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A study on Chinese bulletin board system forums: how Internet users contribute to set up the contemporary notions of family and marriage

Y. WeiMing, M. Sarrica and L. Fortunati

Abstract
The family has always functioned as mediator between the individual and society in China, but in the last three decades, marriage and the family have taken on diverse trends in China's rural and urban regions. This paper aims to map out how online bulletin board system forums, with their open access, interaction, and anonymous nature, are contributing to a change in the concepts concerning family and marriage in contemporary China. From a large database, we selected 46 threads (with 100,932 messages posted by 14,097 accounts) that discuss family and marriage, adopting a lexicometric approach to map online contents. Results indicate that in online debates traditional Confucian values are conflicting with new individualistic trends, with traditional ideals complicated by social factors, including the policy-induced urban-rural divide, corruption, and extra-marital affairs.

Keywords: BBS; China; family; marriage

The aim of this paper is to investigate how the discourses taking place in online forums, also known as bulletin board systems (BBSs), affect and mirror the ways marriage and family are socially constructed in contemporary China.
There are at least two main reasons underlying this study. First, BBSs provide a satisfying place to observe with non-intrusive methods the discourse of netizens on sensitive issues (Hauben & Hauben, 1997; Li, 2010), as well as a place to observe the evolution of Chinese society.
In fact, BBSs still attract a vast number of users in China. In such forums opinions are exchanged anonymously and relevant issues often appear in the form of gossip: this favours the open expression of collective sentiments and the emergence of conflicts that may otherwise be covert in public. In this regard, online discourses do not just mirror the changing society, but actively affect its evolution as demonstrated by new concepts and social actions created online, such as the human flesh search.1
Second, family has always had (and still has) a peculiar function in China: individuals integrate into a community or society through the mediation of family relationships. But in the last three decades there have been many changes to marriage and the family (as social institutions) in China: average family size and household size have declined, family structures have become nuclearized and diversified, and the number of families with elderly couples livingalone has increased (Deng & Xu, 2000). In the light of these structural changes, the concepts of family and marriage held by Chinese social actors are even more crucial for upcoming social transformations.
The paper is structured as follows. The next section describes what BBS forums in China are. We then go on to briefly outline Confucian notions of family and marriage, the Maoist approach, and the contemporary debate on these two issues. The following paragraphs present our investigation on the contents of BBS forums related to family and marriage.

BBS forums in China

Internet use in the People's Republic of China has grown at a tremendous pace: statistics from the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, 2013) show that the number of Internet users in China has now reached 564 million. In 2008 (when we took our sample of messages), young (88.3% of netizens were under 40) men (53.6%) dominated the population of netizens.

In total, 31.2% of netizens had undergraduate education or higher and three types of occupation (students, ordinary employees of enterprises, and self-employed labourers) accounted for 75.2% of netizens (CNNIC, 2009).

The BBS forums attract a massive share of Internet users (Le, 2010).
According to CNNIC, in 2012 there were 149 million Internet users (26.5%) regularly accessing BBS forums, while in 2009 and 2008 the figures were, respectively, 117 million (30.5%) and 91 million (30.7%) (CNNIC, 2013, 2010). A BBS forum consists of dozens or hundreds of discussion boards, which contain thousands or even millions of threads (posts). A thread consists of one root post and its corresponding replies (answers). In the present study, either the root post or a corresponding reply will be defined as a 'message'. While the vitality of online forums has been challenged by blogs, microblogs, and other Web 2.0 services, this online media so appreciated by Chinese online users still has long-term development prospects and has an important and unique position in Chinese online ecology (Hu, 2010).

The number of users and the dimension reached by BBSs clearly indicate that they constitute a major type of public sphere in China. In BBS forums, Internet users find information and solutions to problems, follow up on news and hot topics, discuss all sorts of issues, and share life experiences. Moreover, as views are exchanged anonymously, members tend to be frank on sensitive issues and users no longer rely on the elite or intelligentsia to represent them, but try to make their own voice heard.
The expression of these collective sentiments often appears in the form of gossip: as such, popular online discourses reflect a bottom up process through which norms and beliefs held by the grassroots are constantly being re-shaped (Li, 2010). As Yang pointed out, BBS forums go beyond online boundaries and have a profound influence on Chinese society by prompting political engagement and challenging traditional social or cultural ideologies, as well as creating spaces that nourish civility and social bonding (Yang, 2003).

A research conducted on BBSs by Damm in 2007 pointed out that the fragmentation within urban postmodernist society is most clearly demonstrated by the popularity of BBSs.
Conservative elements such as the emphasis on traditional gender roles and 'family values' were dominant online, but other elements also pointed to a new openness including sexual liberation. But as Damm (2007) stated, both Western and Chinese discourses pay little attention to broader social changes on the Chinese Internet, which mirror the societal development of Chinese society.

The present investigation aims to contribute to filling this gap by focusing on two of the pillars of Chinese society: family and marriage.
But before analysing this online debate taking place on BBSs let us briefly reconstruct how these two concepts – family and marriage – have been elaborated traditionally in the remote past, during the Maoist era and in contemporary China.

Confucian notions of family and marriage

Confucian philosophy has been the most powerful influence shaping Chinese culture. According to this realistic, down-to-earth philosophy, nothing is more important for good government and peace than proper family relationships. In Confucianism, 'Filial Piety' (Chinese: '孝', pinyin: xiao) is considered among the greatest of virtues and must be expressed towards both the living and the dead, including even remote ancestors.

