An Analysis of the Causes Behind the Involution in Chinese Family Education

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***Abstract*—The phenomenon of family education involution in Chinese family education refers to the irrational behavior of parents who invest excessive amounts of time, energy and financial resources in their children's education, driving them to participate in high-intensity academic competition. At its core, this phenomenon represents a form of self-exploitation internal friction within the education sector, as stakeholders vie for limited high-quality educational resources. It has now become a prominent educational and social issue attracting significant attention in contemporary Chinese society. To systematically elucidate the logic and underlying drivers of this phenomenon, this paper conducts a systematic analysis of the causes of family education involution from five core dimensions: traditional cultural heritage, socioeconomic structure, the educational evaluation system, parenting beliefs, and the influence of the external environment. This research reveals that this phenomenon is not caused by a single factor but rather is the result of the interplay and combined effects of multiple factors, including the cultural tradition of prioritising education, the practical pressures of social mobility, the institutional constraints of exam-oriented education, cognitive biases in intensive motherhood practices, and the catalytic role of external market and media environments. By dissecting its formation mechanisms, this study provides a systematic theoretical framework for alleviating the predicament of education involution, guiding rational parenting, and building a healthy family education ecosystem.**

***Keywords*—family education involution, causes, parenting beliefs, social mobility, educational anxiety**

I. Introduction

In recent years, the phenomenon of involution in the field of family education in China has intensified, becoming a hot topic of widespread concern across all sectors of society. From head-start enlightenment education in the preschool years to the proliferation of cram schools and excessive homework in primary and secondary education and the cascading anxiety during the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) phase, family education has gradually fallen into a vicious cycle: parental investment in education continues to rise, yet the actual outcomes grow increasingly meagre, ultimately intensifying competition. While families continue to increase their educational expenditure, this fails to bring about a substantive improvement in the quality of their children's development; instead, it has led to widespread anxiety and a decline in well-being. To give their children an edge in academic competition, parents spare no expense in terms of time, money or energy, enrolling their children in various tutoring classes, purchasing study materials, monitoring academic progress, and even sacrificing their own leisure time, thereby disrupting the normal rhythm of family life. This irrational educational competition not only exacerbates the financial burden and psychological pressure on parents but also traps adolescents in a cycle of excessive study, squeezing out the space for their healthy physical and mental development and hindering the cultivation of their comprehensive qualities.

The continued spread of the involution phenomenon in family education has had a significant effect on family functioning, the educational ecosystem and social harmony. Education involution has evolved into a multilayered, systemic socioeconomic issue, with its impact extending from microlevel family decision-making to the macrolevel economic development landscape; exploring its formation mechanisms holds significant theoretical and practical significance [1].

II. Deep-rooted Traditions and Social Attitudes

The value systems and social psychology embedded in traditional culture provide fertile ground for the emergence of the involution phenomenon in family education. In particular, the value orientation of prioritising education, the social influence of the face culture, and the family-centredness ethics of responsibility are intertwined; together, they shape parents' perceptions of education and their specific behaviours, constituting the intrinsic cultural driving force behind the involution phenomenon.

A. The Cultural Tradition of Education Supremacy and Perceptions of Social Mobility

In traditional Chinese culture, the notion that Officialdom Is the Natural Outcome of Excellent Learning has a long-standing history. Education has never been merely about imparting knowledge; it has also been endowed with the special function of facilitating social mobility. Within the traditional social structure, education was the primary pathway through which ordinary people

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broke free from class constraints and achieved upwards social mobility. This cultural legacy continues to profoundly influence the educational perceptions of contemporary parents. Even as career choices in modern society become increasingly diverse, the notion that 'education changes one's destiny' remains deeply ingrained, serving as the core ideological driving force behind parents' willingness to make substantial financial investments in their children's education.

Under the influence of this mindset, parents generally link their children's academic achievement directly to their future life prospects. They believe that only through intensive investment in education, which enables their children to stand out in academic competition, can they lay a solid foundation for their future career development and social status. This excessive expectation of the role of education makes it difficult for parents to view their children's individual differences and natural developmental patterns rationally. Consequently, they fall into the parenting pitfall of the score-only criterion, fuelling the proliferation of family education involution. The social comparison tendency prevalent in East Asian societies means that individuals focus not only on their own absolute gains but also on their relative social status. This mindset further reinforces the simplistic belief that 'education changes one's destiny', making it difficult for parents to break free from the established framework of academic competition.

