

Seeking Stability in China's “Involution Generation”

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the word “involution” (*Nei Juan*) has become a popular word in Chinese society to refer to the great competitive pressure young people in China now face in their life such as passing the college entrance examination and searching for a job. They are called the “involution generation.” To study the involution phenomenon, I conducted eleven semi-structured interviews with students, parents, and teachers in Zhejiang Province in China. This study also explores the causes and effects of the phenomenon of involution by combining online research and a literature review. I argue that the pursuit of stability produces the present involution while the college entrance examination and differences in family background create different degrees of involution which intensifies the stress of competition. The effects of involution include anxiety and tension for both students and parents brought on by competition, the devaluation of academic qualifications in the job market, and the gap young people experience between their interests and careers.

Keywords: Involution, stability, competition, Zhejiang, China

I hate *Nei Juan*, it always makes me exhausted and annoyed, but I cannot avoid participating in it," one of my interviewees said. Nowadays, "*Nei Juan*," 'involution,' has not only become a popular word used in daily conversation but has also become a social phenomenon in Chinese society. The word "involution" was created by anthropologist Alexander Goldenweiser (1913) and it describes a culture model which does not transform into a new form or remain steady after reaching a certain stage; instead the culture continues to develop in the direction of internal complexity and inefficiency. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1963) then used this word to describe the agriculture of Java Island. When the people of Java put more labor into agricultural production, it did increase agricultural output, but it could not bring real progress and renewal. It only brought the phenomenon of intensification of labor as the operation of the irrigated agricultural system became much more complicated with relatively little growth of output. In the Chinese context, sociologist Zongzi Huang (2002) used involution to describe a situation in which farmers input time and effort into their fields and produce a surplus which supports a growing population. Since the amount of land is fixed, however, when each new person is added to production after the carrying capacity has been reached, the output they produce can only meet their own survival needs, no matter how hard they work. This is because there is not enough land for them to produce a surplus. As a result, involution results in a decrease in benefits over time wherein inputs and profits are not positively proportional.

Now, when Chinese people talk about involution in their lives, it is usually explained by a typical example: when a group of people is

watching a movie in a cinema, if the audience sitting in the front row stands up to watch it, everyone behind them must stand up as well, while in fact everyone could have watched the movie seated. Interestingly, in many interview conversations, involution becomes either an adjective or a verb to use, such as, 「法律行业找工作可太卷了」 "now the recruitment in the legal profession is too involuted" or 「我同学XXX每个周末有六个辅导班，卷死我得了」 "my classmate XXX actually attends six private tutoring courses every weekend, which really involutes me. I want to die!" It is always tied to inevitable struggle and gnawing anxiety in conversations. Therefore, it is obvious that the phenomenon of involution usually occurs in situations of competition, and it tends to increase the anxiety that people feel in these competitions. Anthropologist Biao Xiang (2019) said in the TV program titled 'Shi San Yao,' "People in Chinese society are under pressure not only to move up but also not to move down." Therefore, no one can quit the competition, rather they must keep trying to climb up as people seek to meet the same goals: getting into a good university, finding a good job, earning more money, buying a car and a house, getting married, and having children. The younger generations in contemporary China are the main victims of this phenomenon and they inevitably suffer from the pressures of involution from the beginning of their studies into entering society and finding jobs.

In this paper, I explore questions of how involution affects young people and how do they respond to it. I conducted a literature review, online research, and semi-structured interviews to study this. Involution in the Chinese context has developed over a long period and the present phenomenon discussed by the public involves many aspects of daily social and economic life. For example, the scores of college entrance examinations are increasing year by year and the threshold, in this case the academic degree, for getting a job is becoming more stringent. I argue that the pursuit of stability produces present-day involution; college entrance examinations and differences in family backgrounds, in turn, foster different degrees of involution which

make the competition crueler. Extreme involution has devalued academic degrees to the point where students are having difficulty finding jobs that align with their interests and talents, resulting in significant mental health impacts.

Methodology

Since I grew up in China and spent a lot of time in the Chinese public educational system before attending college in the U.S., I have experienced two completely different feelings about education. My relatively relaxed educational experience in the U.S. compared to China motivated me to explore the reasons for the emergence of the involution phenomenon among the younger generation in China and to reflect on myself as a member of this involuted generation. Although the involution phenomenon in China is the result of the interaction of many social aspects and it took a long time to develop, the use of the term 'involution' to refer to this phenomenon only became widespread in recent years; although it has aroused wide and popular discussion, there are few systematical analyses existing in academic literature. Consequently, I allowed the experiences and views of my interviewees to lead my research. Since many voices are now talking about involution in China in different contexts, I combined participants' experiences with the public conversation about the issue and the academic literature available.

