

“Nei Juan” in Exam-oriented Education in China

LI Meng-ying

Central South University, Changsha, China

Most people explain “Nei Juan” based on the connotation of the “Involution” and other fierce competition outlined above. However, the misunderstanding of the term triggers adverse social anxiety and stigmatizes reasonable education ideas. The result of “Nei Juan” is that everyone screws more effort to expect the raised standard, but no one yields better returns due to the fixed resources. The essay related to the education-oriented examination in China reveals the adverse effects of “Nei Juan,” focuses on why the public misunderstand the “Nei Juan” as involution and distinguishes it from the positive competition. Understanding the term’s connotation is responsible for helping those escaping from the futile effort and relaxing from the rat race.

Keywords: education, “Nei Juan”, involution, competition

Introduction

“Nei Juan,” a buzzword populated in China since 2020, has been wildly discussed in all walks of life to describe the social trend that people evolved into a competition, to catch up with colleagues, peers, and generation, strive to obtain a great result. In contrast, with fixed resources, continuous pressure, and a hopeless result, “Nei Juan” frustrates participators with little initiative and burdens competitors’ shame from a quit. Range from employment in work, children in educational rat races, social competition in massive inequalities. Since exam-oriented education has been employed for thousands of years, it is not surprising that fierce competition is prevailing. Why does “Nei Juan” occur in recent years? What exactly is “Nei Juan”? Scholars and the public desperately define it, but the meaning is far from agreement beyond the words.

Exam-oriented Education in China

Different from higher education in the west serves aristocrats and royalty. Social critic Thorstein Veblen assumes that “Whatever characteristics of the accredited scholastic scheme and discipline are traceable to the predilections of the leisure class or the guidance of the canons of pecuniary merit” (Veblen, 2007, p. 236). The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu emphasizes the Reproduction of education, whatever the extent of the expansion of formal education. Whatever its causes and motivations, the ruling classes will always seek to influence and readjust the system to maintain their social advantages (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 225). Thus, the original intention of Western education is to consolidate the wealth and status of the leisure class, serve the inheritance of property and class stratification, and reduce class mobility. Students to get higher education overwhelmingly

fierce not merely the examination but the best method to change the social status in China. Such intensive exam-oriented competition is traced from the history of Chinese testing culture.

(1) *The Imperial Examination System (Keju)*: Since the Han Dynasty (B.C.E.C.E.), Keju, lasting for two thousand years in China, has been the only method for folks to upward their status and alters their social class. An official government for recruiting bureaucrats ensures that appointment pontificates on capability rather than favoritism or nepotism. (2007). Intellectuals from low-income families count on standing out on examination ranking to uphold the family honor—study for a decade, even several decades to take the exam.

(2) *The college entrance examination (Gaokao)*: In 1977, Gaokao was reinstated after an 11-year hiatus. Intellectuals suspended in the “cultural revolution” (1966-76) rushed to the “Gaokao.” The pivotal 1977 exam labeled the return of intellectuals since removed from their vocations and sent to the rural area. The exam changed the face of China forever. Intellectuals expect to come out in the examination to go back to their life.

(3) *Project 985 and project 211*: Higher education expansion in 1998. From 1998 to 2004, the average annual growth of undergraduate students was about 26.9 percent, from 1.08 million in 1998 to 4.47 million in 2004 (Wang, 2006, p. 19).

In the past, people were eager to be among the best in the college entrance examination and change their lives through a limited admission rate. As universities continue to expand enrollment, the current admission rate of students has been rising, and China’s higher education is better popularized. Since the expansion of college easing the pressure on the entrance examination. Why does the burden go heavier to present students? From high school students down to primary school pupils struggling with the promotion and leading to the “Nei Juan” in the entire teenagers? To dismantle the obscure, we start from its most two majority explanations: Involution and competition.

“Nei Juan” is “Involution”?

