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A Close Examination on Involution's Origin, Structure, and Impact

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## Abstract

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Although involution was a newly reformed word, it has shifted its meaning from originally describing the stagnant ecological progress in Indonesia's rice cultivation to defining today's common social phenomenon that most people are practicing. While Clifford Geertz and Philip C Huang discussed involution in an agricultural view, I believe that such a phenomenon was generated as a value system born from the capitalist system and ourselves. This thesis examines the recent case of involution and argues from a perspective of seeing it as a value system. First, I focused on how scholars from different fields evaluate involution, trace the origin, and weigh its structure based on various scholarly evidence. Then, I propose a combining concept that involution is an exception in human history as the core principle weight on the essence of a sort of internal consumption waste as it repeats without innovation. Later, I concluded that involution was catalyzed by a unique interpretation or shift of capitalism through our inner self due to the value system created through changes in time. Finally, I propose several possible solutions for people to jump out of involution and construct such solutions based on internal and external approaches.

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## A Close Examination on Involution's Origin, Structure, and Impact

What is involution? Although not many people have heard or understand the term, some of them are experiencing the phenomenon that involution describes in their daily lives. While it has a mathematical definition of defining a function, a transformation, or an operator equal to its inverse, it also has an anthropological definition. Such meaning is closely related to philosophical, social, political, economic, and economic perspectives.

I first heard this word from a Chinese friend of mine showing me a Tik-Tok video describing involution. In the video, I saw this girl was using the term "involution," to complain to her friends about the abnormal intensive competition she felt in school. As she said, there is a current phenomenon of how everyone tried so hard to study, created this unhealthy peer pressure around her, and forced her to work harder than she needed without making any significant progress. Living within such an unhealthy environment, she could not stop panicking about every second she spent on things other than studying. So, with this story, I kept wondering about what is involution? Is it really a proper term? Does this have any connotation besides what the girl has described? According to Clifford Geertz, an American Anthropologist who used this term to describe the ecological change progress in Indonesia's rice cultivation: involution describes a society that has progressed in neither mutational nor incremental growth but repeats itself at a superficial level. However, with more research in the current scenarios, involution means more intensive, unhealthy competition that creates no additional benefits. People are trying their best in every aspect of their daily lives to gain a small competitive advantage in society, squeezing out the space of others while causing mental exhaustion and waste.

To further examine and clarify this interesting term, I will discuss the origin, mechanism or structure, implication, and consequences of Involution with my following sections in the paper.

This paper will be divided into five main areas: Origin of Involution, External Structure of Involution, Internal Structure of Involution, My interpretation of Involution, and Possible changes toward Involution.

With those sections, I will slowly reveal my interpretation of Involution and argue for my belief after examining different writers' interpretations of the term. I believe that such a phenomenon was generated as a value system born from the capitalist system and ourselves. Involution has shifted its meaning from originally describing the stagnant ecological progress in Indonesia's rice cultivation to defining today's common social phenomenon that most people are practicing. With rising competition appearing in today's society, people start to participate in those intensive unhealthy competitions where everyone tries their best to gain a small competitive advantage while causing mental exhaustion to themselves and others. Living within it, we sometimes question whether we voluntarily participate in this all-level competition, or are we just played by those capitalists like how the performers play with the puppets using an invisible string. Nevertheless, what cannot be denied is the fact that Involution is no longer a simple neutral phenomenon but an exhausting action that needs to stop immediately.

But how to stop a social phenomenon that already appears in everyone's daily life? How should we approach this issue when people are taking this unhealthy competition to magnify their strengths? To come to a "solution," we first have to see the underlying principle or mechanism that drives people to do such.

### **Origin of Involution**

#### **Geertz's Agricultural Involution:**

However, leaving out what involution means in today's society, it is first important to look at what it meant at the beginning of its history. The earliest definition was from Clifford Geertz,

an American Anthropologist who used this term to describe the ecological change progress in Indonesia's rice cultivation. In his book *Agricultural Involution*, he introduces the concept of "Agricultural involution" through his description of Indonesian agriculture. With close examination of different cultivation products in the area, Geertz argues that the rice agriculture involvement in Java describes the labor-filling model of agriculture as a "self-conquering process" that absorbs more labor inputs within agriculture without lowering per capita income level.

Noting the unique system that Indonesian agriculture was facing, Geertz claims that the reason for such uniqueness was due to the culture system, or cultivation system, in Indonesia, where an intense concentration was conceived by the Governor-General van den Bosch on Java. Such form and concentration on Java's cultivated land create an extreme contrast between Inner Indonesia and Outer, resulting in a stabilized and accentuated dual economy pattern of a capital-intensive Western sector and a labor-intensive Eastern second.<sup>1</sup> While the western industry was rapidly developed, the eastern sector was rigorously stereotyped by preventing the effects on Javanese peasantry and gentry alike of an enormously deeper western penetration into their life from leading to autochthonous agricultural modernization.<sup>2</sup> With an intensive concentration on indigenous Javanese agriculture, its cultivation was imposed as substitutes for money taxes.

Furthermore, under such agencies, "every crop which at the time might conceivably be grown with profit was attempted, including indigo, sugar, coffee, tea, tobacco, etc."<sup>3</sup> However, almost all of the experimental crops have failed to achieve their goal of gaining profit. While Geertz also tried to examine this local cultivation process, he notes that there are two broad categories of imposed crops: annuals, grown on Sawahs in rotation with rice, and perennials, which

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<sup>1</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Agricultural Involution: The Process of Ecological Change in Indonesia* (Berkeley/Calif. U.A.: Univ. of California Pr, 1971), 53.

<sup>2</sup> Geertz, *Agricultural Involution*, 53.

<sup>3</sup> Geertz, *Agricultural Involution*, 54.

could not. These two broad categories later develop into the two forms of Indonesian agriculture: swidden and sawah, which are very different in distribution. While the annuals tended to fall into a mutualistic relationship with such communities, sharing their habitats with them, the perennials tended to fall into an insular relationship, pre-empting unused habitats. Geertz purports that although the annual crops with mutualistic relationship grown in Sawah will be helpful in turns of efficient use of the land, "it is the mutualistic relationship which turned out to be the most damaging to Indonesian economic vitality in the long run."<sup>4</sup>

Geertz points out that as the sugar crop demands a general environment that is identical to that for the wet rice, it was almost necessary to cultivate on peasant Sawah for the most part based on a land-tax procedure. However, coffee production, which is also considered the type case for its majority cultivation, prefers a highland setting mostly cultivated in a so-called "wasteland" and was based on a labor-tax procedure.<sup>5</sup> Geertz notes that the different approaches the two crops involved were due to the tax system in these two areas. The sugar obligation was measured in land units per village, integrated into the sawah regime, and became a peasant crop. On the other hand, coffee was mostly isolated from peasant agriculture; it was considered an estate crop as its assessments were levied on the number of trees each conscripted family had to take care of.<sup>6</sup> However, Geertz points out that during the final three decades of the colonial period, more than 95 percent of the sugar production was from estate crop production, while 60 percent of the coffee production was from small peasant holders.<sup>7</sup> To resolve this paradox, Geertz proposes that when the mutualistic and "exclusivity" relationship were considered, the expansion of one side, the sugar crop, will bring the growth of the other with its wet-rice growing. (G-56) The more irrigated the

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<sup>4</sup> Geertz, *Agricultural Involution*, 55.

<sup>5</sup> Geertz, *Agricultural Involution*, 56.

<sup>6</sup> Geertz, *Agricultural Involution*, 56.

<sup>7</sup> Geertz, *Agricultural Involution*, 56-57.

terraces are, the more sugar can be grown; the more improved these terraces are, the more peasant food production and commercial cultivation can be expanded on the same land. In short, the workability of the whole mutualistic relationship depends on each side of "doing their job," with the subsistence side feeding the labor force and the commercial side producing state revenue. However, Geertz points out that if either side cannot sufficiently keep its role, it will ultimately lead to a radical economic separation.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, such unique periodic effort required by this mutualistic relationship in sugar and rice cultivation demands the hordes of peasant-coolies to organize into short, intensive campaigns.<sup>9</sup>

Geertz states that although such a relationship would be efficient to provide a decent amount of the product and generate enough profits at first- as the population in the areas grows following with the increasing demand on these short intensive campaigns- the proportionate balances between these two sides would be set up when all three factors flourish together.<sup>10</sup> When this greater efficiency in cultivation is derived almost entirely from a greater intensification of labor, such an intensification will become both possible and necessary by the following increasing population.<sup>11</sup> The higher-level densities in sawah would be offset by greater labor inputs into the same production system. Still, the output per head (or per month) remains more or less constant from region to region.<sup>12</sup>

To be more straightforward with Geertz's argument, we can see through an illustration with a hypothesis. Such as, if an acre of land could produce 2000kg of uncooked rice per season, it could feed 137 people for a year if they each eat 14 kilograms a year. On the other hand, if we

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<sup>8</sup> Geertz, *Agricultural Involution*, 58.

