

内卷、加速与当代中国社会的“赶工游戏”
'Involution, Acceleration and the "Making-Out" Game of the Contemporary Chinese
Society'

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If one were to select a topical vocabulary of the year 2020, then “involution” would certainly be found in that list. Earlier used as an academic jargon entangled in the witchcraft sort of academic discourse within a small range of academic circle, involution suddenly had an “exvolution” in the year 2020, becoming a cultural phenomenon popular among the crème university students and the middle class. In the current online discussions in China, involution has already become a vocabulary with an extensive meaning, leading to the “everything is involution” phenomenon. However, these discussions mostly use involution as the “description of a miserable condition”. They focus upon expressing a common anxiety prevalent in the current Chinese society, but lack the analysis of the causality behind the issue.

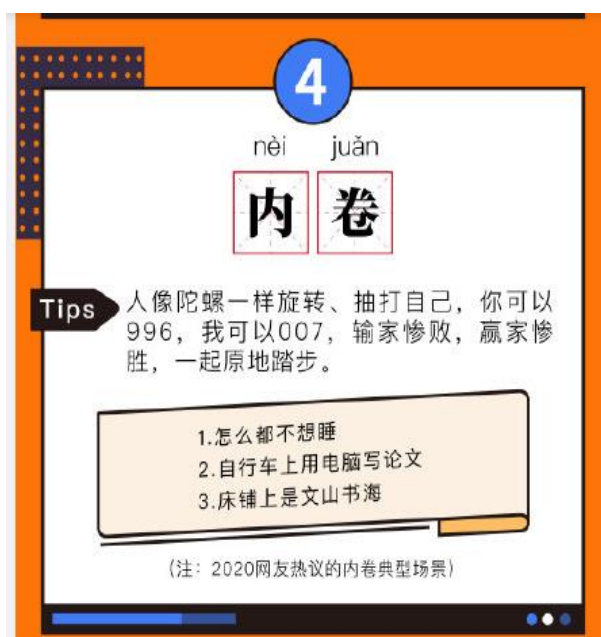


Image text translation: Involution

Tips: One keeps spinning like a spinning top, knocking out oneself, you may work 996, I may work 007, the loser will endure a crushing defeat; the victor shall suffer a Pyrrhic victory, together treading in situ.

1. One just cannot think of sleeping
 2. Writes dissertation on the laptop even while cycling
 3. Mountains of books and papers are piled on the bed
- (Note: typical scenarios of involution as hotly discussed by netizens in China in 2020)

Phenomenal description has not helped in resolving the real social issue. On the contrary, it has cast over the vocabulary a thick cloud of despair. What we need is to go a step further and ask, what is the mechanism that lies at the depth of the occurrence of this phenomenon? Whether or not it is possible for a society to break free from involution and move towards “disvolution?”

(1) The variation in the concept-from a pre-modern phenomenon to a modern malady:

The earliest appearance of the term “involution” can be traced to the *Critique of Judgement*, a book by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant compares “involution” with “evolution” and argues that these two are completely different modes of development. It was the American anthropologist C. Geertz who actually brought this word in the academic realm and fixed its form. He used this concept to refer to a phenomenon in which a society or

a culture having reached a certain level of development just stagnates, unable to transform itself to a higher level.

In the year 1985, the Chinese sociologist Huang Zongzhi brought the concept of “involution” to China for the first time in his article “Economic and Social Changes among the Small Peasants of North China”. Huang Zongzhi used this concept in the research of China’s ancient economic and social development. He called it a development model that heavily relied on a large amount of labour input to achieve growth in total output, but at the same time it progressively decreased the marginal benefits, making it into a kind of “growth without development”. The core issue he wanted to explain through this concept was: why did China not have an industrial revolution? Or to say, why did a highly developed small peasant economy never transition into a modern capitalist economy?

