

Analysis of the Current Status of Involution in Chinese Family Education and Exploration of Response Strategies

Yicheng Chen*

Wuhan College of Arts and Science, Applied Psychology, School of Education, Wuhan, 430000, China

*Corresponding author: 342230647@qq.com

Abstract: The objective of the study is to analyze the current status of involution within Chinese family education and to explore potential response strategies. By integrating a comprehensive review of related literature and data, the study interprets the causes of educational involution from both macro-social and micro-family perspectives. Furthermore, it discusses comprehensive approaches to address the phenomenon of educational involution in Chinese family education, considering the roles of the state, schools, and families. The results of the study revealed that the involution in Chinese family education is driven by various factors, including intense labor market competition, the elite education system, the one-child policy, and societal perceptions of vocational education. The study concludes by recommending multifaceted strategies at the national, school, and family levels to mitigate the issue, emphasizing the importance of balanced development in education and the need for a collective effort from various sectors.

Keywords: Educational involution; Family education; Response strategies.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

The issue of educational involution within Chinese family education has garnered significant attention in recent years, with families increasingly engaging in competitive educational practices that offer minimal benefit relative to the resources invested. This phenomenon reflects broader societal and economic trends and has profound implications for the well-being of children and the future of education in China.

1.2. Literature Review

A review of existing literature reveals a growing body of research on the concept of involution in various fields, including education. Studies have explored its causes, manifestations, and impacts, particularly in the context of Chinese society. However, there remains a gap in comprehensive studies that integrate both macro-social and micro-family perspectives to provide a holistic understanding of educational involution in Chinese family education.

1.3. Problem Statement and Objectives

In the context of involution in education, children's leisure time is significantly compressed, and parents become increasingly anxious as they continuously compare their own children with those of others. How then is this phenomenon of educational involution formed? This article attempts to analyze the causes of educational involution in Chinese family education from both macro-social and micro-family perspectives. Based on this analysis, it explores possible response strategies to address the issue of educational involution.

2. What is "Involution"

The concept of "involution" was originally applied in the

fields of agriculture and economics. American anthropologists Alexander Goldenweizer and Clifford Geertz initially defined "involution" as "a process of continuous refinement and complication internally, under the condition where the system's expansion outward is strictly limited [1]." Based on this research, more scholars have expanded its application to different academic fields and enriched the concept of involution. The current understanding of involution can be interpreted as "due to the absence or overwhelming presence of external forces, resulting in the internal segmentation and penetration of an organization, forming a relatively stable internal development model and strict constraint mechanisms. This leads to path dependency and self-locking in the development model, eventually resulting in involutory growth or lack thereof [2]." Expanding the meaning of involution to the realm of family education, educational involution refers to a series of learning behaviors, where families, under the strict limitations of fixed promotion rates and limited educational resources, engage in comparative yet overall minimally beneficial activities to align their children's development more closely with their expectations.

3. Causes of "Involution"

3.1. Socio-macro Perspective

3.1.1. Intensified competition in the labor market

Before 1984, the Chinese government implemented a strict household registration system, which severely restricted the migration of rural populations to cities and towns through regulations such as the "Draft Regulations on Handling Household Registration Migrations" by the Ministry of Public Security. This household registration system exacerbated the development gap between urban and rural areas and hindered urbanization, leading to a fragmented labor market[3]. In October 1984, the "Notice on Issues Regarding Farmers Settling in Towns" was issued by the State Council, relaxing

the strict household registration control. China began to steadily reform its household registration system, allowing the rural labor force to gradually flow into urban labor

markets. Both the urbanization rates of the permanent population and the registered population continued to rise, as shown in Figure 1.

