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The Impact of Involution on Chinese Undergraduates Preparing for Postgraduate Exams

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Abstract: In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the postgraduate entrance examination, leading more undergraduates to prepare for it. This trend has resulted in a notable phenomenon known as *involution*, characterized by intense competition among candidates. If this continues, it could negatively impact the quality of undergraduate education. This study uses P. Bourdieu's theory of social practice as a framework and adopts a narrative approach. Through narratives and in-depth interviews, it examines the experiences of three candidates preparing for the postgraduate entrance examination. By analyzing how *involution* develops among these students, the study identifies the key factors contributing to this phenomenon. Ultimately, it aims to provide practical insights for future candidates and inform policies to reduce involution in exam preparation, thereby enhancing the undergraduate educational environment.

Keywords: postgraduate entrance examination, involution, excessive competition, university Chinese students

Citation: Zhang Yingxia. The Impact of Involution on Chinese Undergraduates Preparing for Postgraduate Exams. *Vestnik Kemerovskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Seriya: Gumanitarnye i obshchestvennye nauki*, 2026, 10(2): 283–295. <https://doi.org/10.21603/2542-1840-2026-10-2-283-295>

Received 10 Aug 2025. Accepted after review 15 Oct 2025. Accepted for publication 20 Oct 2025.

оригинальная статья

Нарративное исследование феномена *ИНВОЛЮЦИЯ* в процессе подготовки к вступительным экзаменам в магистратуру среди китайских студентов-бакалавров

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Аннотация: В последние годы наблюдается рост интереса к поступлению в магистратуру. В связи с этим все больше студентов-бакалавров готовятся к сдаче вступительных экзаменов. Эту тенденцию сопровождает такой феномен, как *инволюция* – чрезмерная конкуренция среди абитуриентов. Если данное явление сохранится, оно может негативно сказаться на качестве высшего образования. Опираясь на теорию социальных практик П. Бурдьё, в настоящем исследовании реализуется нарративный подход. Путем сбора нарративных текстов и материалов глубинных интервью анализируется опыт подготовки к магистерским экзаменам трех абитуриентов и систематически фиксируется, как *инволюция* проявляется в их поведении на этапе подготовки. Охарактеризована динамика формирования данного феномена, выделены ключевые условия его возникновения. В результате исследования были представлены практические рекомендации будущим поступающим и разработана политика, направленная на смягчение инволюции в процессе подготовки к экзаменам и на улучшение экосистемы высшего образования.

Ключевые слова: экзамен на поступление в магистратуру, инволюция, чрезмерная конкуренция, китайские студенты-бакалавры

Цитирование: Чжан Инся. Нарративное исследование феномена *инволюция* в процессе подготовки к вступительным экзаменам в магистратуру среди китайских студентов-бакалавров. *Вестник Кемеровского государственного университета. Серия: Гуманитарные и общественные науки*. 2026. Т. 10. № 2. С. 283–295. (In Eng.) <https://doi.org/10.21603/2542-1840-2026-10-2-283-295>

Поступила в редакцию 10.08.2025. Принята после рецензирования 15.10.2025. Принята в печать 20.10.2025.

Introduction

Among the irrational competitions triggered by certain structural problems during the period of modernization and transformation, involution represents one such phenomenon. The surge in postgraduate entrance examinations in China has attracted significant attention from society, making the involution of these examinations a prominent topic of discussion. As supported by the data, the overall trend in the number of applicants for the examination has been steadily increasing. Notably, since 2017, the number of applicants has entered a phase of rapid growth. In 2017, the number of applicants reached 2.01 million, and this figure surpassed the 4 million mark within just five years. Prior to 2017, the annual increase in the number of postgraduate entrance exam applicants was merely 86,000. However, after 2017, this annual increase surged to 172,000¹. Although the enrollment scale of postgraduate students is expanding, the overall admission rate has not changed significantly. This implies that millions of candidates fail to gain admission each year, while an increasing number of individuals continue to enter this competitive arena as the exam craze intensifies. Students face various pressures, including heavy coursework, academic performance, further studies, and employment prospects. As a result, they may become trapped in immense competitive stress, which is detrimental to the cultivation of high-level talent and the long-term development of quality education. This study systematically examines the characteristics of involution among three students who exhibit these traits during their exam preparation. By tracking them over an extended period, the research explores the underlying logical relationships behind these characteristics, aiming to contribute to the sustainable development of higher education.

Currently, the education sector in China is exhibiting a trend of involution, primarily due to the expansion of the overall volume and scale of education. This trend is coupled with diminishing marginal returns for educated individuals resulting from investments in human capital. The research on the involution of education encompasses various domains, including basic education, higher education, vocational education, rural education, and teacher education.

Involution

The term *involution* (*nèijūǎn*) was first introduced in I. Kant's Critique of Judgment, where he articulated

the theory of involution [1]. He posited that involution is a process inherent in both natural and societal development, wherein individuals continuously and repetitively complexify inwardly.

In the Chinese context, P. C. C. Huang [2] was the first to introduce the concept of involution, primarily applying it in his research on the small-scale peasant economy in North China and social transformation. He argued that Chinese agriculture, achieving development at the expense of diminishing marginal returns on labor, is fundamentally characterized by the "labor intensification" of agricultural production.