The Filial Piety specified by Confucianism is constituted by: (a) taking care of parents, (b) not being rebellious, (c) showing love and respect, (d) being courteous, (e) concealing or ignoring parents' faults, and (f) mourning a parent's death in persistent, spontaneous, cohesive, and mutually agreed ways (Lin, 1992). The Confucian 'Filial Piety' is extended by analogy to the 'Five Cardinal Relationships' (Chinese:

'五伦', pinyin: wulun) that are paramount in social life: the relationships between 'Ruler and Subjects', 'Father and Son', 'Husband and Wife', 'Elder and Younger Brothers', and 'Friend and Friend'.

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As regards the ideology of the state, two more elements add to Filial Piety and to the patterns of family and marriage (Hsu, 1948): an education that trains for the patterns of old age and an ideology stressing kinship sentiment for the dead and a duty to continue to support one's ancestors.

The common denominator of all these elements was the principle of authority. Expressed in the form of the wishes of the ancestors, its sanctions were such that it gave a very wide measure of control to seniors, with the consequence that all members of the society to some degree lived in the ancestral shadow. In a concrete family, this means that children must submit to elders, especially male elders and the wife (and, eventually, concubines) must submit to the husband, as well as his parent-in-laws.

Notions of family and marriage during the Mao era

However, tremendous changes in the social, political, and economic aspects of life have occurred in Mainland China in the last six decades.

These changes have manifested themselves in radical transformations in the Chinese way of life. Shared meanings of family and marriage have been subjected to strong tensions and changes; in other words, traditional ideals have faced an attack from modernity.

Since the Chinese family held wealth and exercised power, the Chinese Communist revolution which worked and fought to create a classless socialist society required and depended upon changes in the Chinese family.

The Marriage Law of 1950 (passed within a year of the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949) banned many of the practices associated withtraditional marriages (e.g. multiple wives, child marriages, the sale of sons or daughters for marriage purposes, arranged marriages, bride-price, and concubinage) and gave women the right to divorce.

Monogamy was strictly enforced; adulterers were often dealt with harshly.

In the cities, the state acted to break the old bonds of moral debt and filial duty to patrilineal kinsmen. While the countryside underwent massive social transformation, the Communists destroyed the landlords and the organized lineages, but kept the bonds of kinship (Wolf, 1984).

In the Communist era, marriages and families were often regulated by neighbourhood councils or neighbourhood committees (Chinese: '居委会', pinyin: juweihui) and work units.

For example, in the Mao era, couples were required to get permission to marry from their employers or units (workplaces, especially state-owned factories or public offices). Wolf in 1984 concluded that, in normative terms, marriages were still formed to serve the interests of a larger group.

Formerly that group was the family and the lineage, while during the Mao era it was the collective or society. Freed from the oppression of the 'feudal' family, people were expected to transfer their loyalties from the former kind of collective to the one organized by the state.

Wolf (1984) also reported the respondents' view on marriage and children: for both economic and social reasons, one must marry in order to have children, because the state needs another generation of workers (just as the family once needed another generation of worshippers).

While romantic love was seen by many Westerners as the basis for marriage, the guidebooks (Lu, 1964) during the Mao era emphasized that love is 'shared labour, mutual support in studying, mutual criticism, and comradely solidarity', which demonstrated a comrade-like-marriage without the romance.

During the Maoist period, in order to tie Chinese citizens down to their birthplace and to make them dependent on either the rural collective or the urban work unit for employment and

subsistence needs, the household registration system (Chinese: '户口', pinyin: hukou) was first introduced in 1951.
While in urban China the household registration system was carried out by the 'collective household' using the family registration booklet, in the countryside a person's identity was recorded in a collective book kept at the village office (Yan, 2009).
This system not only banned all rural–urban migration without official permits, but also increased and perpetuated the social inequalities between rural and urban areas and led to the negative connotations associated with the social category of peasants that is still present in modern China (Cohen, 1993; Yan, 2009; Yang, 1999).

Fragmentation and individualization of contemporary Chinese society

Chinese society has undergone rapid and radical changes since the Chinese party-state officially launched its post-Mao economic reforms in 1978.
Throughout the 1980s, decentralization, the 'invisible hand' of the market, global operation and competition, and the whole cornucopia of neoliberal economic doctrines were engaged ideologically and theoretically in creating a 'socialist market economy' (Dirlik & Zhang, 1997).
The one-child policy initially applied to first-born children in 1978 and a new marriage law was passed in 1980 which took effect in 1981. According to Festini and Martino (2004), these policies, along with a traditional preference for sons (the son is labour force who ensures a serene old age for his parents and carries on the family line), have also had the effect of changing the sex ratio.

Contemporary China is characterized by emerging 'consumerist postmodernity', 'fragmentation and localization', and 'postmodernization' (Damm, 2007; Dirlik & Zhang, 1997; Lu, 1997).
Lu (1997, p. 66) argues that 'Contemporary China consists of the superimposition of multiple temporalities; the premodern, the modern, and the postmodern coexist in the same space and at the same moment'. In brief, this is a time when paradoxes and conflicts at both the individual and the social levels abound (Yuen, Law, & Ho, 2004).

