

# What is the involution effect? The evolution of the concept in China

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**Abstract:** The concept of involution has been widely used in the analysis of complex issues in Chinese society in the last two years, but the concept implied by this term has been far from its original meaning, and even in different fields the meaning of the concept is slightly different. This paper analyzes how the concept of involution has changed in different application scenarios since its introduction into economics discussions, highlighting the key connotation of “development without growth” in the concept of involution and how it has changed in terms of expression and causation.

**Keywords:** Involution Concept; Evolution; Development without Growth

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## 1. Introduction

Thirty years after being introduced into the Chinese social sciences to analyze many problems in Chinese society, the topic of involution has become popular once again in extended application scenarios. There has been much confusion and controversy concept of the involution effect. We are concerned that the many and varied contributions of social scientists, mainstream media, and public opinion have led to a degree of conceptual chaos and concept misuse. The purpose here is to trace the evolution of a particular branch of involution so that we can better understand what this concept entails and its critical elements. First, we collected and analyzed 40 works of literature on involution in Web of Science and 1,095 in CNKI to describe the temporal evolution of involution in different application scenarios, and then we evaluated different scholars’ definitions of involution. Finally, the connotation of the concept of involution and the corresponding specific characteristics are summarized.

## 2. The birth: An economic perspective

The research time of involution lasts for 40 years from 1982 to 2022. However, the discussion of involitional effects in the literature predates this period, it is the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1790) who is credited with having first coined the term “in-volutions theorie “, distinguishing involution from evolution. (Kant, 2008)

The term “involution” is used to describe a phenomenon of increasing refinement of the interior while all edges are fixed. Such general contrasts between types of change as a general taxonomic way the concept of involution might be usefully applied in a wide variety of contexts.(White, 1983) Geertz. C(1965) described the Java farmers’ move toward agricultural involution due to demographic pressure by drawing on the implications of refinement and rigidity within the basic model(Geertz, 1956) It is a persuasive interpretative paradigm on the interplay of economics and culture, there is no doubt that Geertz provokes deeper thinking (Elson, 2007; Kahn, 2016; White, 1983)

The interest of Chinese scholars in involution began with Huang Philip C.’s (1985) research on Chinese agricultural production. He interprets involution as severely diminishing remuneration per unit of labor input, such ineffective inputs lead to “growth without development” or “over-intensive growth”. (Huang, 1985, 2020) It is worth affirming that this understanding is likely to be universal and can be used to analyze smallholder economic problems in other countries. But Huang narrows the extent of involution, distinguished from Geertz, agricultural production is internally refined, but there is growth, also developed to a very limited extent. (Lu, 2021; Ma, 2016) It also changes the direction of analysis of the concept of involution, and the meaning becomes complex and entangled, due to the unclear starting point of the involution process. ((Guo, 2007; Liu & Qiu, 2004) The attribution of connotations to “growth without development” has given involution a powerful instrumental analytical value, as it can be used to analyze social development or organizations with structural rigidity or increasingly complex internal but ineffective governance, leading to the generalization and misuse of the concept of involution.(Ma, 2016)

### 3. The evolution: Political and Sociological perspectives

In the initial phase, involution is more at the economic level to explain why society operates without a big breakthrough, especially without transforming from an agrarian society to a capitalist economy. The endless debate has taken “involution” research from anthropology to the field of rural development, and rural governance, and is related to the poverty alleviation strategy implemented in China and has begun to extend to the fields of community governance, precision governance in the Era of Artificial Intelligence, public service provision, social organization development, and education.

Another influential scholar who drove these developments was Prasenjit, who was the first to use the concept to describe the involution of state power. State power involution means that state institutions expand their administrative functions not by increasing the effectiveness of old or new (in this case, interpersonal or other administrative resources) institutions, but by replicating or expanding old state-society relationships-like China’s old profit-making brokerage system. (Prasenjit, 1991)

In this interpretation, involution deviates from the original theoretical presupposition: the subjective initiative of the actor is consistent with the goal of development, and development without qualitative change is a creative deficit and an external limitation. Regime involution, however, is the result of the actor’s disagreement with the system’s goals, which interferes with or displaces the development goals. (Ma, 2016)

The results of the analysis give us the information that the key elements of the understanding of involution proposed by Geertz, Huang, and Prasenjit, have been discerned by scholars in the period 2004-2005. Since then, the concept of involution has been closely associated with the theme of “governance,” whether it is rural governance, grassroots governance, poverty governance, or good governance.

Taking 2019 as the boundary, before that the academic comprehension of involution was balanced all of the views held by the three researchers we mentioned earlier, which emphasized the diminishing marginal efficiency of inputs and also the refinement or pattern replication within the system. Differently, scholars have begun to further unpack the meaning of growth without development, suggesting that it is a deviation of the actual goal from the predetermined one, and attributing such deviation to the inconsistency between the subjective will to act and the organizational goal, emphasizing the role of individual initiative in organizational development. And afterward, the constraints affecting individual initiatives are further discussed, continuing the discussion of involution in the field of rural development or poverty alleviation, such constraints as limited resources. In the competition for limited resources, the complexity, and over-density within the organization are interpreted as undesirable competition. Especially in the field of education, such meaningful applications are more popular. However, this change deviates from Geertz and Huang’s presupposition of involution, which in their understanding is due to a lack of economic competition.

### 4. Conclusions

We have, thus far, identified two elements for the development of the concept of involution.

(1) The manifestations of involution, especially in the different applications specifically:

- Growth without development, with diminishing marginal effects per unit
- Replication of a single model
- The actual target deviates from the original target
- Excessive competition

(2) Causes of involution.

-There are external pressures or restrictions on the development of affairs and can inhibit truly innovative development (Lu, 2021)

-The impact of individual autonomy. One scenario is a lack of subjectivity and creativity, and the development of actual goals away from the original objectives. (He, 2019) Another is to obtain limited resources, some individual initiative is fully stimulated and caught in an infinite cycle of self-flagellation triggering undesirable competition.

The instrumental value of the concept of involution makes various fields easily borrow its abstract concepts whichever sense the concept of involution is used, it describes a developmental dilemma or a non-ideal type of institutional change pattern. (Chen & Yu, 2017) The

use of the concept of involution by Chinese scholars is more biased towards the negative meaning of “growth without development” which may not have been in the first place. In this premise, many variations of the combination of the performance of involution and causal elements are possible. Furthermore, the important purpose of researchers for involution research is to “de-involute”. To understand the original meaning of the concept of involution and its subsequent changes, understand the characteristics and connotations of involution especially as it is generally accepted by the public today, and for us to apply the concept in the future.

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