Online patriarchal bargains and social support: Struggles and strategies of unwed single mothers in China

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Article

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Abstract
Patriarchal bargains have been studied in many settings as a strategy that helps women circumvent constraints and forge spaces for individual empowerment. Despite the growing use of mediated communication, little is known about how patriarchal bargains are enacted and realized within online interactions such as in discussion forums. By analyzing how Chinese unwed single mothers renegotiate the state's oppressive population control and gender policies through their online activity, this study proposes the concept of "online patriarchal bargain" to extend patriarchal bargain theory to women's Internet use. It further explores linkages between social support and patriarchal bargain to elucidate how support is integral to enacting agency in the face of forbidding systemic constraints. The findings also delve into the role of therapeutic culture in the day-to-day experiences of women, especially those in marginalized communities.

Keywords
online patriarchal bargain, social support, therapeutic culture, online forum, unwed single mothers, China

From the 1970s, the Chinese government strictly regulated reproduction using penalties (Lu and Xie 2013) under its one-child policy. This persisted beyond 2000 (Greenhalgh 2008) until 2013 when aging trends demanded that the policy be relaxed

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by allowing couples to have a second child. However, non-marital childbearing remains illegal and women who give birth out of wedlock still do not have access to social welfare (Lu and Xie 2013). These birth control regulations have exacerbated gender disparity, social discrimination, and violence against unwed single mothers. However, these marginalized women's voices are missing from current discussions in Chinese academia and public discourse. This study draws on Kandiyoti's (1988) theoretical framework of patriarchal bargain to analyze how unwed single Chinese mothers negotiate the state's population control and gender relations via "online patriarchal bargains."

"Patriarchal bargains" are constraints that regulate male dominance in gender relations (Kandiyoti 1988), influencing women's ability to resist oppression. Previous research have uncovered women's tactics to circumvent patriarchy in face-to-face settings, including exchanging sexual services for economic protection, employing domestic workers to delegate household responsibilities, and tapping women's community groups to mediate domestic disputes (Arieli 2007; Jongwilaiwan and Thompson 2013; Lan 2000). However, patriarchal bargain theory has not been applied to women's online activities, with little known of whether and how patriarchal bargains are struck online. Yet, women's agency online is germane, considering the proliferation of online communities which can potentially enhance women's social ties, disrupt gender inequality, and facilitate social support (Elliott 2004; Humphreys and Vered 2014). Greater resources via enhanced social connections and mutual affirmation can positively reshape the nature and forms of women's bargaining tactics (Pedersen and Smithson 2013). Through extended social networks, participants can reach wider audiences for greater commiseration, mobilization, and fellowship (Reich 2010).

Building on earlier theorizing of patriarchal bargains, this study examines the role of online social support in unwed single mothers' enactment of patriarchal bargains to renegotiate male dominance in heterosexual relations and the state's population control policies. We propose the term "online patriarchal bargain" to encapsulate the negotiation processes (online and offline) facilitated by the resources gained in online communities. This approach extends previous research on patriarchal bargains that focused on material-based exchanges within household settings (e.g., Arieli 2007; Yount 2005). Instead, we emphasize online relational and symbolic resources and highlight their new dynamics as renegotiation defies the boundaries of the household and enters into public discussion. Online forums open up discursive spaces where personal pain can be discussed and disadvantages interrogated (Wright 2008). The collective reconstitution of these women's social experience, resembling feminism's second wave, also reflects how the personal becomes profoundly political (Friedan 1963).

Moreover, women's practices of active self-disclosure and sharing of narratives of personal suffering may be understood through the therapeutic culture lens. It was initially critiqued for fostering a preoccupation with the self over communal bonds and civic responsibility (Becker 2005; Rieff 1966), and for encouraging narratives of vulnerability and socially disengaged narcissism birthing new forms of social control (Furedi 2004). Recent studies laud the therapeutic ethos for its emancipatory value (Wright 2008). Das and Hodkinson (2020) see the agentic potential of self-disclosure in online therapeutic communities in motivating participants to take control and

develop supportive relationships and processes, thereby facilitating self-acceptance, self-awareness, autonomy, and resilience despite adversity (Dubrofsky 2007; McLeod and Wright 2009). The caring relations in women's support groups particularly create transformative possibilities in gender relations (Foster 2016). Therefore, we also explore how online therapeutic discourses helped these women negotiate and navigate structural inequalities and material circumstances.