<sup>9</sup> Geertz, *Agricultural Involution*, 59.

<sup>10</sup> Geertz, *Agricultural Involution*, 75.

<sup>11</sup> Geertz, *Agricultural Involution*, 77.

<sup>12</sup> Geertz, *Agricultural Involution*, 78.

increase the amount of labor to 200 people for the same land, then land could produce 2500kg of uncooked per season. However, to remain the same 14kg of uncooked rice for one person a year, the amount we could make could only feed up to 178 people, and 22 people will not have enough food.

With such demonstration, it could be easily seen where the issue lies. Adding to the superimposition of sugar cultivation on the already unequal distribution of sawah and population over Java left the Javanese peasantry with a single choice: working harder to their terraces for increasing production. The Javanese could not become part of the estate economy, along with the fixed coffee-growing in Swidden areas. Because of the lack of capital, they could not transform their general pattern of already intensive farming in an extensive direction.<sup>13</sup>

Slowly, the "Wet-rice cultivation, with its extraordinary ability to maintain levels of marginal labor productivity by always managing to work one more man in without a serious fall in per-capita income, soaked up almost the whole of the additional population that Western intrusion created, at least indirectly. It is this ultimately self-defeating process that I have proposed to call 'agricultural involution.'"<sup>14</sup>

As the Javanese people were unable to develop efficient export agriculture at the hands of Dutch rulers, suppressed by the pressure of making a profit for fulfilling this cultural system while experiencing the internal pressure due to population growth, they were unable to expand outward. They had to keep strengthening rice cultivation and increasing the number of people. They were faced with this labor-intensive economic characteristic and eventually ended up in this cycle of involution while not making any additional profit.

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<sup>13</sup> Geertz, *Agricultural Involution*, 80.

<sup>14</sup> Geertz, *Agricultural Involution*, 80.

As the agricultural sector in Java is constrained under the forces, either their ability for expansion or the agriculture's outward expansion can only move inward to keep refining. Lacking the ability to change to the current system, they complicate farming strategy and their means of production to absorb the grouping labor force within agriculture without causing a decline in per capita income. In short, the agricultural involution describes the labor-filling model of agriculture as a "self-conquering process" that absorbs more labor inputs within agriculture without lowering per capita income level. But what is this process of self-conquering? It was the process by which the agricultural sector in Java, Indonesia, refined its farming to the 1920s Sawash model of labor-filled agriculture, i.e., absorbing more labor inputs without reducing per capita income. However, as our previous example has shown, even though there are still ways to continue to refine the process, there is still a limitation or plateau for such a process to be reached.

### **Involution as A Self-Conquering Process**

In addition to what Geertz has described the Javanese people's situation, a similar situation has happened to the farmers in the Yangtze River area in China around the 1930s. However, the latter differs from the former as the issue lands on the other mechanism of involution explained by the two scholars. Despite that Dr. Huang claims that both what the Javanese people have faced and what the Yangtze River farmers have faced can be concluded from involution, Dr. Huang proposes a different definition to what Geertz has provided. According to him, when facing this plateau, there are two methods for viewing this self-conquering process. With the different types of farmers in the Yangtze delta river, Dr. Huang claims that while larger farms use hired labor, family farms rely on family labor to respond to this population pressure. As larger farms can hire or fire more labor in response to changes in farm needs, family-based farmlands do not have similar flexibility.

In terms of relative labor, family farms are too small to lay off excess labor as they are often unable to do anything about surplus labor and underutilization of labor.<sup>15</sup>

Firstly, he points out Geertz's argument about the limitation of expanding the boundary of involution. Responding to Geertz's proposal of this restriction of intensive farming to rice cultivation, Dr. Huang extends the boundaries of involution to "more labor-intensive forms of cash crops, rather than further intensification of the rice."<sup>16</sup> In his book, *The Peasant Family and Rural Development in the Yangzi Delta*, he notes that:

"The involutory growth in the Yangtze delta during Ming and Qing did not take the form simply of further labor intensification in rice cultivation. Rice yields in the delta, it turns out, were not indefinitely inflatable in the manner suggested by Clifford Geertz's notion of "agricultural involution." They had already reached something of a plateau by the southern Song and early Ming. There was little or no expansion thereafter until the introduction of modern inputs after the 1950s. Here mounting population pressure on the land had to find different outlets, for example, cotton and mulberries for silk."<sup>17</sup>

With such a case in the Yangtze river, Dr. Huang revised the terminology of involution provided by Geertz and claimed such a scenario as intensification where output or output value expands at the same rate as a labor input. To put intensification differently than involution, Dr. Huang claims that labor productivity remains constant with intensification, while with involution, it diminishes at the margins, as Geertz has proposed.<sup>18</sup> Hence, it can be seen that involution is not necessarily limited to the same cash crop but can be extended to other, more labor-intensive cash crops. It can

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<sup>15</sup> Philip C Huang, *The Peasant Family and Rural Development in the Yangzi Delta, 1350-1988* (Taipei: SMC Pub, 1992), 10.

<sup>16</sup> Huang, *The Peasant Family and Rural Development in the Yangzi Delta*, 11-13.

<sup>17</sup> Huang, *The Peasant Family and Rural Development in the Yangzi Delta*, 13-14.

<sup>18</sup> Huang, *The Peasant Family and Rural Development in the Yangzi Delta*, 11.

expand with a combination of family farming and handicrafts or a combination of "half-work" and "half-farming," as long as the subsistence level can absorb more labor is a process of involution.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to this different terminology proposed, Dr. Huang also introduces the idea of involutory commercialization which he believed that "a high level of this involutory commercialization sustained by the familiarization of rural production was that family farming outcompeted wage labor-based managerial agriculture."<sup>20</sup> Simply speaking, while the rural economy of the Yangtze River Delta did show considerable growth in terms of total output and gross output in absolute terms during the Ming and Qing dynasties; it also showed some growth in terms of annual household income as a whole. However, if we take a closer look toward this "growth," it reveals that this growth was achieved at the cost of decreasing remuneration per unit of a working day. The growth in annual household income comes not from an increase in remuneration per unit of a workday but from a fuller utilization of household labor, such as women, children, the elderly, and the leisure time labor of adult men. To analyze this scenario, Dr. Huang refers to it as the 'growth without development' or 'over-intensive growth.'<sup>21</sup>

Dr. Huang directed "quantitative growth and qualitative stagnation" to the Chinese economy in the late Qing Dynasty to further support this point. The over-densification must be distinguished from modern economic development because it doesn't lead to qualitative structural changes in the countryside. Smallholder production at the subsistence level persists and becomes more complex with commercialization, intensification of farming, and cottage industry."<sup>22</sup> No matter the scenario in the Yangtze river delta or the plateau faced by the Javanese people, those

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<sup>19</sup> Huang, *The Peasant Family and Rural Development in the Yangzi Delta*, 12.

<sup>20</sup> Huang, *The Peasant Family and Rural Development in the Yangzi Delta*, 14.

<sup>21</sup> Huang, *The Peasant Family and Rural Development in the Yangzi Delta*, 77.

<sup>22</sup> Huang, *The Peasant Family and Rural Development in the Yangzi Delta*, 13.

cash crops are made possible by using more labor and bringing a higher gross output per unit of land area. With such, it is still in exchange for a lower average income per unit of working days.<sup>23</sup>

With both the demonstrations by Dr. Phillip Huang and Geertz, it can be seen that involution is a process where there is a plateau of output happening because of the increasing amount of input. In a way, this over-intensive growth provides minimal or no comparative benefit to the overall production. Still, it creates burdens toward both the labor and people who play within the system. By system, shown with Geertz's and Huang's demonstration, it doesn't mean to be exclusive about the labor system involved in the production. Still, it will include people or other parts of the society who would have benefited from such a production process.

Moreover, such an involution process is not only shown in agriculture but also reflected in many other social aspects that, in a way, it has already blended into our society and developed as a value system. But what causes it to have developed as a value system in our community and whether the type of social structure affects the development of the involution is our next question ahead.

### **Combining the two: My Thoughts**

While Geertz and Huang both provide their definitions and examples of involution, I believe that such principle applies not only in agricultural aspects but also has a deeper meaning rooted in our value system. When we consider the idea of a value system, we often first examine one's or people's virtues or vices. One's virtues or vices shape one's value system. A person's standards and self-discipline are set based on the common sense and wisdom of knowing the proper moral rules and discipline and the amount of willingness to see themselves and others abide by them. What I think of involution is that, through decades of integration, such concepts have been rooted in our current moral rules and discipline, which shape our behavior and our mind. In a sense,

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<sup>23</sup> Huang, *The Peasant Family and Rural Development in the Yangzi Delta*, 13.

the involution ideology, to today's scenario, is more as a set of common beliefs that we practice in our daily life, whether consciously or unconsciously.

