

# Involution of Becoming Postgraduate Students: Educational Inequality behind the Pursuit of Higher Qualifications by Chinese Youth

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## Abstract

Involution is used by young Chinese people to describe an irrational or involuntary competition. This kind of involution occurs when Chinese students gain entry to postgraduate programmes. This article analyses the inequalities that exist when Chinese students sit for the Postgraduate Entrance Examination with regard to educational opportunities, processes and outcomes, and suggests that the involution among Chinese youth is a product of these inequalities.

## Keywords

Involution, Educational Inequality, Postgraduate Entrance Examination (PGEE), Chinese Youth

## 1. Introduction

The Postgraduate Entrance Examination (PGEE) should provide equal opportunities for students seeking to pursue higher education in China. The goal of becoming a graduate student becomes a reality if one puts in the effort and meets the requirements. Postgraduates, being more highly educated than undergraduates, should also have access to more employment opportunities and income (Li et al., 2008). Nevertheless, this notion has been overturned by reality. Obtaining a postgraduate qualification is becoming increasingly difficult. The number of students taking the PGEE has increased dramatically, and admission scores have risen, but this has yet to dampen the enthusiasm of young people for graduate school (China Education Online, 2022). It has been found that undergraduate degrees have been devalued and that the job market for undergraduate graduates is becoming less competitive (Hao et al., 2016; Nachatar Singh, 2020; Shuo, 2020). Even though becoming a graduate student is highly competitive, it

appears to be the more helpful option for future career advancement. The limited number of positions and the fierce competition have led to the birth of the involution.

*Involution* originated from Geertz's (1963) description of an economy that defined a self-perpetuating cycle and a process of stagnation in which more significant inputs are not necessarily rewarded proportionally. Young Chinese people have given this term a new meaning, which refers to an irrational or involuntary competition, which leads to a strong sense of burnout and stress among young Chinese people, who often question the usefulness of effort (Yi et al., 2022). In this paper, the term "*involution*" refers to the irrational or involuntary behaviour of young Chinese people in the process of gaining the assessments of postgraduate study, such as giving up all other activities to study in order to get higher grade points.

I will explain the occurrence of involution as a social phenomenon through the lens of educational inequality, arguing that involution is a choice that young people are forced to meet educational inequality. Firstly, I will introduce the ways to become postgraduate students in China. Next, I want to discuss family resource gaps, gender discrimination, assessment bias and intersectional inequalities in the educational opportunities of getting the assessment, which could lead to the creation of involution. Next, I will propose that process inequalities exacerbate the extent of involution, such as the college resource gap. The fourth part will show that inequality of outcomes, exemplified by employment and career progression inequality, forces young people to opt for involution. Finally, I will reiterate my arguments and suggest possible ways to mitigate involution.

## 2. How to Become a Chinese Postgraduate

In China, post-secondary education is referred to as higher education which includes undergraduate, graduate and doctoral programmes at different levels (Liu, 2012). Most Chinese students are qualified for postgraduate study by taking the PGEE. Master programmes are divided into full-time and part-time study modes, with full-time students divided into academic and professional masters (Zhang, 2020). All Chinese citizens with a bachelor's degree or two years after graduating from higher vocational schools can take the exam once a year. They are required to take a written examination in December, the content of which varies according to the admissions authority and includes subjects such as politics, foreign languages, mathematics and professional business (Chen et al., 2022). If they reach the national line or the admissions line of one of the 34 independent schools, they will be eligible to take an interview retest organised by each school in the following spring. Ultimately, schools will accept the best students equally based on written and interview scores (Chen, 2012).

Students who do not gain admission to the first choice will be given another opportunity to transfer (Liang et al., 2007). The Ministry of Education divides the applicants into Zone A and Zone B by geographical area. Compared to Zone

B, Zone A generally has more universities, more extended education histories and more accessible and developed geographical environments. Candidates who pass the national line in Zone A can transfer to universities in both Zone A and Zone B. In contrast, candidates who pass Zone B can only transfer within Zone B. Universities have the right to refuse a candidate's transfer request and will offer the candidate an interview after accepting the transfer. If the transfer is unsuccessful, it also means that the student fails the PGEE completely this time (Ju, 2007).