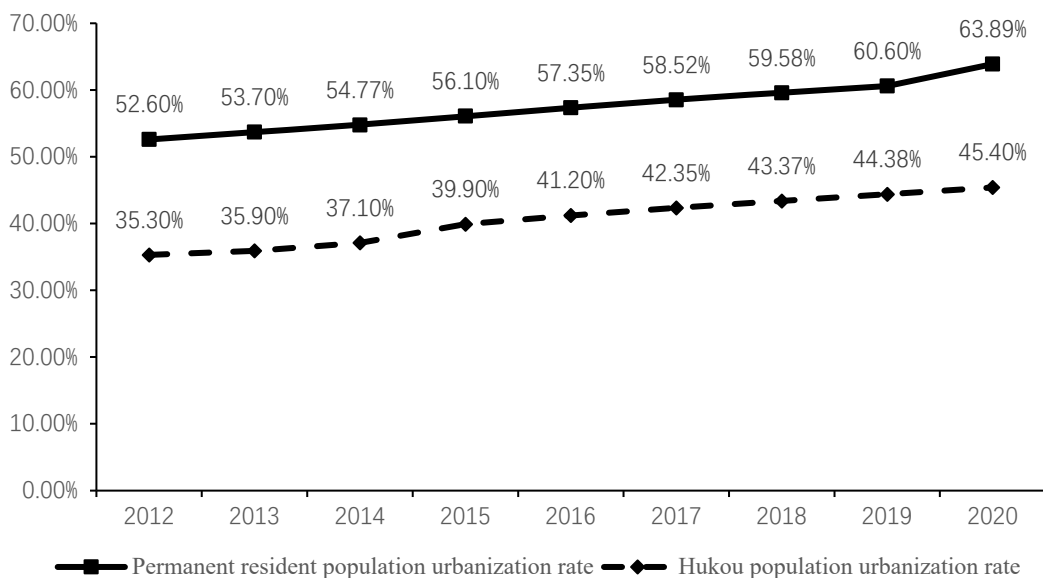


Figure 1. Urbanization rate of China's permanent resident population and urbanization rate of China's registered (hukou) population

Source: Data from 2013 to 2019 are from the National Bureau of Statistics' annual 'Statistical Communiqué on National Economic and Social Development'; data for 2020 are from the National Bureau of Statistics' seventh national population census bulletin.

At the same time, the population proportion of 36 major cities in China has been on an upward trend. From 1998 to 2019, the population percentage of major cities in the country increased from 17.39% to 19.6%. Specifically, the proportion in provincial capitals rose from 10.67% to 12.34%, while in first-tier megacities, it grew from 2.56% to 3.1%[4]. Before a large influx of rural labor into urban employment markets, the number of jobs in cities was relatively balanced. The entrance of excess labor inevitably squeezed the existing market, triggering more intense competition within the internal labor market. Companies, seeking to maximize economic benefits,

increasingly looked to hire either cheaper or more qualified employees to drive progress. Academic qualifications, being one of the basic and direct indicators of an individual's capabilities, have become a fundamental threshold for most companies during the hiring process. Parents, facing the current employment situation, have a deeper understanding of the importance of a "higher education background." To enable their children to attain higher educational levels and be more competitive in the job market, they feel compelled to engage in the "involution" education model.