B. *The Dual Drivers of Face Culture and the Ethics of Responsibility*

China's unique face culture, coupled with group-oriented social psychology, has further intensified the competitive atmosphere in family education. Whether in traditional communities of acquaintances or the social networks built by modern social media, a child's educational achievements have become a key vehicle through which parents can demonstrate their social standing and gain a sense of identity. Parents frequently compare their children's academic achievement, school attendance and awards with those of others. This psychology of social comparison drives parents to continually increase their investment in education to avoid the embarrassment of 'falling behind'. Ultimately, this causes family education to gradually deviate from the children's actual needs, resulting in a transformation into an academic arms race among parents. This competition for prestige, centred on children's educational achievements, is essentially a zero-sum game. The competitive advantage of one family inevitably results in the relative disadvantage of others, ultimately forcing all participants to continually raise the stakes and become trapped in endless internal friction [2].

Moreover, the family-centeredness inherent in traditional Chinese culture means that parents naturally shoulder the significant responsibility of raising and educating their children. The aspiration for 'sons to become dragons and daughters to become phoenixes' is not merely a parent's hope for their children's future but also an inescapable family duty in their hearts. This sense of responsibility often leads parents to spare no expense in regard to their children's education, placing their own life aspirations and the family's honour entirely upon their children's academic achievement. This misguided perception means that parents have no rational limits on their educational expenditure; even when faced with considerable financial pressure or when their children resist, they persist with overintervention. This is also a key cultural and psychological foundation for family education involution.

III. The Real-World Pressures of Socioeconomic Structure and Social Mobility

The shifts in social class structures and disparities in resource allocation brought about by socioeconomic development are the core practical drivers behind the spread of the involution phenomenon in family education. Anxiety over social mobility stemming from income inequality, the scarcity and uneven distribution of resources, coupled with fierce competition in the job market, all cascade into high-intensity investment in children's education by parents, ultimately creating a vicious cycle of irrational competition.

A. *The Catalytic Role of Social Mobility Anxiety and Income Inequality*

In recent years, the existence of income inequality in Chinese society has made the class reproduction function of education increasingly prominent. As relevant research indicates, income inequality intensifies parents' emphasis on their children's education because in a society with an uneven distribution of resources, education becomes the key pathway to maintaining or enhancing class status. For low- and middle-income families, education is viewed as a vital channel through which their children can break free from class solidification and achieve upwards social mobility; for high-income families, education serves as a crucial means of maintaining their class advantages and preventing downwards social mobility.

The class anxiety stemming from income inequality leads parents across different social strata to increase their investment in their children's education, hoping to secure better developmental resources for them through academic competition. The root cause of education involution lies in the negative externality of parental competition. Households making high educational investments not only drive up overall market prices and investment costs but also crowd out the educational returns available to low-investment households, thereby leading to a loss of efficiency in the allocation of educational resources across society [1].

B. *The Dual Transmission of Scarce High-quality Educational Resources and Employment Competition Pressures*

The scarcity and uneven distribution of high-quality educational resources are direct, practical factors triggering family education involution. Although China's education sector has made significant progress, core educational resources such as high-quality schools and excellent teaching staff remain relatively limited, and there

are marked disparities in their distribution across regions, between urban and rural areas, and among schools. To secure high-quality educational resources for their children, parents resort to every possible means to compete, ranging from snapping up school district housing and enrolling children in private tuition classes to accumulating certificates from various competitions, thereby forming a complete chain of competition centered on high-quality educational resources. Competition for high-quality educational resources is, in essence, a zero-sum game. Competitive pressures from the job market are transmitted upwards along the education chain, creating a complete chain of causality: 'employment competition–educational anxiety–increased investment in education'. The phenomenon of credential inflation in higher education has further caused these competitive pressures to permeate all stages of basic education at an earlier stage [3].

Moreover, fierce employment competition is transmitted upwards along the educational chain, further intensifying the degree of educational competition within families. As higher education has entered a phase of massification, the number of university graduates has continued to rise, and competition in the job market has become increasingly fierce. Employers' requirements regarding job seekers' qualifications, alma maters and academic achievement are also constantly rising. This screening mechanism in the job market prompts parents to begin preparing their children for future employment from an early age, with the goal of enhancing their children's employability through intensive educational investment. The competitive pressures of the job market, combined with the screening function of the education system, form a complete chain of causality: First, intensified job competition triggers parents' anxiety over academic qualifications; ultimately, this drives the continuous intensification of family education and leads parents to constantly increase the stakes in their children's academic competition.

IV. The Orientation and Constraints of the Educational Evaluation System

The exam-oriented nature and institutional constraints of China's current educational evaluation system are the core institutional drivers behind family education involution. A single evaluation criterion focused on academic achievement, the leverage effect of the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) system, and the devolution of school educational responsibility to families—these three factors collectively push parents and children onto a track of intense academic competition, making rational parenting difficult to implement.