Clifford Geertz, an American cultural anthropologist, first applied the term “Involution” in his book *Agricultural Involution* in 1963. he analyzed that Java’s economy in Indonesia responds to population growth. “Greater labor inputs offset Higher-level densities into the same production system, but output per head (or per month) remains more or less constant from region to region” (Geertz, 1963, p. 78). Refinements of wet-rice cultivation, with increasing labor in the fields, fail to yield a proportional harvest in crops; It should be expected to see a greater output. The state of equilibrium and stagnation fail to transform to an advanced model. Then, the overuse of the word “Involution,” which resonated with social sectors, refers to arduous work and increasing investment without expecting rewards; the whole experience turns to be a meaningless effort. Involution translated to “Nei Juan” in Chinese, representing input without output and working for nothing.

What is “Nei Juan” embodiment in education? For example, Half of the students take extra tutoring to boost rank. The remains, however, have to catch up with them in case of dropping behind. In the end, the ranking locked the same, but each one was burdened in overload study. In the other case, the assignment for a term paper required 5,000 words; those who aspire to higher grades write exceedingly over the requirement reaching 10,000 even more. In the end, each submitter excels needs, while the rate of the “excellent” granted is limited. Everyone is suffering than before; nevertheless, the grade remained the same. The situation seems identical to the Clifford involution theory: More input harvests the unchanged yield. But when we examine the

case in education specifically, it is not precisely the same. The improvement consists of two parts: Process and Results. Although the rank results remained the same, we still have some modification of comprehension in reading, knowledge accumulation, and writing skills instead of no progress in the process. Xu Yingjin, a philosophy professor at Fudan University, said excessive competition exists in all aspects of social development, but using the word “involution” to explain all these phenomena is problematic. In this term, we hardly attribute the “Nei Juan” to the “involution” theory analogy overall (Xu, 2021, p. 59).

Indisputably, some progress has indeed been made along the way, why do people hardly see the progress in the process but only the gain in the result and attribute it to Involution? Two habits can't be excused, achievement obsession and submissive learning are responsible for the fact. They are obsessed with achievements and ranking. The Chinese are taught to learn for the sake of their parent's pride, family dignity, and even the country's future rather than their interests. Students whose passion is incited by high ranking rather than the charm of knowledge are in vain. When the result failed in the rank, they attribute the whole process to Involution regardless of personal growth, which is unreasonable and inappropriate.

“Nei Juan” is the Competition?

Suppose we cannot define “Nei Juan” from the effect of Involution. In that case, we go deeper and consider the cause behind the “Nei Juan,” hardly can we escape to shed light on the fact: competition. The juxtaposition of “Nei Juan” and competition is essential for us to distinguish the nuances. Nevertheless, those two terms are similar to the external form that required massive endeavor and crowded with numerous competitors. The purpose is to attempt to get outstanding. Why does “competition” seem reasonable while “Nei Juan” arouses repulsion? What makes “Nei Juan” exclusively alienate from the “competition”? We should analyze the motivation, manifestation, and result of “Nei Juan” to reveal its anomie.

Passive in Motivation

Individuals get involved in “Nei Juan” subconsciously. Compared with the “competition,” the most significant difference of “Nei Juan” is the “passiveness”: **Desire the desire of Others**. Most participants are not choosing the task in interest and willingness. Instead, followers just go with the flow abide by the convergence of peers, suggestions from elders, and social criteria. From Lacan's assertion, the desire is to fulfill the desire of others. Individuals fail to follow the heart, as the examples mentioned above. Either the essay's words count or the after-school tutors' facts. Except for those who have clear goals and are willing to take challenges, other followers, being afraid to be dropped off, merely purchase active's desires.

An old saying from Confucian Analects is that “When we see a man of virtue and talent, we should think of equalling them.” It has been taught in the very beginning for pupils. And almost every Chinese parent would use the standard to compare their child with others who have an advantage superior to theirs. We called them “other people's children.” As a result, we strive so hard to catch up with other's gifts instead of exploring ourselves' aptitudes.