My research process included three parts: a literature review, online research, and semi-structured interviews. First, as the college entrance examination policy has changed in recent years, I did research on the government education website to understand the latest college entrance examination policy in Zhejiang Province. Second, I read academic articles in Chinese and English to look at theories about the involution phenomenon and how it relates to issues like the social ideology of stability and the college entrance exam policy. Third, I conducted eleven interviews in Shaoxing and Hangzhou, two cities in Zhejiang Province. The interviewees included three high school seniors and three college seniors to compare the two age groups' responses to the involution phenomenon as well as three high school

seniors' parents and two high school teachers to see their responses to the involution phenomenon among their children and students. I found the above interviewees through my high school teacher in Shaoxing and a relative of mine who teaches at a high school in Hangzhou. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between thirty and sixty minutes each. I used an Informed Consent Statement at the start to explain the risks of participating in the research, such as discussing ethics policies, and how I would protect the data they provided. The purpose of the questions posed was threefold: to understand participants' idea of involution, to discuss their life in a time of involution, and to ask whether solutions exist. I used audio recording or handwritten notes, as determined by the preference of the interviewee, and I asked follow-up questions through WeChat.

The Conditions that Formed Present-Day Involution

Although the word involution has only become popular in people's daily conversations in recent years, this phenomenon developed within the context of long-term social reform in China. China experienced a period of reform and opening up in the 1980s. During this period, China shifted its focus to economic development, and gradually transitioned from a socialist economy to a market economy (Liu 2020) which brought obvious advantages of rapid economic development as well as significant instability. In particular, the desire to establish a new economic system brought about by the neoliberal transformation of Chinese society in the 1990s and the early 21st century conflicts with pre-existing, deep-rooted political interests. Most obviously, the fear that a more efficient economy would lead to mass unemployment (Breslin 2006). The insecurity brought by the threat of unemployment to individuals and families urged people to master more advanced skills and knowledge, thus fostering competition based on experience and skills in the workplace.

Also, neoliberal market reform has heightened competition for some highly valued jobs. For example, new policies not only have expanded the public supply of education, social

pension, health, and unemployment insurance but also have gradually eliminated the long-standing urban-rural segregation in China. This has resulted in more generous treatment in urban areas for civil servants and people with formal labor contracts over that of informal workers and unemployed people which has brought about complicated new social segregation and income inequality (Duckett 2020). Therefore, it is precisely because of the emergence of these new dark sides that people are eager for some jobs labeled with high income and stable formal labor status.

Moreover, during the period of neoliberal reform, China experienced significant higher education expansion and the government has made it an important goal to train young people with skills and knowledge suitable for promoting the country's economic and social development (Mok 2021). However, the one-child policy pressures families to pin their hopes on their only child; in an environment where the country advocates higher education, it is the goal of every one-child family to help their child win the education competition. Winning this competition would benefit children to achieve a future external stable life, which aligns with the traditional Chinese ideology of stability.

People's Common Desire: Stability

Different people have different understandings of stability and I classify these understandings into two broad types: external and internal stability. For most Chinese parents, the broad meaning of a stable life for their children is to have a life-long job that guarantees a sustainable source of income and security of life (the "five insurance and one fund" system, includes endowment, medical, unemployment, industrial injury, maternity insurance, and housing provident funds). This idea of using economic and material conditions to achieve external stability is the most basic expectation of parents because they ensure that their children do not lack the material necessities they need to survive. Therefore, it has become very popular among young people to enter state-owned enterprises or to find a job "within the system." One college student said, "you can die with an iron rice bowl once and for all if you become a civil servant or a doctor or teacher."