The tension between traditional and modern values can be witnessed in the realization of 'Filial Piety' nowadays. From the structural-functionalist theories, modernization brings about social structures and changed aspirations that weaken people's acceptance of the norms of Filial Piety and their practice of its obligations (Ng, Phillips, & Lee, 2002). The relevant societal changes are those associated with industrialization, urbanization, and the increasing participation of women in waged and salaried employment (Dioale & Seda, 2001).

Among these, the development of industrialization has been the major process that has broken the previous local socioeconomic routine and de-legitimated its tradition.
Consequently, tensions between the traditional social practices and relationships and the new 'rational' social environment have emerged.
These tensions have resulted in the enhancement of the individualization process, in the increase of the distance of individuals from their community, relatives, and family, and finally in the increasing distinction between the private and the public.

Alternative views suggest that, because the actual practice of filial or inter-generational support requires material resources as well as an ideological or attitudinal basis, modernization, which brings about increases in economic resources and education, reduces Filial Piety minimally or conditionally (Cheung & Kwan, 2009).

Many researchers have also noticed the social transformation that has happened in China since the economic reform: the rise of the individual in social practices, the rise of consumption-based sociality in a commercialized public space, and the individualization of social relationships (social interactions among individuals as individuals, instead of as representatives of the family or other social groups) (Tsui, 1989; Yan, 2009). The situation of 'compulsive and obligatory selfdetermination' (Bauman, 2000) compels people to become proactive and self-determining individuals who must take full responsibility for their own problems and who develop a reflexive self (Giddens, 1991). Under these fragmentary and individual circumstances, the social actors

in contemporary China face several conflicting ideals and values (Yuen et al., 2004), especially in their personal lives concerning such things as marriage and family.
These individualizing tendencies interact with materialistic approaches towards marriage and family.

A social survey (Pan, 1986) showed that 68.3% of workers and employees thought that the most important change during the economic reform which started in 1979 was a desire to 'earn as much money as possible by working hard so as to modernize family life', which means buying modern household appliances and raising living standards.
This value orientation was different not only from the unselfish, collectivist orientation emphasized by the Communist Party, but also from the traditional familism, which calls for self-sacrifice for the sake of parents and ancestors.
More recently, Pierson (2010) pointed out:

> Many women won't marry a man who doesn't own a home. This recent shift, along with soaring real estate prices, has created a woefully frustrated class of bachelors…Marriage is becoming more and more materialistic. This is a huge change in Chinese society.

Marriage is delayed through various constraints and sanctions. Young people are expected to delay marriage until they graduate from college, get a job, save money, and purchase accommodation (Tsui & Rich, 2002).
Furthermore, Zheng et al. (2011) argued that China appears to be on a pathway of de-traditionalization of attitudes towards four sexual behaviours: premarital sex, extra-marital sex, same-sex relationships, and sex work.
There are varying degrees of acceptance of these four sexual behaviours, with premarital sex seen as common and with considerable acceptance of commercial sex work as part of male business transactions and social life.

Nevertheless, traditional values have continued to influence the way Chinese people behave. Pimentel (2000) has found that parents in urban China continue powerfully to affect their children's marriages,and that Chinese couples have what Westerners might characterize as a relatively unromantic vision of love, seeing it as more like companionship.
In such a changing context, we expect that ICTs, and BBSs in particular, act as technological catalysers of the discoursivity about family and marriage.
The ICTs, even with the well-known limitations, tremendously enhanced the amount of available information, the access to 'other' experiences, or the possibility of discussing new trends. In sum, ICTs accelerated the recording of conflicts between the 'coexisting multiple temporalities' and the development of new solutions.
As already stated, BBSs are one of the most important place where tensions and controversies are debated and where new ideas are created and shared.
Family and marriage, in particular, emerge as objects of social construction: shared sets of knowledge elaborated through public conversation to cope with novelties and to understand and predict social interactions (Flick, 1998).
Therefore, it could be hypothesized that online discussions contribute to developing new ways of conceiving these pivotal elements of Chinese society.

Research question

The current research aims to complement the reviewed literature by focusing on family and marriage as objects of social construction.
In consequence, we state our research questions as follows: What are the main contents used by Chinese netizens in discussions of family and marriage and how are these ideas organized?
And how far do they reflect reported ideas in the literature? We expected to find online a conversation concerning these issues which not only merely mirrors offline institutional and widespread discourse on these topics, but also actually reshapes, in a more concentrated and profound way, prevalent ideas about family and marriage.
In particular, in line with Lu (1997), we expected that multiple temporalities coexist in online discussions.

We thus expected that traditional values rooted in the Confucian 'Filial piety' as well as Maoist features, such as the rural–urban difference or the strict relationship between family and societal issues, to be present in online discourse.
At the same time, we expected that Confucian and Maoist-based approaches to family represent a shared background against which new interpretations, new risks, and new challenges based on individualism, independence/selfishness, or money-based evaluation stood out.
In particular, drawing on the examined literature, we also expected that economic and social reasons behind marriage and having children that were anchored to societal needs during Maoism (Wolf, 1984) are now being reconsidered in terms of individual needs.
Moreover, we expected that both structuralist (Ng et al., 2002) and alternative hypotheses (Cheung & Kwan, 2009) on the effects of the market economy and new industrialization on families manifest themselves in online discourse, in terms of perceived conflicts between new possibilities offered by independence and autonomy and new risks connected to isolation.