One major component in both Geertz's and Huang's definition of involution is the role of competition or the necessity of increasing output. While the Java agricultural environment was faced with difficulties of increasing overall rice production, the Huang's Yangtze river delta scenario also illustrates a similar condition. Applying the same principle to the contemporary social world, I believe that such conditions became paralleled with today's society's overall urgency to receive tremendous results, either from work or an academic perspective. However, such a description does not mean that this urge for success should be avoided or that competition among groups or individuals is unnecessary or unhealthy. While society processes largely depend on improvement, improvement is largely based on the process of competition between thoughts and beliefs. While we have these competitive beliefs of trying to improve or trying to succeed, those beliefs, to one extent, did beneficially help us to fulfill what we desire. Nevertheless, the "extent" is an important phase to know before further discussion. It means that there will be a maximum level or a "ceiling" to how much we would gain. As the soil in Javanese agriculture, there is a top-level of rice production that can produce an arc of land.

In a sense, when we try to maximize our results of, for example, getting a hundred out of a percentile-scale test, we know that the "ceiling" or the maximum level we can get out of, no matter how much more input or study we did is, by default is a hundred percent. So even though we put in twice as much work as we did from 99 getting a 100, we wouldn't be able to make the scale to a hundred and one percent because there isn't such a number as the test is based on a percentile scale.

Then, if I follow my pattern of reasoning through with this hypothetical scenario, why would I want to maximize the results? Or why would this "necessity of increasing output" appear in today's society? My answer to these two questions is that we are influenced by our value system, as a temptation toward performing such action is encouraged or promoted by our value system. Thus, it is critical for me to first address what I believe is the value system, which people in today's society automatically adapt to when we first start to step into a community. I considered an adaptation toward the value system as soon as we began to live in the society, or in other ways of speaking, we inherited this belief of competition due to human nature.

As we learn through the world by culture, customs, social rules that the society we live in, etc., we generally adapt to the value system we are grown into. For example, we learned the importance of family and love through the way society or our families had taught us. We also learned kindness through the social customs that our culture has taught us. So on and so on, how we perceive have been shaped by those social customs and value systems that we absorb through years of social interactions. In this sense, we can see that when our value system is absorbed from the society that we live in, conversely, the message sent out by the society is what we take as influences for our value system. To be more illustrative, consider the propaganda or public messages from WWII which were used to mobilize women to participate more in the workforce. Their need for working women is that government propaganda during World War II was responsible for the change in society's 'tolerance' and acceptance for women in the workforce. Moreover, it created a new value system of gender equality and norms that women are not limited to housework but are also capable of handling work as man does.

However, what is the social message that today's society has been expressing? We can talk about this type of message in two ways: the rise of urbanization and the social shift from the age

of industry to the age of information. Firstly, with the increase in urbanization and the successes of equal rights movements, it appears to people that those high-wage jobs are no longer limited to a small percentage of the population but are wide open to people who have the ability. Hence, with increasing numbers of labor flooding into the labor market, problems arise when such demands for job opportunities largely exceed what the market could have supplied. When such a demand and supply curve go off its balance due to this increased demand, competition arises if there isn't any change toward the number of supplies. Such competition might include higher requirements required by the companies or higher standards that each worker needs to maintain their work stability or any method that could be used to control the number of admitted labor to attempt to resolve or balance out this in-equilibrium. Hence, in one way, some of the social messages that today's society has been expressing could be considered as a call for high-competitive labor. But how would this influence our value system in developing our belief or the habit of involution? Secondly, with the shift occurring in today's society compared to past decades, the world is shifting away from the age of industry and aiming toward an age of information. With such a change, it is simply not just the method of production that has changed, but also the calculation of labor productivity has changed.

To further my discussion on this, I will start my second section of the paper: External Structure of Involution. I will first illustrate how Marx has discussed the impact of change in labor in terms of the market in his *Communist Manifesto* and his work in *Wage Labor and Capital*. Then I will use Louis Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses to discuss how people would react toward such a situation and the possible motives behind their commitment toward this involutive system. After considering the external structure of involution, I will follow up with some of the discussion on the internal structure on involution and heading to my third section of the paper:

Internal Structure of Involution. In this section, I will discuss how Hegel's *Master and Slaves* was another "representation" of today's people's relationship with the social structure. Lastly, I will shift back to my focus on the market and use the High-level Equilibrium Trap to summarize the status quo that we today have been trapped in. Lastly, I will argue that involution has a unique combination of external and internal structure.

### **External Structure of Involution**

#### **Marx's means of production and capitalist's competition**

Although Marx didn't mention the terminology of involution, his argument in both *Communist Manifesto* and his work in *Wage Labor and Capital* have shown such a scenario started by his discussion about the idea of capitalist competition. Therefore, we can view it in this hypothetical scenario to be more specific in what I aim for.

If one capitalist wants to gain more profit than his competitors, according to Marx, then he either has to expand his market, improve his technology, or reduce his costs.<sup>24</sup> We can see the method of expanding the market was used in imperialism, having cheap labor from third world countries; however, such an approach is not so applicable in today's society. To improve technology, either the industrial machinery or the AI in the future will not be that impactful in terms of the longer period as its competitors will soon follow the same pattern of improvement. Denying the first two will then lead to the last, third method, reducing costs: material or labor costs. We will not dig into the change of the expenses in the material first, as we aim to talk about how we or labor will play into this system; however, changing either of them will involve changes in the method of production/ the means of production. Such changes will be reflected through this

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<sup>24</sup> Karl Marx, "Wage Labor and Capital. Chapter 9," Marxists.org, 2019, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/wage-labour/ch09.htm>.

more detailed division of labor.<sup>25</sup> For example, it makes it possible for one worker to do the work that previously required several workers to do because of the addition of work done by machines. Also, the more detailed the division of labor becomes, the more simplistic the labor becomes, and the less demanding the job becomes.<sup>26</sup> In other words, as the job is less demanding in what the workers can do, more people can do the job and thus create more competition for this job. On the other hand, with the massive use of more advanced machines, many costly workers will be replaced, and those eliminated workers can only compete with work with lower pay and worse conditions. As a result, workers will have to do more work than others to win a better job, thus getting paid less than before, making competition more and more intense. And this integrated competitive process is what people call involution.

Although such a scenario has represented some of the workforces in today's society, we cannot also deny the fact that there is a shift in labor productivity in the current market. By labor productivity, I am talking about the value of labor or, in other sense, what can this labor or employee bring to the company that would allow him to not be replaced by other competitive campaigns. When we think of labor productivity, back into the age of industrialization, such value could be calculated based on how much work labor can produce in a given day. However, in addition to what Marx has demonstrated, I believe that there is a misconception about today's labor's method of production. Moreover, such misunderstanding would be counted toward one of the external reasons for their involvement in involution because it was built by the social value during previous decades.

Such a misconception is the belief that: if I work hard, I will be rewarded.

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<sup>25</sup> Marx, "Wage Labor and Capital. Chapter 9, 1-2.

<sup>26</sup> Marx, Wage Labor and Capital. Chapter 9, 2.

In this day and age, simply believing in working hard will not give you good rewards but will provide you with a great possibility of being laid off, not being able to pay your mortgage, or even not knowing what you've done wrong. In other ways, failure or less-than-ideal will always be with you because of this misconception. Why? Because of the changing times. In the industrial era, the recognized productivity of labor, or the value of labor- according to Marx- can be measured. The more products produced per unit of time, the greater the productivity or, the greater the value a worker can have.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, if we placed the same principle into today's society, can such productivity still be countable toward this same calculation? For example, let's say there are two salespeople:

One worked hard every day from 9 am to 9 pm or even overtime until dawn, but he wasn't able to sign any contracts at the end of the month; however, the other salesperson worked fewer hours but resulted in the 100 successful contracts by the end of the month.

If we put ourselves into the position of these two salesperson supervisors, which one would we prefer to recruit? The answer is clear, as we would most likely choose the second one over the first one as he brings more "value" to the company than the first. In today's era, if your productivity or work efficiency is still allied with the calculation standard of the industrial era productivity, you will be easier to replace because the threshold of this work is very low as the requirements are low due to the increasingly used technology. But nowadays, inside the society, more and more people use their knowledge or information instead of pure labor to increase their productivity, so workers' productivity is getting harder and harder to calculate. So, if people are still using industrial-era metrics to prove their productivity, they will continue to be enveloped in an involuted society and not get any more practical value out of it, or even lose the weight they already have.

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<sup>27</sup> Marx, Wage Labor and Capital. Chapter 9, 3.

## **Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses, Louis Althusser**

In addition to how the capitalist society has placed this misconception in people, we also have to consider how social structure affects the development of involution. In *the Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Louis Althusser talks about how state apparatuses would function in today's society related to labor distribution.