J. Chen [3] was the first to utilize involution as an analytical framework to interpret the current state of rural education in China. He contended that long-standing tendencies toward involution are evident in various aspects of rural education, including functional performance, goal orientation, reform approaches, and conceptual / cultural dimensions [4]. Current research on educational involution spans multiple fields, including basic education, higher education, vocational education, rural education, and teacher education. Within the field of higher education, many new dilemmas have emerged, including over-education, a degree-centric mentality, and involution [5].

J. Xia [6] points out that involution in higher education refers to the situation where higher education, as a social system, continually refines and complicates itself internally under conditions where external expansion is challenging to achieve, yet the overall efficiency of the system does not experience qualitative development.

Involution in postgraduate entrance examination

Researchers primarily discuss the involution of postgraduate entrance examinations (known as *kaoyan*) from two perspectives: its causes and students' motivations.

Firstly, some scholars indicate that the increasing popularity of the exam, coupled with the country's emphasis on cultivating high-quality talent, has led to a growing number of students opting to take the exam, thereby giving rise to the phenomenon of involution. Other scholars, drawing on Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, argue that the involution of postgraduate entrance exams arises from pressures related to safety needs in a competitive social environment, peer competition driven by social needs, expectations from significant others under esteem needs, and irrational choices stemming from the need for

¹ 历年考研人数和录取人数统计汇总. 在职研究生招生信息网. 23 Nov 2023. (Summary of statistic son the number of people taking the postgraduate entrance exam and the number of people admitted in the past years. *Part-time Postgraduate Admissions Information Website*. 23 Nov 2023). URL: <https://www.eduego.com/wenti/110007.html> (accessed 10 Jul 2025).

self-actualization [7]. In terms of solutions to alleviate the involution of postgraduate entrance exams, some scholars advocate for reforms to the entrance examination system to curb excessive competition. They also suggest revising employment standards that place undue emphasis on academic qualifications. Secondly, concerning the relationship between involution in postgraduate exams and college students' learning motivations, some scholars assert that different learning motivations lead to vastly different behavioral outcomes. The motivations behind the phenomenon of involution include intrinsic motivation driven by academic development, extrinsic motivation driven by career advancement, and irrational motivations induced by various mentalities. Consequently, they argue that the postgraduate education system should be further optimized, the postgraduate training framework improved, and students' learning motivations adjusted to foster high-level talents with comprehensive development in ethics, intellect, physical fitness, aesthetics, and labor.

Additionally, scholars analyze the root causes of the involution phenomenon through surveys and experimental methods. They contend that the issue is not due to a lack of self-awareness among college students, but rather their obsessive focus on using the exam to enhance their employment prospects, which results in a lack of clear understanding of the job market. They propose strengthening career planning guidance for college students, conducting objective self-assessments concerning interests and abilities, and implementing scientific and rational career planning so that students can approach the decision to take the postgraduate entrance exam more rationally [8].

In summary, research on the involution of postgraduate entrance exams in China is relatively limited and lacks a systematic approach. Current studies primarily address its causes and countermeasures through speculative methods, with a notable absence of in-depth, systematic research on the real-world manifestations of this phenomenon. Given this, the research into the generative logic of involution in postgraduate entrance exams will employ narrative research methods to gain a deeper understanding of students exhibiting characteristics of involution. This approach aims to thoroughly describe the real-world manifestations of involution and, based on these findings, explore the deeper underlying causes of this phenomenon. The study will also analyze the common characteristics of students' involution, investigate its generative logic, and provide reflections and insights for students currently experiencing involution and for the ongoing development of higher education.

Theoretical framework

P. Bourdieu posits that practice consists of three interconnected questions: where the actor practices, what the logic of the practice is, and what means are utilized in the practice. The practice is not grand or monumental; rather, it refers to the general, everyday activities of individuals [9]. Scholars have translated P. Bourdieu's focus on social activity into the concept of *practice*, which is primarily understood in relation to his foundational concepts of social practice: namely, field, habitus, and capital.

P. Bourdieu's theory of social practice serves as a theoretical framework that incorporates the dimension of practice within its research perspective. By employing social practice theory, this framework helps clarify the generative logic behind the involution of postgraduate entrance examinations. On the one hand, the involution of postgraduate entrance exams falls within the category of social practice. The practice P. Bourdieu refers to encompasses the general, everyday activities of human beings, and the involution of postgraduate entrance exams is an extension of this concept.

On the other hand, the excessive competition within the involution of postgraduate entrance exam is inherent to social practice theory. The scarcity of educational resources and the development of meritocracy have intensified competition among students taking the exam, creating a relationship of competition among actors. This competition connects different actors, leading to the formation of an objective relational structure, or field, through comparison. Besides, the mutual construction and constraint between capital and habitus are involved. The involution of postgraduate entrance exam involves the relationships between family, school, and society, and social practice theory views reality from a relational perspective, making it a fitting framework. In conclusion, social practice theory can be applied to explore the practical issues behind the generative logic of the involution in postgraduate entrance exam.

Methods and Materials

The study does not aim for statistical representativeness through a large-scale sample. It focuses on exploring in-depth information derived from individual experiences. Following the principle of purposive sampling, our objective was to select participants who could provide maximum information pertinent to the research issues. The study primarily employs a "snowball" sampling method [10] through introductions from acquaintances and online recruitment to identify three representative postgraduate entrance exam students as research subjects, with the main selection criteria outlined as follows:

1. All three participants possess a high density and intensity of information. Throughout their extensive preparation for the postgraduate entrance examination, each has accumulated rich and unique experiences, which can provide in-depth and specific firsthand data for the study of involution behaviors.