A. The Single-dimensional Assessment System and the Leveraging Effect of the NCEE

Within China's current education system, exam-oriented education remains dominant, with academic achievement serving as the core metric for evaluating students and schools. Although the concept of quality-oriented education has been advocated for many years, under the influence of key entrance examinations such as the High School Entrance Examination (HSEE) and the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE), school education continues to revolve around academic achievement, while the development of students' comprehensive qualities is often neglected. This one-dimensional educational evaluation system compels parents to focus their educational efforts on improving their children's academic achievement. In the pursuit of higher marks, they spare no effort in subjecting their children to high-intensity academic training through means such as enrolling them in cram schools and having them repeatedly practice exam questions.

Parents' educational expectations and behaviors are profoundly influenced by the evaluation system. When academic achievement is at the core of this system, parents often develop excessively high academic expectations and resort to overintervention to push their children toward achieving these goals.

The National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) is China's most influential university entrance examination. Its selection mechanism, which effectively determines one's future on the basis of a single exam, has had a profound effect on family education. The competitive pressure of the NCEE has a distinct ripple effect, extending upwards from the senior secondary level to junior secondary, primary, and even preschool education. The phenomenon of 'a thousand candidates vying for a single point' in the High School Entrance Examination (HSEE) compels parents and students to stake everything on chasing higher scores; even a one-point difference requires vast amounts of rote drilling to achieve, which has directly fuelled high-intensity educational investment at the household level, resulting in a full-chain educational race to the bottom [4]. Parents generally believe that only by ensuring that their children maintain a competitive edge at every stage of their education can they ultimately stand out in the NCEE. This long-term competitive planning and high-intensity investment in education have plunged family education into a vortex of irrational competition.

B. The Devolution of School Educational Responsibility to Families

Under the overall pressure of exam-oriented education, some schools have implemented the devolution of school educational responsibility to families, further exacerbating the burden on parents. To improve pupils' academic achievement, certain schools assign excessive amounts of homework, require parents to mark it, and involve them in day-to-day school management, thereby implementing the devolution of school educational responsibility to families. This shift in responsibility means that parents must not only care for their children's daily lives but also shoulder the heavy burden of academic tutoring and supervision.

To meet the various demands of schools, parents are compelled to invest substantial amounts of time and energy in managing their children's academic affairs. Many parents even go so far as to hire private tutors or enroll their children in curriculum-based tutoring to compensate for their own limited ability to provide academic support. The devolution of school educational

responsibility to families has transformed the role of family education from nurturing daily life and shaping character into an 'extension of school education' outside the classroom. Parents are forced to become the 'primary responsible party' for their children's academic achievement, further exacerbating the burden and intensity of family education involution [4].

V. Internal Drivers: Parenting Beliefs and Psychological Factors

Parents' own misguided parenting beliefs and psychological motivations constitute the core internal driving forces behind family education involution. Overly interventionist parenting styles, perfectionism, ever-escalating academic expectations, and intergenerational compensation psychology combine to trap parents in the trap of irrational parenting, leading them to voluntarily and continuously increase their investment in education.

A. Overly Interventional Parenting Beliefs and Cognitive Misconceptions

In recent years, the concepts of intensive motherhood and helicopter parenting have become widespread among parents in China. Both approaches essentially involve overintervention in children's development and constitute a key psychological foundation driving education involution.

Specifically, the concept of intensive motherhood emphasises that parents should participate comprehensively and intensively in their children's developmental process, providing continuous intellectual stimulation, emotional support and behavioural supervision. At the core of intensive motherhood lies parents' comprehensive and intensive involvement and overintervention in every stage of their child's development.

Helicopter parenting, on the other hand, manifests as parents' overprotection and overintervention in their children's lives, taking care of everything for them and seeking to shield them from all risks and difficulties; it represents excessive control and comprehensive micromanagement of a child's development.

Under the influence of these two notions, parents generally believe that only through intensive investment in education can they foster their children's overall development and help them succeed in the future. However, overintervention not only fails to enhance children's development but may also foster a sense of dependency, diminish their self-regulated learning ability, and even leave them lacking frustration tolerance and social adaptability. This cognitive fallacy further exacerbates family education involution. The permeation of Meritocracy in the education sector has trapped both parents and students in the cognitive trap of score-only criteria, leading them to believe that losing out in competition is a result of insufficient personal effort. Consequently, they continually increase family educational investment, creating a vicious cycle in which increased competition breeds greater educational anxiety, and greater educational anxiety fuels further competition [4].

B. Perfectionism, Escalating Expectations and Intergenerational Compensation Psychology

As social competition intensifies, parents' academic expectations of their children are constantly increasing, with perfectionism becoming increasingly pronounced. Research has indicated that in recent years, adolescents have perceived a continuous increase in academic expectations and criticism; such high expectations drive parents to push their children to pursue perfect academic achievement and overall development.