If in the academic discourse, the concept of involution carried the meaning of a pre-modern socio-economic phenomenon, then in the contemporary public discourse the concept of involution has gained traction as a typical malady of the modern times. It is no more a growth-game between human beings and nature: it has rather become a war among human beings, an almost bare hand to hand combat in a race for positions, professional advancement and academic credentials, a game of acceleration signifying a cruel competition

for survival. It has made everyone fall into a kind of “gyroscopic endless loop”, in which everyone must beat themselves, mobilize themselves, so that they can gain an iota of competitive advantage.

So, what could have led to such a phenomenon like involution? Most theorists attribute the rise of involution to the scarcity of resources and social wealth, saying that the “cake” is not big enough. Hence, it has led to a contradiction between limited resources and unlimited human desires. Amid such discourse and logic, involution has become a kind of alternative with no alternative.

This leads to two completely different directions: one of which is of extreme pessimism, which believes that human beings, with no way to break free from the control of desires, are doomed to find themselves entangled forever in the snare of involution, with no way of self-extrication ever; the other is of vulgar optimism, which believes that the technological advancement and the rise in the productive forces will promote the abundance of social wealth, thereby greatly alleviating the competition for survival among human beings. These views, having ignored the deeper social roots of involution, have simply “naturalised” and rationalised the phenomenon of involution. In fact, the phenomenon of involution is, not only not the result of the scarcity of material wealth; on the contrary, it is exactly the

product of a modern society with a highly developed material production. A high level of “involutization” competition has created more and more social assets and spiritual wealth. However, it has made human beings fall into an even fiercer game of involution, thus forming a cage in which “the more one strives, the more one volutes”.

To really understand the phenomenon of involution, one must delve deep into the logic of production which serves as the intrinsic character of the modern society.

(2) The “making-out game” and the obscured “third party”:

The phenomenon of involution reflects a fierce competition between individuals, a competition which finally leads to an outcome that is unfavourable to all the participants. But this is the outward appearance of the phenomenon. Upon delving inwards, it is found that behind all the participants who suffered a loss, there is certainly a third party who made profit. The source of involutizaion can be traced to this invisible “third party”.

To locate this obscured “third party”, we can carry out our analysis by borrowing some of the findings of the famous sociologist Michael Burawoy from his book *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism*.

Manufacturing Consent is a representative work of Burawoy; it is also one of the classical works studying the capitalist labour process theory. Traditional Marxist theory mainly emphasizes that in the process of production, labour and capital are mutually antagonistic. Burawoy, however, discovered a very interesting phenomenon. He found out that the factory workers did not exhibit any sentiment of resistance towards the labour system of their employer. On the contrary, they had a voluntary “consent” and acceptance for the work system set up by the employer. Therefore, the key question which confronted Burawoy was: why were the workers willingly working so hard?

Burawoy pointed out, by the 1960s and 1970s, the classical “factory despotism” had become obsolete in capitalist factories in the West. Purely relying upon “coercive force” was not going to shape the production order. Thence, as per the demands of the time, “voluntary servitude” came into being. During his field work, Burawoy found a specific mechanism through which capitalism was concealing the surplus value and at the same time manufacturing “consent” towards capitalism, i. e. the “making-out” game.

The United Company in which Burawoy was working had a minimum guarantee direct piece-rate wage system. Using the incentive as the primary measure, it made every operator to

attempt to attain the productive level where they could earn incentivized wages. Under this system, for each type of productive operation, the production department of the enterprise had established a datum, that is, the number of products which could be produced in an hour. Below the datum, the operator would only get the basic wage for that work; above the datum, the operator would not only get the basic wage, but would also get the corresponding bonus or incentive based on the number of pieces surpassing the datum.

This kind of a wage system was mainly based on the extent of individual labour, not collective labour. It thus created a relationship of conflict and competition between the individual workers. All the workers were striving hard to work fast, in order to get more rewards and a higher salary in this “surpassing quota game”.

The emergence of the “making-out” game made the workers add a small element of fun to an otherwise dull work environment, thus getting a false consciousness of satisfaction and freedom of imagination. At the same time, the mutual competition stimulated by the “making-out” game between the workers, successfully transformed the vertical class antagonism among them into horizontal antagonism. The “making-out” game thus played the role of an ideological obscurant.

