual disabilities, placing them in a challenging, if not impossible, position within the practise of homogamous marriage—a deeply ingrained value in Chinese culture (Huo and Chen 2022). Within this cultural framework, individuals with intellectual disabilities often resort to 'silence' as a coping mechanism. Parents, while offering unconditional love to their children with intellectual disabilities, suffer from the cultural shame associated with ending the family bloodline. This shame acts as a psychological scar, leading to significant psycho-emotion 'weep'.

The Chinese meritocratic tradition is deeply intertwined with the practise of filial piety and has a significant impact on how

the sexuality of individuals with intellectual disabilities is managed. This tradition, based on hierarchy and merit, emphasises the ideal of the 'dragon child'. In Chinese culture, the dragon symbolises exceptional abilities and success, and many parents aspire for their children to become 'dragons'—extraordinarily accomplished individuals (Wang, Cheng, and Lu 2019). As one parent remarked, 'Every parent hopes their children will have a bright future. I admit that I am that type of person... but in reality, my son (with intellectual disabilities) cannot make it'. Research shows that in Hong Kong's social context, there is an intense emphasis on children's academic achievements. When a child falls short of these high expectations, it may cause the family to lose 'face' in this hierarchical society (Chang and Wang 2020; Leung and Shek 2018). For parents of children with intellectual disabilities, the inability to achieve the 'dragon' ideal leads to a double loss of 'face' and 'favour'—two critical components of social standing in Chinese society (Chen and Yu 2024). This deepens the emotional burden, sinking the 'weep' even further into the hearts of these parents.

In Confucian tradition, individuals, especially males, are expected to become 'dragons', embodying virtues such as benevolence, justice, politeness, wisdom, fidelity, integrity and filial piety (Hu and Broome 2020). Achieving these ideals typically involves rising to elite status within the hierarchical social system, which in turn qualifies one for homogamous marriage, earns respectable social standing, and brings honour or 'face' to the family (Li 2017; Tsang et al. 2022). Unfortunately, this traditional sociopolitical ideology has long legitimised merit-based inequality (Wang, Cheng, and Lu 2019; Xie 2016), creating significant barriers for individuals with intellectual disabilities. These individuals are often excluded from opportunities for upward mobility and are perceived as incapable of making meaningful contributions, rendering them 'invisible' in the eyes of the majority (Huang et al. 2020; Rosencrans et al. 2021; Shi et al. 2022). In such an unfavourable cultural terrain, although individuals with intellectual disabilities have an apparent yearning to establish a relationship, they cope with the restriction by adopting a submissive role, not striving to be 'dragons' but instead aiming to be 'forever good children'.

In this research context, both individuals with intellectual disabilities and their parents shared their concealed experiences, which revealed their distinct coping mechanisms within the societal framework. People with intellectual disabilities often suppress their desires for romantic relationships and sexuality. In response to this suppression, they tend to adopt a non-protesting stance or maintain a state of 'silence' as a form of adaptation. Within the cultural context of filial piety, this response is not seen as unfavourable but rather as a means of earning the 'reward' of being considered a 'forever good child'. The parents who participated in this study were acutely aware that wielding paternalistic authority was a self-centred action. However, the societal invisibility of families with a member with intellectual disabilities shielded them from external scrutiny and, consequently, favoured parents to exercise their authoritative parental power. This swing between offering unconditional love and exercising authoritative parental control left parents in a state tinged with a psycho-emotion of 'weeping'. The silence and weeping condition may appear to be negative aspects of the participants' lives. Nevertheless, when it comes to managing the

sexuality of individuals with intellectual disabilities within the Chinese cultural context, this dynamic can also be seen as an equilibrium between the participants and society at large.

## 5 | Implications

Faced with parental disagreement, the individuals with intellectual disabilities in this study often chose to comply with the imposed restrictions on exploring and expressing their sexual emotions. Research indicates that prolonged exposure to sex education can effectively address misconceptions about sexuality (Heymann et al. 2019). Therefore, systematic and regular relationships and sex education should be offered to both individuals with intellectual disabilities and their parents, along with ongoing training for teachers and healthcare professionals. This paper also highlights how Chinese values, such as filial piety and meritocracy, shape the dynamics between individuals with intellectual disabilities and parents, particularly in matters related to sexuality. Transforming this dynamic requires transforming deeply ingrained cultural beliefs, but such a shift is a monumental task that cannot happen overnight (Lam et al. 2024). To promote the long-term self-actualization of individuals with intellectual disabilities, society must shift from a meritocratic to a more pluralistic perspective.