Under the influence of perfectionism, parents find it difficult to accept their children's ordinary achievements or shortcomings and to set excessively high standards across all aspects of their children's lives, including academic achievement and personal interests. To achieve these goals, parents continually increase their family educational investment, ultimately becoming trapped in a cycle of 'never-ending' competition.

Moreover, intergenerational compensation psychology serves as a significant psychological driver for parents to increase their family educational investment. Many parents experienced material deprivation or lacked adequate educational resources during their own upbringing; consequently, they project their unfulfilled life aspirations and unmet developmental needs onto their children. This compensatory behavior, rooted in personal regrets, often overlooks the individual needs and natural developmental patterns of the child, causing parents to lose sight of rational boundaries in their educational expenditure and further fuelling the spread of family education involution.

VI. The Contributing Role of the External Environment

In addition to the internal factors at the cultural, psychological and institutional levels mentioned earlier, various forces within the external environment play a significant role in fuelling family education involution. The capital-driven industrialisation of education, the transmission of educational anxiety via social media, and the guidance provided by public opinion and role models have collectively amplified educational anxiety across society, driving family education involution to ever-greater extremes.

A. The Dual Catalyst of the Industrialisation of Education and Social Media

The rapid development of education industrialisation has provided both material infrastructure and market momentum for family education involution. In recent years, various after-school tutoring institutions have risen rapidly. Through commercial operations and marketing campaigns, they continually stoke educational anxiety, inducing parents to purchase educational products and services. Training institutions often stimulate parents' demand for educational consumption by exaggerating educational outcomes and creating a competitive

atmosphere, thereby driving parents to continually increase their family's educational investment. The capital logic of the industrialisation of education aligns with parents' educational anxiety, creating a vicious cycle. This cycle further raises the competitive threshold in family education. Following the implementation of the Double Reduction Policy, curriculum-based tutoring has come under strict regulation, whereas noncurricular tutoring has rapidly emerged as a new arena for educational competition. Areas of holistic development, such as arts and sports, are gradually exhibiting signs of involution, further broadening the scope of competition in family education [5].

Moreover, the proliferation of social media has made it easier for parents to exchange information and compare notes on education while simultaneously accelerating the transmission of educational anxiety. On social platforms such as WeChat Moments and parents' groups, parents frequently share their children's academic achievement, awards and tutoring schedules; this practice has gradually evolved into a competitive 'show-off' contest. As most content on social media is overly embellished and selectively presented, it easily creates the illusion among parents that 'other people's children are more accomplished', thereby triggering their own educational anxiety. To avoid falling behind in this social comparison, parents are compelled to increase their family's educational investment and push their children to participate in more learning and competitive activities.

B. Influence of Public Opinion and Role Models

The excessive promotion of 'successful educational case studies' by public opinion, coupled with the exemplary effect of role models in their immediate circles, has also played a significant role in fuelling family education involution. Frequent media reports on 'academic stars' and stories of admissions to prestigious universities often deliberately emphasise the importance of high-intensity family educational investment, providing parents with seemingly 'replicable' educational templates.

The parenting beliefs of friends, relatives and colleagues also exert a strong exemplary influence. The sustained guidance of public opinion, combined with the influence of role models in their immediate circles, has made intensive family educational investment a widely accepted 'correct choice' among parents, further consolidating the social foundations of family education involution.

VII. Summary

The emergence of family education involution is a complex social process. This phenomenon is not caused by a single factor but rather is the result of the combined effects of multiple forces, including traditional cultural values, socioeconomic structures, educational evaluation systems, parental psychology, and external environmental factors.

The continued spread of family education involution has brought about multifaceted negative consequences. It not only exacerbates the financial burden and psychological pressure on families but also damages the physical and mental health of young people, hinders their overall development, and distorts the normal family education ecosystem. To alleviate family education involution, concerted efforts are needed across multiple dimensions. At the cultural level, parents must be guided to adopt rational parenting and reshape diverse standards of success. At the societal level, efforts must be made to gradually narrow income inequality, optimise the allocation of educational resources, and alleviate the public's anxieties regarding social mobility. At the educational level, reforms to the educational evaluation system must be deepened, the concept of quality-oriented education must be genuinely implemented, and students' academic burdens must be effectively reduced. At the family level, parents must be guided to adopt rational parenting, respecting their children's individual differences and natural developmental patterns. At the market level, the business practices of after-school tutoring institutions must be regulated to curb the excessive penetration of capital into the education sector. Only through concerted efforts across these various fronts can we overcome the predicament of family education involution and develop a more rational, healthy and diverse family education ecosystem.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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