Burawoy pointed out, the “making-out” game “did not just conceal their common class attributes, that is, them belonging to the common class of labourers selling their labour force for wages, it also concealed the class differences between them and the class which owned their unpaid labour”. As soon as they participated in this “game”, the “third party” – the employer – who led the workers to compete with each other, was immediately obscured. Now, the workers were not only not going to question the rules of the game anymore, that is, the rules of capitalism per se, furthermore, they were going to enthusiastically vie for an advantageous position in this “game”.

Every worker was going to be sucked into this unique set of behaviour and language of/in the pursuance of “surpassing the quota”, thus forming a unique kind of workshop culture. Under this workshop culture, participation in the surpassing quota game was not just a matter of social returns, but a matter of psychological returns as well, making the workers brim with voluntary enthusiasm and recognition for this game. For example, when Burawoy with his friend Roy entered the workshop for the first time, they felt “a little disdain” towards this surpassing the quota game, but very soon they found themselves “deeply indulged in this game and became enthusiastic players”.

Even though this game, centered around surpassing the quota, led to short-term gains for the individual worker, it made the workers collectively fall into the “prisoner’s dilemma”. With the continuous rise in the production volume, the employer would also continuously raise the datum. Hence, when seen in long-term, although the labour intensity and production efficiency kept rising, however, the overall salary standard of the workers remained static. Thus, the actual wage per unit, in fact, reduced.

This “prisoner’s dilemma” competition which centred round surpassing the quota is the essence of the so-called involution. Like a treadmill, all the workers were trying to run forward with their utmost strength but they would find themselves static at the original place. Individual rationality brought along collective irrationality causing continuous harm to the actual interests of the workers, and making the “third party” the real dominant force and beneficiary.

(3) Involution spreading out: from “Making-Out” game to “Studying-Out” game

With the deepening of the market reform and the infiltration of capital’s logic, the “making-out” game also started prevalently appearing in China. Although Burawoy had analysed the internal situation of a manufacturing factory,

but this phenomenon also exists in large numbers in other areas.

The delivery service industry, which boomed during the great internet wave, is the hardest hit area by the “making-out” game. The job of a delivery rider is highly individualistic. The delivery platforms have designed a very stringent graded reward system for the riders. The cash rewards and level upgrades e.g., hundred percent attendance reward, rush-delivery reward and bad weather subsidy are decided upon the work performance and capability of the rider... In addition, the higher the grade of the rider, the more preference one gets for deliveries; or the opportunity to make nearby deliveries with high monetary rewards. Driven by the system and the algorithm, the riders have fallen into what Burawoy called the “making-out” system. As stated in the article “Takeaway Riders, Stuck in the System” (外卖骑手, 困在系统里 *Wàimài qíshǒu, kùn zài xìtǒng lǐ*), in the face of acceleration rewards and overtime punishments, the rider runs faster and faster, and “when the system calculates that everyone is running faster and faster, it accelerates further.”

Speaking of the white-collar class with a University degree, engaged in mental labour in a cubicle inside a high-end office building, they too can not break free from the fate of the “making-out” game. In comparison to the workers of the manufacturing factory, the

process of labour of the white-collars is even more decentralised and individualised. Therefore, the competition of surpassing the quota is even fiercer. A classic example of this is the case of “996” work system greatly prevalent in the internet companies. Even though the competition and acceleration among the individual programmers, which is centered around surpassing the quota, reaches the physiological limits of the human body, however, they cannot help but continue to play this game of involution, unless, abrupt death forces one to quit.

The work place involution has also infiltrated into other spaces, for example, institutes of higher education. Serving as a reserved force of the labour market, involution in higher-educational institutes is the extension of competition in the workplace. After the expansion of enrolment in these institutions, leading to the inflation and devaluation of degrees, being a University graduate is not synonymous anymore with being elite. Centered round grades, glory and gaining positions, there is a fierce competition amongst the University students, the aim being getting a more favourable place in the future labour market.