Sample and method

This study is based on the Four-Forum database which yields 9158 threads with 7,262,888 corresponding replies in total from four major comprehensive Chinese BBS forums in the period of one year (from July 2007 to July 2008).
We chose, 'Qiangguo Forum', 'Maoyan Kanren Forum', 'Tianya Forum', and 'Sina Forum' (Chinese: '强国论坛', '猫眼看人论坛', '天涯论坛', and '新浪论坛'), four websites according to their ownership, location, discussion topics, ranking, and history.
Considering the tremendous amount of content in the database, we followed a multiple stage sampling method.
First, the first page of each forum was systematically sampled; this lead to a research population of 9158 threads. Second, a random sample composed by 1070threads was extracted from the population.
Within this sample we found 46 threads discussing family and marriage, from three online BBS forums: Maoyan Kanren, Tianya, and Sina (threads from Qiangguo Forum did not contain posts concerning topics on family and marriage. Therefore, Qiangguo Forum is not included in our sample).
Our final textual corpus is composed of these 46 threads, with 100,932 messages posted by 14,097 accounts (Table 1). The textual corpus was submitted to lexicometric content analysis.
The analysis was performed in two steps.
The threads were first coded according to a preliminary content analysis grid, inspired by Confucian literature (cf. above).
Wherever the preliminary grid did not fit, new categories were added to the grid.
This phase led to the identification of seven main categories concerning the notion itself of family, the structural relationships inside the family (parent–children, husband–wife, and brotherhood) or outside it (concubine), a feeling such as love, and finally the sociogeographical category rural–urban (Table 2).
These categories are a cultural expression of classic sociological themes such as the family and its internal structure and the relationship between societal and structural forces and the ways family life and the interpersonal relationships are organized and conceived.
Our preliminary grid included three categories: 'Parent–Children' (corresponding to the 'Father and Son' relationship), 'Husband–Wife', and 'Siblings' (corresponding to the 'Elder and Younger Brothers' relationship).
Furthermore, we found a large number of messages concerning 'concubines' (Chinese: '二奶', pinyin: ernai), especially stories about a rich or powerful man who keeps a woman outside his marriage, as well as stories about the 'rural–urban gap' inside the family.
These issues led to the following two categories: 'Concubine' and 'Rural–Urban'. Two other categories, 'Love' (threads only focusing on passionate desire and the intimacy of romantic love) and 'Family' (threads talking about family in a more comprehensive way), were introduced to complete the range of topics discussed in the messages.
The textual corpus was first treated with the aim of reducing its variability and of concentrating on the most 'dense' in meaning (adjectives, verbs, and nouns). From the lexical point of view the common procedure includes normalization of the text and lemmatization of the graphic forms.

We had to face an obstacle in dealing with Chinese texts. Unlike Western languages, Chinese is written without spaces between words and punctuation appears only at the end of a sentence. Thus to run any word-based or token-based linguistic software on Chinese texts, it is first necessary to determine word boundaries.
We adopted the ROST Content Mining System[2] to calculate the total word frequencies, and these are given in Table 2.

We defined a minimum frequency threshold of 10 and we identified the frequency threshold at the sharpest concave bend in the frequency distribution.
In some categories, there were still a massive number of most frequent words and we decided to keep 10% of the most frequent words of these categories. Finally, we deleted from the corpus the empty words generated by the system (such as 'author', 'reply', 'send message', etc.), we reduced synonyms keeping as far as possible cultural nuances, and we translated the words from Chinese into English.

Table 1. Summary of the sample.

Forum	Thread	ID Account	Message
Tianya	25	13,855	100,490
Sina	19	205	403
Maoyan	2	37	39
Total	46	14,097	100,932

Table 2. Characteristics of the textual corpus by seven categories of content.

Category	Thread	Number of messages	Total word frequency	Distinct word of frequency >10
Love	9	803	25,946	380
Rural–urban	4	824	32,887	545
Concubine	9	41,957	860,686	11,424
Husband–wife	8	248	15,518	185
Family	9	51,944	3,442,188	25,047
Parent – children	6	2737	43,140	471
Sibling	1	2419	137,360	2220
Total	46	100,932	4,557,725	40,272

The treatment of the text leads to a final corpus of 500 words.
The most frequent words were then examined to grasp the main contents used to define each of the seven categories identified in the first step of the content analysis.

Moreover, the resulting matrix words (N = 500) by category (N = 7) were submitted to correspondence factor analysis (CFA) (Greenacre, 1993; Greenacre & Blasius, 1994) supported by Spad software (DECISIA, 2003; Lebart, Morineau, Becue, & Haeusler, 1989).
It should be noticed that the use of CFA with textual data can be considered as a quali–quantitative method of investigation.

In fact, the co-occurrence of words and categories as well as the axes unveiled by the analysis are based on strict statistical calculations; nevertheless, the meanings associated to those relationships and to the dimensions that organize them are inferences and interpretations provided by the researchers.
CFA is an exploratory technique similar to principal component factor analysis; it is especially suitable for categorical data and allows us to detect underlying dimensions that organize the relationships between categorical variables.
After these operations we were thus able to explore the relationship between contents and between categories.