Patriarchal Bargain Framework

"Patriarchal bargains" are manifested in different degrees and forms of resistance, from eager collaboration to skillful maneuvering (Kandiyoti 1988). This framework augments our understanding of women's choice and tactics within systemic constraints in explaining why women can be mobilized around certain issues despite undermining long-term interests (Waylen 1992). Systems of patrilineal inheritance and patrilocal residence require that women submit to the male authority to gain economic protection and other extrinsic resources (Kandiyoti 1988). Such "bargains" necessitate women's adoption of interpersonal strategies to manipulate their husbands' affections to maximize security through offering reproductive, sexual, and labor services, demonstrating sexual and emotional fidelity, and exchanging kin-keeping tasks (Jongwilaiwan and Thompson 2013; Yount 2005).

Women continuously contest, redefine, and renegotiate the rules and scripts of patriarchal bargain (Tønnessen 2010) through seeking education and employment, thereby liberating themselves from family work and autonomy in childcare (Lan 2000; Lim 1997). Women-centered social groups mobilize to mediate domestic dispute and raise their social standing (Arieli 2007). By letting women enjoy some economic and social autonomy, the patriarchal system gains women's collusion in reproducing their own subordination (Kandiyoti 1988). Given such vested interests, women then resist subverting the prevailing order unless empowering alternatives emerge (Waylen 1992), where women's silenced voices are restored (Sa'ar 2005). However, previous studies were notably on face-to-face contexts, particularly in marriage relationships. With the growing ubiquity of online support groups (Pedersen and Smithson 2013), we must more closely examine patriarchal bargains in online interactions and their relationship to social support.

Social support refers to the exchange of resources and assistance within social networks (Cohen and Syme 1985) such as emotional, informational, and network support (Cutrona and Suhr 1992). Online support groups are a potentially valuable resource for mothers to navigate cultural limitations offline, such as providing breastfeeding support (Alianmoghaddam et al. 2019), encouraging experience sharing (Hall and Irvine 2009), offering increased social connections, and better understanding of parenting roles (Brady and Guerin 2010). These facilitate depression mitigation and enhanced self-esteem (Bragadóttir 2008). Pedersen and Smithson's (2013) study of the online parenting community of Mumsnet also suggests that online parenting communities allow mothers to campaign for gender equality.

However, very few studies touch on the needs of unwed single mothers, especially in China. Context is crucial in our study as Chinese women's experience of unwed

motherhood is determined by the government's legislative reconstitution of reproduction and the cultural script of childbirth within marriage. Moreover, there is scant research on how online social support fosters agency and system navigation. Therefore, we extend social support theory to patriarchal bargains to uncover how online interactions enable women's resistance against structural oppression.

Patriarchies of Unwed Motherhood in China

Patriarchy encapsulates the privilege and power men enjoy relative to women (Connell 1987; de Beauvoir 1961; hooks 1981). In this study, the term "patriarchy" specifically refers to social systems that disadvantage unwed single mothers relative to men and wed mothers. As non-marital childbearing is illegal, a "social fostering fee" penalty is imposed, and children born out of wedlock are denied access to a household registration system of social welfare (Lu and Xie 2013). National Census data in 2010 estimate that ninety million people lack household registration, with a significant proportion being illegitimate children, constituting 7.1 percent of the country's total population (Sun 2018). Maternity tests also increased by around 15 percent in 2010, with a large portion out of wedlock.[1]

Unwed single mothers also suffer social stigmatization and marginalization because premarital sex is considered disgraceful for the woman and her family, and antithetical to normative sexual conduct and motherhood (Cao 2015). Poverty is entrenched among unwed single mothers (Hertog 2009) and their voices are excluded from discussions in Chinese academia and public discourse. Previous academic studies and governmental social assistance programs define single mothers as divorced and widowed mothers, thus excluding unwed single mothers (She 2013). While these gendered social systems and processes circumscribe unwed single mothers, the Internet, especially parenting forums, provides opportunities for them to defy boundaries and make their voices heard (Yang 2013).

Research Questions

Given the preceding theoretical framework and research context, we ask the following:

   Research Question 1 (RQ1): What are the online patriarchal bargaining strategies adopted by Chinese unwed single mothers?
   Research Question 2 (RQ2): What online social support do the women solicit and elicit via online patriarchal bargains?