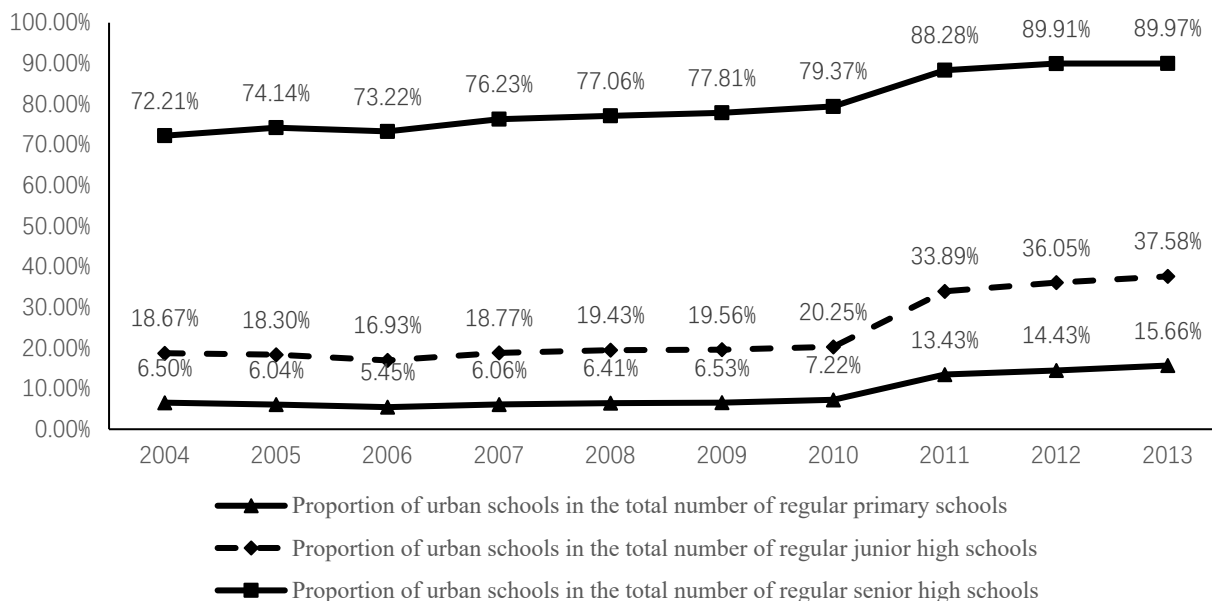


Figure 2. The proportion of urban schools in the total number of schools

Source: Official website of the National Bureau of Statistics of China.

3.1.2. Development of the Elite Education System In its educational policies

China established a system of key schools to cultivate talent in science and industrial technology. The aim of this policy was to invest scarce educational resources in outstanding students to rapidly advance national technological development. However, this system also had a negative impact on educational equity. The gap in status and the value of degrees obtained by students graduating from key versus non-key schools is substantial[5]. Policy changes have gradually led to a concentration of schools in urban areas, with the number and quality of rural schools showing a downward trend. Compared to rural schools, the proportion and prominence of urban schools have significantly increased, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Key schools in urban areas can receive substantial government support to hire more qualified teachers and use advanced teaching equipment to provide higher-quality educational services. However, the number of these schools is very limited and concentrated in economically developed large cities. Parents, eager for their children to access the best educational resources within their reach and succeed in entering these schools, increase their investment in "shadow education." In China, "shadow education" refers to fee-based educational activities provided by tutoring institutions to improve students' academic performance, occurring outside school hours and premises, commonly known as "extracurricular tutoring classes" or "supplementary lessons."

Some parents view exam scores and ranking as the sole indicators of their child's academic level, believing all educational investments are merely to serve the purpose of improving "scores."

3.1.3. Impact of the One-Child Policy and Family Planning

During the reform and opening-up period, China established the one-child policy and family planning as a fundamental national policy, significantly controlling the birth rate and increasing the number of one-child families. Compared to families with multiple children, parents of an only child have higher educational expectations[6]. Since there is no opportunity to choose the "best" child for investment, parents tend to hope that this only child will follow the path they envision and devote all their efforts to support this. Economically, the financial burden of raising a single child is much less than that of multiple children, allowing parents of an only child to allocate more financial resources to their child's education. From the perspective of parental involvement, an only child often receives more attention, and parents have more time to provide educational support. In today's society, the birth rate is declining, as shown in Figure 3. The number of children in modern family structures is typically one to two, and as the economy and society develop, this situation further enables parents to invest more resources in their children, fueling the competitive struggle in education.