Results

Main contents

The most frequent words for each category give us a first idea of the contents for each issue.
The following are words used most by BBS users in the seven categories considered.
Messages dealing with Love frequently include terms such as woman (frequency = 205), man (188), girl (113), love (107), friend (92), and girl-friend (92). Terms such as parents (91), brother (45), and society (22) are relatively frequent; these words are used in messages dealing with the relationship between interpersonal relationship and the communities to which individuals belong.

A third group of contents relates to economic and materialistic content associated with love, money (62), and jewellery (23).
The Rural–Urban category includes words that oppose village (1283) and city (637), yet other dimensions such as gender and economy are often evoked with words including woman (206) and money (148).
Referrals to discrimination (129) are also frequent.
The category Concubine is characterized by the presence of terms such as human flesh (5844), public officer (5117), concubine (4268), parents (2764), and unit (workplace, 2139). These words are used in messages dealing with the dialectic between public offices and private relationships.

The most frequent terms that are used in the Husband–Wife and in the Family categories tend to replicate the structural elements of the relationships, i.e. wife (201), man (119), woman (104),husband (74), and relatives (66) for the first and daughter (32,585), parents (31,878), brother-inlaw (29,790), house (21,677), and son-in-law (16,581) for the second.
It is interesting to note that the aged (12,148) are included frequently in the category of Family.
As to the category Siblings, words like elder brother (4659), sister-in-law (elder brother's wife, 3510), money (2679), parents (1630), and like (797) are used most frequently.
Finally, the contents in the Parent–Children category bring to the forefront the traditional concept of Filial Piety: words such as father (1057), restrain one's grief (866), offer incense and pray (795), rest in peace (686), parents (426), and Filial Piety (123) are highly frequent.

Organization of contents and categories

From the CFA, on the basis of the eigenvalues histogram (i.e. similarly to the scree-test), we chose to illustrate the first three dimensions, which account overall for 81.6% of total inertia.
In the interpretation of these dimensions, we retained lexical forms with absolute contribution ≥0.2 and categories with absolute contribution ≥ 14.3.[3]

Responsibility and care: new pattern to show 'Filial Piety'

The first factor, which explains the highest part of the total inertia, is a unipolar factor related to the macro category Parent–Children and is opposed to all the other six macro categories considered in this research: Love, Rural–Urban, Concubine, Husband–Wife, Family, and Siblings. It is the first and the most important dimension and the elements that significantly contribute to it can be traced back to the needs of security and safety, as well as to caring practices (Bowlby, 1969). However, it must be stressed that the expressions that contribute to this dimension are culturally situated and can be interpreted in the light of the Confucian tradition (Table 3).
As we anticipated, according to Confucianism, 'Filial Piety' is considered among the greatest of virtues. Given the elements that contribute to determine the first dimension emerging from the correspondence analysis, we can infer that Chinese BBS users still consider Filial Piety a relevant organizing principle of everyday discourse.

Table 3. Correspondence analysis. Factor 1, children–parents relationship.

Inertia (%)	Word	Coordinates	Contribution
33.7	Restrain one's grief	−10.49	25.61
	Offer incense and pray	−10.49	23.51
	Rest in peace	−9.97	19.26
	Father	−3.45	10.13
	Double income no kids	−10.09	7.22
	Baby	−6.23	3.57
	Heaven	−4.56	1.69
	Safety	−4.88	1.11
	Blessing	−2.68	1.08
	Ungrateful person	−4.07	0.84
	Health	−2.27	0.44
	Regret	−1.43	0.37
	A lifetime	−1.59	0.27
	Happiness	−0.62	0.22
	Glad	−0.69	0.22
	Parent–children	−6.42	98.17

Note: Only relevant contributions are displayed.

The relationship between parents and children continues to be, in the social representation of these Internet users, the foundation of every other social relationship.
On the whole, the first dimension is highly emotional (concepts such as grief, safety, blessing, regrets, happiness, and gladness) and is also touched by a religious sensitivity (ideas such as heaven, praying, and offering incense).
But in this dimension especially a tension emerges between Filial Piety practised as social routine (attitudes expressed by children towards their parents) and the change of lifestyle and family structure that has been caused by people with modernization.
Examples are as follows: a netizen who expressed his grief over and memory of his departed father (the root post's author's 'departed father') and other Internet users delivered their comfort and good wishes to the aged.

In comparison, the double income no kids thread ('DINK' for short) discusses the case of a double income family planning to choose a lifestyle without kids; Internet users gave suggestions and opinions such as 'a child gives parents pride and happiness' or 'regret this kind of lifestyle'. But the discussion here is drawn from personal interest, individual needs, and social problems, rather than from traditional norms of 'Filial Piety' which deems 'no posterity' to be the greatest

offence to the ancestors as well as the clan (Chinese: '不孝有三,无后为大', from 'Mencius Annotation', the first part of Lilou).

Menaces against the family: from inside and outside

The second factor (x-axis, Figure 1, inertia = 25.9%) which we will denominate 'Menaces against the family: from inside and outside' expands the notion of family in some other directions.