Method

Participants

The participants' ages ranged from twenty-three to thirty, with the average childbirth age of twenty-three. They hailed from rural and urban areas with eight living

in municipal cities or provincial capitals, fifteen in smaller cities, and seven in counties/rural areas across thirteen provinces. Of the thirty unwed single mothers studied, eleven (37%) have a college degree, with 63 percent up to high school education.

Especially striking was the respondents' relationship impoverishment. All the women were separated from the child's biological father during pregnancy, thus lacking emotional connection and financial support. Only seven (23%) of them lived with parents or received help, while twelve (40%) were turned out by their families and the remaining 37 percent concealed their childbirth from their families. Four respondents had no stable accommodation and found themselves drifting among friends' homes. Poverty and unemployment were prevalent as they had no childcare support. Only five (17%) were employed and another three (10%) were working part-time, with twenty-two (73%) unemployed. Child-raising and penalty payment strained their finances, and estrangement from their social networks undermined their well-being.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited from Beijing-based parenting forum babytree.com, China's largest parenting forum with a "Danqin Mama" (Single Mother) discussion board specifically for single mothers, including unwed single mothers. Xiaoman Zhao, the first author of this article who is a native Chinese, reviewed discussion board posts for two months to identify potential participants. The homepage of each ID was visited to see whether the user was active in the forum according to the number of original threads and replies she initiated. Only relatively active users were included as they interacted more and thus had more insights. She then sent recruitment letters and the participant information sheet to potential participants through the in-site message function. In stage 1, thirty respondents were contacted and twelve replied.

In stage 2, two forum moderators were also interviewed and their permission sought to post recruitment advertisements on the discussion board, through which seven additional participants were recruited for stage 3. Participants were asked to recommend other potential participants, leading to eleven more participants in stage 4. After four recruitment stages, thirty-two participants were interviewed in total.

Ethical Considerations

Given the topic's sensitivity, the authors anticipated challenges in recruitment. Therefore, a participant information sheet explaining the research protocol approved by our institution's ethical review board was sent to the potential participants explaining our research purpose and process, and their right of withdrawal. To ensure confidentiality, only the authors have access to participants' identifiable information, with all records de-identified before use. Participants were given a mobile top-up voucher of fifty RMB as a token of appreciation and told it would be given irrespective of completing the interview. All participants completed the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Chinese, of 45- to 120-minute duration. The mutually agreed venues for face-to-face interviews included parks, cafes, and respondents' homes. Interviews were digitally recorded then transcribed verbatim in Chinese, generating 418 pages of text.

All thirty-two transcripts were analyzed in full through three thematic analysis steps (Corbin and Strauss 2014). Open coding was first conducted, where salient phrases and words were marked according to themes suggested by the data itself (Charmaz 2014), guided by the theoretical constructs. Further grouping and categorization was performed through discussion between the authors to ensure the research questions were answered. These categories were refined into three themes during selective coding (Corbin and Strauss 2014). To ensure validity of the findings, we sought feedback from thirteen participants by sharing with them case summaries, codes, and relevant quotes to assess whether our interpretation matched their perceptions and experience. All thirteen respondents approved the interpretations.

Results

The online community provided these single mothers with social support and new spaces for active bargaining within social and material constraints, enabling novel tactics such as leveraging online influence, negotiating marriage commodification, and circumventing legalities.

Leveraging Online Influence

Unwed single mothers mustered support and exerted pressure on their former partners, largely through moral condemnation and online denunciation. They adopted strategic storytelling and self-disclosure to win the community's trust and sympathy. The community derived influence from their abilities to construct an interpretation of the situation that placed the blame on the men and forward these interpretations to the wider public. The ensuing moral condemnation compelled the men to undertake the due responsibilities.

The respondents' relationships with their male partners were largely fraught with unequal power dynamics, further intensified by the family planning policy that legitimizes only heterosexual marital units. Subject Ou explained how her child's illegitimate status denied her alimony:

> The law just does not protect us. My lawyer told me the law would not support me. The women's federation and other organizations only protect those with marriage certificates.

Her account highlights the dearth of support unwed single mothers face. They thus turn to online communities for social support and resources. For instance, after being betrayed and abandoned by her partner Wang who was a famous singer, and refused

assistance by local institutions, Quan chose to disclose her experience on the Single Mothers discussion board:

> I have been with him for one year. Now I need his ID to register at the hospital, but he just shirked his responsibilities. Now I do not have money, and also have threatened miscarriage.