However, some have the motivations, including material value, praise, and prestige from others; those extrinsic incentives push you to move forward. Nevertheless, anxious and exhausted feelings can never be more substantial in that you just satisfy others' expectations never approach yourselves'. With the same external

manifestation, competition turns to be passive “Nei Juan” internally. Once involved in the game, they would be treated as losers or cowards by social justice if they quit. That is why “Nei Juan” hurts.

Therefore, “Nei Juan” conducts the overwhelmingly anxious feeling in will and fatigue in energy rather than continuous euphoria and vitality in robust competition. The original reason stemmed from the passive education tradition. Creativity and critical thinking are not mainly encouraged in Chinese education. They emphasized memorizing rather than critical thinking since the ancient teaching methods, such as reciting *The Four Books* and *The Five Classics from Confucianism*. Students, following their mentor, are reluctant to ask questions and struggle to stretch their ideas, which is the effect of a submissive learning style. In the short term, without motivation and initiative. For a long time, education directly determines social status and social wealth in form. Considering the lack of insight goals, those competing for high rank in tests fail to appreciate the meaning of knowledge and merely focus on the result instead of the effect.

Xiangbiao, a social anthropologist at oxford university, mentioned that Chinese students who write reports applications would emphasize the project’s significance in social and human aspects. It is difficult for them to express why they think something is of interesting. Whereas in the UK, if you don’t have a good narrative for why you find it interesting, people will think you are not “authentic” or just please people.

Non-differentiation in Aim

What “Nei Juan” tortures most is witnessed at the non-differentiation and homogenization in aims: conforming to the expectations of others. The non-differentiation in exam inextricably shackles on different characteristics; Go to prestige college, get a master’s degree at the practical major, and be employed in state-owned enterprises. Victims are propelled to go down the same path in which identical life routes are undisputedly treated as the most reliable and guaranteed; besides, any choices are down to the inferior alternative to compromise. When everyone squeezes to the same path, we are passively involved in the game and finally enter the battle mode.

Moreover, individuals possess different inborn talents, like book smarts and street smarts. Book smarts learned everything they needed to know in school and excelled at it; they aced the quizzes and tests while half-asleep. Street smart awarded the world’s wisdom in years of experience, and they know how to make the best of every situation. Academic achievement is regarded as the only essential and shining talent in the school years, and other abilities and interests are cast aside and despised. Every child study at school; those who excel in grade are treated as intelligent child even geniuses. The latter is inferior as troublemakers or slow learners regardless of their distinct innate talent.

“Nei Juan” is that you go with the flow when all the students are running for valedictorian; you aim at a personal goal of graduating with a 3.8 or the higher grade point average. That is your goal of valedictorian. Success is set your target and achieve not the perfect of other desires. You cannot get validation from the binary of success/ failure. Because many choose the goals over their ability, balancing personal capability and the target is hard. Lots of critical examinations require massive input, including time and energy, for a long time. Pressure and uncertainty increasing undergoing.

Repudiation in Result

The next problem immediately appears disproportionality. It means the rate of competitors and the winners is not proportionable, especially in giant national examinations, like College Entrance Examination, Postgraduate Examination, Civil Service Examination. Success is out of proportion to failure. What “Nei Juan” most frustrates people is the result of repudiation. Students who study without interest-oriented and strive at the test with peer flow, followers, just pursue the high ranking at the game to prove their value, if they lose, which means all repudiation.

The pressures are from two aspects: stereotype and threshold of vocation. First, people got the subconscious social awareness that technician workers, not from their talent, just failed at school and are left with no choice to make a living and be treated as cheap laborers in society. Therefore, no matter how talented in a field such as cooking, selling, or hairdressing, people hesitate to develop their careers. Only got college certification is the right direction of life. However, they are not good at it. Once failed at school and miss the best time to learn the skill at a young age, they become self-denial and marginalized by society. Second, reputed enterprises in recruitment require the Certificate of academic degree, although the vacant slightest related to their majors. Significantly, A rule indicates that the first degree is vitally essential, no matter how brilliant the following certifications are. Applicants who may not be smart enough but willing to study harder and change their lives everlastingly reject the market, which overwhelmingly defeats their self-identity.