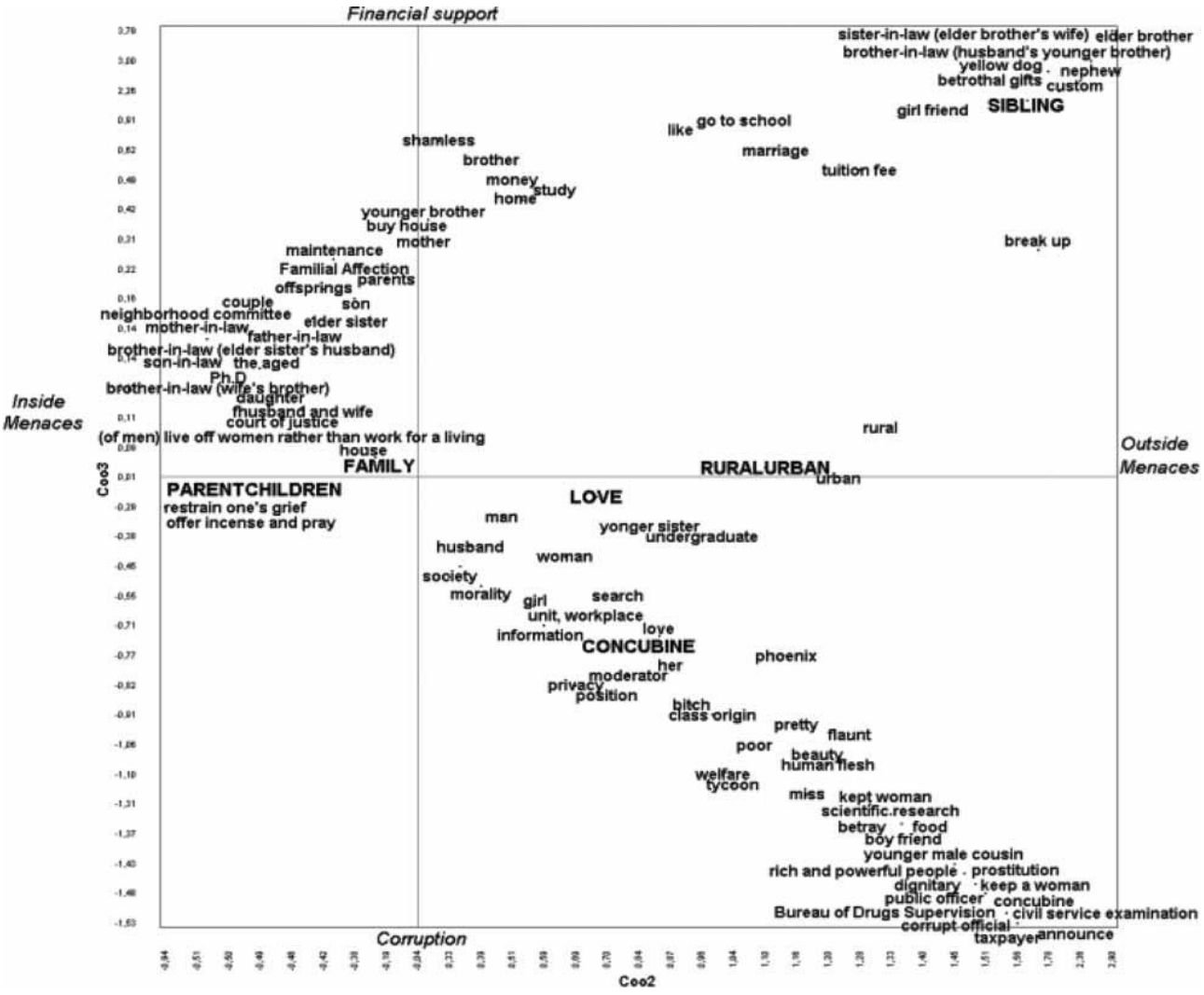

Figure 1. Correspondence analysis. Second and third dimensions.
Note: Plotted terms are only those with considerable absolute contribution on the second (x-axis) and third (yaxis) dimensions; uppercase terms: active categories; and italicized terms: interpretation of the poles of the axes.

This second factor on the negative pole highlights the crisis happening in stem families and the tension between family members of origin and acquired families.
To this pole, economic and social-psychological factors contributed greatly to specific cases (in contemporary China, young couples are struggling with high housing prices).
A married couple living with their parents-inlaw cited problems related to poverty, housework, and child care. A post revealed that a man with a doctoral degree used his parents-in-law to take care of his son.
After his son began to attend kindergarten, he kicked his parents-in-law out of the house, because he did not need their help anymore.

Further discussion developed online revealed that these complex domestic problems sometimes find a solution by recourse to a neighbourhood committee or even the courts of justice.
At the opposite pole, menace against the existence of the family comes from extra-marital relationships (and in particular from the existence of a concubine) and crises inside the family (such as problems between siblings).
On the one hand, pretty girls who come from rural and poor families needing money to pay fees (like tuition fees for university or living expenses) in the cities become concubines of rich and powerful men.

One concubine who went public about her life on the BBS Forum led indignant netizens (who claimed to be 'taxpayers') to execute a human flesh search to identify the corrupt official.
On the other hand, menaces against the family might come from financial problems between siblings.
The individual calculation of money (such as the case where the netizen's sister-in-law asks him to pay back his tuition fees to his elder brother) challenges the traditional morality or code of brotherhood.