While external stability refers to the ability to secure food, clothing, shelter, and transportation, internal stability can be summarized as a sense of spiritual stability and happiness, and students, especially college students, were more likely to focus on this kind of stability. College seniors who are about to graduate not only want a job that meets their basic financial requirements, but they are also a job with better career prospects and personal development opportunities which does not require employees to work too many hours. This is in contrast to the recent popularization of the 996 working system which requires employees to go to work at 9 am, get off work at 9 pm, and work six days a week. In the Chinese context, working overtime does not just mean working outside the usual work hours with no extra pay. According to a university student I interviewed, it also implies making a "hard worker" impression to the boss and supervisor to ensure a good relationship with them. This kind of overtime work is actually less efficient because the worker's goal is not to create value and outcomes; instead, they spend time sitting and pretending they are working to give their boss a good impression of them. Especially in China's Internet firms (Zheng and Qiu 2023), the 996 working system became normal and made a good impression by reflecting employees' loyalty through their working hours. Because of this, college seniors see working overtime as meaningless and a waste of time; they feel they cannot achieve internal stability in jobs which expect this kind of overtime.

The happiness and spiritual stability that students seek in life also comes in part from the emotional support brought by the geographical closeness to parents. For example, senior year high school students will consider whether to go out of the province when choosing a university after the college entrance exam because there is only one prestige university in Zhejiang Province and the required score is very high. It is a dilemma to make this decision because it is related to the choice between internal stability and external stability — a university close to parents but with a worse reputation or a university with a better reputation but far from parents.

The younger generation desires and even expects stability to follow the traditional ideology associated with the characteristics of Chinese society. According to Fei (1992), Chinese society is fundamentally rural and contains three characteristics: it is rooted in the soil, has a non-flowing population, and is an acquaintance society. In traditional Chinese society, the concern with stability began as a matter of survival. Chinese society has a long history of farming which extends into the recent past or even the present for many people, as such, Chinese people understand the importance and value of the soil. Moreover, the land was cultivated with crops and, as the crops did not move, human societies were rooted in place. While industrial workers can choose to move depending on their jobs, flowing across the land like a river, people who have been farmers for a long time cannot move their land and crops; they are non-flowing (Fei 1992).

This characteristic has been rooted in the hearts of Chinese people for thousands of years, so it is very difficult to change. This culture influences the lifestyle of people in Chinese society and gradually abstracts into an ideology connected to stability. Furthermore, stability can be associated with a society of acquaintances. Due to the traditional thinking of collectivism, people live in one place from birth to death and everyone grows up not only watching the people around them, but also being watched by the people around them. The social circle is relatively fixed (Fei 1992). Thus, the choice of stability also follows the usual way of life in which life and work will not have a great change during each person's lifetime and people expect their lives to follow a familiar, traditional pattern.

It is the widespread pursuit of stability that has led to the gradual rise of involution. For example, state-owned enterprises and jobs "within the system" are called "iron rice bowls,"—as mentioned previously—literally meaning rice bowls that can never be broken. These kinds of jobs can have lifelong security; for as long as employees do not break the red line of the law, they will not be fired. The work pressure of these jobs is relatively low which allows people to have more time for their personal life. Thus, this kind of job is the symbol

of stability in Chinese society. In modern Chinese society, where overtime is so widespread, it is hard not to aspire for a stable job that is both financially secure and relatively easy. However, when more and more young people want to get this "iron rice bowl," the competition gradually grows out of control. Every year, there is a limited number of positions the state and state-owned enterprises hire for, but the number of applicants is ever-increasing which brings about a higher base standard for jobs. A master's degree (not just a bachelor's), two foreign languages (not just one), advanced technical programming skills, and other qualifications are the standard. But, in fact, the job content is the same as before, so if talented people with outstanding experience are recruited, they will not be able to make full use of their talents on the job.

In this case, the increasing recruitment requirements are meaningless in the context of the jobs people are hired to do. For example, people now need a PhD degree to serve as practical advisors for college students in public universities, even though the research and teaching skills developed in a PhD program are not necessary for this job. Zhejiang University's recruitment plan for 2024 (2023) listed the need to recruit 15 full-time practical advisors, and the proportion of doctoral students is not less than fifty percent. But this unnecessary requirement cannot be changed because a larger number of candidates must be sorted. Even the people who win the competition only achieve external stability, but not internal stability because their talents are wasted in jobs that do not require them to use their full abilities. Worse, involution cannot bring positive significance to the whole society.