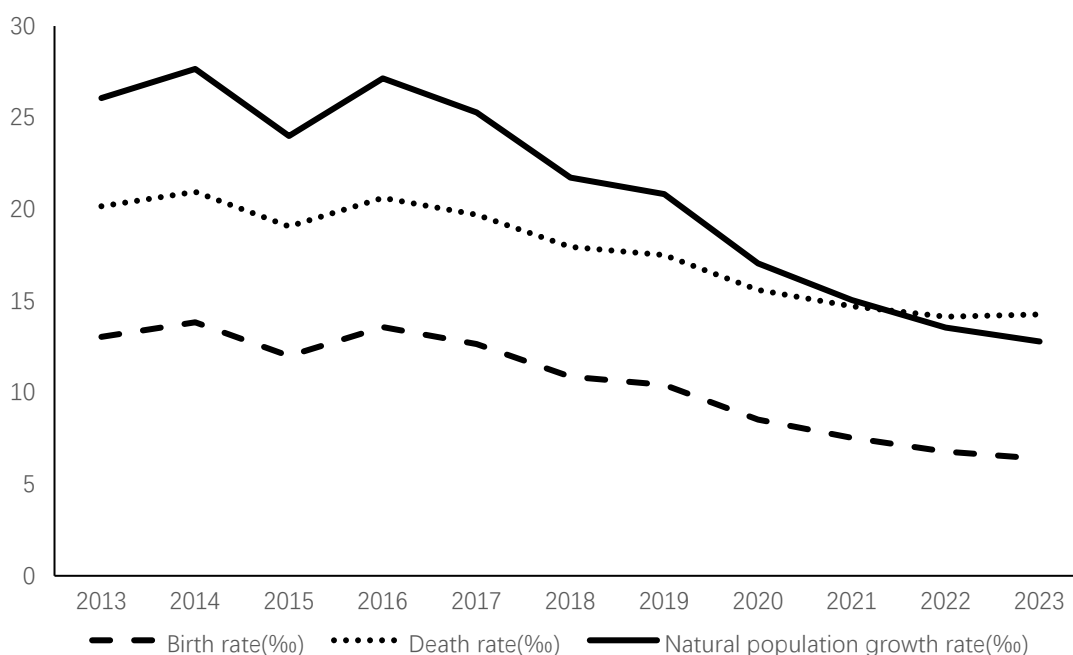


Figure 3. Population Dynamics Indicators Chart
Source: Official website of the National Bureau of Statistics of China.

3.1.4. Discrimination in Vocational Education

In China, a unified training model is implemented during the nine-year compulsory education. After the middle school entrance examination, students are streamed according to a fixed admission ratio, with some entering secondary vocational schools to continue vocational education. In China's ideological system, there has been a historical emphasis on academia over mere technical skills, with investment predominantly directed towards higher education.

This has resulted in insufficient funding, outdated teaching conditions, and low salaries for teachers in secondary vocational education, making it challenging to provide quality education. Additionally, many enterprises set degree thresholds during recruitment, excluding vocational school graduates, who often can only take up entry-level jobs. Against this backdrop, parents tend to be biased against vocational education, viewing students in vocational schools as more troublesome compared to those in regular high

schools, and labeling them as disobedient, playful, or rebellious, associating vocational schools with a lack of ambition or bleak prospects. Parents, under the pressure of fixed provincial college entrance rates, push their children into the competitive grind of study regardless of their suitability, leading to education-related anxiety and involution.

3.2. Micro-family Perspective

3.2.1. Utilitarian Learning Ideology

The idiom "hoping one's son will become a dragon" reflects the high expectations Chinese parents have for their children's academic and career success. Traditional Confucian ideology, which highly values education and hard work, also influences modern family dynamics, where parents feel responsible for nurturing their children with clear expectations. In contemporary society, the nature of learning has shifted towards "naturalized learning," where learning is seen merely as a biological necessity—an extreme manifestation of the learning era[7]. Under this influence, some parents believe that diligent study is the only way to avoid being left behind by society, equating not studying with a bleak future. In this mindset, learning loses its intrinsic value and becomes a tool for obtaining fame and wealth, with the focus solely on outcomes. This motivation deviates from the true intent of education, hinders children's self-actualization, and contributes to the involution of family education.

3.2.2. The Cycle of Investment and Returns in Children's Education

Traditionally, Chinese society has held the notion of raising children as a safeguard for old age. Although this concept is diminishing with the development of modern social security systems, all parents wish for their children to secure a respectable job and a happy life, viewing their children's achievements as a family honor. Competition and comparison are inherent in human society and are inevitable in child-rearing, leading parents to habitually compare their children with those from similar backgrounds. If their child outperforms, parents feel a sense of accomplishment, viewing it as a return on their educational investment and potentially increasing their investment. Conversely, if another child excels, parents might engage in competitive tactics to surpass them, aiming for a never-ending victory. Research shows a significant positive correlation between children's academic performance and parental satisfaction in high-income urban families and one-child households[8], indicating that parents perceive educational investments' returns through their children's academic successes.

3.2.3. Educational Expectations for Class Mobility

China has a long history of stories like "Fan Jin passing the imperial examination," emphasizing education's role in societal and family contexts since the formal implementation of the imperial examination system in the Sui and Tang dynasties. The system allowed any male from the era to achieve a bureaucratic position through the examination, enabling class mobility and life transformation. Influenced by this cultural notion, contemporary parents gradually adopt the idea of using continuous educational intervention to improve their children's educational level, ultimately gaining family honor and social status. From their perspective, high-status and wealthy families can provide their children with superior educational resources from an early age, giving them a head start and avoiding the center of educational competition. In contrast, families with lower social status and economic

power, constrained by their educational vision and financial resources, cannot provide the same competitive background for their children, often leading to lowered expectations. The middle class, the largest demographic in China's family economic structure, is also the most "involved" in competition. These families are aware of the upper-class education and lifestyle, viewing class mobility as attainable, not through their efforts but through maximizing educational investment in their children. However, due to some parents' limited educational levels, many fall into the "theater effect" when shaping their children's education. This effect manifests when one family enrolls their child in extracurricular training, prompting other parents to follow suit to prevent their children from falling behind, excessively encroaching on children's leisure time.

