

A Comparative Study on the Relationship Between Academic Involution and Parental Psychological Control Among Chinese and Vietnamese University Students

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ABSTRACT: *This study aims to examine the relationship between academic involution and parental psychological control among Chinese and Vietnamese university students. Based on survey data from students in both countries, the findings indicate that parental psychological control significantly influences the occurrence of academic involution. Specifically, parental emotional manipulation and overprotection increase students' academic pressure, leading to excessive academic engagement and psychological distress. The results further show that high parental expectations and strict demands are important contributing factors to academic involution. By analyzing the similarities and differences in the cultural backgrounds and educational systems of the two countries, this study reveals the distinct mechanisms through which parental psychological control affects academic involution. It also proposes intervention strategies to alleviate students' academic stress. The conclusions provide both theoretical foundations and practical guidance for educational policy-making and mental health interventions.*

KEYWORDS: *academic involution; parental psychological control; China; Vietnam; university students.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, the intensity of educational competition continues to escalate. This is particularly evident in East Asian countries such as China and Vietnam, where university students face substantial academic pressure. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as academic involution, which describes a situation in highly competitive environments where students are compelled to invest excessive time and effort to remain competitive, yet may not obtain commensurate returns [1]. Closely related to this is another important factor—parental psychological control, which has a profound impact on students' academic achievement and mental health.

Parental psychological control typically manifests in forms such as emotional manipulation, overprotection, and restriction of autonomy. Such controlling practices can undermine children's independence and increase their levels of anxiety and stress [2]. Previous studies have demonstrated a significant correlation between parental psychological control and children's academic performance as well as psychological well-being. For instance, some research suggests that parental psychological control may influence academic achievement indirectly by shaping children's failure mindset [1].

Although China and Vietnam differ in cultural backgrounds and educational systems, university students in both countries exhibit notable similarities in terms of academic involution and parental psychological control. Research indicates that high parental expectations and strict demands are prevalent in both contexts, contributing to excessive academic competition and inefficient allocation of educational resources [3]. Furthermore, excessive parental intervention and control may also lead to depression and other psychological problems among students.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the relationship between academic involution and parental psychological control among Chinese and Vietnamese university students, analyze the underlying mechanisms, and propose corresponding intervention strategies. It is expected to provide both theoretical foundations and practical guidance for educational policy-making and mental health interventions.

II. DEFINITION AND CURRENT SITUATION OF ACADEMIC INVOLUTION

In recent years, academic involution has become a widely discussed topic in the field of education in China. It refers to the continuously increasing academic burden and pressure that students experience in highly competitive environments, which leads to declining learning efficiency as well as negative impacts on physical and mental health. With the growing societal emphasis on higher education credentials and academic achievement, students are compelled to invest increasing amounts of time and effort in order to maintain their competitiveness, thereby forming an endless cycle of academic competition. Research indicates that academic involution not only affects students' academic performance but also has adverse effects on their psychological well-being [1]. In both China and Vietnam, this phenomenon is particularly pronounced due to limited educational resources and intense pressure for educational advancement. However, in Vietnam, the concept of academic involution has not yet been widely studied or fully recognized, which provides a unique research opportunity to explore how this phenomenon manifests and operates across different cultural contexts.

The primary cause of academic involution is the unequal distribution of educational resources. Although China has made significant progress in reducing the urban–rural gap in recent years, disparities in education still persist. According to Stanford University's Rural Education Action Program, more than 70% of urban students enter higher education, whereas the rate in rural areas is less than 5% [4]. At the same time, with overall economic development across the country, many families have migrated to urban areas in search of better access to resources. This rural-to-urban migration has contributed to rapid urban population growth, making already limited educational resources even more scarce. This situation has led to multiple consequences. First, as educational opportunities become more limited, the entry threshold for certain schools has been raised significantly. Even admission to kindergarten is often regarded as a highly competitive process, as parents must compete for a limited number of places. Some parents even enroll their children in mock interview training programs to increase their chances of gaining admission to prestigious schools [5], not to mention the highly competitive transitions into middle school and high school. Thus, consistent with the concept of involution, when a large population intensely competes for limited educational opportunities, the selection system becomes increasingly complex in order to identify the “best” candidates among highly similar applicants.