Althusser refers to a Marxist tradition that the state is explicitly conceived as a repressive apparatus, a machine of repression, calling it the State Apparatus. It enables the ruling classes to ensure their domination over the working class and thus stimulates the ruling class to subject the working class to the process of surplus-value extortion.<sup>28</sup> To my stand, such surplus-value extortion seems no different from today's concept of involution as both share a similarity of capitalist exploitation.<sup>29</sup>

According to Althusser's discussion, the reproduction of the labor force seems to be an important link for one of the stages of the whole socio-economic activity, i.e., the reproduction of the conditions of production itself.<sup>30</sup> Further, providing the labor force with basic food, water, and various incomes for marriage and childbirth creates only a material condition for ensuring the reproduction of the labor force; however, those conditions are not sufficient to complete the whole process of reproduction of labor force. The overall mechanism of labor reproduction would be much more complicated than that, as the preparatory labor force needs to master the various behavioral norms in each position brought about by the social division of labor. In his essay "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus," Althusser writes:

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<sup>28</sup> Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (1970; repr., London; New York: Verso, 1970), 10.

<sup>29</sup> Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 10.

<sup>30</sup> Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 2, 3.

"The reproduction of labor was fundamentally done outside the factory, and laborers needed to be educated in a variety of skills to adapt to the complex division of labor. Due to the decline of apprenticeships and guilds, the place where these skills were taught shifted from the workplace to specialized educational institutions."<sup>31</sup>

What are those specialized educational institutions? Schools seem to be the only answer to this question, browsing across our society. In addition to direct labor skills learned from the workplace, 'students' or people from this specialized educational institution were taught to obey the current social order and the order of the division of labor. such division can be further divided into two main aspects: "the production of obedience to the dominant ideology for workers" and "the reproduction of the ability to correctly apply the dominant ideology for the parties engaged in exploitation and repression."<sup>32</sup> Althusser argues that it is the working class that primarily learns the former. At the same time, it is the bourgeoisie that primarily learns the latter, and a kind of both that is learned by the agents of the bourgeoisie: the managers, or more broadly speaking, any consultants and department heads. However, while acknowledging the two different aspects of this division of labor, only the working class and the bourgeoisie were involved in this process of reproduction of labor. Connecting to previous Marx's reflection on how the involution was involved in the labor forces and how the history was recorded in the history of class struggles, it becomes clear that involution is a peculiar behavior for those 'preparatory' managerial class. In other ways, involution is particularly for people preparing themselves to enter this managerial class or upshift their class to the bourgeoisie. There is a strictly limited boundary set for the system of involution that not every increase in input can be considered as involved in involution.

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<sup>31</sup> Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 11.

<sup>32</sup> Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 22, 23.

Aligning with Althusser's statement on the reproduction of labor power and the peculiarity of the preparatory managerial class, it appeals to me that there is something unique in terms of the means of production applied by members of this class. However, who are they exactly? While they are participants, some people cannot participate in the strict sense of involution because of their means of production. For example, laborers in the factory wouldn't participate in involution. Their unlimited overtime of assembling can indeed increase the factory's productivity; capitalists do not need to participate in such involution, as those involved are often both exploiters or exploited managers. Then, who else has been left? The middle class. Those in the middle-class work or study hard to uphold their social status because their increasing hard work cannot directly increase their gains toward themselves or society. As their production condition requires higher needs than the lower-class labor, they perform jobs that are unique to these classes of people. However, because of this increased need for their production condition, the input into their study or preparatory work is also higher. Think of it as some of the programmers work at a large IT company; many of those programmers need a higher educational buildup that allows them to acquire such skills- creating this increased investment in education. If the investment in education is high and the income from work is low, then the number of people choosing this career as a programmer will be greatly reduced, leading to an oversupply of labor. Thus, to avoid such oversupply, those programmers' wages will not be low enough but will not be high enough to create competition as more and more people will choose to participate in this career. Because if doing so, then there is no difference between a programmer and a laborer. So, what would be a good way for those capitalists or the bourgeoisie to not only control the wages that they would benefit from while ensuring that those programmers would work hard enough to produce enough benefit for them? The answer is: by asserting involution or rationalizing the existence of involution. Although the content taught in the

involution is not fully compatible with the direct production requirement, it seems to create this satisfaction that those programmers- or people just like them- are desiring to achieve class circulation.

To an extent, involution appeals as a form of knowledge taught by those capitalists or the social value that today's society has put on us. It both objectively ensures the reproduction of the middle class and subjectively satisfies the desire of the middle class to achieve class circulation.

But who else, besides those programmers, would fall into this "desire for the knowledge of involution?"

Here we return to students again: Students, or more specifically, college students.<sup>33</sup>

For example, a widely held belief is that college would create better job opportunities. While decades of statistics of increasing college graduates have proved this belief correct, we are still here to question to what extent of correctness those college graduates have achieved? If we shift times back to twenty years ago, an undergraduate degree seems to be a guaranteed ticket to success. However, are we still confident to say the same thing as we had twenty years ago? I believe that is not necessarily. While those in the middle class can recognize such a dislocated knowledge, involution, as a material to participate in the intense homogenization of competition, this so-called knowledge learned from school allows students to contain a certain element of direct production. It mainly manages the proletariat, enabling them to adapt to their market division of labor and not "degenerate" into the proletariat.<sup>34</sup>

"The mechanisms which produce this vital result for the capitalist regime are naturally covered up and concealed by a universally reigning ideology of the School, universally reigning because it is one of the essential forms of the ruling bourgeois

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<sup>33</sup> Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 23.

<sup>34</sup> Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 25.

ideology: an ideology which represents the School as a neutral environment purged of ideology (because it is ...lay), where teachers respectful of the 'conscience' and 'freedom' of the children who are entrusted to them (in complete confidence) by their 'parents' (who are free, too, i.e. the owners of their children) open up for them the path to the freedom, morality and responsibility of adults by their own example, by knowledge, literature and their 'liberating' virtues."<sup>35</sup>

At the same time, with its element of creating identification with their social classes, this knowledge can satisfy the psychological ascent of the middle class to the bourgeoisie.<sup>36</sup> However, this misplaced nature of knowledge does not allow students to feel at ease that they can fully grasp the requirements of their future jobs, nor does it allow them to be among the upper class. Its role in psychological reality can be said to be a complete failure, and therefore this knowledge cannot gain recognition on its own. Therefore, it requires endless competition to allow itself to achieve such satisfaction. Althusser described such ideology of this psychological reality as the imaginary nature of this relation.<sup>37</sup> "What is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live."<sup>38</sup> But wouldn't such be also a type of proletariat? Or think oppositely, what is the true gain that students can gain through getting this college degree? I believe that the first few ideas coming up from attempting to answer this question will not be as easy as I want to know more about something or as simple as I do not know. Most will reply with different but similar answers: a good job. Having this aim of getting a good job at the end of education, people view employment as a grace rather than a choice for today's college students, as if only a

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<sup>35</sup> Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 25.

<sup>36</sup> Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 30.

<sup>37</sup> Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 32.

<sup>38</sup> Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 32.

good job can satisfy all we need. People might say that it doesn't apply to all college students or such involution is a myth or partially representative. However, if only we would give up the meaningless, homogenous competition, we could easily get the same grace. But the truth is that, when we put ourselves into involution, what we subjectively want to pursue, whether a good college or a good job, never actually exists as a grace to be obtained, but as a link in a system of exploitation.

A similar example has been demonstrated with Althusser, such that children at school have to learn to 'speak proper French' to handle the workers correctly.<sup>39</sup> Just as children at school learn the 'rules' of good behavior, for the attitude that should be observed by every agent in the division of labor according to the job they are destined for.<sup>40</sup> Althusser concludes this type of learning and behavior as:

"The reproduction of labor power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order, i.e., a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class 'in words'."<sup>41</sup>

By teaching students with the knowledge of 'know how to ensure subjection to the ruling ideology or master of its 'practice,' such state apparatuses not only limited the tasks of the exploited, such as the proletarians. It also set up the founding rule for all classes that only permitted them to ensure the ideological subjection made for the reproduction of the skills of labor power.<sup>42</sup> With such use, the ideological state apparatus focuses on creating the image of a grace-worthy winner through

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<sup>39</sup> Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 6.

<sup>40</sup> Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 6, 24-25.

<sup>41</sup> Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 6.

<sup>42</sup> Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 6.

reward and selection; on the other hand, it also organizes actual competition without interruption. In reality, we enter the realm of involution; it doesn't matter for the apparatus whether there are one or two internal winners because it needs nothing more than the external image of the winner to organize the competition smoothly.

### **Internal Structure of Involution**

While philosophers like Marx and Althusser argue involution from an external structure, Hegel and Elvin take involution into an internal structure as such development raised from our inner beliefs. Such that, when we think of involution as a value system being adopted in today's society, while it indeed was firstly brought by the capitalist, individual's internal thoughts on such a value system would also play a role into their involutorial behavior.