Quan explained her purpose of posting:

> I was really sad, heartbroken. So I sought consolation in the forum. I have been attacked by his family and other people millions of times, so I posted hoping that someone can speak up for me. Also I wanted to let the public know the kind of person he is.

Her account highlights her trust in group solidarity and her being attacked by Wang's supporters underlines her weak bargaining position. After her post was viewed more than 800,000 times, drawing more than 4,000 replies, she further posted to explain how she was impregnated by Wang and then betrayed and abandoned:

> [. . .] I have been looking for him all over and was so desperate that I tried to commit suicide. He kept hanging up on my calls and shirking his responsibility.

Each of her posts garnered more than 10,000 views and hundreds of replies. Some members expressed sympathy, while others offered suggestions on how to protect her own interests, such as "Currently do not worry about the ID. It is only required for birth certificate and household registration. Currently, staying healthy is most important." Some other members also sought to shift the blame to Wang to counteract cultural norms that stigmatize women for unwed pregnancy:

> Girl you are by no means promiscuous. You fell in love with the wrong man and became pregnant, so what? He is the irresponsible and immoral one.

These interpretations were actively shared with the wider public and as the forum discussions spanned months, they eventually drew attention from beyond the forum community. Quan's posts were picked up and reported in websites of traditional media outlets, such as *ifeng* and *People's Daily*. With wider public pressure, Wang was compelled to pay alimony and suffered irreparable career damage.

Likewise, Nan successfully leveraged the online community to negotiate her relationship with the father of her son, posting,

> He never showed up during my pregnancy. Now I need his ID number for household registration, only to be rejected. He even used a false name during our relationship.

Her post received more than 18,000 views and more than 300 replies, most of which were supportive, such as "Dear did you save any evidence for lawsuit? Such as chat history or photos. You should ask for financial compensation." In addition, the

single-mother community also endorsed her actions and destigmatized her situation: "You are a kind woman, hurt by a bad man. He is the one to blame, selfish and irresponsible! He does not deserve to be a father!" Some members offered to help contact the local television station to forward these interpretations to the wider public and expand the influence of their denunciation. The ongoing discussion and denunciation put the man under pressure to take due responsibility. As a result, Nan obtained the man's ID for household registration for her child and secured alimony from the man. Such a bargaining practice became a readily suggested route that women increasingly adopt as forum moderator Flower described:

> I cannot see any other better choice to deal with this kind of men. You can only try to find him, through discussion boards, Weibo, local forums or @his friends on social network platforms. Try to dig him out. That is the only possible way to win over some interest.

Through active engagement with technology, the women strategically elicit public sympathy as Quan explained in a post:

> I have been pregnant before, ending in miscarriage because of a forced sex act by him. I was also hospitalized for uncontrollable bleeding.

Such posts contained narratives around physical violence, emotional breakdown, and threatened miscarriage. Subject Nv explained how such storytelling was carefully formulated:

> You need to depict yourself as tragically as possible. The effect is even better if you mention your baby, because no one would pay attention to your experience otherwise.

Narratives of suffering thus serve to create an image of vulnerability and abuse that elicits community support as explained by the moderator Flower:

> Basically, all forum members are kind and compassionate being mothers themselves. They are thus easily moved by other members' stories of hardship and suffering. Especially when they see photos of the babies suffering, their maternal love just overflows, and they join in to support.

The online space thus enables women's agency as they strategically craft messages to amplify their bargaining power. By uploading photos, screenshots of chat histories, and audio records, they increase the credibility and potency of their messages:

> Just words or audio records are not enough. Photos are the best, most appealing, and screenshots of chat history. They are more credible. No one can deny the facts in the face of private photos.

Quan also explained how she leveraged online affordances to demonstrate her commitment to romantic relationships:

> I kept some of his private photos. I took them when I accompanied Wang for his performances. And also our chat history. So I can prove that I was his girlfriend rather than in a casual relationship. Otherwise, people would not support me.

By curating her image to highlight her commitment to their relationship, she scotched speculations of promiscuity and capriciousness on her part. The photos and screenshots of chat histories boosted her credibility and bargaining power. While seemingly calculative, such bargaining involves cost and compromise on the part of the women who must engage in constant self-disclosure and emotional work but thereby amplify bad memories:

> When you reveal all your secrets to public scrutiny, you may feel uncomfortable as your personal experience is circulated widely and may be distorted over time.