2. The three participants come from different backgrounds and exhibit significant variations in their exam preparation behaviors and attitudes, thereby achieving maximum variation sampling.

3. All three participants demonstrate a strong willingness to communicate and possess good expressive abilities. They can actively engage in interviews, sharing their experiences and insights clearly and coherently, which ensures that the study can obtain detailed and valuable information.

Considering these factors, the selection of participants Z, X, and S – representative, diverse, and capable of providing abundant information – facilitates an in-depth and comprehensive exploration of the underlying logic behind the *involution* phenomenon in postgraduate entrance examinations. Among the three candidates, the parents of Z and X are both self-employed, and their family financial conditions are relatively stable, allowing them to focus on exam preparation without excessive concern for economic issues such as postgraduate exam expenses. In contrast, S's parents are farmers, and his family financial situation is relatively tight. During his multiple attempts at the postgraduate entrance examination, S faces not only academic pressure but also economic anxiety. The specific information of the participants is summarized in table.

The study employs a narrative research method [11] to deeply explore the involution behaviors exhibited by three students during their preparation for the postgraduate entrance examination. It respects the subjective expressions of the narrators while aiming to reconstruct the specific contexts they experienced. The goal was to provide an in-depth interpretation of their experiences and insights. The three students encountered numerous struggles and engaged in self-encouragement, ultimately breaking through the involution process they faced during their preparation. To recreate this scenario,

the narrators were asked to recall and share significant events, along with the self-reflections and insights that emerged from those experiences. Through detailed analysis and description of various educational events and behaviors, the narrative research method reveals the deep educational philosophies and concepts embedded within these events, thereby uncovering the internal principles of education and teaching [12]. Additionally, emphasizing the subjects' characteristics in narrative research, this study primarily employs in-depth interviews [13].

The specific implementation process was divided into three phases: pre-interview, formal interview, and post-interview organization.

Pre-Interview Phase:

- First, a semi-structured interview outline was designed based on the objectives and a review of the literature. This outline included core modules such as motivation for postgraduate exam preparation, manifestations of involution behaviors, stress-coping strategies, and reflections on experiences, as well as open-ended questions. Second, communication was conducted online with multiple potential participants to clarify the purpose, duration, and format of the interview, as well as the principles of information confidentiality, while also coordinating suitable times for the interview. Finally, we selected three participants with typical characteristics (Students Z, X, and S).

Formal Interview Phase:

- First, we initiated ice-breaking conversations on casual topics to alleviate participants' tension, and reaffirmed the interview process and confidentiality commitments.
- Then, questions from the outline were posed in a logical order: exam preparation background → manifestations of involution behaviors → psychology and strategies → reflective cognition. We asked follow-up questions regarding ambiguous or valuable information to obtain detailed data, while maintaining neutral listening without interfering with participants' expressions of opinion.

Tab. Information on the Participants

Табл. Информация об участниках

Name	Category of the Current Institution / Category of the Institution Applied to	Candidate Category	Subject
Z	Regular Universities / Regular Universities	Admitted to Graduate School	Science
X	Key Universities / Foreign Universities	Admitted to Graduate School	Humanities
S	Regular Universities / Key Universities	Not Admitted to Graduate School	Humanities

- Finally, key information was summarized to confirm its accuracy, and we asked the participants if they had additional information to provide or any other questions to raise.

Post-Interview Organization Phase:

- The audio recordings were transcribed on the same day, and a second check was conducted to correct errors or omissions. We extracted key information from the transcribed text, and preprocessed it with labels. At the same time, we organized and archived the non-verbal information recorded during the interviews, aligning it with the textual data to create a complete interview data package.

Results

The Field of Postgraduate Entrance Exam Involution

A field is not a fixed social domain, nor is it merely a simple social relationship or a structure formed by different social statuses. Rather, a field should be viewed as the focal point of research operations. It represents a network and configuration of objective relationships between positional relations, emphasizing the balance of power and actual tensions within social relationships [14]. Therefore, the involution in the postgraduate entrance exam is generated by the tension between the university field, the education field, and the social field.

University Field: Student Blind Conformity under Group Effect. Within the university field, the structure itself is always a game of stakes. Various struggles within the field, based on territorial claims, represent battles to maintain the legitimacy of these stakes [15]. Students preparing for the postgraduate entrance exam begin competing with each another to obtain limited educational resources, resulting in competition that exceeds reasonable bounds. The involution among students in the university field can be summarized as follows:

In order to secure the limited educational resources available at the university, students engage in unreasonable competition. As participant Z noted:

- *In our school, there are limited opportunities for admission to graduate programs without an exam, so most students have to choose to take the exam. However, as the number of students increases, the energy required for the exam also grows. Every student is studying with all their might, as if this is our last lifeline.*

The relationships between exam candidates in the university field become sensitive, sometimes leading to hostility. As student X pointed out:

- *Exam students share the same campus and dormitory, so some interactions are inevitable. However, because the competition for the exam has become more intense, the relationships between students inevitably become*

more concealed. Student relationships are no longer purely friendly; they are now mixed with a lot of sensitivity, even hostility.