Even enrolled in a top university, “Nei Juan,” never ends. Many master’s or Ph.D. students struggle to publish papers for certification and find teaching work in university or research institutions. It is not rare that a few candidates who fail to publish papers on time and are denied a certificate by the university to commit suicide and end their precious lives. Certification, however, is not the only evidence of profession and leads to a successful career. If Steven Spielberg, busing on graduating from college and took countless examinations and papers, had missed his precious practice opportunity in the Universal, he would never have become a famous director at such young age. The celebrated Chinese pop singer, Jay Chou, would never have published many exquisite pop music albums at his young age and never had time to write the hundreds of original music style songs combined with traditional Chinese elements. If she had given her spare moments to take college examinations, which not her best, had the little Chinese American girl, Liu Yulin, allowed the talent at performance brain to academic. In contrast, she took Language and Culture major at a prestigious college and quickly found a decent job instead of assiduously practicing acting skills in Hollywood filming sites; she would never have become a famous actress. A certification is just a supplement tool, never the necessary complement thing in the career; students should refrain from trapping in a Diploma dilemma.

When you chase the attempting goal, those three significant traits differ the “Nei Juan” from the competition and push the victim into the corner. Every step closely accesses the destination but is far away from the motivation. Xiang Biao, a professor of social anthropology at the University of Oxford, referred to this as “a competition with no option of failure or withdrawal.”

Resistance of “Nei Juan”

Since “Nei Juan” possesses such detrimental effects on students, measures should be conducted to address this problem from all aspects of society: (1) **Involve Government guidance**. On July 24, 2021, China’s Ministry

of Education introduced a guideline to ease the burden of excessive homework and off-campus tutoring for primary and junior high school students. It is called “Shuang Jian,” listing requirements in areas such as reducing the amount and the difficulty of homework and improving the quality of education and after class services provided by schools. Those compulsory acts are expected to mitigate students from the “Nei Juan” in the examination; (2) **Broaden personal development channels.** In school years for students, the dual development model of vocation education and higher education are actively advocated at the national and social levels. A college education is no longer the only way to success, and the development of vocational education has made increasing people choose their own suitable and durable direction. Life is not all about being seen as successful or rising above your peers in academics; It might be a good idea to develop some expertise that purely suits each person; (3) **Explore the blue ocean.** For future perspective as life-long development, As mentioned earlier, Involution is partially caused by a shallow definition of success, so an excellent method is to not be dropped off in the competitive atmosphere, but conduct things away from crowding. As illustrated in the bestseller under the same name written by Chan Kim & Rene Mauborgne, the blue ocean strategy is characterized by exploiting an unknown field and rendering the competition irrelevant. This method can apply to more than simply the business world: willingness to explore the road less traveled could be a great living attitude.

Conclusion

In conclusion, “Nei Juan” in exam-oriented education is built around the historical tradition and enlarged enrollment. Individuals who stand out have to experience fierce competition and aim the higher education as the only way to striving out. However, in reality, higher education is just one of the options for personal development and never the best for everyone. This essay shows that “Nei Juan” is neither the involution nor equal to the competition. It is also not the right attitude to treat “Nei Juan” as involution and overlook the endeavor of the process, although which is not the recommended approach of personal growth. In this regard, “Nei Juan” is destructive to education development: when the youth are crowded into the trace, and the group pursues one or several career purposes, it can cause simplification and deficiency of sound social structures. Furthermore, the ideology may finally lead to a phenomenon in which the public considers other vocational education to be less decent in society, and at the same time recognize that personal interest should be sacrificed for majority choices. Authorities and society should contribute to building a beneficial education environment for the young generation. When individuals subconsciously get involved in “Nei Juan,” they should realize that exam-oriented education is not the only way for success. Finding a genuine interest and striving to excel on it would be an excellent option in a life-long career.

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