Outstanding undergraduate students may be recommended for a master's degree without the fierce competition of the examinations (The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2006). The Ministry of Education annually publishes a list of universities that can recommend and accept postgraduate candidates without requiring an examination (Guo, 2022). Students who excel at university can submit documents to the university of their choice to gain an exemption from the PGEE (Chen et al., 2017). In addition, undergraduates can obtain exemptions by obtaining administrative positions in universities (Xue, 2015), teaching in remote areas to aid education (Hu et al., 2016), working in ethnic minority areas (Wang & Jiang, 2011) and serving in military (Jiang, 2013), and by completing appropriate work assignments and meeting the requirements. Places in these pathways are limited, and students should compete to gain access.

As the above descriptions, it is not easy for young people in China to obtain a postgraduate qualification, and the opportunities vary for each individual. Students strive to distinguish themselves from their peers, aiming for superior results in written exams and better performance during retest interviews. As competition intensifies, it leads to involution. Therefore, the involution I propose is actually a response by young Chinese people to confront educational inequality, and I will go into it in the following parts.

### **3. Involution as a Product of Inequality of Educational Opportunity**

Inequality of educational opportunity refers to whether individuals or groups are discriminated against and subordinated in their participation in education (Unterhalter, 2021: pp. 157-158). In the case of the PGEE, inequality of educational opportunity can be described as inequality in access to postgraduate study, which can refer to differences in the amount of access and the ease of access. In this section, I will discuss the gap in students' access to postgraduate programme qualifications regarding the vertical, horizontal, process and intersectional inequalities and the irrational or involuntary efforts they need to make to compensate for these objective inequalities.

#### **3.1. Vertical Inequalities in Family Resources Lead to Involution**

Disparities in family resources are an important reason for the existence of in-

equalities in postgraduate examinations, including gaps in the financial support received from families, parents' ability to gather information and the educational resources already available, all of which can make students not on the starting line in preparing for examinations. Unterhalter (2021: pp. 151-152) referred to these inequalities concerning resource allocation arrangement as vertical inequalities.

This inequality in the distribution of resources is reflected in the family's economic status. The better the family's economic situation, the more opportunities there are to continue with further education (Mok, 2015). There are costs associated with studying for a degree, which include registration fees, materials and tutorials (Li, 2002). Children from low-income families are less likely to obtain advanced degrees, and they cannot afford additional education for their children (Bowen et al., 2009). Financially well-off parents can pay for their children to attend graduate school, giving them access to better educational resources, such as purchasing extensive exam materials and attending one-on-one tutoring.

Secondly, the inequality in the distribution of resources is also reflected in the information resources. Another challenge faced by students from socioeconomically disadvantaged families is the need for more ability to gather information (Roksa & Kinsley, 2018). Financially advantaged parents tend to be more involved in their children's development decisions and provide their advice (Ceja, 2006). In contrast, parents in economically disadvantaged households may need help to provide the assistance their children need at the tertiary level. For example, it is more challenging to own a private computer in rural China, and parents may not be capable of using the internet for information searching, which may put them at risk of being closed to information about examinations (Zhao & Chen, 2023).

This resource gap is also reflected in parents' knowledge base or educational attainment. Parents' educational attainment affects their children (Blanden, 2013). Parents with a high level of education may use their existing knowledge to tutor their children better than if they were to learn independently (Castro et al., 2015; Teachman, 1987). Suppose parents have a master's degree or higher. In that case, they will likely pass on to their children experiences and lessons from the PGEE which they took part in, but parents with lower qualifications cannot give to their children. Although research suggests that parents can provide little help at the higher education level of their children and that inequalities due to family gaps are not evident (Lei & Shen, 2015), such inequalities due to intergenerational mobility in education cannot be ignored (Golley & Kong, 2013). The findings of the Peking University research team (Wen, 2005) provided data to support this view, with a large proportion of students from better family backgrounds in China's top universities.

There are discrepancies in the level of effort of students from different families (Dietrich et al., 2021), and generational inequalities in education may lead students who are not advantaged in terms of family resources to choose to make up for the shortfall taking involution. Without extra money to attend tutoring in-

stitutions, additional sources of information and extra home tutoring, they need to work harder to access educational opportunities (Li, 2013). As a result, they may engage in irrational behaviours such as staying up late or studying excessively long to gain more study time.