The article “Grade as the King: the Prisoner’s Dilemma of Young People in China’s Top Notch Universities”

(绩点为王：中国顶尖高校年轻人的囚徒困

境 *Jī diǎn wèi wáng: Zhōngguó dǐngjiān gāoxiào niánqīng rén de qiútú kùnjìng*), which went viral in my friend circles some time ago says, in top notch universities like Qinghua and Peking, “revealed through the beautiful indicators and nice-looking success is the common predicament that these brightest young people of China are facing: of successfully suppressing growth, of indulging in doing PK with the peers and finding themselves completely worn out amid extreme competition.” The involutization centered round grades has caused the loss of real essence of learning. The pursuit of success, the yearning for it, has led to these God’s favoured ones ignore true spiritual growth. However, this kind of absurd and helpless reality has its deep realistic plausibility.



Image text translation: If you come to us, we will train your child. If you don't come to us, we will train your child's competitor

With the same logic, involution in high schools is again the extension of involution in higher educational institutes. Hengshui High School, the famous “Gaokao Factory” (*Gaokao* in Chinese means higher educational institutions entrance examination system – tr.), has already taken the “cram-volution” in Hebei to a point where without an average sixteen hours of study per day per person, one cannot get into an undergraduate programme. Moreover, even with seven hundred points there is no chance to get into Qinghua or Peking University...this kind of involution logic has even reached the kindergartens. In the television series *Nothing But Thirty* (三十而已), quite popular a few years ago, the female protagonist Gu Jia is seen constantly “self-packaging” herself, trying to make her way into camps and social circles. She sponsors fireworks show, and even takes loan to buy a luxury apartment. Only to raise her social status to be sold at the time of the interview, in order to make it convenient for her child to get into a top kindergarten. This type of competition, which is centered around the issue of education and begins from kindergarten, can be summed up as a kind of “studying-out” involution. As a mean of social stratum reproduction, education has been endowed with too much significance by the people of contemporary China. Although “studying-out” game is different in form from “making-out” game of the workplace, but their inherent logic and mechanism are the same. While it has made the students of China get

into a situation of “prolong learning,” “excessive learning” and “advanced learning,” leaving the students and the parents utterly overburdened in this fierce competition of education; at the same time, it has manufactured a “voluntary” servitude towards the current educational regulations, making many people deeply obsessed with this game, with no way to extricate themselves.

The infiltration of involution logic in workspace and in different realms of life has brought along a widespread “acceleration” in the society and in the rhythm of the lives of the individuals. China has already entered into what Harmut Rosa calls the “social acceleration mode”. From kindergarten children to the grey-haired elders, from the takeaway riders of the lowest strata to the intellectuals of the highest strata, everyone is entangled in this game of acceleration, with no way to get disentangled from it. Accompanying it is the spread of instrumental rationality and the universal alienation of people, as well as a kind of an omnipresent feeling of anxiety.

(4) The “Involved Kings” and the “Zen-Y”: the “over speeders” and the “offbeat resisters” of the involution game

In *Manufacturing Consent*, along with expounding on the “making-out” game, Burawoy has also analysed the stealth resistance tactics of the workers. Even though

in the course of continuous pursuit of surpassing the quota, the workers fell in a kind of collective “prisoner’s dilemma”, but, they still tried to contain the surpassing within a corresponding limit, in order to prevent the emergence of the phenomenon of excessive acceleration. Those “over speeders” who evidently surpassed this range would become the target of collective ostracism in the workshop. This was a kind of stealth collective resistance formed by the workers in the workshop.

Burawoy cites a real example. The workshop he was attending had an operator named Ed. When the employer was calculating the working hours afresh, Ed put forth “some ‘suggestions’ to enhance the speed of his machine”. These suggestions were immediately accepted by the employer, leading to Ed receiving bonus from the employer. But it compromised the collective effort of the workers to resist “acceleration”, hence, he very soon came to be seen as the common enemy, “he was almost completely ostracized in the workshop”.