Fierce Competition: College Entrance Examinations (*Gaokao*)

Even before entering the competition for careers, high school students seeking stability must face another fierce competition: the college entrance examinations. As one senior high school teacher put it, "The college entrance examination is the first big difficulty that students need to overcome in life, which not only tests students' mastery of academic courses, but also their mentality when facing

challenges.” Indeed, the college entrance exam is a fateful rite of passage for Chinese students (Howlett 2021). The results of the college entrance examination will determine what level of university (high level, intermediate level, and relatively low level) students enter and what kind of academic qualifications they will be able to earn there, which then affects their competitiveness in the job market. Chinese society attaches great importance to the ranking and fame of universities. Therefore, students who are admitted to a good university not only receive praise, but, more importantly, are made to feel they have demonstrated strong competitiveness early in life. In general, the college entrance examination attaches great significance to Chinese people’s life because the result impact future career prospects, which results in examination fever spreading in Chinese society (Howlett 2021).

A notable example of the significance of college entrance exams is the concept of “first degree” in the labor market. A college student who majors in Law told me during her interview that, in the legal field, there is a strong emphasis on the “first degree” awarded by the university from which the student received his or her undergraduate education. Many first-tier law firms or large corporations recruit legal counsel with clear requirements for the quality of their undergraduate institute, not just their law school and internship experience. Students with “first degrees” from the most prestigious “five colleges and four departments” have an outstanding advantage over undergraduate students from other schools in the recruitment process. Like the Ivy League in the United States, these programs have an important status in the Chinese legal education sector and have a significant impact on the development of the Chinese legal system and the construction of law.

The entrance examination scores required for acceptance to these universities are usually very high so students who want to enter these universities must have very outstanding results on the entrance examination. The pursuit of scores by students is manifested even more clearly in the fact that no point can be lost. There is a very popular metaphor recounted by a high school teacher, that is, “getting one point

can throw off whole playground competitors,” meaning that a single point can distinguish winners from losers.

Although Zhejiang Province has a developed economy and rich educational resources, the college entrance examination in Zhejiang Province is still famous for its fierce competition. The reason is because of Zhejiang’s special exam structure (students have two chances to take exam), scoring rules (the actual scores of the three required subjects plus the highest curved scores of three elective subjects), and limited choice in top university (there is only one 985 University: Zhejiang University). Due to the desire for the highest possible score, students often retake the exam even when they have already achieved very high scores in their first attempt. “For most students, this is two tortures,” said a high school teacher.

In addition, when admitting students, universities not only have requirements for the total score of the college entrance examination, but different majors also have clear requirements for specific elective subjects. Therefore, it is difficult for students to choose subjects according to their interests; instead, they choose subjects they are good at since the first task for students is to ensure high scores in the college entrance examination. Zhejiang University only admits 3140 students from Zhejiang each year, but there are about 350,000 annual examinees in Zhejiang Province each year and this number is growing. Because of this fierce reality, involution in scores has worsened.

It is important to distinguish between students who actively choose to participate in involution and those who are forced to participate in involution. Some high school students with clear goals think that if they do not put in the effort, they will easily be overtaken by other competitors whose abilities and efforts are unknown to them. The increasing number of students taking college entrance examinations every year is a major source of anxiety in students’ minds—the fear of being surpassed. A senior high school student told me that he wanted to be admitted to the Zhejiang University medical department, but the scores in the medical department were

very high every year and the number of candidates taking the college entrance examination was increasing year by year. To enhance his competitiveness, he had to care about the gain and loss of every point, because, if he did not, someone could overtake him at any time. Other students are forced to participate in involution because of their surroundings. Some parents know the cruelty of competition in the social and career market, so they know the importance of college entrance examination scores. Therefore, they have strict requirements for their children's scores and for the university they attend, which forces their unwilling children to participate in the involution of scores. The crazy pursuit of scores may lead students to achieve the goal of entering a good university, but no one can guarantee that this pursuit will ensure a happy life for them. The only fact that can be determined now is that this pursuit has caused endless anxiety and tension for students and parents.

The Starting Line: Family Backgrounds

In China, there is a saying, "all roads lead to Rome, but some people are born in Rome." This sentence can be understood as saying everyone can succeed through hard work, but different family backgrounds create different starting lines. When people are studying at school, students are judged by their academic performance. Family background does play an important role in academic performance, but students also have some opportunity to develop and compete through their own hard work. Once they leave the ivory tower of the school, however, young people who enter society find that their own efforts are far from enough, and their family background and network resources become much more important factors if they want to get a job that allows them to remain in their social class or move into a higher social class. Due to differences in family background, both the competition in schools and the competition faced by college students in finding jobs are full of inequality and involution.