Earning sympathy at the price of continuous emotional work thus requires one to negotiate between privacy and public exposure. For instance, to fully gain the trust and solidarity of other members, Quan had to disclose her true identity:

> At first many people did not believe me. So I disclosed my phone number, home address, and social networking accounts. It may incur stigma, as some would think I should just remain silent over such a shameful childbirth. But if they did not trust me, they would not consent to help me.

Furthermore, the women actively engage with traditional sexual conservativism in Chinese society to seek public affirmation. For instance, Quan recounted how Wang seduced and dated multiple women simultaneously and abandoned them after sex. His promiscuity and immorality was then highlighted by media reports:

> One of Wang's ex-girlfriends found he was dating 2 girls on the same day. More details have been disclosed online, showing that he was dating 8 girls during a short period of time. (*People's Daily* report)

Such reports earned Wang moral condemnation, thus reflecting the effectiveness of the strategy as Na explained:

> The public fury over Wang's chaotic private life, where he was exposed as having have relationships with several women simultaneously, riled many.

Negotiating Marriage Commodification

Unwed single mothers also sought to circumvent government legislation of childbirth premised on marriage. Based on advice solicited from unwed single-mother online communities, they engaged in unions of convenience, thereby earning a sense of empowerment and self-esteem. Through such commodified marriage, they could also

neutralize feelings of alienation. As Fen recounted, she was "pursued" by local family planning officers and excluded from normal social life:

> The neighborhood committee kept coming to my home to register my marriage status. I gave them false information and did not even dare to take my daughter out.

Marginalization is thus a very real consequence of the state's strict legislation. Besides institutional exclusion, unwed single mothers also face isolation from their own families. Hong recounted how her parents ostracized her:

> My parents still refuse to accept my baby, as they feel ashamed. They told me if I get married, they may consider helping me.

Without family and support networks, these women have limited resources for circumventing constraints. Hence, some women engage in unions of convenience online as detailed by Baoer:

> There are some communities of unwed mothers where you can find a man to register marriage with you so that you can get household registration for your baby.

Similar posts also appear from time to time on the board, offering advice about such marriages, including child custody and the impact on future childbirths: "Some people are willing to do it online. But you need to reach an agreement beforehand about possible risk. For example, his own child will be the second child in the future."

Marriage is thus commodified, being bought or exchanged, with emotion and love being secondary, as Tian recounted: "I just wanted to get a marriage certificate, so that my baby can have household registration. It is purely a transaction." Indeed, so commodified is marriage among such people that there is a price list reflecting different rates for marrying men from different households as Baoer explained:

> The price is clearly indicated. The price for marrying a man with a Beijing or Shanghai household is especially high. The more you pay, the better the welfare you can enjoy. Just like how you buy any other things in the market.

Besides such practical advantages, marriages of convenience can also serve as protection from social stigma as Ya illuminated:

> After getting married, I can register household for my child and give him the man's family name. And my parents can just tell others that I am divorced. My son would encounter less discrimination.

By entering into a transactional relationship, Ya resolves challenges for her child and earns social recognition too. Notably though, such bargains come at the expense of romantic love and free choice, possibly hindering future chances of a new relationship as Baoer shared:

> It is very hard for me to start a new relationship, especially since I am now legally divorced. I do not expect so-called love any more. But my child will always be mine.

While hers is a commodified marriage, the social recognition and wider resources she can enjoy for her child affirm the wisdom of her choice.

Navigating the Legal System

This strategy relates to the political context in which strict regulations of illegitimate births coupled with the household system severely constrained these mothers. But by sharing experiences, they could accurately evaluate the situation and seek solutions. Many felt pessimistic as multiple obstacles have been introduced and reproductive rights are frequently infringed upon as Hong critiqued:

> Whether to get married, it is women's right. Childbirth is also women's right. However, in China, you cannot have a baby if you are unmarried. Otherwise you pay the penalty or induce an abortion.

To subvert such restrictions, women negotiate for a better position through articulating a compelling online narrative as Shao did:

> The hospital I first attended refused to issue a birth certificate because I did not have the birth authorization certificate. So I posted on the discussion board seeking suggestions.

In response, a member shared her own experience of obtaining a certificate from a private hospital without presenting a birth authorization certificate:

> It turned out to be true. The private hospital only requested my identity card. The price was higher than public hospitals, but still much lower than the penalty.