### **3.2. Horizontal Inequalities of Gender Discrimination Lead to Involution**

Gender discrimination, which makes it take more effort for female candidates to gain access to postgraduate studies, is manifested in questioning patriarchal and disciplinary competence in the family or society. This discrimination stems from the relationship between groups and cultural structures and is known as vertical inequality (Unterhalter, 2021: pp. 152-153). The preference for boys has been rooted in people's consciousness in China through traditional Confucian culture and patriarchy (Murphy et al., 2011; Hamilton, 1990), which is also reflected in education. Parents prefer to invest in their sons' education rather than their daughters' because they see investment in their sons as protecting their interests (Murphy et al., 2011). The daughter is likened to always being the spilt water, and once she marries, she does not belong to her family of origin (Zhang, 2009), and the investment in her would not pay off. Boys receive family support and have greater access to education (Wang, 2005). Women also have to contend with social pressures that expect them to enter marriage and family in their twenties rather than pursue higher education (Chang, 2020). They would miss out on the age of marriage because of postgraduate study, whereas boys do not have this concern (McClintock, 2014).

In addition, there is gender discrimination in terms of subject competencies. Studies have shown that male students are more inclined to major in science and engineering in their choice of university majors. In contrast, female students are more inclined to major in literature and the arts (Sheng, 2015). However, this results from women being shaped by long-standing stereotypical discrimination. Women socialised to believe that men are better in science will continue to accept this assumption and deny their abilities, creating a stereotype-threatening effect (Eccles & Jacobs, 1986; Galdi et al., 2013). More personal interests motivate the choice of postgraduate majors, while girls may be perceived as not being good at science and forced or voluntarily forgo educational opportunities (Liu & Morgan, 2018).

This socio-cultural bias and discrimination leads to inequality and puts more pressure on women to make graduate school choices. They need to achieve more academic achievements than men to prove their strengths (Butler-Barnes et al., 2021). In exam interviews of the PGEE, they want to have a crushing advantage and the skills related to their science major to present their scientific abilities and to be recognised by the interviewer for their science learning abilities. For this, women may participate in study frenzies during their university years and work hard at various competitions and related internships to gain additional evidence. The involution is also produced.

### 3.3. Inequalities in the Process of Biased Assessment of Push-Exemption Qualifications Lead to Involution

The implementation of the push-exemption system highlights process inequality. The push-exemption system represents a positive attempt to reform China's admissions system, which refers to admissions in which university students are assessed based on three years of academic grades in universities and a combination of aspects of performance to get a place in the retest of the PGEE without written examination (Luo, 2011). Such assessment criteria lead to inequalities in the educational process. The use of three years of academic performance as a criterion for the need to qualify for exemption means that a student's academic performance is a critical factor in determining access. However, it is unfair to evaluate students' academic potential solely through exams; students' potential should be dynamic and variable (Benbow & Stanley, 1996). In other words, a student's performance in a final university examination does not represent their academic ability. Students who are good at memorising and taking exams may score high on the exams. However, students with real potential and ability may be overlooked or eliminated because of their low grades.

This pressure to standardise exams has given rise to test preparation practices unrelated to improving the academic ability to improve scores (Froese-Germain, 2001). Students become invested in learning test-taking tricks and rote memorisation of knowledge, and they become mere purveyors of authoritative knowledge, lacking creativity and critical thinking (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991). The low productivity level of young people who repeatedly recite exam content is a sign of involution (Geertz, 1963). University students may sacrifice leisure time and breaks to commit themselves to memorization in their first three years of higher education, with the aim of excelling academically and qualifying for exemptions in subsequent studies.

### 3.4. Intersectional Inequalities Lead to Involution

Inequalities in educational opportunities are complex and intersectional, leading to the PGEE involution. Inequalities on intersectionality refer to various socially divided axes exercising rights, such as gender, disability and age, which work together (Unterhalter, 2021: pp. 154-155). In other words, inequality in education is not the result of a single cause, and students may be in a position of 'complex inequality' (McCall, 2001). I focus on gender, family background and age gap because the first two are the most common forms of educational inequality in educational research (Hadjar & Gross, 2016; Codioli McMaster & Cook, 2018), while the latter is based on age inequality in the Chinese socio-cultural context (Chang, 2020).