Second, the phenomenon of academic involution in education arises partly from the widespread belief in the social returns of education in Chinese society. It is commonly believed that obtaining a good education ensures stable employment opportunities, particularly in the context of a growing middle class. In addition, China's long-standing one-child policy, implemented for over 30 years, has also shaped family attitudes toward education. Although only children can benefit from concentrated family resources, they are also subject to heightened expectations from all family members. As a result, compared to the past, a larger proportion of individuals pursue higher levels of education, leading to increased educational demand and intensified competition. Specifically, in the field of education, academic involution is primarily manifested in excessive investment.

III. DEFINITION AND IMPACT OF PARENTAL PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTROL

Parental psychological control refers to a parenting style in which parents influence and regulate their children's psychological and behavioral functioning through emotional manipulation, guilt induction, and rejection. This form of control includes strategies such as making children feel guilty or anxious, or threatening to withdraw emotional support in order to pressure them into complying with parental expectations. It is distinct from behavioral control, which involves the direct supervision of children's behaviors and the establishment of rules and regulations [8][10].

Parental psychological control, often manifested through intrusive or overprotective parenting practices, restricts children's autonomy and self-expression. Extensive research has shown that such controlling behaviors can have significant negative effects on adolescents' psychological development and behavioral patterns. For instance, excessive parental control is associated with lower self-esteem, increased anxiety, and even impaired academic performance. Parental psychological control has also been found to be closely related to symptoms of anxiety, depression, and low self-worth among children and adolescents [13]. These controlling behaviors can lead children to feel manipulated and helpless, thereby contributing to a range of psychological distress and mental health problems [13][14].

In addition, psychological control may undermine trust and emotional closeness within the parent-child relationship, further exacerbating children's emotional difficulties [9]. In the academic domain, such control can reduce students' intrinsic motivation and interest in learning, as they may perceive academic effort as a means of satisfying parental expectations rather than pursuing personal development or interest [11]. Excessive psychological control may also cause children to feel pressured and powerless when facing academic challenges, thereby negatively affecting their academic performance [15].

Moreover, parental psychological control weakens children's autonomy and independence, which can result in lower self-confidence and reduced social competence in interpersonal interactions [12]. Children who experience long-term psychological control may struggle to develop healthy social relationships and are more likely to exhibit dependency and social withdrawal behaviors [10]. High levels of psychological control have also been significantly associated with behavioral problems in children and adolescents, including aggression, rule-breaking, and antisocial behavior [10]. Overall, this form of control undermines children's self-regulation abilities, making them more vulnerable to maladaptive coping strategies when facing stress.

IV. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACADEMIC INVOLUTION AND PARENTAL PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTROL

A growing body of research has demonstrated a significant association between parental psychological control and academic involution. High parental expectations and strict demands often lead to students' excessive academic investment, which in turn contributes to the emergence of academic involution. In addition, parental psychological control may indirectly intensify academic involution by influencing students' self-efficacy and learning motivation.

Academic involution refers to a situation in which students, in order to stand out in highly competitive educational environments, experience excessive academic pressure and anxiety due to intensified competition. Parental psychological control, on the other hand, involves excessive interference in children's behaviors, thoughts, and emotions. Studies have found that these two variables are positively correlated. Specifically, higher levels of parental psychological control are associated with a greater likelihood of academic involution among students [16].

Furthermore, parental psychological control not only directly affects students' academic behaviors but also shapes their psychological states, making them more prone to anxiety and stress, which in turn exacerbates academic involution [17]. When parents place excessive emphasis on grades and rankings and continuously exert pressure on their children, students are more likely to develop heightened academic anxiety and an unhealthy competitive mindset, thereby intensifying involution-like learning patterns [17][18].

Research also indicates that parental psychological control is significantly associated with students' social anxiety and self-efficacy, with social anxiety playing a mediating role in this relationship [16][19]. In other words, psychological control increases social anxiety and reduces self-efficacy, which further contributes to maladaptive academic functioning and intensified academic competition.

From a conceptual perspective, parental psychological control refers to parents' use of emotional manipulation, criticism, and rejection to regulate their children's behavior and emotions, whereas academic involution refers to the phenomenon in which students engage in excessive academic effort under conditions of high competition and pressure, resulting in heavy academic burdens and psychological distress. Research suggests that excessive parental control and unrealistic expectations often increase students' academic anxiety and their tendency toward involution. For example, some parents may overly interfere with their children's study schedules and impose strict performance requirements, which can lead to anxiety and an externally driven learning orientation, thereby reinforcing academic involution. Therefore, it is important for family education to avoid excessive control and interference and to promote more balanced and supportive parenting practices in order to support healthy adolescent development.