The primary group in the university field consists of students, whose behaviors reflect mainstream values. A large number of candidates are strongly affected by their peers. Student S explained:

- *When I first entered university, I heard many of my peers say that their future plan was to take the graduate exam. Not only that, but I also observed many seniors and juniors who were struggling with the exam. They shared their experiences with us, telling us that due to adjustments in the market economy, the job market is more competitive, so taking the exam to enhance one's competitiveness is a very good option.*

Educational Field: The Link Between Educational Background and Ability. In the educational field, involution in higher education manifests as issues such as disorderly competition and institutional dilemmas. With the devaluation of degrees in the job market, the phenomenon of educational overextension has become increasingly prominent. To alleviate employment pressure, the government has expanded graduate enrollment, thereby lengthening the educational period. Concurrently, graduates from prestigious universities working in domestic services or PhD graduates taking jobs in community offices have sparked widespread discussions in society about "wasting degrees" and education involution. The involution in graduate school entrance exams is also a reflection of the educational field. Many students consciously or unconsciously link ability with degree level, leading to exam candidates often experiencing involution.

Student S observed that many students believe passing the graduate school entrance exam can help them transcend social classes:

- *When I was preparing for the exam, I may have had similar thoughts, believing that my life would definitely be much better after getting into graduate school, at least better than it is now. But later, I realized that one must focus on the present, not project all hopes onto the future. The present comes with its own difficulties, and the future will have its own trivialities. There is no inherent connection between passing the exam and social mobility. Under some misguided online opinions, many students lack a clear sense of identity regarding their postgraduate status, leading to the misconception that higher education equals higher ability. While there is an assumption that degrees and ability are directly correlated, is that truly the case?*

Social Field: Harsh Employment Situation in the Context of Economic Structural Transformation. In the social field, the involution of postgraduate

entrance exams has similarly led students to develop a highly singular focus on their goals, value evaluation systems, and methods of competition. This is influenced by several factors within the social field:

1. Due to the transformation of the Chinese economic structure and the continuous expansion of higher education, the threshold for enterprises has been raised, increasing employment pressure for university graduates. Consequently, many students choose to further their education to secure their desired jobs. In the context of economic structural adjustments, university students often feel uncertain about their future development and lack a clear plan. Observing their peers preparing for the graduate exam, they decide to follow suit (Student S).

2. Social media has fueled the involution atmosphere surrounding the exam. With the rapid development of online media, various exam institutions and related media have extensively promoted and covered the exam, making this utilitarian behavior a booster for the involution atmosphere. Student Z believes that, compared to the harsh employment situation, a more important reason is that major exam institutions and related media, by constantly amplifying the tension around the exams, create a sense of panic among the students. This prompts them to seek external help regarding the exam.

3. Student X also mentioned that:

- *In the face of the overwhelming influence of online media, a variety of advertisements flood the internet, and many young people, including myself, are often severely "brainwashed" by these advertisements.*

Capital of Postgraduate Entrance Exam Involution

Capital is a force embedded in both social subjects and objects, serving as the principle that allows society to function in a regular manner. This is what distinguishes social competition from mere chance. According to P. Bourdieu, society is not a static entity but is constantly being constructed and evolved through the struggles of different possessors within it. In this construction process, economic capital and cultural capital play key roles [16]. The capital generated by the involution of graduate school entrance exams primarily arises from the interactions and struggles among family economic capital, academic cultural capital, and social relational network capital, leading to varied outcomes.

Family Economic Capital: The Foundation for Involution in the Postgraduate Entrance Exam. Differences in family economic capital significantly influence how children engage in the involution surrounding graduate school exams. Socioeconomically advantaged families can create a competitive edge for their children by leveraging their resources [17]. Children from affluent families often pursue graduate studies

to access better opportunities. Student Z admitted that their parents have high expectations for them, stating:

- *We had planned to take the graduate school entrance exam since college. During our preparation, we received a great deal of encouragement from our parents.*

Moreover, due to their family's financial stability, they never had to worry about the costs associated with exam preparations. They were even prepared to attempt the exam twice, with their parents fully supportive, as the family's financial situation could easily sustain their study plan. In contrast, students from average families often participate in the involution competition with the goal of achieving a more stable life. Student S discussed their motivation, explaining:

- *I did not give up because my family and I had invested too much. The closer I got to missing the opportunity, the more determined I became to succeed. I've spent four years, over a thousand days, and I feel that the result should reflect the cost I've invested. I have developed a "gambler's mindset", betting that this time I will win.*

With industrialization, urbanization, and the overall development of cities in China, social mobility has been on the rise. However, studies indicate that while urban and rural incomes are rising, the wealth gap is widening, and social stratification is becoming more pronounced [18]. The middle class strives to prevent their children from falling into the next lower class, while lower-income families hope that their children can ascend to the next level through their own efforts. As China's overall expansion trend becomes more evident, especially with the expansion and solidification of social classes, this creates the foundation for the involution surrounding graduate school exams.

Academic Cultural Capital: Driving Force behind the Involution in Postgraduate Entrance Exam.

The material and symbolic benefits guaranteed by academic capital are built on the foundation of diplomas, which are primarily valued based on the principle of "rarity equals value". The reason many university students are eager to pursue postgraduate entrance exams is mainly to increase their academic capital, thereby acquiring more symbolic capital for future development. However, as the number of higher education diploma holders continues to rise and the labor market demands higher qualifications, competition among diploma holders becomes increasingly fierce.