First, individuals with intellectual disabilities—particularly those with mild conditions—are not incapable of surviving or functioning independently in society. Individuals with intellectual disabilities may face challenges in conceptual development, social interactions, and daily living skills, but they can still achieve significant independence with appropriate support. Society should rethink the concept of ‘individual independence’ within a broader framework of ‘interdependence’. Even for able individuals, successful independent living typically involves support from various sources, including family, neighbours, the community, socio-political structures and healthcare systems. In Hong Kong, for example, all students with intellectual disabilities are required to have an individual education plan (Ho and Lam 2020). Consequently, it is essential for teachers and social workers to address the misconception that ‘total independence’ is either a universally attainable or necessary goal.

Moreover, individuals with intellectual disabilities may not necessarily hold prestigious positions, such as that of a CEO. Therefore, it is crucial not to judge their worth solely based on their academic achievements or employment success. To encourage a broader appreciation of their value in order to promote their sexual autonomy, one potential approach involves recognising and celebrating their strengths in accordance with local cultural values. In the Chinese context, the concept from Confucian philosophy called ‘li’ can be considered. ‘Li’ is one of the five Confucian virtues that refers to the practise of public civility, and embracing this principle can help challenge the prevailing Chinese meritocracy paradigm (Li, Chia, and Gosling 2023). At the policy level, by promoting the idea of ‘li’, it can be operationalised by creating community service opportunities where individuals with intellectual disabilities actively contribute, thereby fostering a sense of mutual respect and societal engagement (Snell, Wu, and Lei 2022). In addition to acknowledging the value of ‘li’, promoting the entitlement

of people with intellectual disabilities to ‘peopleship right’ can also be regarded as politically and morally proper in the Chinese community (Lin, Levy, and Campbell 2024a). The concept of ‘peopleship’ emphasises the dual-self in Chinese culture, balancing individual interests (‘small-self’) with familial and societal obligations (‘great-self’) (Lin, Levy, and Campbell 2024b). In line with this cultural value, the community should develop social programmes to illustrate the positive lived experience of people with intellectual disabilities and their family and cultivate a positive collective understanding of their strengths and personal values (Grung et al. 2020).

## 6 | Limitations

To the best of the authors’ knowledge, there appears to be not many qualitative studies that include both individuals with intellectual disabilities and parents in discussing their experiences and perspectives on the sexuality of people with intellectual disabilities. By employing IPA, the study further provides an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of this often-overlooked group, offering rich, nuanced insights for practitioners and researchers. However, several limitations of the study should also be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample size, particularly for individuals with intellectual disabilities, was relatively small. The COVID-19 pandemic and associated social distancing measures in Hong Kong significantly restricted recruitment opportunities, leading to a smaller and less diverse sample. The small sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings and may not fully capture the diverse experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities about their sexuality. Additionally, the study utilised a cross-sectional design with convenience sampling, which may introduce biases and influence the understanding of the experiences related to sexuality among people with intellectual disabilities. A more diverse and representative sample would enhance the comprehensiveness of the findings.

Another significant limitation is the gender and role disproportionality within the parent group. The limited representation of fathers in the parent group hinders a balanced understanding of parental perspectives, particularly given the potentially distinct roles and expectations placed on fathers in Chinese culture. Further research that specifically explores fathers’ experiences is necessary to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how families navigate issues of sexuality when they have a member with intellectual disabilities.

The two groups who participated in this study were independent from each other. It means they had no blood relationship. In this regard, the actual negotiation process about sexuality issues among the participants could not be observed directly. Qualitative research methodologies are inductive and focus on meaning, producing rich and in-depth data, to make sense of the context or phenomena under investigation (Jones and Smith 2017). By observing the real-time negotiation dynamics, it can shed light on the emotional and power dynamics of discussions about sexuality, providing richer narratives and deepening the emic understanding of these interactions within a Chinese cultural context. Ethnographic methods, such as observing family interactions or analysing sex education deliveries, can be employed to uncover



deeper insights into these negotiation processes and the cultural artefacts that influence conversations about sexuality.

Future research could incorporate quantitative methods, such as large-scale surveys, to complement these qualitative findings (López-García et al. 2023). For instance, surveys could investigate societal attitudes towards individuals with intellectual disabilities engaging in sexual relationships or forming families, providing measurable data on acceptance levels across different demographic groups within Chinese society. This mixed-methods approach would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural and social factors at play.

## 7 | Conclusion

This study revealed the attitudes and experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities and their parents regarding issues of sexuality. It highlights the profound influence of Chinese cultural values and the social system on these attitudes. Promoting greater sexual autonomy for individuals with intellectual disabilities requires rethinking societal notions of dependence and leveraging Confucian values to challenge existing constraints within the Chinese context—a potential solution, though a difficult one to implement. Ultimately, the study's key contribution lies in highlighting the importance of recognising and respecting the complex interplay between cultural values and contextual constraints in shaping the sexuality of individuals with intellectual disabilities. While this topic is not entirely new, it remains an underexplored area in research that warrants further investigation and in-depth study.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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