

Entry and Breakthrough: The Self-Redemption of Chinese College Students under the Normalization of "Involution"

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Abstract

The word "involution," once reserved for sociologists only, has gradually become a term used by everyone and is now frequently used to refer to the senseless excesses of competitive processes in all spheres of social life. The narrowing of the definition of "involution" by national historian Huang Zongzhi, who described it as "growth without development," is credited with changing the tone of this idea in China. According to some academics, the present in-book environment has had detrimental effects on college students' learning lives, including inappropriate competition, unjustified evaluation, a loss of personal autonomy, and even the transformation of learning itself into a "fake" performance. However, rather than going away, the involutory environment has gradually normalized and grown to play a significant role in college life. This paper instead attempts to focus on a group of college students who are trying to redeem themselves in the normalized environment of "in-involuting," and to explore the means and mechanisms of their self-redemption from the level of facts and phenomena. As a result, it does not make value judgments about the rightness or wrongness of "in-involuting."

Keywords

Involution, College students, Self-redemption.

1. Entry: The Formation of The "Involution" Normalization

1.1. The appeal of the Involution: as an effective means of competition

1.1.1. Inescapable, the admission ticket to the resource competition

Higher education has grown in popularity in China since the 1990s. As of May of last year, "the total number of students enrolled in school reached 44.3 million, and the gross enrollment rate of higher education increased from 30% in 2012 to 57.8% in 2021, with higher education entering a stage of universal development." However, it is obvious that the growth of education cannot be equated with the improvement of educational equity; rather, it has to some extent also contributed to it. Instead, this has in some ways made the "Effectively Maintained Inequality" worse. Different colleges will compete for resources when there are few advantageous resources available, including the 985 and 211 institutions, which are undoubtedly in a strong position. Similar resource competition has been spreading from students at different educational institutions to those at the same university. College students actively or passively participate in this frenetic competition to obtain as many resources for themselves through extreme self-exploitation and deft calculation of the rules in order to have a comparative advantage in the increasingly fierce competition among their peers, such as a constant proportion of high-scoring places, guaranteed study places, internship opportunities, recommendation opportunities, etc.

Obviously, the competition is frequently filled with absurd components, like math majors vying in artwork and the required shape of a piece of paper being transformed into a modern interpretation of the "Qingming Shanghe Tu." However, in students' thoughts, avoiding it appears to be a much scarier thing with intolerable risks. We submitted a "classroom" report on the computer, and the instructor requested a paper copy. Several groups spent hundreds of dollars looking for a shop to provide them with typesetting and color printing so they could create an elaborate book on the day of submission. Many students chose to print on one side to simply make their material appear thicker. I don't believe it's necessary because programmers don't create art. (Interviewee 2, college student). However, when pressed further, the respondent stated, "We reproduced in color and on one side as well, but not as much as those organizations. You won't receive a high score if you don't do it (Interviewee 2, university student). Parents and pupils are accustomed to engaging in the "involution" when it is not difficult and the expense of not doing so seems prohibitive. They are unwilling to take any chances. They want to follow the safest possible course; they don't want to take any chances.

On the question of whether or not involution can improve scores, students from different schools and majors gave highly similar answers:

You can, indeed. It's similar to how writing well on an exam paper will always result in a better impression score. Our group created a PowerPoint presentation on bizarre art, and the teaching aide gave us praise. (Interviewee 7, a Chinese undergraduate in college)

"I believe it's acceptable. I had a final paper in a class last semester, and the handwriting version received a better mark than the computerized version. The instructor told the class that it was because they "put in more effort," and oh my god, the average was 5 points higher! five points (Interviewee 4, a student majoring in automation at a university)";

"While our teacher didn't say it directly, he will definitely not lower the grade if you do more," (Ask 3 interviewee, major in Journalism)

Therefore, despite constant criticism, "involution" persists as a normalized environment that Chinese college students both adore and despise due to the urgent need to outperform peers and compete for resources.