Although all students have the opportunity to develop their abilities in school, some have

had the advantage of private tutoring classes until a recent policy shift made them illegal. Family background was a very important factor as parents decided whether to send their children to attend private tutoring classes and in this decision-making process, involution happened, deepening educational inequality (Li 2021). Private tutoring classes had advantages that cannot be ignored. Not only did they help students consolidate what they had already learned in school, but they also improved students' ability to respond flexibly to knowledge and helped them gain an advantage in grades. Thus, when parents heard that other people's children were attending private tutoring classes, they worried that their children would fall behind, so they too tried their best to get their children into private tutoring classes as well. Therefore, whether or not to send their children to private tutoring classes became an involution phenomenon among parents.

This phenomenon was the product of shadow education, a term widely used in East Asia for private supplementary education such as cram-schooling and private tutoring (Choi and Park 2016; Yu et al. 2022). As parents sought more and better education resources to improve their children's competitive advantage in learning, the result was increasingly unequal educational opportunities. The reason was that, with private tutoring classes, a large amount of capital poured into the education market, which led to more serious educational unfairness (Yu et al. 2022). For instance, Howlett (2021) posits that families with resources can use their social connections, social capital, to get their children into good schools, their academic knowledge, cultural capital, to prepare their children to do well in school, and their money, economic capital, to pay for private tutoring. Moreover, families with sufficient economic advantages can help their children overcome any deficits in cultural capital by paying for private tutoring classes (Howlett 2021).

A high school student I interviewed was assigned to a special competition class. Because of his father's job, his family has connections to some university professors, so his parents helped him find a professor who specializes in mathematics and the Information Olympics to tutor him at weekends for a fee of one

thousand RMB every hour. Therefore, he was not only assigned to the special competition class because of his excellent math and physics scores but also joined the school's Information Olympics team because of extra training, which allowed him to participate in the national Information Olympics competition. Winning an award in the Information Olympics competition improves his chances to be pre-admitted to some prestigious universities. Children from families who invest in shadow education, like my interviewee, are expected to convert their cultural capital into economic capital when they go into the job market.

The family background also played a significant role in what level of tutoring classes they attended. There were significant differences between private tutoring classes. Some tutoring classes were run by teachers themselves. This kind of class usually required parents to use their own interpersonal relationships to negotiate entrance for their children and the fees were relatively high. However, the results would be remarkable because those teachers usually did not accept too many students, so their attention to each student was high, which was more conducive to student learning. Therefore, this filled gaps and improved their grades. Another kind of tutoring class was run by private tutoring agencies. These private tutoring classes only needed parents to pay money to sign up; parents did not have to draw on their personal social relationships to get their children into the classes. The teachers and the curricula were all determined by the agencies; the teaching ability of teachers in those agencies was not equivalent to those teachers who set up tutoring classes privately, who could even predict the trends of college entrance examinations. Thus, the efficiency of tutoring was relatively low in the classes offered by agencies. There seems to have been an informed ranking of those tutoring classes and the classes run by teachers were ranked higher than those run by agencies. Therefore, attending either kind of tutoring class became a competition among families.

The Chinese government, however, noticed that the existence of these private tutoring options was leading to inequalities in education, so they banned any form of outside-school

tutoring in late July 2021. This policy is the so-called "double reduction policy (2021)," where "double reduction" means effectively reducing the heavy homework burden and after-school training burden of students in the stage of compulsory education. Overall, this policy is beneficial, because private tutoring agencies exploit and amplify parents' anxiety, thus causing greater pressure and manufacturing competition (Li 2021). But, due to the limited quality of public education, which focuses on basic theories and simple applications rather than the deeper understandings and more flexible applications required for success on exams, students and parents are now looking for other ways to improve their grades. This policy only transforms the phenomenon of involution from frantically attending private tutoring classes to seeking other ways to boost scores.