When individuals invest considerable time and energy into acquiring academic capital but find the returns are less than expected, involution behavior begins to emerge. Specifically, the less profit they gain, the more effort and time they are willing to invest, which leads others to imitate them. Each participant starts comparing

themselves to others, with those at the front standing out while those at the back stretch on their tiptoes. This continuous competition results in the acquisition of more valuable academic qualifications and diplomas.

As Student S observed, the primary motivation for the first job search is to obtain a higher diploma, which facilitates finding a job later on. However, after entering the workforce, they realized that to get promoted and secure higher positions, they would need to further improve their education:

- *This is the only way to stand out among many top performers.*

The "one-directional" approach in education caters to societal market demands, diverting educational practice from its fundamental task of moral and character development.

When grades become a visible target, instrumental rationality overrides value rationality, short-term goals overshadow long-term objectives, and the atmosphere of learning investment becomes involute [19]. The "theater effect" further disrupts educational rules, raising the competitive threshold. People become increasingly eager to squeeze into the increasingly narrow channels of upward mobility, placing greater importance on education and viewing it as the only "low-cost" tool for changing their fate.

Social Relational Networks: The Thrust behind the Involution in the Postgraduate Entrance Exam.

According to Bourdieu, social capital is primarily formed through the relationships that members of society acquire, shaped by the quantity and quality of these relationships. Social capital is built through the connections between individuals, and by investing in social capital, actors can tap into the resources available within their relational networks.

First, exam involution is significantly influenced by peers. Student X noted that after entering university, they observed many classmates had already made plans to prepare for the graduate school entrance exams. They also noticed that most senior students were preparing for the exams and, when discussing future plans, mentioned the phenomenon of degree devaluation. In such an environment, these senior students often warned underclassmen to constantly upgrade their qualifications.

Secondly, family expectations contribute to the involution. Student X:

- *Parents often expect their children to achieve better outcomes than their own generation. Some parents, feeling disadvantaged due to their limited education, place their hopes for academic success on their children. Parents typically wish for their children to have better lives, not to follow in their own footsteps, and to have greater development opportunities. Therefore, only through hard study*

and obtaining higher degrees and qualifications can one secure a satisfying job. Thus, the "involution" of the exam sometimes stems from family pressure.

Additionally, the social environment plays a significant role. The involution of the exam among university students reflects the increasingly fierce social competition. The uncertainty in the job market leads to anxiety and insecurity among students, prompting them to accumulate advantages to secure a dominant position in the employment process. Student Z shared that their initial preparation for the graduate exams was due to their undergraduate institution lacking a competitive edge, and they hoped to improve their competitiveness through graduate studies. Later, after graduation, the decision to pursue graduate school again arose because they encountered a bottleneck in their career. Student Z:

- *When I started my job, I could improve my skills through self-learning, such as observation and communication. But to move up to a higher position, I had to enhance my qualifications. A high degree is a brick in the wall, and since I'm also in the education field, I need to keep improving myself.*

The Habitus of Postgraduate Entrance Exam Involution

In the spatial field, the different types of capital possessed by actors determine their position within that field. From a temporal perspective, actors with different habits also influence the establishment of their position in the field. The psychological factors of students preparing for the postgraduate entrance exam, along with their ingrained traditional educational concepts, intentionally or unintentionally govern their study behaviors, which are then reflected in their learning practices.

The Inertia of Involution and Psychological Warfare.

When students observe their peers continuously improving and becoming more outstanding through the process of involution, they are naturally driven to invest more time and energy in pursuit of perfection. The habitus of involution has become so ingrained that it resembles inertia. If one does not participate in involution, they may feel as though they are wasting time, filled with regret and a sense of guilt. Some students during their undergraduate years may have excelled in their major courses, held positions in student organizations, and participated in numerous competitions, consistently performing well. They become accustomed to this competitive environment, making it difficult to disengage even when preparing for the postgraduate entrance exam.

Conversely, some students are simply influenced by their surrounding peers and blindly follow the trend. Student X:

- *If their friends are all exceptionally outstanding and highly competitive, they will naturally join this "battle" without realizing it. This form of involution can be understood as an involuntary process.*

Another reason for the involution in postgraduate entrance exams stems from the influence of "psychological warfare". Some students may intentionally project that they are progressing faster in their revision, which implies a broader knowledge base, thereby exerting pressure on others. When others feel this pressure, it increases their chances of success by encouraging them to follow a structured approach. This can be considered a psychological strategy. Student Z:

- *In highly competitive environments where acceptance rates for the same program in the same institution vary drastically, employing psychological tactics – such as displaying confidence and unconsciously conveying an image of thorough preparation and strong self-assurance – can induce panic among competitors. As a result, one's chances of success may increase.*

Influence of Confucian "Excellence in Learning Leads to Official Service". Zixia stated, "If one excels in official duties, they must first study; if one excels in study, they must pursue official duties". This idea has profoundly impacted Chinese educational culture for over two thousand years. It manifests in two main aspects. Firstly, the idea promotes education, knowledge, and talent, which is positive and progressive. However, on the other hand, "excellence in learning leads to official service" also advocates the notion of seeking career advancement through studying, propagating a belief in becoming a government official through academic achievement.

Under the influence of this idea, later Confucian scholars proposed notions such as "those who labor with their minds govern others; those who labor with their bodies are governed by others", and "all things are inferior, only studying is superior", reflecting a disdain for physical labor and contempt for working-class individuals. This thought has significantly impacted future generations.