1.1.2. Voluntary hustle: an extraordinary sense of accomplishment under "efficiency orientation"

A group of pioneers naturally emerged in the raging internal volume process; they took the initiative, occupied the high ground, and enjoyed the benefits of being the first echelon of "involutionists." Their classmates mockingly referred to them as "volume kings," but in the process of taking the lead, they also reaped the psychological satisfaction in addition to success. It begins with the idea of "efficiency orientation," which is "a constant focus on productivity, progress, and getting more done in less time." This idea arose with the development of modernization and industry. Because of this, "efficiency" has grown to be a crucial indicator for demonstrating and evaluating one's skills in contemporary society. While many people might think that excessively busy peers cause tension, anxiety, and stress in those around them, it is actually a great way for them to improve their own wellbeing.

On the one hand, people's negative feelings are reduced by voluntary hustle. Being late for a job, for instance, can be extremely frustrating and even cause self-doubt and denial. However, if he or she is actually extremely busy at that time, this negative sensation will be greatly diminished. They will be more likely to think that they still have the capacity to manage their time effectively and that the poor outcome is simply a result of their inability to complete everything at once.

On the other hand, Kim J. C. asserts that voluntary hustle does improve self-identity and a feeling of control over one's life, both of which are critical components of life satisfaction: Being busy makes one feel more important, and this feeling encourages self-control practices. Additionally, for some college students, being busy is a good way to fight confusion. According

to Interviewee 6 (a student), "I am especially afraid of being idle because when I am idle, I get confused and anxious, so I like to be busy, and it is better to be busy than to be idle." Is it important for people to discuss whether a distraction like being busy can effectively combat confusion? Some believe that by keeping occupied, as in the proverb "Go forward, there is always a way," you will inevitably discover the solution to the future. Another perspective holds that progress is not the same as being busy, and that pursuing busyness is merely a cunning way to escape dealing with the difficult problems that lie ahead.

Furthermore, we cannot ignore the fact that "time is given a symbolic value in the efficiency-oriented modern society, implying a judgment of individual identity." Being busy at work indicates competence, motivation, and a decent income. The job market views busy people as excellent and scarce resources because they are in high demand. This also applies to current college students who are frequently regarded as leaders among their peers and resource race winners, which surely gives them a sense of accomplishment.

In conclusion, busy college students who are constantly involved in a high volume of work also learn to control their negative emotions, build their self-esteem, and feel significantly more accomplished than their peers. This promotes "involution's" normalcy even more.

1.2. The environment as a catalyst: a model of achievement in competition

Along with the college students themselves, parents and instructors frequently view "evolution" as a continuation of the culture of struggle. Within the context of Chinese society's distinct culture of reverence for hardship, this interpretation is highly regarded and praised.

Involution has become a paradigm of success in a cutthroat environment as a result of the union of these two elements.

For one thing, the distinction between involution and effort can be very hazy for parents and educators who are not particularly aware of the culture of in-involuteds. They have a hard time telling whether the "volume" college students talk about is actually a volume that can be consumed internally or if it is just an excuse for not wanting to work hard and being scared of challenges. The extension of the struggle culture in the modern period, this simple belief that "there is no harm in working harder," inspires and rewards parents. The teaching community generally maintains a hazy state of neutrality, neither supporting nor objecting while watching events unfold. "Since so many students will spit it out, we instructors are undoubtedly aware of it. In general, no teacher will explicitly object to the internal volume because the boundary itself is challenging to describe. As a teacher may not be able to dissuade students, sometimes students appear to believe that this person is good to involuted ah, or perhaps people are really interested in doing a lot of it (Interviewee 8, university teaching assistant)". The more internal involuteds we do for our college students, our vice president said, the better (Interviewee 1, a present University student).

Second, the two words "tired" and "suffering" are frequently used by college students to describe their negative feelings toward the involution occurrence. There is a tradition in Chinese society of exalting suffering.

Suffering culture proponents contend that hardship is an essential component of success and that those who experience it are fortunate. Therefore, going through pain also appears to be a moral virtue to be boasted about. According to a quote from Lu Xun, "Being a slave, though unfortunate, is not terrible because one knows that working hard can still lead to freedom; if one looks for beauty in the life of a slave, admiring and intoxicating, one is a slave to the end of all days." Perhaps out of a sense of self-satisfaction, our cultural context frequently paints suffering with too many beautiful and poetic hues, turning it into something other than what it originally was angels' wings or the phoenix's tail.