Furthermore, family background also has a great influence on graduate careers. One of my interviewees, a parent, told me that he hopes his child can live close to him in the future because he can help his child to find a stable job and, later, help out with the grandchildren he hopes to have. Nowadays, it is not easy to win in a competitive job market. Therefore, the help of parents like this will undoubtedly determine the outcome for many graduates. Although people in today's Chinese society hold negative views of those who rely on their parents' interpersonal relationships to get positions in the job market, it is undeniable that compared with those who are still seeking jobs, these people have easily achieved the "stability" that many people want. Therefore, differences in family background also intensify the involution phenomenon in the job market for people from families with weaker backgrounds. People with good family backgrounds are more likely to be at the top of the pyramid because they take the best jobs and make the already scarce job positions even scarcer. Even for people at the top, however, there are often more well-connected applicants than there are positions and decision-makers must make fine distinctions in determining whose family background is more favorable. In the job market, in addition to the family background, which will affect the final employment decision, the applicant's academic background is also

one of the thresholds for getting a job. However, the phenomenon called the devaluation of academic degrees makes the competition fiercer and more terrible.

Devaluation of Academic Degrees

Nowadays, under the background of China's social involution, competition in the job market is intensifying. The fierce competition of higher education graduates in major labor markets leads to the phenomenon of over-education and the unprecedented increase in higher education enrollments has resulted in the continuous devaluation of university degrees in China (Fan and Ding 2013). As I have already discussed, as more and more people get higher degrees, increasing the supply of job seekers in the job market, the minimum requirements for the educational level of job applicants are also rising. At the same time, when more and more people get a certain educational diploma or degree, the degree's value will decrease because the number of jobs available for those degree-holders is relatively fixed. Fuller (2017) calls this phenomenon "degree inflation," which also happens in the United States, and he thinks this phenomenon makes the labor market more inefficient. The phenomenon of academic degree depreciation can be regarded as a manifestation of involution.

The phenomenon of devaluation of academic degrees is not only due to the surplus of academic degrees caused by the popularization of higher education, which leads to oversupply in the job market, but also to the change in people's purpose of obtaining academic degrees (Xue 2021). In China, people refer to the students who get degrees higher than bachelor's degrees as 研究生 *yanjiusheng* 'graduate students,' which refers to both master's students and doctoral students. In Chinese, 研究 *yanjiu* means research, so graduate students can be understood as students who do research, and doing research is the basic purpose of graduate students. However, today's *yanjiusheng* care less about the research itself or about the skills and experience they gain when doing the research, and more about earning a graduate degree they can use as a bargaining chip in exchange for a job that will give them stability.

I once saw a professor post on a social platform in China that he does not like teaching graduate students because they do not have the mind to immerse themselves in research, and they do not have the ambition to pursue results in research; they just want to make sure that their grades meet the graduation requirements so they can get academic certificates and then exchange that for a job. "Graduate students are no longer pure," some people say, and doing research is no longer the main reason these students want to obtain higher academic qualifications. For example, students pay more attention to the university's reputation and the program's reputation when they choose during their postgraduate study, and some technical and job-oriented graduate programs, such as master of Finance Management, are more popular (To et al. 2014). People regard a "stable" life and work as the ultimate goal, but now the pathway to achieve this goal and find a place in an involuted society through higher education has become very difficult. Still, getting a higher degree is the most common way to achieve this goal, and it is also the only way for people to achieve it through their own merits. Therefore, more and more people are pursuing higher academic qualifications, earning academic degrees as a springboard to achieve stability.

The criteria for judging whether academic degrees are devalued are not only economic but also personal. The public's criteria for judging the value of academic qualifications is based on the economic return that degrees can bring. Therefore, when people cannot exchange their high academic degrees for a job with a satisfactory economic return, the value of academic qualifications is reduced. One of my interviewees told me that choosing to study as a graduate student in law and being educated in a famous law school will lead her to a job with high economic returns so that she can achieve external stability. In her case, the value of the academic degree she plans to pursue has not decreased. However, on a personal level, she does not like law. What she really likes is researching different languages. Therefore, the academic degree she will get after three years will not help her realize her personal value. Therefore, it can be said that the value of this degree, to her, is meaningless. Her situation,

and her decision to pursue a degree and career she does not enjoy, is very common among young people in China who desire both external and internal stability but find it almost impossible to achieve both at the same time.