A longitudinal study involving 731 Chinese 10th-grade high school students (356 boys; Mage = 15.64 years, SD = 0.68) collected two waves of data over one year using student-reported measures of parental psychological control and academic-related beliefs, strategies, and behaviors. The results showed that parental psychological control at Time 1 significantly predicted increases in maladaptive academic functioning at Time 2. Conversely, adaptive academic functioning at Time 1 significantly predicted decreases in parental psychological control at Time 2. These findings suggest a dynamic and reciprocal relationship between parenting practices and students' academic functioning over time. The predictive relationship between parental psychological control and academic functioning was found to be consistent across genders. Additionally, more urbanized adolescents were more likely to perceive their parents as psychologically controlling, suggesting a cultural shift in the perceived importance of autonomy among urban youth [20].

V. COMPARISON OF ACADEMIC INVOLUTION AND PARENTAL PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTROL AMONG CHINESE AND VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Although China and Vietnam differ in cultural backgrounds and educational systems, university students in both countries exhibit similar patterns in terms of academic involution and parental psychological control. In China, high parental expectations and intense social competition place considerable academic pressure on students. In Vietnam, despite differences in economic development levels, parents also place a strong emphasis on education, resulting in similar manifestations of academic involution.

5.1. Manifestations of Academic Involution

University students in both countries may experience academic involution, including excessive competition and heavy academic workload. Chinese students are more likely to engage in intense competition focused on grades and ranking, and similar patterns can also be observed among Vietnamese students.

In Vietnam, university entrance examinations are highly competitive, with hundreds of thousands of candidates each year but only a small proportion gaining admission to top universities. This intense competition places substantial pressure on students, particularly in a social context where higher education is highly valued. In some cases, students experience severe psychological distress and uncertainty regarding their future pathways. Reports have indicated that some students seek psychological counseling due to exam-related stress, and in extreme cases, they may experience acute emotional crises following examination failure.

According to Dr. Ho (psychological counseling expert, Binh Duong University, Vietnam), each year a considerable number of students who fail examinations contact him, expressing extreme despair and a sense that “everything is over.” This reflects a worrying level of psychological stress among students, where some may even exhibit impulsive or self-harm-related thoughts under intense pressure.

After 12 years of schooling, entering university is often perceived as a natural expectation; however, many students struggle due to a lack of psychological preparedness. At the same time, excessive expectations from self, family, and society further contribute to negative thinking patterns.

Academic involution in China and Vietnam also shows notable differences. In China, involution is commonly understood as a consequence of intense academic and occupational competition, where students and workers are expected to set extremely high standards for success, often resulting in chronic stress and reduced life satisfaction.

In contrast, although academic competition exists in Vietnam and may affect students’ mental health, academic involution has not yet become a dominant social issue. Most Vietnamese students tend to focus more on learning and personal development and are less constrained by intense societal and familial pressure. The diversification of higher education options, including private universities and vocational institutions, also reduces the intensity of competition. In China, however, academic involution is largely driven by unequal distribution of educational resources. Students face competition from an early age, particularly during high school, where high performance in examinations is essential for admission to elite universities. Research indicates that such excessive competition contributes to elevated levels of psychological stress and anxiety among students [21].

Chinese students typically spend a large amount of time on academic activities, often from early morning until late evening in schools or tutoring institutions. Studies have shown that Chinese students’ study time is significantly higher than that of students in many other countries, which negatively affects both mental and physical health [23]. Moreover, the Chinese education system is highly exam-oriented, leading both teachers and students to prioritize test-taking skills over holistic education. This has been shown to restrict the development of creativity and critical thinking [22].

In addition, strong parental and societal expectations further intensify academic pressure. Many parents invest heavily in tutoring and closely manage their children’s academic progress. This family pressure significantly increases students’ psychological burden and reduces overall well-being [24]. As a result, academic involution is strongly associated with mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and sleep disorders [25].

5.2. Levels of Parental Psychological Control

Parental educational approaches differ between the two countries. Chinese parents tend to place greater emphasis on academic achievement and competition, often exerting stronger pressure and control over their children’s academic pathways. Vietnamese parents, by contrast, are generally more inclined toward balance and tend to adopt more supportive and guiding approaches.

In China, parental expectations constitute a key dimension of psychological control. Many parents expect their children to achieve high academic performance and gain admission to prestigious universities. Such expectations often translate into controlling behaviors, including interference in academic choices and career decisions. Research has shown a positive correlation between high parental expectations and students’ levels of stress and anxiety.