In such a societal setting, involution is no longer something to be condemned, but rather a yardstick to determine a person's strength and suitability for success. Spitting on the inside paper thus acquires a certain air of boastfulness. It appears to be saying: You see, I am taking pleasure in what you term suffering, so I will also succeed more than you.

The spread of a similar social mentality alone is sufficient to normalize it as a significant component of social culture, regardless of whether involution are really a sufficient prerequisite for a successful outcome.

2. Breakout: The Self-Redemption of Chinese College Students

2.1. Background: Social immobility and the devaluation of college pupils

It could be said that we grew up hearing the proverb "study changes fate" as our generation developed. A never-before-seen window of opportunity has opened in the country of China in the forty years since the reform and opening up, and countless tide makers have been riding the east breeze of the times. Social mobility became a reality for almost everyone as a result of market changes and the expansion of the labor market after 1978, according to Yanjie Bian (2002:104). Many people can trace their ancestry from the rural to the urban, from subsistence to affluence, through their dads or themselves. "My mother and father both read by reading, and they frequently told me that they could be poor in the country when I was a child. In addition, my father said he was still helping people carry rice to earn money when he was as old as me. Then, look at my life now; it is quite emotional (Interviewee 12, a university student in school)."

However, in recent years, on the one hand, our socioeconomic development has steadily stabilized, and social class mobility is not as high as it once was; on the other hand, the aforementioned mobility is primarily manifested in the horizontal movement from the agricultural to the non-agricultural sector, and the vertical movement has shown a decreasing trend since 2007.

According to the statistics, there will be 46% of urban youth workers aged 16 to 24 who have college degrees by the end of 2020, but there will be up to 2/3 of them without jobs. The employment rate of recent college graduates prior to graduation fell by 15 percentage points by the end of June 2022, and the youth unemployment rate once climbed to 19.9 percent in July, higher than that of the United States and Germany by 12 to 16 percentage points than in nations like Japan and Korea.

"Is earning a PhD in liberal arts the equivalent of operating an online car? I encountered a psychology PhD. When I questioned him about using his degree for something more useful, he responded that it was no longer practical because he now had to care for his two children (interviewee 11, graduate student). "High education is nothing, I am 985 science master, graduate salary a month ¥2,000 two (interviewee 10, graduate)" is an all-too-common statement made by 985 graduates who work as babysitters and delivery workers.

(Interviewee 13, who graduated with a master's degree in liberal arts from 985 and is currently working in publicity) "My cousin called me yesterday to ask how much my salary, I said full attendance, then to ¥5,000, she said six years ago she entered the factory a month to hand ¥6,000"

This demonstrates how drastically different the environment is for today's college students compared to our parents' generation, and how studying doesn't seem to be as helpful.

"To be honest, I personally find it incomprehensible that I would have to sacrifice nearly all of my time between the ages of 18 and 24 in order to roll for seven, eight, or even more years, and only just manage to earn a salary of ¥5,000 or ¥6,000 as a result." (Interviewee 14, 211 Prospective Graduates); "Study study study, and eventually have to fight family. Interviewee,

19, 22-year-old college graduate: "Before, I believed that as long as I won the roll, there is a wonderful future waiting for me. Now, I think there is no use."

"Reading is still beneficial, correct? Graduate students' starting salaries are reported to be about ¥1,000 higher than those of undergraduates, and doctoral students' salaries are even higher, so on the exam, a little higher education is still very helpful. Student in college (Interviewee 6).

Because of this, even though the "involution" in higher education is not entirely useless, the cost efficacy is drastically decreased in a society where there is less vertical social mobility and less value placed on college students. "Is the price really worth it? Will my existence ever be satisfactory? Numerous average college pupils have started to withdraw as a result of this.

2.2. Self-Redemption: Two Common Paths

The process of self-redemption for modern college students is realized through mentality adjustment, which can be broadly divided into two ways: one is to adjust their mentality in front of reality, lower their expectations, improve their mental toughness, and reduce their harshness in the worldly evaluation system; the other is to create a paradise, build a small world in accordance with the laws of the universe.