A Dilemma: Gap between Interests and Careers

I have observed two completely different ideas about the relationship between occupation and interests: some people think that hobbies and interests should not become occupations because occupations could ruin interests; others think that only by taking interest in a career can people be happy and achieve success. Hobbies, in the most popular sense, are things that people can persist in doing for a long time for the sake of happiness, while jobs are tools to make a substantial living. There are two situations which seem to combine interests with careers in an ideal fashion. First, some students pursue certain careers because they have a yearning for those careers. One of my interviewees has always admired dentists, so he is trying his best to enter an excellent medical school and become a dentist in the future. Second, some people have no specific interests or career preferences to begin with. They find their interests through work, get positive feedback such as the boss's commendation and promotions, realize their own value, and conclude that their jobs are their interests.

In reality, however, most people end up in more difficult situations because of the pressures of involution. In some cases, interests and jobs lead to contradictions. The reason is that many interests and hobbies do not have hopeful employment prospects. As such, it is difficult to bring economic security to life and ensure external stability by pursuing them. One of my interviewees told me that, despite her interest in English, she had to double major in law. She believed that, because of the widespread knowledge of the English language in China and the development of new translation technologies, an English major alone was insufficient to ensure external stability in her life. The other way interests and jobs may come into contradiction is that getting a job connected to a hobby is bound to consume the interest a person once had in their hobby. At

work, people will inevitably deal with unpleasant situations such as maintaining relationships with leaders and interacting with people they do not like. These situations are called "office politics" in Chinese, and it is hard for people who have been in a job for a long time not to resist doing the work because of pressure or irritability.

Another ubiquitous situation is that many young people do not know what they like, so they choose to follow their parents' opinions when choosing a major. Their parents usually choose majors which, according to their own experience and reasoning, will lead to easy-to-find jobs with high social status and considerable returns. Many students find that they dislike the majors chosen by their parents, but, in Chinese universities, it is difficult to change majors, so many students have no choice but to continue studying majors they do not like. On the subsequent job-hunting road, their academic record shows their specialty, and it is taken as the best proof of professional knowledge. Since it is almost impossible for people to find a job without proof of systematic study, they have to continue to work in jobs they do not like.

Moreover, an increase in people choosing the same small number of majors and jobs with high economic returns leads to homogenization of talents and skills and to the reduction of diversity in society. This increasing homogeneity in society does not just happen because students choose the same majors and jobs, as Li (2021) proposes, but also because parents are choosing majors and jobs for their children. As we have seen, involution happens in the college entrance examinations and the job market, and it affects almost all young people in China, whether they are high school students or students about to graduate from college or recent graduates early in their careers. The most striking impact of involution is widespread mental health problems.

Terrible Consequence: Mental Health Issues

The psychological issues of the younger generation have attracted popular attention in Chinese society in recent years. The psychological issues of high school students are

taken extremely seriously by the public, and the concern for mental health has increased much more than when I was in high school. One parent of a senior high school student told me, “staying healthy is a first thing for children; it’s much more important than grades.” Every year, there are numerous stories about senior high school students jumping off buildings or committing suicide because they cannot handle the academic pressure. Thus, the issue of the mental health of senior high school students is at the top of the public’s mind. The culprit for this issue, according to everyone I interviewed, is the phenomenon of involution.

For most students, involution happens because everyone wants to achieve higher grades, yet most students are close to average in intelligence and memory. Because grades are relative, this means more students are getting higher grades, so the first student has to work harder to stand out; when others see this student work even harder, they will try to work harder than their peer, so the cycle repeats itself, forming the phenomenon of involution between students. Moreover, I have observed that students who are comfortable just being average and do not set high requirements for grades for themselves may avoid participating in the involution for a time but seeing both stronger and weaker students working harder inevitably produces a kind of panic psychology, as they fear that they are left behind. No one wants to fall behind, and when they see everyone else around them doing something, they just follow this behavior (Li 2021). In this way, they, too, are forced to participate in the involution.

It is true that some students driven by the pressure of involution can get grades good enough to get into their desired universities, but this cannot be all students because educational resources are limited and there is a limit to the number of students that can be enrolled. Senior high school students know this fact very well, so they cannot avoid having internal anxiety and stress about the college entrance exams and grades, and when this stress and tension accumulates over time and is not properly managed, mental health problems naturally occur. Moreover, these mental health problems often lead to lower grades. A high

school teacher told me, “the more you want to get a high score, the less you actually get that score, and some students will even be depressed.” She meant that due to their strong desire for high grades, students put tremendous pressure on themselves and end up feeling nervous and anxious during the exam. If excessively nervous and anxious, students may be flustered during the exam, and the scores they get may be lower than they expect — they may even fail. The accumulation of negative emotions can lead to mental health issues and even some more serious consequences. When students find that the means to cope with anxiety and stress are exhausted, they even have suicidal thoughts and behaviors (Sun, Dunne, and Hou 2012).