The “involved king” (or “involved demon”), a concept which has emerged in the online world of contemporary China, are those “over speeders” who have evidently surpassed the collective speed. The existence of a large number of “involved kings” is the driving force behind the continuous progress of the

involution game. They continuously push the involution game to a new level. For example, a student said that a normal “blow off class” requires them to submit a three thousand characters long end-semester paper, but someone submitted a twenty thousand characters long dissertation, as a result he was/ “forced to add another thirteen thousand characters.” The “involved king” could push the quota to twenty thousand characters, even in a situation which only demanded three thousand characters, thus the “involved king” could break the existing ecological balance, and force other students to feel forced to add more characters.

In the workplace, “involved king” has another less than elegant appellation – “struggle-porn star”. Somebody defined it as that employee who “does everything from the perspective of the capitalist, engages in self-exploitation, continuously gives away one’s personal space, hoping that the boss will be moved by their continuous struggle and reward them, and at the end, ends up making the workplace pestilent.”

Economist Xue Zhaofeng in his “chicken soup for the soul” kind of statement says, “It is not the boss who makes you work overtime, but other people who are willing to work overtime.” Those who willingly work overtime, and thus force other colleagues to work overtime as well, are the so-called

“struggle-porn star”. To sum it up with an even more vivid sentence, they are those who believe that “I would rather exhaust myself to death, but I will not let my colleagues live”. Words like diligence, hard work, and struggle have had positive connotation in traditional Chinese concept. However, in this highly involuted game, the excessive diligence of the individual being evoked out of personal interest, is leading to others being pushed into an infinitely deteriorating environment. “Involuting King” or “Struggle-Porn Star”, are the vocabularies of criticism borne out of this kind of discourse where individual struggle is criticised.



Image text translation: I would rather tire myself to death, but I will not let my colleagues live

The discourse of ostracising the “involuting king” and the “struggle-porn star”, is in fact a stealth sanction against the “over speeders”, which reflects a simple wish of the individuals who have been continuously forced to accelerate in the involution game. In this process, some of them have also developed offbeat resistance strategies. Being “Zen-

Y(outh)” and practicing the “Touching Fish Philosophy” are some of those strategies which have become quite popular in the recent few years.

“Zen” is “life who knows, anyhow it goes, with indifference looking at everything, with no struggle for anything, muddling along is one’s being” kind of a lifestyle. The post-90s youth, who has already spent half its life voluting in this involution game, who in the quotidian competition for existence and as the blessing of “996”, received the rewards of “gastro paresis, baldness, divorce”, finally discovered that “I am still nothing but a “labourer” and a “company livestock” with nothing to my name”. So, instead of tired living, why not go a little “Zen”?

The “Touching Fish Philosophy” aka the “Philosophy of Slacking Off” has come to be very popular among the “Zen-Y”. “Touching Fish” has already become a “flavour-ant” in the uninteresting and tasteless “996” lives of the company livestock. The philosophy is: “As long as I can get off my shift faster, the boss cannot get hold of me; As long as I slack off at work profoundly enough, I will be able to wash off the hubbub of this vulgar world; As long as I loaf on the job, I will feel as if I am retrieving my lost self-back; As long as my appearance of doing my job is realistic enough, I can fool the hastily passing time.” “Touching Fish Philosophy” is a rebel against the “Struggle

Philosophy”. It implies giving up striving, completely lying down flat and becoming a tranquil outsider in the involution game.

Be it “Zen-Y” or “Sang” culture or “Touching Fish” philosophy, they all appear to be expressions of pessimism. They all represent exiting the involution game, rejecting it, thus, actually being a kind of resistance culture. Essentially speaking, the individual competitor (including the “over speeder”) participating in this game, was never the real enemy of the “involved” individual; it was always the “third party”, who dominates this game from outside and profits out of it. Therefore, the real possibility of breaking free from involution lies in breaking free from the “consent” manufactured in the involution game, and directly faces this obscured third party. It lies not in winning the game, but in doubting it and challenging it. In this sense, in “Zen-Y” choosing to “halt the car” and the “Sanhe Gods” choosing to “rollover the car”, there is a connotation of the possible “eversion” of the involution game.

Edited by Hemant Adlakha

The views expressed here are those of the original author and not necessarily of the translator or of the Institute of Chinese Studies

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