### **Hegel Master and Slaves**

Through the demonstration of Althusser's ideological state apparatus and its role in the process of involution, we can see that there is a sense of obedience from people toward this sort of authoritative value system created by the apparatus. As if there isn't such an obedience, why would people from all classes fall into this trap of fearing and competing? Then, what type of 'obedience' are we performing toward this ideological state apparatus? When we first consider the term 'obedience,' we have to acknowledge that such a term doesn't contain passivity.

"Since the notion is the subject's own self, which presents itself as the coming-to-be of the object, it is not a passive subject inertly supporting the accidents; but by country, the self-moving notion which takes its determination back into itself."<sup>43</sup>

When taking one's determination back into oneself, it should be seen as an active 'acknowledgement' of the people obeying what the person is asking for.<sup>44</sup> However, how is such

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<sup>43</sup> G W F Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*. (S.L.: Univ of Notre Dame Press, 2019),37.

<sup>44</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 37-38.

acknowledgment involved in our relationship with involution? With the establishment of the rationale of the authority.

For example, when a ruler uses violence or force to command people's obedience, there will be three possible outcomes for such command—first, the ruler's loyal followers. Second, people who are fearless toward such violence and resist explicitly. Third, people who disagree but fear the ruler's violence and force, or observers. The ruler's authority would thus be established among the first group, fail among the second group, and proved again among the third group due to the rationale of choice that the third group has made. Thus, a person can still obey the ruler's rule and admit to the ruler's authority while admittedly against their involuntary obedience to them. As long as this third group of people is still obeying this authority, they still implicitly agree to this command because due to rational thinking, obedience is the most reasonable choice to choose.

However, just as I have illustrated earlier, admitting doesn't mean believing that such tranny is good, but was more as an excuse for them to actively participate in this obedience to avoid punishment for disobedience.

I believe that a similar principle applies to involution and answers why some people, while acknowledging the deficit of involution, still obey and participate in involution. Although we can give ourselves many excuses for our participation in involution, like the third group of people in the above analogy, involution must be directly mediated by each person's will to be truly realized, and such can only exist when each person is autonomously subordinated to its norm. In a sense, our relationship with involution is circular as the belief that we have to participate created by our voluntary participation. By the imaginary nature of this relation with ideological state apparatus, we create a value or belief that if we don't participate in involution like others have done, we will not achieve the status that we are hoping to achieve. In general, we rationalize our actions based

on a presupposition that we must participate in such involution to succeed. But our actions themselves create that presupposition.

As I have mentioned above about the 'origin' and the behind scene 'mechanism' of involution, I am shifting my discussion toward one of the explanations provided by Mark Elvin, which is used to demonstrate possible situation factors that might cause involution. With such acknowledgment, I will shift my center back to the persistent stagnation that the Yangtze delta agriculture has been facing.

### **Mark Elvin's High level Equilibrium Trap; A trap in the current Status Quo**

Instead of calling it involution, Elvin calls such stagnation as a high-level equilibrium trap: "a situation to which most of the usual criteria of "backwardness" do not apply, yet characterized by a technological immobility that makes any sustained qualitative economic progress impossible."<sup>45</sup> Focusing on the economic aspect that such stagnation has proposed, Elvin holds that as the technical advances in the area have managed to keep pace with the population increase and resource depletion, welfare- per capita income- has remained fixed.<sup>46</sup>

Elvin describes that while the technology in those areas, either about the windmill, incubation box, hothouses, or new fertilizers, had developed to the fullest extent possible, there isn't a discontinuous jump involving the application of modern scientific inputs.<sup>47</sup> From Elvin's description, we can see that he aligned with Marx's rejection toward one of the ways to efficiently improve productivity: improve technology. Even if such improvement would lead to increased profits, a misapplication of such technology would still involve this high-equilibrium trap because of the unchanged means of production. By such means of production, I am referring to both Marx's

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<sup>45</sup> Daniel Little, *Microfoundations, Method, and Causation: On the Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 1.

<sup>46</sup> Little, *Microfoundations, Method, and Causation: On the Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 1.

<sup>47</sup> Little, *Microfoundations, Method, and Causation: On the Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 1-2.

meaning of change-more precise labor division- and Althusser's interpretation of the means of production-the imaginary relationship created by the schools under ideological state apparatus. In comparison, it is not about the technology that participated in the production process but, more importantly, the mechanism that such a system has applied through its process of production.<sup>48</sup> We can think of it as the differences between the soft skills that each person obtained through learning and those hard skills that they acquired. Those hard skills are like the technology, tools, or even fundamental knowledge of the work itself. In contrast, soft skills are the rules set by the capitalists/rulers that workers/subjects are following or the knowledge of how to apply those hard skills into the field.

Elvin accounts that because of these new investments, new technologies, or new use of resources, those novelties do make agricultural production's elevation plausible, such that it could have saved agriculture from sharply diminishing returns.<sup>49</sup> However, he further claims that it wouldn't improve to a certain degree.<sup>50</sup> The failure of economic revolution in those areas resulted from the absence from the core of technological innovation prerequisites. Similar to the analogy that Kierkegaard has illustrated in his theory of crop rotation where the same soil is constantly rotated to maximize the use of nutrients for the crops: farmers keep trying to optimize the production of the same land; workers keep trying to maximize their production using the same method; the student's trying to maximize their scores using the same logic of studying.<sup>51</sup> However, doing such will create some results but not change their results with huge increases. For example, a student could study two extra hours per day to increase their score from 80 out of 100 to 99 out

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<sup>48</sup> Little, *Microfoundations, Method, and Causation: On the Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 7.

<sup>49</sup> Little, *Microfoundations, Method, and Causation: On the Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 4, 6.

<sup>50</sup> Little, *Microfoundations, Method, and Causation: On the Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 17.

<sup>51</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, Victor Eremita, and Alastair Hannay, *Either/or: A Fragment of Life* (London Penguin Books, 2004).

of 100; however, no matter how he studies more, it would be impossible to increase his score over a hundred as the percentile was maximized to its extreme. From here, we can see that the essence of involution is internal consumption, and its warning meaning is that repetition without innovation is a waste. Similar to the students in the example, although we would be impressed by their hard work and focus on the details; however, without applying what he has learned to somewhere outside of the text, the value of what he learned would be no more than numbers.

Involving into this High-equilibrium trap, suggested by Elvin and to my interpretation, refers to the activities that remain high-level of skills or complexity but remain still into this skill or complexity with nothing else besides such.

Another example would be quoted from Alexander Goldenweiser, an American anthropologist, who compared the decorative art of the Maori people of New Zealand to the concept of involution.<sup>52</sup> Such art was famous for its detailed and intricate looks with various subtle layers. In a word, anyone who has seen the art would agree that there is a lot of effort being put into it with such hand-painted art. However, this complexity is monotonous. This decorative art is so fine that there is not much meaning inside. It is still simply a few patterns repeated repeatedly, without much creativity or diversity. We can only call them "craftsmen," not "artists" for people engaged in this craft. Because of the fine, you will feel quite impressed, as the money you spent on it is worthy; however, this art does not have much appreciation if we look deep into it and consider the essence behind it. This is also a type of involution. The evolution to "inside," with more and more sophisticated and complex, are a few fixed patterns of repetition, as no creativity has broken out of the pattern. Thus, to describe either the examples I gave above, or the decorative

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<sup>52</sup> Goldenweiser, A. Loose ends of a theory on the individual pattern and involution in primitive society. (Lowie, R. ed.) *Essays in anthropology presented to A. L. Kroeber*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1936. p. 99-104.

art related by Goldenweiser, such processes are in the status quo of getting caught up in the high equilibrium trap with a low level of complexity.

### **My interpretation of Involution**

In this sense, Involution is a phenomenon involving repetitive competition among groups while such competition does not result in positive production; additionally, such phenomenon was caused by both external structure, such as capitalist values, and internal structure, people's motivations for such competition. As a result, how should we read involution in light of these two considerations? I contend that involution was initiated by the external structure but catalyzed by the interior structure and applied to an individual's mind. As Cathy Park Hong wrote in her book, *Minor Feelings*, concerning her father's career, he worked very hard yet earned very little in return. She questions the same underlying principle as I did for involution: why do we receive little while we work so hard and why such a result not only didn't stop us from quitting but also encouraged us to work harder than before?<sup>53</sup> Moreover, when looking at Geertz and Huang's involution, it seems that there is a misconnection between the past interpretation of it and the current interpretation. Thus, in this section, I will connect the two interpretations, argue that involution is an exception in human history and support it with three separate reasons.

### **Involution as exception in Human History**

After examining the underground mechanism of involution, in this section, I will mostly focus on involution in the modern-day and its role in human history. Although we have touched on the educational and economic perspective of involution, I will further illustrate why involution was brought up in today's society and argue why I believe that involution is an exception in human history.

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<sup>53</sup> Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*. (S.L.: One World Ballantine, 2021).