2.2.1. Self-adjustment of mentality: from "utilitarian" to "Buddhist"

(1) Feeling positive emotions to draw energy

In the university community, mental adjustment, or the drawing of positive emotions from the positive aspects of things, is taking place. This increase in positive emotions is then used to increase mental resilience, get through difficult times, and enhance one's sense of well-being.

The idea of mental toughness has been interpreted in many different ways, with some academics believing it to be a steady characteristic while others believe it to be unstable and stressful. However, there is academic agreement that mental toughness, a competency attribute that aids people in surviving trauma-based situations, is effective in enhancing wellbeing.

"They're busy, exhausting, and pointless, and I don't want to roll, but they aren't my entire existence, yes. (Interviewee 2, college student) "I also notice a lot of other good things in my life, such as the weather is good, today there is a new dish is delicious, and so on, and generally happy."

"I have to confess, it's very admirable to see people who can adapt in this way. This is due to the fact that people who are overly stressed find it very challenging to divide their focus between different aspects of their lives. I am aware that I should seek out elegance in my life, go to more exhibitions and films, and read more books, but I lack the motivation to do so. Even though I really want to, I just can't do it (Interviewee 5, current college student). All I want to do after study hall every day is slumber and play video games to unwind."

According to Happiness, "the joy of living and all the little pleasures that fill our lives are totally excluded when we are stressed out. Usually, what is left of existence is barely bearable but not really worth having.

(2) Accept the ordinary after the frank "lying flat"

The second way is more common among college students who are trying to redeem themselves, they are the "lying flat", "lousy" and "Buddhist" youths who are so popular on the Internet. In the face of enormous pressure, they can not get a sense of happiness from the breathless life, so they choose to "let themselves go". They lowered their desire for a set of worldly success, and made fun of themselves as "985 losers" and "vegetable dogs". "Learning to do, but do not think about the study exams, to become the internal volume of people; life or to live, but do not think about success on the top of life; to get well, do not work after a few years of savings is not enough to enter the hospital for two days. Ah, lying flat is really good. (Interviewee 17, 985 university)".

It is important to remember that this self-deprecating laying flat is not all negative.

Based on research and analysis of 9305 college students from 23 colleges and universities across the country, Peng Jun and Yu Tao, researchers at Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, found that 88.64% of the students strongly agree that "lying flat for a short time is a way to move forward better" and that 62.81% of the students agree that "lying flat is a way to adjust oneself and relax for a short time." Lying down is a way to adjust oneself and relax for a brief period of time, according to 62.81% of the students. 87.87% of students in the overall statistics believe they have "lie flat" behavior, but only 3.12% of students select this option, and students who select "short-term lie flat, long-term struggle" do so. Only 3.12% of pupils, on the other hand, selected the option to "lie flat," while 79.08% selected the option to "lie flat in the short term and struggle in the long term."

In reality, from the viewpoint of college students, it is unclear whether lying flat is "short-term" or "long-term." Although it is undeniable that literature has, to some degree, purposefully influenced college students to select the outcome of "long-term struggle," we can still see a hint of how the students themselves perceive lying flat.

We simply understand the market, don't want to be other people's leeks, and don't constantly chase things that aren't ours. "Lie flat is not lying to the ground," we explain. Keep the things in mind and be content. Interviewee 15 is a potential graduate student. "In the second term of my sophomore year, I took a six-month break, which is equivalent to going to lie flat. During those six months, I leased a home close to the school and spent a lot of time searching for the world and myself. I also picked up interests like cycling and fitness. Overall, I don't lament meeting up with my girlfriend at all. (14-year-old interviewee, aspiring doctoral student)

"Lying flat, I really agree with Mr. Chen Di's viewpoint. Refuse to serve the collective objective for the purpose of self-imposed code, that is, without violating the premise of the rules." (Interviewee 15, prospective graduate college student)

2.2.2. Creating a paradise: a small world of self-protection

Subjective well-being is generally higher in people with strong self-esteem, internal control tendencies, and lower internal conflict. The external null tendency, which places the blame for successes and failures outside of oneself, is in opposition to the internal control tendency, which refers to the evaluation system's desire to originate from within oneself.