Parental psychological control is also reflected in strict monitoring and directive parenting styles. Studies indicate that excessive supervision can reduce students' autonomy and self-efficacy, thereby negatively affecting both psychological well-being and academic outcomes. Economic pressure further reinforces such control, as many families view educational success as a pathway to upward mobility, thereby placing strong emphasis on academic achievement [26].

In addition, the broader Chinese social context places a high value on education. This societal norm reinforces parental control behaviors, as academic success is widely perceived as a key determinant of future socioeconomic status. Consequently, students experience not only familial pressure but also socially reinforced academic expectations.

In Vietnam, parental psychological control is generally present at a relatively high level, particularly in terms of monitoring and regulating children's academic and daily life activities [28]. This phenomenon is more pronounced in urban families, where parents tend to rely on high expectations and strict discipline to ensure academic success [31]. However, such control also leads to negative outcomes, including increased psychological stress and anxiety among children [27].

Vietnamese cultural values emphasizing family honor and collectivism further reinforce parental control behaviors [30]. Nevertheless, many Vietnamese parents' controlling behaviors are driven primarily by care and concern for their children's safety and development. Unlike China, where academic pressure is often centralized around high-stakes examinations, Vietnam offers more diversified educational pathways. For example, many private universities admit students based on high school GPA rather than entrance examinations, which reduces competitive pressure.

As a result, parental control in Vietnam is more often expressed in daily life guidance rather than intense academic enforcement. Although such behaviors are intended to be protective, they may still limit children's independence and adaptive skills development. Scholars have suggested that increasing parents' awareness of positive parenting strategies may help reduce psychological control and promote healthier adolescent development [32].

5.3. Educational Ideologies in Both Countries

5.3.1. Educational Ideology in China

China's education system places strong emphasis on examination scores and school rankings. This utilitarian orientation intensifies academic involution and strengthens parental control behaviors [34]. High parental expectations are closely linked to academic achievement, leading to intensive parental involvement in children's education [36].

The national college entrance examination (Gaokao) serves as the core mechanism of educational selection in China. This high-stakes system creates substantial academic pressure for both students and families [40]. Consequently, parents often engage in strict supervision and intervention in their children's academic activities [33].

5.3.2. Educational Ideology in Vietnam

Vietnam's education system places greater emphasis on students' holistic development and practical competencies, aiming to cultivate comprehensive abilities rather than focusing solely on examination scores [37]. This approach helps reduce academic pressure and parental control, allowing students greater autonomy in their development [35].

The increasing presence of private universities and international schools in Vietnam provides alternative educational pathways that emphasize practical skills and global perspectives, reducing overemphasis on standardized testing [38]. Many Vietnamese parents are also willing to invest in private education in order to reduce academic pressure and avoid excessive competition [39].

VI. CONCLUSION

This study compares academic involution and parental psychological control among Chinese and Vietnamese university students, revealing significant differences in educational culture and family dynamics between the two countries.

The findings indicate that in China, strong parental emphasis on academic achievement and social ranking places students under substantial academic pressure, contributing to a high level of academic involution and psychological stress [40]. In contrast, although academic pressure also exists in Vietnam, the overall level of academic involution is relatively lower due to the education system's stronger emphasis on holistic development and practical application [37].

Parental psychological control is more pronounced in China, where parents tend to exert strong academic demands and maintain high expectations for their children. This often results in students experiencing reduced autonomy and a sense of being overly controlled [34]. In Vietnam, although parental psychological control is also present, it is more frequently expressed in daily life guidance and moral education rather than being strictly focused on academic performance [38].

High levels of parental psychological control are closely associated with students' mental health outcomes. Chinese students report significantly higher levels of anxiety and depression compared to Vietnamese students, suggesting that high-pressure parenting styles in China may have more negative psychological consequences [33]. In Vietnam, despite the presence of psychological control, students tend to demonstrate relatively better mental health outcomes, which may be related to parents' greater emphasis on balanced and holistic development [35].

In summary, the differences between China and Vietnam in terms of academic involution and parental psychological control largely stem from distinct educational cultures and social expectations. These differences not only influence students' academic performance but also have profound impacts on their psychological well-being and personality development. Future research should further explore how educational reforms and parental education programs can reduce excessive psychological control and promote students' overall development and mental health.

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