Money and power: corruption and concubines vs. financial support

The third factor (y-axis, Figure 1, inertia = 22.03%) has been denominated 'Money and power: corruption and concubines vs. financial support'.
At the negative pole, the issue of extra-marital relationships introduces the societal issue of the policy-induced urban-rural divide.
Concubines are a way to discuss the corruption of public officers, the power exercised in the workplace and the power exercised by rich people, dignitaries, and tycoons: the stereotypical example is the story of some poor pretty women from rural China who exchange sex for money, the opportunity of social mobility, or a governmental job that provides work stability and benefits such as low-cost health care and subsidies on housing, transport, and meals.

At the positive pole of the third factor, the issues are siblings and the financial responsibilities inside the family – whether, for example, parents who paid for their daughter's tuition fees still need to offer betrothal gifts when she gets married.
The underlying question is how much Chinese parents should support their children financially (education, purchase of a house, etc.).
In some cases, when the parents are gone, the eldest child of the family has to take care of the younger members.

Since the first dimension is unipolar, we focus on the factorial plane defined by the second and the third dimensions (Figure 1).
It is possible to notice that contents related to corruption and financial support are positioned on the positive pole of the second dimension.
In other terms, the wholeness of the family is threatened by societal corruption that is exemplified by extramarital relationships and by a re-definition of financial responsibilities between siblings and between parents and children.

Discussion

The results of our analysis depict a map of the main concepts and ideas concerning family and marriage expressed by Chinese Internet users in BBS Forums.
Our expectations that online conversations could represent intense discourses where family and marriage are re-shaped are supported.
From our analysis, traditional values (especially Confucian values) concerning family and marriage in online discoursivity clearly appear in conflict with modernity, individualism, and materialism.

This result confirms that the fragmented condition of contemporary Chinese
society is caused by the coexistence of multiple temporalities. As Dirlik and Zhang (1997, p. 3) state: 'The coexistence of the pre-capitalist, the capitalist, and the post-socialist economic,

political, and social forms represents a significant departure from the assumptions of a Chinese modernity, embodied above all in the socialist revolutionary project'.
There is no doubt that the crucial theme discussed in our textual corpus is the relationship between adult children and parents, which emerges in the first factor of the correspondence analysis 'Responsibility and care: New Pattern to Show "Filial Piety"'.
As expected, new patterns are elaborated online in order to express 'Filial Piety'.

For example, the 'DINK' thread discloses the decline of 'Filial Piety' in an indirect way: even when feelings of regret are expressed, Internet users involved in this thread argued from self-interest and individual needs, and do not invoke absolute values or prescriptive norms.
This online discourse on 'Filial Piety' mirrors the increasing difficulties that the Chinese elderly encounter in receiving support from their adult children in everyday life (Chou, 2011).
The situation of the elderly in China is so precarious that Chinese government in these days has attempted to regulate 'Filial Piety' by law by establishing a series of norms that adult children have to apply towards their old parents (the 60s in China are today 185 million).
This law requires citizens to call and visit their old parents more often and gives 20 days of permission each year to adult children (especially the oldest ones) to visit their parents.
This law also requires doing physical exercises with them, teaching them how to use the Internet or how to make pictures, cooking for them, organizing their birthday party, taking care of their health and giving them sufficient money to live.

This law represents the will of the Chinese government to resolve the social evil of the abandonment of the elderly not by producing a welfare state but by bringing back the problem of the care for the elderly into the family (Wong, 2013).
The second factor which emerged in our study as 'Menaces against the family: from inside and outside' mirrors the notion of a twofold society bringing down the collective boundaries that confined the individual within a given group and recognizing the individual as an independent unit in social life (Fortunati & Law, 2012).
To interpret the second factor, we have to note how family is affected by the individualization of its members (Yan, 2009).
Self-determining individuals who take full responsibility for their own problems appear in Chinese BBSs disembedded from external social constraints, as Bauman (2000) and Beck and Beck (2002) noticed in other contexts.

These constraints include both cultural traditions in general and some encompassing categories in particular, such as family, kinship, community, work unit, and social class.
The online debate concerns Confucian ideals or codes ('Five Cardinal Relationships') and self-interest (individual monetary calculation among siblings) mirrors the familial-individual tension.

On the one hand, there are increasing demands for individuality, choice, and freedom both from and being imposed on individuals and especially on women (Riley, 2013; Zhang, 2010) and on the other hand, there are the complex and unavoidable social institutions upon which the same individuals usually depend (Hausen & Svarverud, 2010; Yan, 2011).
From the Confucian code on brotherhood, one should 'treat an elder brother as father'; in reciprocation, the elder brother should take responsibility for the family when his father dies or becomes incompetent.

But the online debate on BBSs mirrors the fact that the rise of consumption- based sociality (Yan, 2009) means that social interactions become interactions between persons as individuals, and even the siblings inside one family treat each other as individuals from a perspective of rational calculation.
In some aspects, the tendency, showed by netizens, towards individualism, which is functional-oriented, is in conflict with the traditional family code that uses the degree of closeness of relationship as the bases for value judgement and distribution of benefits (Yuen et al., 2004).
The conflict between the traditional family code and the tendency towards individualization is mirrored by the reshaping of the notions of brotherhood as valuable forms of alliance, which is taking place in the daily life of contemporary China.
In particular, the tensions among siblings concerning old parents' care should be analysed in the light of social insecurity due to the persistence of lower incomes, high internal mobility, and insufficient support by the state, as stressed by Wu (2010).