As a woman prepares to pass the "crossroads" of graduate school (Crenshaw, 1989: p. 149), she may be harmed by gender discrimination, family background differences, or age differences. Data suggested that the proportion of Chinese women in higher education reached 50% in 2013 (Liu, 2016), with more and

more women having access to higher education. However, gender discrimination cannot be measured by gender equality, and proportionally increasing the share of women is evidence that men and women as discriminated groups are mutually exclusive in the competition for resources (Unterhalter et al., 2022). A woman's access to higher education does not mean that she does not suffer from gender discrimination. China's one-child policy has resulted in many families having only one child, and parents devote all their resources to that child, even if she is a girl (Fong, 2002). However, when there is more than one child in the family, the children need to allocate resources, and, as analysed earlier, the son will be favoured more (Wang, 2005). At the same time, research also found that middle and upper-class parents are willing to invest more in their daughters' education because it is more cost-effective to invest in their daughters' education than in their sons at higher economic levels (Stromquist, 1990). In other words, girls from low-income family backgrounds do not receive adequate investment in their parents' education, an inequality that comes from the family background gap. As previously analysed, these inequalities can cause young Chinese to develop involution. Fearing their disadvantages will impede their educational opportunities. They have to exert more effort to prove their abilities and gain a crushing advantage in exams to get a master's education.

Age is also another direction of inequality suffered by young Chinese. Chinese women are expected to marry early, and education delays their marriage (Ji & Yeung, 2014), so they suffer from age anxiety in pursuing a master's degree. Women fear being disadvantaged in the marriage market because men tend to marry younger women, and even if women are successful in terms of social capital, age can work against them, labelling them as stigmatised 'leftover women' (Ji, 2015). Men also suffer from age-related anxieties, as they are expected to enter the workforce earlier and start earning money. Under the influence of traditional culture, men earn money to support the family and pass on the family name. They need to be expected to enter the workforce early to earn money and marry their daughter-in-law when their parents cannot provide an adequate financial base (Jiang & Sánchez-Barricarte, 2012). Time is tight for young Chinese people, and they have many tasks to complete, so it is not common for people to choose a gap year in China, and many families even oppose it (Wu et al., 2014). Therefore, students taking the PGEE are very eager to succeed. If they fail, they must wait another year to retake the exam to gain admission (Chen et al., 2022). Older candidates will be under more pressure than younger candidates, and the stakes of their potential failure will be higher. To avoid going through a gap year, Chinese students will try their best to study and devote themselves to exam preparation.

Overall, young Chinese people have unequal access to postgraduate programme qualifications, and these inequalities stem from several intertwined factors, including family background, gender, examination system and age. The Chinese government is expanding postgraduate enrolment and increasing students' access to postgraduate education. However, the expansion of education



has not changed the status of disadvantaged students, and these inequalities persist (Luo et al., 2018). Absolute numbers do not prove that disadvantaged groups are given equal access to education (Chan & Ngok, 2011). Students have no choice but to study diligently to fight for their educational opportunities. Therefore, the involution is a product of unequal educational opportunities.

#### 4. Inequalities in the Educational Process Exacerbate Involution

Unterhalter (2021: pp. 157-158) suggested that inequality in the educational process is an important part of educational inequality, which describes inequality in the experiences associated with the process of educational practice. The educational process includes the quality of undergraduate education students receive and the tutorial resources they receive in preparation for examinations. Inequalities in the educational process could be analysed regarding university resources.

The disparity in university resources is mainly in faculty strength and enrollment bias. Chinese universities are stratified (Costa & Zha, 2020). To train top talent, the central government has launched Project 211 and Project 985 universities, followed by nine truly first-class universities (C9) modelled on the Ivy League schools in the United States. These universities were given extensive government funding to guarantee their research and educational development expenditures (Luo et al., 2018). These schools are provided with more resources than other universities, including teaching facilities, human resources, and learning opportunities (Ngok & Gao, 2008). The faculty members of reputable universities are PhD holders, and most have further education experience abroad, while the faculty members in private universities are less qualified (Chan & Ngok, 2011). Well-known universities are even qualified to set their questions in postgraduate examinations, and candidates from their universities may receive exam-specific teaching (Hu & Zhang, 2021). At the same time, high-quality universities require tutors to guide and supervise students' planning and preparation for the exams during the exams (Du, 2009). These resources allow students from reputable universities to make the most of their limited time when preparing for the exam. In contrast, non-university students are left with extensive revision. They want to memorise more by extending their study time, staying up all night or studying through the night to get a good score on the exam. In addition, the admissions bias in the exams also leads to inequality in the education process. Students from non-985 and non-211 universities suffer discrimination from these schools. These prestigious universities prefer students who have studied at a prestigious university as undergraduates (Chen & Jiang, 2015). This situation undoubtedly makes it more difficult for students from non-famous universities to become graduate students. They try to gain an advantage from other sources, such as participating in competitions, taking qualification exams, or attending online classes at famous universities (Feng et al., 2016). The involution is exacerbated in their cases.