Examples from ancient times, such as the "Three Moves of Mencius' Mother" and the more contemporary notion of "selling pots and pans to send the child to university", illustrate the intense educational expectations families place on their children, with educational success being a key driver [20]. Behind these strong expectations lies the Confucian cultural value of emphasizing children's education and the belief that educational success brings honor to the entire family or even the whole lineage [21]. In the context of traditional Chinese family values, education is seen as a source of family pride. Student Z:

- *In the past parents simply hoped for their children's healthy growth. Nowadays they aspire*

for their children not only to grow up healthily but also to achieve greater success. Parents often engage in competition, comparing the educational resources they invest in their children and the accomplishments their children attain. As a result, today's children bear an overwhelming amount of expectation.

Discussion

Creating a Positive Environment

Academic production within university disciplines is inextricably linked to the deep historical and regional contexts of the institution, as well as to the foundational conditions and practical capabilities inherent to the academic field. Academic activities occur within a specific field; wherein distinct disciplines operate under unique sets of rules. The strategies of actors must align with the rules of the field they are in [22].

Enhancing Individual Rationality and Guiding Collective Rationality. Developing personal ideals requires students to actively broaden their knowledge while at university, which involves extensive reading and diverse travel experiences. Regular reading enriches the mind and nurtures the spirit. Just as plum blossoms thrive even in the harshest winters, university students should dive into literature from both ancient and modern times to build a strong intellectual foundation. An open mindset promotes more rational decision-making and encourages long-term thinking.

In today's information age, it is imperative for students to cultivate a discerning awareness of the information landscape surrounding them. They should avoid merely conforming to popular discourse or being swept away by the prevailing media narratives. Instead, students ought to reflect on their roles in this information-rich era, actively engage with emerging trends and phenomena, and pursue interests that resonate with them. By embracing a process of experimentation and learning from failures throughout their university years, students can identify the fields where they can genuinely establish roots. It is essential for them to remain open to new ideas and innovations, as these developments align with contemporary trends. Consequently, young individuals must possess the courage to accept and explore novel concepts.

Overcoming Educational Anxiety and Focusing on Educational Context. In the society where consumerism prevails, the utilitarian orientation in education emphasizes its instrumental function, often prioritizing instrumental rationality over value rationality. This results in a disconnect between individuals' perceptions and behaviors and the fundamental principles of education, thereby neglecting education's pivotal role in human development. Short-sighted and profit-driven teaching methodologies are prevalent, leading to an educational

process that strays from its core essence and devolves into a mere instructional procedure. Consequently, university educators should critically evaluate their teaching methods, encouraging students to focus on their own needs and interests while leveraging real-world issues as a framework for learning.

Educators should facilitate inquiry-based learning, integrating both indirect and direct experiences to foster diverse learning opportunities. This approach will enable students to concentrate on the learning process and gradually uncover their strengths through inquiry, ultimately clarifying the career paths they aspire to pursue.

Simultaneously, parents should provide diversified attention to their children. The dominant mindset of focusing solely on intellectual education needs to change. Parents should regularly communicate with their children, recognize their talents, and consistently create opportunities for their growth, thereby enhancing their overall abilities. Student X:

- *Our development is greatly influenced by the family environment, and parental understanding is crucial. When parents have high expectations, fostering open communication is beneficial, encouraging them to embrace modern developments. It's also important for parents to continue learning and evolving with changing trends. This mutual growth between parents and children is essential.*

Preventing the Over-Utilization of Education and Optimizing the Path of Employment Reproduction.

British educational philosopher Richard Peters posited that education should prioritize matters of intrinsic value, seeking to understand them from their core essence [23]. Instrumentalized education fails to provide students with opportunities for genuine understanding; it merely emphasizes the functional aspects of knowledge. The ultimate goal of knowledge should be to enable students to comprehend what they have learned and apply it in practical contexts. This cyclical process allows for the exercise of students' autonomy and creativity in real-world scenarios. Following the significant expansion of higher education, it is crucial to actively encourage university students to pursue employment and entrepreneurship. This includes fulfilling the genuine role of employment guidance, ensuring that students interested in hands-on entrepreneurship acquire practical skills from their courses, rather than allowing career guidance to devolve into a mere formality.

Universities should enhance the accuracy of employment information dissemination. Institutions should not only guide students in taking career assessments to identify their strengths but also develop individualized career profiles for each student. Additionally, universities should actively integrate

employment resources and establish interactive platforms to support students' career development and employment opportunities.

Society at large needs to strengthen oversight of exaggerated publicity propagated by internet self-media. The internet has created numerous opportunities for students, making them susceptible to assimilation and the development of a herd mentality. Additionally, commercial practices that utilize online marketing to sell diplomas have unintentionally or intentionally exacerbated the involution of the postgraduate entrance exam. The students must critically evaluate media promotions and recognize, or even block, harmful online media publicity. When life slows down, they may come to realize that everyone's existence is, in fact, quite ordinary and humble, with individuals simply striving to live seriously and diligently.

Moving Toward Practical Rationality in Capital Supply

During the preparation for the postgraduate entrance exam, students should adhere to the principle of practical rationality. They must not overlook social characteristics or detach themselves from the essence of academia. Through their interactions with economic, social, and cultural capital, students continuously contribute to the production and reproduction of knowledge. Advancing toward practical rationality in capital supply enables students to recognize the inherent value of the postgraduate entrance exam itself, activate their inner spiritual world, and enhance their autonomy and self-awareness throughout the exam process.