Reading off from Geertz, Huang, and Elvin, their idea of involution highlights a critical concept opposite from what I have illustrated above. Whether it is from the rice production in Java people or the Yangtze delta area, involution seems more to appear as a lack of economic sense of competition as its goal was to maximize its production or maximize the family's chance of survival due to the increasing population. In their speech, there is no such content about industrialization or capitalism, but more about why there has not been a breakthrough in the functioning of this society, from a quantitative accumulation to a qualitative breakthrough, especially from an agrarian society to a capitalist economy. However, with such understanding, it seems to be quite different from how I have interpreted earlier as what I have illustrated, involution is not only a stagnant phase but also involves high-level competition. Nevertheless, with or without competition, I believe that the two share the same core underlying principle: involution is a dead-end of its cycle; it cannot jump out while it is highly energy consuming.

Then, how does this involution change its meaning throughout the years? Our society's shift from agriculture-based to industry-based was one clear reason for creating a sort of misunderstanding in our lives. Suppose the original involution refers to an agrarian society's repetitive, uncompetitive inability to get out of such a structural pattern. Today's involution is a gyroscopic death cycle where we have to keep jerking ourselves around, letting ourselves just idle, and constantly mobilizing ourselves every day. So, it is a highly dynamic trap and is very energy intensive. Of course, it's physically exhausting in a smallholder society, but it would not have this kind of 'torture' in the mental sense of the word.

In the following paragraph, I will focus on two aspects that I believe lead to this mental 'torture' and argue why capitalism might not be the only faulty party for involution in today's society.

## **1. Lacking reverence to life/job**

Besides our discussion into the model/means of production in today's society and the status quo that enable people to fall into the high-equilibrium trap, what are some of the causes of involution? I believe that a sense of lacking reverence to life or job was a major part of its contribution as we don't see those as a meaning of life but a making of life. In our previous discussion, either from Marx's labor and production or Althusser's ideological state apparatus, my discussion seems to be based completely on the assumption that humans have no free will. Still, each individual is just a screw in a bigger machine. The value or the aim of our work is for the sole purpose of increasing productivity. However, that's not our goal but the capitalists'. So then, what should be our goal? I believe that it should vary, but it should never be simply as "I want to produce this product as much as possible." Such a statement could only represent the result, not the reason. For example, if I say, "I want to produce this product as much as possible because the more I produce, the more I have earned." Then, earning is the reason or motivation that drives my action. Or "because I want to get home earlier, so I want to produce this product as much as possible." The hope of getting home earlier and finishing my work earlier is why I want to work hard. To an extent, what drives our motivation is unclear when we focus only on the result of the action.

I call it a lack of reverence to life or job for such unclearness. When we fall into the trap of involution, we are easily attracted to the results' changes, to an extreme that we wouldn't pay as much attention as we had before on the real reason we start such action. As the students in our earlier example, his motivation to study harder is to get better knowledge and do better on his next test. But when he falls into the trap of involution, by only focusing on the number of the test, he seems to lose that original intention as he wouldn't care about what he learns but how many decimal points he has increased. Another example is the creator of decorative art in New Zealand. As

Alexander Goldenweiser has illustrated, what was the original intention for making such art? Does such purpose align with his following steps of simply complicating the pattern of the art without changes? While I believe that involution is a value system that today's society has implemented in us, its facilitation was also a result of this miss of reverence or real reason for job or life. Moreover, I believe that such reverence would also be a way of jumping out of the cycle, as I will examine later.

## **2. Unification Vs. Diversification**

Another aspect that I want to focus on is a 'catalyst' to the cycle of involution: A unification of success. Besides Incorporated from Althusser's standpoint on the ideological state apparatus, such a shift toward capitalist society or industrial society seems to bring us into this zone of chasing success. By success, its meaning appears to be limited to a very unilateral perspective. However, I also want to address that such unification, I believe, doesn't apply to every culture or concept, while it was, in fact, a crucial role in certain societies. For example, involution was more common in some East Asian countries than some western countries, as belief systems imply differently. Such as the differences between individualism that western focus and collectivism that eastern countries have been focused on would also impact people's chance of participating in involution.

In short, I believe that what is behind involution is this highly unified competition where there is only one track to race. Although I have applied Marx's capitalist ideology to explain involution, as in this workforce perspective, we can say that involution is used to critique present capitalism. I also think that using the term capitalism is too broad and not very precise. Because the first place where capitalism originated, such as Britain, and then the best development of modern capitalism, probably Germany, there are not many phenomena of "involution" in these countries, so it is a little bit of a character that is out of control of capitalism. Behind the involution

may refer to the highly integrated market competition becoming life-oriented, the basic way of organizing society and distributing life and resources. First of all, of course, there is market competition. But a lot of competition is not market-based; for example, your education is not strictly market-based; the exams are set by the state or the schools. But it still simulates market competition, makes it like market competition, and lets everyone participate. And then the "high degree of unification" is very important. An important prerequisite for the internal volume we are talking about today is no differentiation; we all identify with one goal and live for the same sole goal. Otherwise, if you are not happy in the workplace, you can choose to do something else as not everyone has to be crowded into one lane.

On the other hand, I view this sort of unification as a vertical line, with a little standpoint on the horizontal level. We can also say involution is a ladder, where people from all different classes are climbing on these ladders: with the higher classes on the top, middle classes on the middle and lower classes at the bottom-with the top of the ladder being what we called success, money, or any material things that we human desires. The rich want to be richer, but at the same time, they have no desire for redistribution. The bottom class still wants to achieve class promotion through education; the middle class may be thinking that I can become an elite if I work harder or whether my children can go to the Ivy League or study finance or go to investment banks work on Wall Street. At the same time, those elite people are more likely to fear the chances of falling. The status quo is that everyone is very anxious on this ladder; no matter what class you belong to, everyone is afraid of their position, either maintaining or achieving. The bottom still hopes to change their fate, but the middle and top are not talking about continuing to move up; their biggest fear is not to fall. What you get can't be lost again, which is probably the greater fear. Thus, in this vertical ladder scenario of involution, it is to express that after I participated in so many

competitions, I might not even have the most basic expectations to be met because of this non-stop process.

However, compared to the German example I have listed, the biggest problem of fear and unstopping competition in this ladder scenario is the lack of horizontal diversification. Think about it as a cone or make this ladder a wider shape. Designing the cone's apex to be the "highest success" that all want to achieve, we will still have this sort of success. However, the difference is that, unlike a ladder where there is only one way of climbing, there are multiple ways of reaching this apex as a cone is more three-dimensional than a ladder. What the cone is based on, then, is the horizontal line that we can draw as the starting point.

In short, what I mean by this cone analogy or this ladder analogy is to illustrate that instead of thinking vertically of how far we can reach, we also have to consider our lives in a horizontal perspective. The wider our base is, the higher and the more stable we can achieve; contrary, the narrower we start with our flat base, although we may still reach the same altitude, we are also facing greater chances of falling as we are lacking a solid foundation. Thus, by advocating a way of thinking between unification and diversification, I am arguing that participating involution disables us to think from a broader perspective and can only see our future through this unilateral ladder.

### **Capitalism might not be the only faulty party**

Aligning with this unilateral ladder analogy I have described before, I also want to touch on this misconception that people hold, which I have explained in my discussion on Marx's argument for labor productivity. I believe that there is a misconception about today's labor's method of production. Moreover, such misconception would be counted toward one of the reasons for their involvement in involution.

Such a misconception is the belief that: if I work hard, I will be rewarded.

However, for this section, I will not continue further discussing what misconception is, as I did earlier, but will focus on how it was raised. As such, I believe that this misconception people hold is due to their lack of ability to think dialectically to change our status quo according to the change in society.

When we talk about the rise of involution, I will not deny that capitalism is one of the parties to blame; however, we can look at the capitalist side of the story and the participants' side of the story. From here, I will introduce the concept "dialectical thinking" presented by Grace Lee Boggs, an Asian American Civil rights Activist. She proposed this ideology and called for a revolutionary change in our thought process. To be more specific, by dialectical, she meant: "These two notions—that reality is constantly changing and that you must constantly be aware of the new and more challenging contradictions that drive change—lie at the core of dialectical thinking."<sup>54</sup> In her documentary, she mentioned that in today's society, we get stuck in one mode of capitalism; what human beings need, value, and want changes throughout history, and if we don't adopt such change, we will be stuck with the past. In contrast to Marx's Dialectical materialism and cooperating with the core of a Hegelian method, Boggs proposes the idea of Dialectical humanism."<sup>55</sup> In other words, our revolution had to be to accelerate our evolution to a higher plateau of Humanity. That's why we called our philosophy "dialectical humanism" as contrasted with the "dialectical materialism" of Marxist-Leninists."<sup>56</sup>

With such connotation in mind, I argue that we are stuck into involution because of our lack of ability to change accordingly with changes, and our inability to change is also due to our

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<sup>54</sup> Grace Lee Boggs and Scott Kurashige, *The next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 17.