Concubines vs. Financial Support', online users introduce the topic of the concubine (Gu, 2013), which is apparently gossip, to discuss much more relevant social issues (Brown, 2013). From the fervent discussions on concubinage, we found a definite tension in online debate between two dimensions: rural–urban and official–civilian.

The importance of rural–urban relationships we found in our study adds a new element to the research literature, which needs further exploration (Cohen, 1992).
Participants in BBSs use concubinage as a way to question the rural–urban difference that is still relevant in contemporary China.
The household registration system is used for controlling population movement and sorting individuals for the distribution of goods and services (Liu, 2005). Under the household registration system as it is currently set up, 'origin' (where a person comes from, ascribed status) is far more important than 'current location' (achievable status) (Hussain, 2003; Zhang & Treiman, 2013).

Behind the original place is one's parents' social economic status and social class, which in some way determine the professional achievement and in general the whole life of a person.
Online experience intrinsically contrasts with this organization: networking, which is at the core of ICTs, dramatically changes the perception and the meaning associated with places and distances; moreover, participants in BBSs are anonymous, thus individual contribution to the debate is far more relevant than ascribed characteristics, such as origin, which cannot be controlled.
As to the official–civilian relationship, in ancient China officials' self-discipline, governmental supervision, and the local elite (because of their 'semi-official, semi-civilian' nature) were used to mitigate the tension between public officials and civilians.
In contemporary China, the Internet (especially BBS forums and microblogs) has become the users' anti-corruption weapon, where they can display their concerns about and criticism of public officials (Dai, 2013; Dong, 2013).

'Human Flesh Search Engines' are a form of online vigilante justice, in which collective Internet users hunt down, expose, and punish wrongdoers, as well as bringing attention to mistakes made by the media or the government (Herold, 2011). The change brought about by Internet in the official– civilian relationship emerges, through the concubine issue and the related human flesh search, even in our research, which was supposed to focus mainly on online discussions of family and marriage.

Conclusion

The BBSs proved to be a good observation point to investigate the debate on family and marriage in contemporary China.
Our data present a broad picture of the way family and marriage are undergoing a deep process of re-signification in contemporary China and show how the debates developed on BBSs contribute to the societal discussion: the traditional Confucian ideals are not absent, and nor are people indifferent to them, but individual feelings, personal enjoyment, and social issues are becoming more and more respected.
Nevertheless, some caveats should be stressed in order to avoid over-generalization of the results.

First, we chose to analyse online forums. As explained in the introduction, these data were selected for the growing influence that BBS Forums have on Chinese society and for the challenges they pose to traditional social or cultural ideologies (Damm, 2007; Yang, 2003).
Even if we selected the major Chinese BBS forums and a large data-set from these forums, our data may suffer from the self-selection of participants.

For example, we cannot exclude that those who actively participate in the forum are the vanguard of the new generation, trying to push forward new issues and societal changes. Further research is thus needed to clarify the presence of specific sub-groups online or to eventually identify other contexts (online or offline) where specific groups of individuals express their positions and ideas.

Second, we chose to adopt a lexicometric approach in order to manage the large amount of textual data collected. Data show the co-presence of contrasting values and ideologies; however, the articulation of contents is only partially grasped by lexicometric analysis, which is based on the most frequent words and their co-occurrence. Further studies are needed to explore and interpret other characteristics of the texts.
Qualitative content analyses would be useful in addressing specific issues, such as emotions, the descriptions of concubines, and the role of money in more detail.

In fact discoursive approaches may address the way debates evolve online and how ideologically rooted contents are rhetorically used by netizens.

Third, our interpretation of the results was supported by a deep theoretical discussion about societal changes in contemporary China and by a native perspective on the data.

The link between structural changes, the contents of societal discourses, and the situated practice is a complex issue that we left in the background. In this paper we empirically addressed one pole of the triangle.

Our data suggest that a deep change is happening in the family and marriage relationships; nevertheless, further studies are needed to empirically address the link with structural changes and practices.

This study may be understood as a picture of the change in progress; a time dimension should thus be added in order to understand the ongoing dynamics between debates, structures, and practices.

Even with these caveats, this study presents a rich picture of the interlink between changes happening in the societal and private spheres in China as they are described by netizens in BBSs, paving the way for further and more detailed investigation of the complex cultural, or we may say inter-cultural, dynamics faced by Chinese people.

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Notes

1. Human flesh searches are a primarily Chinese Internet phenomenon of massive researching using Internet media. They have generally been stigmatized as being for the purpose of identifying and exposing individuals to public humiliation.

They are used for a number of reasons, including exposing government corruption, identifying hit and run drivers, and exposing scientific fraud.

2. ROST Content Mining System has been developed by the ROST virtual learning team from Wuhan University, China.

Downloaded from http://www.fanpq.com/?page_id=2.

We used ROST to extract the co-occurrence set of high-frequency Chinese characteristic words and establish the frequency of each word.

3. The absolute contribution of a point to a dimension is the proportion of inertia (variance) explained by the point.

The sum of the contributions of the points to each factor is equal to 100.

Only points with considerable value (i.e. >100/n, where n is the number of points) are discussed.

In our case, it is

100/500 = 0.2 for words and 100/7 = 14.3 for categories.

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