Shao's positive experience highlights how the forum affords peer-to-peer sharing of insights and tips that are clearly beyond the purview of institutional structures and regulatory oversight. Similarly, Qian recounted how the shared experiences demonstrated the lack of coordination between governmental branches, thereby emboldening her into bargaining:

> A mother recounted that the penalty was charged by family planning committees, while household registration was granted by the police station, and the latter only required the father's ID card . . . [so] I borrowed my friend's ID card and obtained household registration. After that, the family planning committee approached me, but since I already had household status, they could not do anything else, but charged me a small penalty to close their report.

By actively seeking information support online and strategically navigating the myriad power structures, Qian overcame her feelings of uncertainty and helplessness.

The women empowered one another through sharing tips: "Don't write the father's name in the birth certificate or reveal any information about the father to the police" and "Register your child's household under some distant relative in the village, as it's easier to complete the procedure there."

Crucially, such messages expose the inconsistencies in the population regulation system and remind the women of the space for negotiation and maneuvering. The forum served as a convergence point for self-disclosure and knowledge sharing, collecting, and validating experiences, as Yuchen noted:

> It is impossible to get all the required documents for routine procedures. Civil Affairs Bureau, Public Security Bureau, family planning department and all other departments involved. It is better to follow others' experience.

As the strategies shared on the board for bargaining with the family planning system were at the intersections of legality and illegality, the members had to be careful not to challenge the political establishment. Yuanai recounted pushback on politically sensitive issues:

> I remember from the end of last year, my posts were removed, and my account was occasionally muted. It made me very cautious but is still hard to avoid. Whenever you talk about politics or national affairs, you touch the so-called sensitive words.

Yuanai's account highlights how the government tries to devolve censorship responsibilities on online intermediaries and build an atmosphere of self-censorship of illegal and seditious content. When interviewed, both moderators acknowledged being required by the forum to target posts critiquing the family planning policy and mute the accounts when necessary. Hence, circumventing such restrictions without challenging the status quo was the only viable option open to users who nevertheless felt empowering as Yu articulated:

> [System restructuring] is impossible and can also invite danger and troubles. We want more understanding and respect from society. Maybe their actions [referring to the bargaining practices] cannot bring about social changes immediately, but at least we have dignity and pride. In this way we expect that society can change its view of unwed motherhood.

Social Support in Patriarchal Bargain

Social support facilitated the women's online patriarchal bargains in three ways: (1) by providing collective wisdom, (2) garnering public support, and (3) expanding the resource pool. Overall, social support was a critical enabler in enacting bargains.

Providing collective wisdom. Online social support, especially information support, offered collective wisdom. The suggestions and experience shared online encouraged the women to creatively explore multiple options, leaving no stone unturned. For

instance, the first post Quan made about her plight was very emotional and disorganized, thus undermining the credibility of her narrative. In response, some members advised her accordingly:

> If you need more than sympathy, you should share more details. Or post a photo with him. If your account is authentic, we are all willing to help you.

After Quan posted several photos with Wang to prove her authenticity, her messages began to draw attention and support from more members. Their collective wisdom boosted her confidence:

> Some of them suggested that I modify my postings, and where to post the messages, and how to initiate lawsuits. Without them I could not have hung on till the end.

Information support was also an empowering resource. As Jiaming explained, information support addressed practical needs but also eased her anxiety:

> Almost every day, I consulted everyone about legal issues. It helps me know the general direction to pursue. You do not feel so anxious after seeing other's experience.

As these suggestions were drawn from the actual experience of the posters, the forum's anonymity encourages the sharing of tricks that may not be legal but nevertheless had proven efficacy.

Garnering public support. Public support was highly motivating because members of the community expressed encouragement and companionship through inspirational notes: "Keep on fighting. You will definitely have a better life!" and "Brave mommy, hope you will always be happy." When asked about the usefulness of the board, almost every respondent mentioned emotional help, including encouragement, understanding, and warmth. Such supportive messages showed that those who replied were paying attention to the narratives. Posts that drew more support remained on the top page so more people would see them. With public support, more pressure could be exerted on errant male partners, as explained by Na:

> There can be hundreds or even over a thousand replies to each thread within just one day. People from other boards would also come and follow the chain of events, adding to the heat of the discussions.

Such support and public pressure can be parlayed into a bargaining tool for compelling the man to honor his obligations, as Nan explained:

> He called me, asking me what I want, and asked me to stop my online friends chasing after him. It seems that my post, or the messages in the community really worked.

Similarly, Quan compared the discussion board with other media:

> I had also posted on Weibo, but no one paid attention. Without active and supportive response from the discussion board, my posts would not be forwarded to other platforms.