Upholding the Principle of Educational Fairness and Reducing the Gap in Tangible Economic Capital.

With the rise of lifelong learning and a long-standing focus on education, families from various social backgrounds tend to have similar expectations for their children's schooling, all aiming for their children to excel in learning and secure official positions. However, the monopolization of social resources by elite families directly impacts the quality of life for lower-income groups, often compelling parents, under economic pressures, to prevent their children from pursuing higher education. This situation contributes to the entrenchment of social classes and unequal educational opportunities.

Therefore, when addressing students from families with varying levels of economic capital, it is essential for national policies to regulate and for market economic policies to play a significant role. There is an urgent need for policy measures to support students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, ensuring they have the opportunity to pursue postgraduate education rather than abandoning their aspirations due to financial constraints.

Firstly, the government should implement relevant support policies, with universities responsible for registering and screening students preparing for the postgraduate entrance exam. For students from previous years, local government personnel or educational authorities should conduct the registration and screening. Secondly, educational decision-makers must consistently adhere to principles of fairness and justice throughout the reform process. Educational policies, serving as the framework for the educational field, have a cascading effect; thus, reforms related to higher education must prioritize fairness and justice. To effectively reduce the entrenchment of social classes and narrow the gap in tangible economic capital, it is crucial that educational policy formulation is grounded in and ultimately aims to achieve fairness and justice.

Weakening Academic Credential Violence and Establishing a Correct View of Diplomas. Firstly, university students must accurately and clearly define their identities. They need to understand that obtaining a university diploma does not automatically grant them entry into the elite class of society. Many employers today, when hiring, consider not only the applicant's degree but also place greater emphasis on the applicant's overall abilities. If some students are blindly pursuing postgraduate studies solely for the sake of acquiring a higher degree, they should reassess their views on diplomas. They need to temper their expectations and recognize that university students are no longer regarded as part of the social elite but should view themselves as ordinary workers.

Secondly, employers should also move away from a "degree-only" mindset and establish appropriate talent selection criteria. Employers should focus more on applicants' professional skills rather than solely on their academic credentials. Only when employers cease to place undue emphasis on degrees and adopt a healthy employment perspective will many university students be able to find suitable positions during their university years, thus avoiding the blind pursuit of postgraduate entrance exam preparation. Furthermore, in a market-driven modern society, universities must enhance students' adaptability to the workforce. Today university education primarily focuses on foundational education and vocational training. However, employers expect graduates to be able to adapt to specific job roles immediately upon graduation, without the need for additional retraining. Universities need to revise their talent development strategies to align with job market demands, achieving a balance between supply and demand, rather than a scenario where supply exceeds demand.

Reducing the Influence of Relational Network Social Capital and Clarifying Personal Goals. The way students

perceive themselves while preparing for the postgraduate entrance examination, along with their diverse social networks, greatly impacts their goal setting. This often results in confusion about their values. Therefore, students should develop a clear understanding of competition and their personal values.

It is essential to break free from the singular focus on taking the postgraduate entrance exam. The involution surrounding the exam arises because the perceived significance of the exam serves as a mediator in the students' minds, confining them to view it as the only viable option. To avoid involution, students who have opted to pursue a master's degree should explore multiple avenues to achieve their aspirations. As Z remarked:

- *I think one should first find their goal, then look for ways to achieve it. If my goal absolutely requires taking the postgraduate exam, then I will take it. If my goal can be achieved through other paths, then there's no need to force my way onto this crowded single-plank bridge.*

Therefore, identifying the right path for oneself and recognizing diverse channels is crucial.

Universities should provide specialized psychological counseling to assist students in forming a more objective self-perception, establishing realistic expectations, setting attainable goals, and making rational choices through careful deliberation. Concurrently, students preparing for the exam should also engage in their own psychological self-care. They should orient themselves towards life, transcend abstract logic, and approach problems in concrete scenarios to avoid involution. As X noted:

- *The term "brittle college students" is circulating online now, indicating that current university students have notably poor physical fitness.*

Therefore, universities need to proactively address the mental health issues faced by students. They could offer elective courses in psychology for those in need, which would also promote the physical and mental well-being of students. Furthermore, organizing diverse psychological activities can help individuals discover greater meaning and beauty in life.

Deconstructing the Involution Habitus in Postgraduate Entrance Exam Preparation

Ultimately, students preparing for the postgraduate entrance examination must embrace the pursuit of scholarship as their mission. The essence of this pursuit lies in the "internalization" of academic knowledge within their lives. Bourdieu referred to this internalized form as "habitus" – an open system of dispositions that is continually shaped by experiences, thereby being consistently influenced in ways that either reinforce or modify its structures [24]. It is durable but not eternal.

The involution habitus surrounding the exam represents a dynamic process, influenced by multiple factors during its formation. Therefore, to effectively address the phenomenon of exam involution, it is imperative to deconstruct this involution habitus.