<sup>55</sup> Grace Lee Boggs and Scott Kurashige, *The next American Revolution*, 21.

<sup>56</sup> Grace Lee Boggs and Scott Kurashige, *The next American Revolution*, 21.

lack of ability of dialectical thinking. When we still hold these heritage, cultural properties left by the industrial revolution, we will never be able to change as we still believed ourselves to live in that period. With changes in society, our mind also has to change accordingly to follow up with this pattern of history. Hence, although involution might have different perspectives in various aspects of society, it all shared with the same core principle as the essence is a sort of internal consumption waste as it repeats without innovation.

### **Resolve Involution**

When we know what involution is and how it has developed over the last decades, this section will discuss some of the changes that we can apply to jump out of the cycle of involution. Through this section, I will mostly focus on the two aspects of change- systemic change and self-change- which I believe would provide us with closer content regarding how we should flow within the waves of involution. I will first refer to Joseph Schumpeter, a political economist, for his discussion in economic development theory and apply his idea of innovation into this status quo. Then, I will continue my previous discussion about increasing reverence for jobs and life from the perspective of increasing credit to craftsmanship. Later, I will shift my focus on the paper into a possible self-change process, led by Grace Lee Boggs's argument on dialectical thinking and Adrienne Marine Brown's strategic thinking, to talk about what our step should be within and against this status quo.

### **Possibly Systemic Change**

According to our above discussion, it can be seen that involution is a phenomenon in which a socio-economic model, having reached a certain definite form at a certain stage of development, stagnates or cannot be transformed into another, more advanced model. Such a phenomenon was illustrated through Javanese agriculture problems studied by Geertz and through Huang's

economic stagnation of the Chinese Yangtze Delta area. Both areas had experienced an agricultural plateau for a long time without progress in production technology but repeated past paradigms over and over again, failing to increase per capita output. While such work might increase production, this growth shows a marginal decreasing trend, even trending to zero after a certain point. With such economic jargon, this status quo led me to think of Schumpeter's innovative and economic development theory, where such a state of affairs is characterized by quantitative growth without qualitative improvement.

According to Schumpeter, when interacting with the investigation on the economic system, we need to pay attention to some of the conditions of such changes and focus on how such changes occur and what economic phenomena they give rise to?<sup>57</sup> With such revolutionary changes led by the phenomena of involution, it is first critical for us to differentiate between economic growth and economic development.<sup>58</sup> While the former refers to the growth in total output of a country or region over a certain period compared to the previous period, economic development, on the other side, contains more than a simple increase in data. According to Schumpeter, by development:

"Economic development is not a phenomenon to be explained solely economically, but that the economy in itself without development, is dragged along by the changes in the surrounding world, that the causes and hence the explanation of the development must be sought outside the group of facts which are described by economic theory...nor will the mere growth of the economy, as shown by the growth of population and wealth, be designated here as a process of development."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Joseph A Schumpeter, Redvers Opie, and Richard Swedberg, *The Theory of Economic Development* (London; New York: Routledge, 2021), 62.

<sup>58</sup> Schumpeter, Redvers Opie, and Richard Swedberg, *The Theory of Economic Development*, 63.

<sup>59</sup> Schumpeter, Redvers Opie, and Richard Swedberg, *The Theory of Economic Development*, 63.

In short, such a concept is the process of continuous advanced changes in a country's economic and social structure based on economic growth. Hence, it has a richer connotation, including not only the increase in the quantity of output but also technological progress and structural changes in the economy. Accordingly, in terms of the situation illustrated by involution, such growth in population and wealth is by no means economic development, but an increase of changes in data where it calls forth no qualitative new phenomena but only a process of adaptation of the same kind.<sup>60</sup>

Compared to the phenomena of involution with such definition, it is reasonable for us to consider those stagnant processes discussed by both Geertz and Huang as not economic development but as economic growth where there are no new innovative changes added into the system. Then, to break this stagnant process, innovation is needed. It proves the system with recent dynamic changes where it would provide the system with a recent tendency toward existing equilibrium. As innovation is to establish a new production function, which counts toward the recombination of all production factors by introducing either a new methodology or technology that never existed before into the production system, technological innovation and institutional change would be possible ways to resolve this stagnancy of involution. Similar to our earlier discussion of Marx's suggestion toward those capitalists, what Schumpeter has suggested as a catalyst for economic development can be considered as five new categories:

- "1) The introduction of a new good. 2) The introduction of a new method of production. 3) The opening of a new market. 4) The conquest of a new source of supply of raw material.
- 5) The carrying out of the new organization of any industry."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Schumpeter, Redvers Opie, and Richard Swedberg, *The Theory of Economic Development*, 64.

<sup>61</sup> Schumpeter, Redvers Opie, and Richard Swedberg, *The Theory of Economic Development*, 66.

Here, the five cases would be summarized as Product innovation, process innovation, market innovation, resource allocation innovation, and organizational innovation. Comparing the theory of involution with Schumpeter's theory of economic development, we can see that involution essentially means the same as Schumpeter's "economic growth."<sup>62</sup> It can also be said that Schumpeter's economic development theory is an upgraded version of the theory of involution: the key to avoiding the trap of involution lies in technological innovation and institutional reform.

Within such suggested reform, one key aspect that I would like to focus on is the idea of institutional reform. Such an idea contains not only on how we should continue to perceive changes but more on the structural changes that would allow us to jump out of the bubble of this production-main thinking process: increase reverence. In another way of saying, I am referring to this concept of changing the society's attitude toward different means of production

To further illustrate my point, I will focus on discussing craftsmanship in relation to my previous argument on the unification of success. As we have previously talked about, this unification of success narrows our perspective of life; to an extent, it enables us to chase such 'success' on a single narrow ladder and disables us to think of pathways outside the ladder. Is there only one way to succeed? Or is there only one definition of success? I believe with most people that the answer would be no. However, how did our action accommodate this thinking despite our rational thinking of this answer? We would say that involution could be a kind of a stock game under the premise of limited resources. By entering these stock games, society raises the entry qualifications of those "resource users," as the admission tickets for those games are getting higher and higher. Wouldn't it be another form of "resource shortage?" We enter the stage of this stock game with the mindset of having these limited resources because of the so-called unbalanced

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<sup>62</sup> Schumpeter, Redvers Opie, and Richard Swedberg, *The Theory of Economic Development*, 64-66.

supply-demand relationship between everyone. But what if we jump out of the perspective that we are destined to participate in the game? Couldn't we also be the host of the game while participating within it? For example, if I am the executive officer of a company and I came up with a method of letting all people compete with each other as the highest of all would be rewarded, wouldn't I create a scenario of excluding myself out of the competition while enjoying all the benefits brought by the competition? We can see that the so-called shortage is all artificial with such a method. As the chief officer, I created this scenario of shortage. I urged this competition by creating a reward that all my fellow employees would want and phrase it as something they have to achieve and receive through their time in the company. By doing so, I increase the full profit for my company and increase the so-called productivity of my employees, which would benefit me, as the main beneficiary, with a long-term return. This scenario is what I believe is a snapshot of today's status quo. As I created the whole process, success is also an artificial term defined by myself.

With the above scenario, we can see that the key question within involution is that are we, each individual, actually participating in a real involution? Or is it that the institutional structure participates in this involution where each entity wants their maximum profits. To say such a thing in a naive tone, what I believe as a change toward this status quo of involution is that we have to have institutional reform. We have to have a method of letting everyone jump out of this so-called designated stock game, think outside of the boxes, and acknowledge that what we think and believe is nothing but a word game played by today's society. In short, it is mostly impossible for us to change on the institutional aspect since it would overturn not only individual companies but the social structure that we have long lived in. However, as naive as it sounds, I still believe that we can make some possible changes on an individual level that allow us to withdraw ourselves from this black hole while participating.

## **Possible Self Change**

In this short section, I will demonstrate some of the ways which I believe would change our own status in this process of involution. Although I still believe that it is impossible to change the whole status quo, I also believe that with those mindsets, we are free to flow at our own pace within this riptide of involution.

## **Boggs' Dialectical thinking of flowing within the change**

Throughout her argument, Grace Lee Boggs has focused on this necessity of transiting from making a living to making it a life. She also addresses the importance of thinking dialectically and argues that bonding with dialectical thinking is what everyone should acquire in this capital world. Furthermore, she notes that "Jobs have a dehumanizing effect as people fill interchangeable slots in a big machine. In today's global economy, workers can be easily replaced with those willing to work for lower wages."<sup>63</sup> Along with her argument on work and job, and combining our previous reading from Marx, I believe that it is important for us to be not only aware of this different perspective of thinking but also be aware of the issue that has been underlined in her reading, Involution. In this section, I will first use a scenario to prove that such an issue has been deeply rooted in our society and examine the cause with Marx's argument on capital competition. Lastly, I will use Grace's argument on dialectical thinking to argue that such an issue is an exception to human society and propose avoiding it with dialectical thinking.