Other psychological problems of senior high school students are brought about by the involvement of parents in involution. Some parents have expected plans for their child’s life after graduation, so they want their child to follow their predetermined path step-by-step. When parents see how competitive the job market is, they feel forced to participate in involution requiring their children to have excellent academic performance and multiple skills, which will undoubtedly increase the pressure on their children. Parents may feel anxiety, worry, panic, and other unpleasant emotions in relation to their children’s education because of their high expectations, uncertainty about the results of their children’s education, and fear of failure (Wu et al. 2021). Among them, parents of senior high school students are under the most pressure; they desperately want their children to have good grades, because with good grades their children can enter a good university and eventually find a good job. Their urgency of achieving the expectations and their anxieties are constantly transmitted to the students, resulting in increasing pressure on the students. Therefore, students may feel that their parents only force them to work hard instead of understanding them, so they cannot deal with the pressure by communicating with their parents. In fact, if the parents had solutions and suggestions to deal with the pressure, they would not be so anxious and expose their anxieties in front of their children; that is also the reason why students do not choose to communicate with their

parents, because they suspect that their parents actually have no solution. Also, according to Bandura (1989)'s social learning theory, children can learn their parents' action patterns. Therefore, if parents show great anxiety when they face pressure in front of their children, then, when their children encounter stressful situations, they may also show a series of reaction patterns imitating their parents, resulting in nervousness and anxiety.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the younger generation in China is known as the "involved generation." They are not only involved in college entrance examination scores but also in academic degrees when looking for a job. Whether they actively or passively participate in involution, members of the involved generation in China often suffer from anxiety and tension in mental health. The desires of young people and their families to achieve stability not only raise the threshold of the "Iron Rice Bowl" industry—comprised of teachers, doctors, and civil servants—higher and higher but also bring the undesirable trend of social homogenization. Living with the many negative effects brought by the phenomenon of involution cannot help but make people feel frustrated and wonder if there is a solution. In fact, no one I interviewed seemed to be able to give specific effective solutions even though they felt life would be better without involution, but there are some efforts to respond to the problem at both societal and individual levels.

At the level of the whole society, the government can carry out policy reforms to regulate this phenomenon, but it takes time to design and implement new policies and then to test whether they are effective. The implementation of the "double reduction policy" discussed above, for example, was an attempt by the government to alleviate the competition and pressure faced by students. However, it is doubtful whether a one-size-fits-all policy approach can really be effective at alleviating involution and reducing anxiety. In response to the double reduction policy implemented in 2021, for example, some schools extended the school year so their graduates would be more competitive, and some individuals are pursuing

private tutoring illegally. If the government could keep refining and updating its policies according to the evolving situation, that would be a sustainable way to slow down the involution becoming more complex. Not only should the government keep working to improve policies, but the individual could also do something when in the face of involution. At the level of the individual, keeping a healthy attitude towards competition, not feeling excessively inferior or overconfident, and/or finding and pursuing the field that you are good at and like regardless of the economic rewards are ways not to be involved.

Although most young people in contemporary China are caught up in involution, there is an opposite phenomenon in Chinese society, which is called "lying flat/lying down." Lying flat seems to mean giving up competition and everything that comes along with it. But one of the reasons why many people are worried about the future seems to be that they want to "lie flat" on the one hand because the competition is too fierce, but, on the other hand, they are forced to take part in involution because they cannot give up the "stability" they desire. In the same television interview cited in the introduction, Professor Xiang Biao (2019) also said in TV show, "lying flat is a kind of resistance of contemporary young people to involution, and they quit the competition by giving up their efforts that they think are meaningless. This shows that society and people have begun to reflect on the past development model, which is actually a good thing." The "past development model" Xiang refers to is also the common belief and value among Chinese people today, which is that people can get success only if they put time and effort into working hard. But now, in real life, although people put in endless efforts, they may still not achieve what they want, and so some resist competing at all. Even if some young people are lying flat, however, most Chinese people reprimand them for lying flat and uphold the efficient and hard-working traditional culture. Therefore, how to solve the problem of involution still needs to be discussed, but fortunately, people have begun to reflect on it now.

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