In order to devote oneself to a peach blossom, one can either create chances for this, such as joining a religion, or one can create a small spiritual world made up of their interests and goals.

(1) Enter a paradise: the solace of religion

Man is a metaphysician by nature and a thinking mammal. The proportion of religious followers among college students has increased since 2005, peaking at 44% and dipping as low as 3.5%. People who convert to religion still enjoy the right to pursue eternal happiness in their value system, and it seems to be easier to operate than quitting graduate school, taking exams, or finding a good job. Religion offers an ideal paradise for people in distress where the reality of education, wealth, and status seem lacking, and those are temporary and disillusioning. We can still be happy without having to "involute" our way through the intense competition with others because this path is almost entirely about us. It is especially alluring because of this. Last August, I visited Wuhan Lingquan Temple. There is a four-person dorm, delicious fasting food, frequent small snacks from the brothers, drawing workshops, fan-making, and other activities. The lifestyle there was very nice and tranquil, and I really enjoyed it. Student in education (interviewee 18)"

(2) Creating a paradise: a small world of self

Those who choose to convert to religion remain in the minority; religious faith is a rather sacred and prudent thing, and more college students who are overwhelmed with the weight of internal volumes are not at the point where they need religion to de-stress. What they do is to create a peach of their own.

Creating one's own peach blossom is a spiritual space in most cases, but in some cases it is also reflected from the physical plane.

"With the school epidemic taking an early break, I took the opportunity to come to Dali to sojourn for a while and travel while taking online classes... the best of both worlds really! I had a great time in Dali every day! (Interviewee 21, university student)" "I belong to the kind of person who 'creates a peach blossom source' for himself, I like to read books, all kinds of books, philosophy, art, literature, and I also love to write my own movie and book reviews on Douban. But in real life, I am a loner, I rented a house and moved out of the dormitory in my sophomore year, the pressure of studying and living is already enough, I want a space to heal myself (Interviewee 20, university student).

According to the author's interviews and observations, these students have one common characteristic: they are not satisfied with the value evaluation system of the existing world, and they are not willing to just fit into a certain evaluation system. They will choose to create their own evaluation system and fill this space with things they like and agree with. For them, even if the outside world is flooded, as long as the small world is still there, they can still be calm and relaxed.

"Yes, I can be counted as having 'my own peach blossom', I can't go on the class, that teacher looking for the PowerPoint reading still can't read, go is simply murder me, I also for a long time under depression. Sometimes I would read the new national debate for a week by myself and take detailed notes, or write calligraphy for an afternoon and spread the rice paper all over the room. At those times, I feel very happy and good, just like in the movie, my heart has a place to return to. (Interviewee 9, current college student)"

Research has shown that an individual's value orientation can have a greater impact on his or her happiness. In contrast, height and looks, family income, and life events have a much smaller impact on subjective well-being. This can also support why investing in/creating a peach of a value system can be an important way for contemporary college students to redeem themselves.

3. Conclusion

For the present-day Chinese university students, involution is a powerful form of competition that can improve an individual's competitive advantage as well as provide spiritual solace. At the same time, China's unique social environment is subtly catalyzing this kind of behavior, but it is in this cycle that many students are growingly intolerant of it. In a situation where there is so much pressure but no improvement in the outcomes, they feel helpless and hopeless. More and more of them are refusing to give up their independence and ego in exchange for the fanciful justification for self-redemption.

There are two main methods that this self-redemption occurs. The first step is to change their perspective; on the one hand, they will concentrate primarily on positive things and draw energy from them; on the other hand, they learn to embrace every aspect of themselves and allow peace of mind to take the place of competitive zeal.

The second strategy is to designate a personal area, like the peach blossom garden that was described in the article. Some individuals decide to change their religion and find happiness in it, whether it be Buddhism, Christianity, or something else. Additionally, more people are building their own unique little worlds filled with whatever they like. The understanding of personal redemption comes last.

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