Establishing the Ideal and Belief of "Knowing Oneself" to "Becoming Oneself". Students trapped in the exam involution should clearly recognize whether pursuing this path is genuinely suitable for them. The exam serves different purposes for different students. It is crucial to learn to accurately discern whether one is genuinely suited for postgraduate studies or is opting for this route merely to avoid job hunting. If studying is chosen solely to evade stepping out of one's comfort zone and confronting employment challenges, the fundamental issue remains unresolved – one will still face job searching three years later. It is essential to understand one's true inner motivations and address the core issues. Many individuals impulsively pursue the postgraduate exam without careful consideration, which contributes to the increasing severity of involution in recent years. While it is true that economic restructuring requires careful consideration of the broader environment, it is precisely during such times that one must reflect clearly on what they truly desire.

Students caught in the postgraduate entrance exam involution impose limitations upon themselves. They fail to achieve clear self-awareness, struggle to discern their own potential and limits, and consequently lose sight of other possibilities in life. They superstitiously adhere to the evaluation criteria of a singular standard system, viewing *involution* as an unavoidable reality. Therefore, university students must first maintain their independence and achieve inner transcendence to distinguish themselves from the crowd. Secondly, they must continually cultivate a studious mindset and possess the consciousness for self-cognitive iteration. This consciousness requires not only daily accumulation but also ongoing self-reflection, enabling the continual renewal of understanding regarding one's own potential, interests, and limitations.

Adopting "Excellence in Learning Leads to Official Service" and Cultivating the Ideal Personality. Students trapped in the exam involution must fully recognize the positive influence of the concept "excellence in learning leads to official service". They should continuously enrich themselves through study, thereby achieving a state of "inner sageliness". However, inner sageliness is merely a prerequisite; the true goal is to attain "outer kingliness". How is outer kingliness achieved? It is realized through self-cultivation via learning and subsequently contributing this knowledge to society, thereby becoming a valuable member of the community. Therefore, students embroiled

in exam involution should establish the value orientation of "inner sageliness and outer kingliness". Given the rapid pace of social change, to become the talent most needed by society, one should master their specialization thoroughly and profoundly.

Students trapped in the postgraduate entrance exam involution should also extricate themselves from its vortex. They should strive to cultivate the Confucian ideal personality within the framework of "inner sageliness and outer kingliness". This ideal personality entails realizing external social status, power, and achievements through the comprehensive capabilities of the individual subject. This represents the self-actualization of the subject, embodying the ideal personality achieved through self-creation.

Conclusion

Based on P. Bourdieu's theory of social practice, this study systematically explores the mechanism of involution in postgraduate entrance exam preparation, analyzed from three core dimensions: field, capital, and habitus. In the field dimension, the formation logic of postgraduate entrance exam involution manifests as the overlapping influence of three fields: the tendency of blind conformity among certain students in the university field; the cognitive bias that equates academic credentials directly with competence in the educational field; and the intensified employment pressure caused by economic structural transformation in the social field. In the capital dimension, the supporting capacity of family economic capital, the accumulation level of academic and cultural capital, and the accessibility of social network capital collectively constitute the material and resource foundation for the emergence of postgraduate entrance exam involution. In the habitus dimension, two factors jointly shape students' behavioral tendencies to participate in postgraduate entrance exam competition: the path-dependent inertia formed by the existing involution phenomenon and the profound influence of traditional Confucian educational thought that "excellence in learning leads to official service". From the perspective of the overall formation logic, the field provides a structural relational framework for postgraduate entrance exam involution, capital lays the material and resource premise for its formation, and habitus further accelerates the intensification and spread of the involution trend.

Based on the aforementioned formation logic of postgraduate entrance exam involution, this study proposes targeted mitigation suggestions from the three dimensions of field, capital, and habitus:

Focusing on Field Environment Optimization: in the university field, it is essential to guide students

in enhancing the rationality of personal choices while consolidating collective rationality through value guidance. In the educational field, efforts should be made to alleviate education-related anxiety at the social level and guide students to focus on personalized educational development paths. In the social field, the tendency for the over-instrumentalization of education should be firmly prevented, creating a more relaxed field environment for postgraduate entrance exam candidates by improving the employment market mechanism and expanding employment channels.

Emphasizing Capital Supply Restructuring: it is important adhere to the principle of educational equity and narrow the gap in family economic capital through policy preferences. The negative impact of "academic credential violence" should be weakened and guide society and individuals to establish a correct view of diplomas that prioritizes competence first. Additionally, reducing the improper interference of social network capital in postgraduate entrance exam competition, can help students clarify their personal development goals, and move toward a practice-oriented rational model of capital accumulation.

Focusing on Habitus Cognition Reconstruction: students should be guided to establish the ideal

of "knowing oneself" to "becoming oneself", and abandon the single-minded competitive mindset. Simultaneously, drawing on the Confucian ideal of "inner sageliness and outer kingliness" can cultivate a sound mentality while improving personal abilities, thereby alleviating the postgraduate entrance exam involution phenomenon at its cognitive root.

Conflict of interests: The author declared no potential conflict of interests regarding the research, authorship, and / or publication of this article.

Конфликт интересов: Автор заявил об отсутствии потенциальных конфликтов интересов в отношении исследования, авторства и / или публикации данной статьи.

Funding: The research reported in this paper was supported by 2025 Gansu Provincial Universities Postgraduate "Innovation Star" Project (grant number: 2025CXZX-368).

Финансирование: Исследование, представленное в этой статье, было поддержано проектом «Звезда инноваций» для аспирантов университетов провинции Ганьсу 2025 года (номер гранта: 2025CXZX-368).

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