4. Pathways to Dissolve Involutionary Family Education

4.1. National Level

On July 24, 2021, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council issued the "Opinions on Further Reducing the Homework and After-school Tutoring Burden on Students at the Compulsory Education Stage," known as the "Double Reduction Policy." This policy aims to refocus education within schools and promote balanced development in compulsory education. However, some families continue to engage their children in extracurricular academic tutoring, such as one-on-one home tutoring, live-streamed classes, and art training. To address this, the policy's regulatory responsibilities should be further clarified to ensure its effective implementation. Additionally, expanding the supply of high-quality educational resources and enhancing the public, open, and shared nature of education can create a system where schools are the main focus, supplemented by the market.

To address the inequality between urban and rural educational resources, leveraging the benefits of the information age to establish a city-rural mutual assistance online school system can be beneficial. Establishing a regional mechanism to categorize schools into urban and rural categories and forming assistance alliances based on geographical locations can facilitate resource and teacher sharing and promote joint educational activities, aiding rural teacher development and addressing uneven resource distribution[9].

4.2. School Level

Today, parents judge a school's excellence based on its college entrance rate, which also sources competitive pressure among schools. To maintain or increase their admission rates, schools often overload students with academic work, employing rote learning or intensive practice tactics to artificially boost performance. This not only fosters a harmful focus on scores but also contradicts the "Double Reduction Policy" and the comprehensive educational philosophy of cultivating moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labor development. Schools should focus on shaping students' life and value perspectives, fostering morally sound and proactive youths, and enhancing students' comprehensive abilities. Breaking away from the notion that scores are the ultimate measure of a student's worth, schools should lead by adopting more diversified evaluation criteria, focusing on students'

thought processes, practical application of knowledge, individual development, and encouraging innovative and critical thinking to enhance learning interest.

4.3. Family Level

The development of national education should align with the economic structure and labor market, balancing the need for research professionals and vocational talents. With numerous cases of graduate students unable to complete their theses, it's worth questioning whether individuals pushed into research by their families genuinely possess passion and interest in their fields. In an era where innovation and creativity are increasingly crucial, individuals unsuited for their roles lack the motivation for innovation. Modern parents should embrace evolving educational philosophies, avoid imposing excessive academic pressure, and resist forcing children into numerous tutoring or extracurricular classes. Instead, families should center on children's interests, allowing them choice and exploration while guiding them to discover their passions, creating opportunities rather than pushing them along a rugged path. Rejecting blind competition and deepening understanding of education's essence can help realign family education with its core values.

5. Conclusion

This study investigates the causes of educational involution in Chinese family education and concludes as follows: From a macro-societal perspective, the causes of educational involution in Chinese families include the increasingly tense employment situation due to labor market mobility between urban and rural areas; the emphasis on elite education systems where the state invests heavily in certain schools, leading to a stark disparity in educational resources between urban and rural areas and highlighting issues of educational inequality; the impact of family planning policies resulting in fewer children per family, causing parents to focus more on the education of each child; and discrimination against vocational education, with a reluctance to let children pursue such paths. From a micro-family perspective, education has become increasingly utilitarian, with parental investment in children's education serving as a means of comparing and competing with similar families, reflecting the aspiration for class mobility. To alleviate the involution in Chinese family education, it is recommended that at the national level, further implementation and refinement of the "Double Reduction" policy should be pursued, alongside leveraging the internet to

share educational resources between urban and rural areas. Schools should continuously improve their evaluation systems, focusing on holistic student development and moving away from a sole emphasis on scores. Families should respect their children's choices, treat vocational education equally, and avoid blindly following societal trends.

This paper has its limitations, such as not incorporating variables like parental characteristics into the analysis of causes, and some data may be outdated. The issue of educational involution in Chinese families is longstanding and complex, requiring collaborative efforts from various sectors for resolution.

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