Quan's experience illustrates that the large number of users and sizable influence of Weibo did not guarantee successful patriarchal negotiation. It is the enclosed community of *Single Mother* with its supportive atmosphere that translated into success. According to Flower, while exposure and support vary according to different platforms, social support is crucial for bargaining success:

> Only those celebrity users can get public attention on Weibo. But on the board, discussions about males' responsibilities are very active. It is a strategic way to find a forum for a specific purpose first to get your messages circulated before they are picked up by other platforms.

The board's network of mutual support worked coherently to strengthen their influence and push their claims into the public arena.

Expanding the resource pool. Network support connected the women to larger social networks and sub-communities, thus enabling the unwed single mothers to significantly expand the resource pools they could tap. In Quan's case, her messages were actively forwarded by some members to other platforms, such as Tianya and Weibo, which connected their narratives to the larger Chinese community and drew more sympathy. A member once posted on Tianya, championing more support for Quan:

> You can go to the Single Mother community . . . Hope you can understand this mother and hope my forwarding of the post can help her.

By connecting the unwed single mothers' storytelling to the larger community, network support encourages more women to reassert their agency over a relationship. Indeed, Quan explained that other women who had been spurned by Wang were encouraged to seek justice for themselves.

In addition to seeking alimony, network support could help the women navigate the legal system by connecting them to "underground" communities as Kong explained:

> This kind of information is very hard to access elsewhere, because it is not legally sanctioned. In addition to marriages of convenience, there are also some communities relating to pregnancy tests, or household registration agencies.

Similarly, Zhang recounted how the network support connected her with an agent that was hard to approach offline, through which she managed to obtain household registration:

> One mother connected me to her acquaintance, and further to an agent for household status. I was charged 39,000 RMB, inclusive of everything. Of course, they don't reveal how.

Zhang's experience reveals the covert nature of such transactions and the difficulties of accessing such resources through conventional approaches. Under the cover of anonymity, network support connects the women to critical, elusive, yet empowering sources of information and practical assistance that were potentially life-changing.

Discussion

The presence of a solidary online community together with the provision of social support encourages open and frank self-disclosure and creates new spaces for agency to be enacted. Unwed single mothers were found to ingeniously bargain with the patriarchal system by leveraging online influence to exert pressure on ex-boyfriends for alimony and engaging in unions of convenience for tangible benefits. They also proactively constructed narratives that made errant male partners culpable and forwarded these interpretations to the wider public so as to counteract the cultural stigma of unwed motherhood. Online advice-giving and resource-sharing also helped them navigate the legal system in obtaining the required certificates and political and social recognition offline. The specific dynamics on different platforms also require the women to adapt their bargaining practices accordingly. Some platforms are open while some are closed; some are more influential while some are more supportive; while some afford more media richness while others invite greater self-disclosure. These online communication spaces require the women to carefully craft their messages to maximize their bargaining power. The findings point to a need to reconsider the theory of patriarchal bargain and raise some new aspects that are worthy of investigation.

Moving from offline to online, their patriarchal bargains also lead to unique influences and costs. In classic patriarchy, women's negotiation strategy (i.e., the exchange of female labor resources for economic protection) is related to increased economic and social dependency on their husbands and ongoing emotional labor to attain a better sense of self (Arieli 2007; Kandiyoti 1988). The strategy of hiring domestic help, while reducing their loads of domestic work, also entails emotional costs of anxiety and insecurity (Lan 2000). Moreover, some women's self-empowerment is always achieved at the cost of other women, such as the power of mothers-in-law over daughters-in-law and the domination of more privileged women over less (Lim 1997).

Unlike offline bargains, online patriarchal bargains require negotiation between privacy and public exposure. By entering into public discussion, the women had to forego some level of privacy. Their strategy of disclosing extensive personal details to win trust also introduced potential for doxing and attack. Furthermore, the bargaining practices also defy the traditional exclusion of women and stigmatized women's groups from discussing sensitive and taboo issues such as sexuality in the public sphere. In some cases, the women in the study were found to become targeted scapegoats for breaking boundaries and this exacerbated their sense of insecurity. Furthermore, to win sympathy, they had to undertake considerable emotional work in their storytelling, which may lead to additional psychological strain. One way of doing so was to always relate romantic relationships to personal experiences of suffering, which could be a strategy for garnering sympathy but also amplified bad memories.