## 5. Inequality in Educational Outcomes Forces Young People to Be Involved

Inequality in educational outcomes is closely related to the involution of becoming postgraduates. Chinese youth have access to better follow-up opportunities if receiving higher education. This inequality is reflected in students' exclusion, prejudice and devaluation in social, cultural or political participation (Unterhalter, 2021: p. 158). Vertical stratification of education, namely differences in the level of academic qualification, is one of the reasons why young people choose to work towards obtaining a master's degree over an undergraduate degree (Yochim, 2012). A postgraduate degree means better educational resources and employment opportunities (Huang et al., 2022). Human capital theory suggests that education increases human productivity, which leads to rich economic rewards and social status (Acemoglu, 2000). Due to the severe information inequality in the labour market, employers can only judge the productivity level of job applicants from their attributes, making education a vital consideration (Xiong et al., 2005). A master's degree means more opportunities in the job market compared to a bachelor's degree, better job opportunities and career progression, and thus opportunities for social mobility (Li et al., 2008). Young people's earnings are positively correlated with their level of education (Checchi, 2006). Therefore, young people are increasingly opting to get the assessments of postgraduate study to achieve class transcendence and upward mobility. Despite research suggesting that contemporary Chinese higher education is increasingly failing to deliver on the promise of social mobility and high incomes (Li et al., 2008; Bregnbæk, 2016), they are not giving up on eliminating the inequality of outcomes from low qualifications in this way (Li et al., 2021; To et al., 2014), so they are forced to join this fierce competition in the PGEE.

## 6. Summary

This article analysed the inequalities experienced by Chinese youth regarding educational opportunities, processes and outcomes and suggested that involution is a product of these inequalities. These objective inequalities force young people to take the involution to increase their chances of getting a master's degree. The educational inequalities experienced by Chinese students are complex inequalities stemming from family background, gender, educational experience, age and social recognition. It is pleasing to see that as society develops and attitudes change, these inequalities are being recognised and actively addressed. For example, the gap between urban and rural education is gradually decreasing (Luo et al., 2018), and women are re-gendering themselves out of self-denial (Liu, 2013). However, these inequalities persist and influence the behaviour and attitudes of young people preparing for the PGEE. Revising policy development and assessment to address these inequalities, while also creating a more equitable and diverse platform for young people to develop, will effectively mitigate levels of involution.

In addition to proposing to minimise inequalities, I propose a re-examination of the purpose of higher education to reduce the involution of young people in China. The purpose of education in China is often perceived as preparation for passing exams (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011), and this continues to be the case in Chinese higher education, where they strive to do well in postgraduate entrance exams. Students are passive in their interactions with their teachers; they receive knowledge passively. Teachers are reciting what they know and what they think, and students are responsible for listening and remembering everything (Freire, 1970). Such educational objectives and teaching methods have left students with a disconnect between their competencies and society's needs, which has led to the devaluation of qualifications in China today (Nachatar Singh, 2020; Shuo, 2020). I believe that higher education should focus more on the development of student's creative and critical skills than other stages of education, preparing them to be able to lead prosperous lives later on (Reiss & White, 2014: p. 78), which means that students at different levels are encouraged to acquire different skills and knowledge and that academic education and skills development go hand in hand to enable the ability to make a good living in terms of career development (Fan, 2020). As young Chinese individuals discover the multitude of pathways and avenues towards a fulfilling life and personal growth beyond the pursuit of postgraduate degrees, their fixation on postgraduate entrance examinations may diminish, thereby alleviating involution.

It is essential to acknowledge that there are limitations to the analysis in this paper. Education is a subset of society (Apple, 2012), and the causes of involution are complex. The knowledge of educational inequality is one of the perspectives I have chosen. Therefore, its analysis of involution still needs to be completed. Similarly, educational inequality is caused by complex factors (Unterhalter, 2021). This paper does not mention geographical, racial, religious and many other factors due to space limitations, but they may be present in the PGEE.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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