According to Geertz's definition, Involution is the "process of continuous internal refinement and complexity of a system under strictly limited conditions of external expansion."<sup>64</sup> While it seems that such a definition is incompatible with today's society, considering the

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<sup>63</sup> Boggs and Kurashige, *The next American Revolution : Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century*, 10.

<sup>64</sup> Clifford Geertz, "The Agricultural Involution: The Processes of Ecological Change in Indonesia," *Monoskop.org*, 1963, 80.

technological expansion or variety of job opportunities we have; however, it is actually what the core of today's societal market lies.

In response to Olga Bonfiglio, Grace remarks that “Jobs have a dehumanizing effect as people fill interchangeable slots in a big machine. In today's global economy workers can be easily replaced with those willing to work for lower wages.”<sup>65</sup> And the reason for such a scenario to happen in today's society is a reflection of Involution. For example, with the advancement of technology, there is a change in the means of production. Human labor will not be the only option as those companies consider; thus, labor will become more detailed in terms of its division. As the division of labor becomes more precise, the tasks required for those laborers will be more simplistic, and the overall demand of the job requirement becomes less. Soon with such advancement of technology, a larger number of costly workers will be eventually replaced by those automatic machines, and those eliminated workers can only compete with work with lower pay, worse conditions. As a result, workers will have to do more work than others to win a better job, thus getting paid less than before, making competition more and more intense. When everyone keeps progressing with this line of logic and worrying about being replaced by others with lower pay rates, Involution has been created. Since no one has been thinking of jumping out of this cycle but keeps competing with others and lowering their demands to get this job, the cycles of Involution will continue. Such scenarios have also been reflected in Marx's Communist Manifesto and his work in Wage Labor and Capital when he talks about this idea of capitalist competition. As he summarizes: "the more productive capital grows, the more it extends the division of labor

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<sup>65</sup> Grace Lee Boggs and Scott Kurashige, *The next American Revolution*, 10.

and the application of machinery; the more the division of labor and the application of machinery extend, the more competition extends among the workers, the more their wages shrink together."<sup>66</sup>

However, even though Involution is a result of the capitalistic system, I argue that Involution could be prevented as it is not an inevitable consequence of capitalist society but an exception in human history. It is an exception in human history because if we follow through the lines of capitalism, people can argue and object to Involution by claiming that they can withdraw from such competition and pursue something unrelated to the scenario mentioned above. However, such an objection is valid only if we are capable of withdrawing ourselves from such competition. And this is also what Grace Lee Boggs and James Boggs have mentioned in their workshop by using the new contradiction that African Americans are in crisis.

"Ever since the civil rights movement achieved its goal of eliminating legal discrimination and segregation in 1965, people in the black community have been thinking biologically, not dialectically. They/we have been looking at everything in terms of race. Everything black has been seen as positive and beautiful. Everything white has been seen as negative and ugly. This was very effective at first. By talking black and thinking black we intimidated whites and made them feel guilty, so that we were able to extort jobs and programs from them...Meanwhile, because the reality has been changing over the last 30 years, we are faced with new contradictions."<sup>67</sup>

In today's society, it is hard for people not to fall into the trend of Involution as our value system has unified in terms of what we aim to pursue. Involution is the highly integrated market

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<sup>66</sup> Karl Marx, "Source: Wage Labor and Capital, the Original 1891 Pamphlet; First Published: Neue Rheinische Zeitung," 1847, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/wage-labour-capital.pdf>, 23.

<sup>67</sup> "Dialectical Humanism," [www.boggscenter.org](http://www.boggscenter.org), May 25, 2012, [http://www.boggscenter.org/html/dialectical\\_humanism.html](http://www.boggscenter.org/html/dialectical_humanism.html).

competition that has become life-oriented and the basic way of organizing society and distributing life and resources. In an extreme scenario, if a person wants to reject such Involution, they won't have to choose to attend college or high school, as what he defines as life-oriented is not related to what society has put on us. However, unless all people or the majority of people realize that there is a need to change as there shouldn't be a unified way of living, we can't withdraw from this competition as we, humans, are social animals and we are born into this competition.

Hence, the core of the Involution lies in this inability of people to change along with the changes in society. While we couldn't change the overall environment of this capitalist system, it is still possible for us to avoid such issues by following Grace's proposition of thinking dialectically. According to Grace, today's people need to think beyond making a living to making it a life that respects the earth and one another.<sup>68</sup> This transition of thinking is a reimagining of work and reimagining life, bonding with dialectical thinking that everyone should acquire in this capital world. The two notions—that reality is constantly changing and that you must constantly be aware of the new and more challenging contradictions that drive change—lie at the core of dialectical thinking."<sup>69</sup> Only when we are able to think dialectically, it is possible for us to change accordingly with the changes that are constantly happening. Such that, instead of continuing on the trend of this unsolvable competition, we need to encourage the creation of work that not only produces goods and services but also develops our skills, protects our environment, and lifts our spirits," as what Grace has recommended.<sup>70</sup>

### **Brown's self-change based on ten emergent strategies**

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<sup>68</sup> Grace Lee Boggs and Scott Kurashige, *The next American Revolution*, 10.

<sup>69</sup> Grace Lee Boggs and Scott Kurashige, *The next American Revolution*, 17.

<sup>70</sup> Grace Lee Boggs and Scott Kurashige, *The next American Revolution*, 9.

Another way of approaching this process is through the Emergent strategies introduced by Adrienne Maree Brown. "Change is coming, what do we need to imagine as we prepare for it?"<sup>71</sup> Instead of thinking principle and preparing our thoughts like what Boggs suggested, Brown tries to approach this mental preparation through a more practical way. As such, she states that "emergent strategy is how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for."<sup>72</sup>

Accompanied with Brown's nine core principles underlying her suggestion toward the preparation of changes, I suggested that this same principle can also be used to withdraw oneself from the process of Involution. To jump out of this cycle of Involution, the central idea is to be aware of the Involution. As she said in the principles of emergent strategy:

“1) small is good, small is all. 2) change is constant. 3) There is always enough time for the right work. 4) There is a conversation in the room that only these people at this moment can have. Find it. 5) Never a failure, always a lesson. 6) Trust the people. 7) Move at the speed of trust. Focus on critical connections more than critical mass-build the resilience by building the relationships. 8) less prep, more presence. 9) What you pay attention to grows.”<sup>73</sup>

Just as her first principle states, "small is good, small is all,"<sup>74</sup> we don't have to start thinking about the whole system within Involution, but we should pay attention to small things that count as its components. As the large is a reflection of the small, we need to recognize the small things that we do and determine which ones are truly worthy and which ones are just things that we do due to

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<sup>71</sup> Adrienne Maree Brown, *Emergent Strategy : Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico, Ca Ak Press, 2017), 58.

<sup>72</sup> Brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 7.

<sup>73</sup> Brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 27.

<sup>74</sup> Brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 41.

what could be called peer pressure. I mentioned peer pressure doesn't indicate the visible pressure that only comes from others to you, but more as a bidirectional pressure that people have created for themselves. For example, in light of a paper I will be writing, as the requirement only requires approximately 1000 words, my original intention would also be around the same word count. However, I would be involved in the process of Involution if I heard others doing over 2000 words and unnecessarily decided to extend my paper to roughly the same length. The competition will be created as my guideline for this paper is no longer what is required by the professor but was based on how others wrote. With such a mindset, I will be chasing not the original goal of writing clearly, but the goal of having it longer. Moreover, Involution has been placed as I start to fill up my paper with superfluous words; the more I write, the more energy I spend, and the less clear my argument has been.

With the above demonstration, what Brown will say will be reflected in her third principle: "There is always enough time for the right work. There is a conversation in the room that only these people at this moment can have. Find it."<sup>75</sup> Instead of creating this unnecessary competition, we need to choose what the what is, and by finding this deep insight, we would have greater leverage than how I perform it. Just as my previous analogy of a stock game, instead of blindly chasing after this competition, we have to look clearly at why we are participating and what we are chasing after. Another example would be her ninth principle of "what you pay attention to grows."<sup>76</sup> With similar ideology, while we flow within this riptide of involution, instead of focusing on what we haven't achieved, we have to look back to see what we have achieved and to pay attention to our needs instead of what others have said.

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<sup>75</sup> Brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 41.

<sup>76</sup> Brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 27.

In general, with the nine principles, Brown proposes a central idea of looking back to ourselves as we are the only agency in our life. Agreeing on what she said, one method I believe that would release the pressure of involution is to allow yourself to take control of your pace and understand truly what our goal is. In one sense, along with Boggs's suggestion of thinking dialectically and Brown's nine core principles of emergent strategies, I believe that the key to stopping Involution is self-reflection. Not only should we self-reflect on our mindset, but also, we should self-reflect on our role in those changes. Only when we focus on what we want to gain from those works and find our path within changes, we would be able to jump out of the cycle of Involution.

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