By entering into marriages of convenience, they also had to forgo romantic love and free choice, hindering their future chances of new relationships. Their bargain with the family planning system was also at the margin of legality and illegality, implying considerable risk and other forms of passivity and harm. Such compromises also highlighted the paucity of other life options in the system. Most of the time the bargains did not permit the women to entirely break free from the political and social system that stubbornly subordinates women. To gain such advantages as a group, they had to sacrifice legitimate liberation.

Theoretical Implications

In many ways, unwed single Chinese mothers try to maximize life options within formally restricted opportunities. Scholars have stressed women's social role as active agents in their patriarchal bargains (Kandiyoti 1988; Sa'ar 2005). Our study contributes to the discussion of patriarchal bargains through an exploration of women's active bargaining with both male dominance and the broader sociopolitical system. Echoing Kandiyoti, unwed single mothers have always taken an active role to navigate and negotiate structural limitations. In particular, we have proposed the notion of "online patriarchal bargain," extending beyond previous work on patriarchal bargains that focused on material-based exchanges within established institutions of marriage or household. Rather, our study emphasizes the new dynamics arising from online affordances and how online patriarchal bargains defy existing private boundaries by disrupting the gendered dichotomization between a public rationality and a private realm of emotions (Wright 2008).

At the same time, the women's practices still conform to Kandiyoti's notion of patriarchal bargain. Despite the benefits unwed single mothers gained, current patriarchal structures remain unchallenged and the logic of male dominance consolidated (Sa'ar 2005; Tønnessen 2010). Our findings showed that these women's bargaining practices only reproduced China's traditional gender and sexuality norms. Moral and ideological conservatism was found to persist in their online accounts. By positioning themselves as vulnerable and abused, the women won public support but could not fundamentally restructure the patriarchal system. Furthermore, marriage of conveniences only underlined their traditional roles of wife and daughter in exchange for social recognition and resources.

Strengthened political control over the Internet by the Chinese government, as identified by previous scholars (Esarey and Xiao 2011), also prevents them from challenging established family planning policy. Both moderators and participants were careful not to transgress certain standards but produced new forms of patriarchal dominance. Indeed, new strategies and forms of consciousness do not emerge smoothly from the ruins of the old; rather, they are often complex and contradictory, created through personal and political struggles (Kandiyoti 1988). Echoing Kandiyoti, our findings highlight the empowering possibilities in waging patriarchal bargains despite the costs and compromise entailed. While these women's bargaining practices are insufficient and inadequate for them to realize complete empowerment, they

nevertheless represent important milestones toward reshaping Chinese society's entrenched patriarchal culture and power structures.

Social support is crucial in decision-making, critical thinking, and social companionship (Bragadóttir 2008; Pedersen and Smithson 2013), and our findings demonstrate that online social support was a critical newfound enabler for unwed single mothers' online patriarchal bargains. Our findings also build some conceptual linkages to capture the relationship between social support and patriarchal bargain, which theoretically elucidates the specific processes in which mediated interactions facilitate system renegotiation and navigation.

Adopting a social informatics perspective, the notion of "online patriarchal bargain" also sheds light on the complex ways in which therapeutic imperatives are enacted. While scholars are divided about the impact of the rise of the therapeutic ethos (Furedi 2004; McLeod and Wright 2009; Wright 2008), our findings indicate the value of therapeutic communities as a space of empowerment. Through strategic storytelling and active use of online affordances, the women managed to gain sympathy and support from the public but concurrently upheld traditional images of women as vulnerable, emotional, and abused. Nevertheless, we argue that the personal sharing and supportive relationships, as a manifestation of a therapeutic ethos, provided productive emotional and informational resources that were not accessible offline by helping them attain precious social recognition and a sense of competence and personal autonomy.

Limitations and Conclusion

The study's limitations lie in the difficulty of discussing topics that are politically sensitive in China's current sociopolitical context and its narrow focus on patriarchy within only three social institutions: heterosexual relationships, sexuality regulation, and gender norms, given their significant influence over the lives of unwed single mothers in China. Future work should examine patriarchy in other social institutions to fully explore the role of online media in facilitating online patriarchal bargains and, in turn, changing the system over time.

In conclusion, this study highlights the new space opened up by technology for unwed single mothers' active resistance to structural oppression. We propose the notion of "online patriarchal bargain" and its conceptual linkages with social support.

Note

1. See, for instance, http://www.chinanews.com/sh/2010/11-07/2639561.shtml.

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