

Cultural Differences Between China and the West Behind “neijuan”

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Over recent years, our society has plunged into the phenomenon of “neijuan” (in English “involution”, a kind of meaningless competition). And it even becomes a social dilemma that many people are forced to make more efforts to compete for limited social resources. This phenomenon has, of course, attracted the attention of many researchers. There are many researches about “neijuan” varying from its popularity reasons and its trend to its application, but there is very little research about the cultural differences between China and the West behind this phenomenon. Therefore, based on Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory, this paper analyses the different manifestations of “neijuan” in China and the West and explores the cultural differences between the two.

Keywords: neijuan, Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory, cultural differences

Introduction

The term “neijuan”, in English “involution”, was first put forward by German philosopher Immanuel Kant in his book *Critique of Judgment* (Kant, 1987). Then, American anthropologist Alexander Coldenweiser used “involution” to describe a cultural pattern, that is, when the social or cultural pattern stagnates, it is confined to its own internal complex transformation and cannot become a new form (Guo Jiqiang, 2007). And American anthropologist Geertz also applied this term in his book *Involution of Agriculture: The Process of Ecological Change in Indonesia*. Geertz found that under the pressure of population, farmers continue to increase the labor input in rice planting, and produce at the cost of diminishing marginal returns regardless of efficiency. Labor tends to involute, thus forming “growth without development” (Geertz, 1963). Chinese scholar Huang Zongzhi (2000) first introduced the term into the country in his book *Smallholder Economy and Social Change in North China*. He summed up the connotation of involution as growth without development.

As a highly academic term, “neijuan” was first used in smallholder economy to describe the process of increasing labor force into agricultural production in the context of limited land area.

In October 2020, several pictures of college students reading while riding a bike, using a computer while riding a bike and covering their bed with books flooded the Internet. The student who uses his computer while cycling has been dubbed “卷王” and has been trending online, sparking discussions about involution. In December 2020, “neijuan” was selected as one of the “Top 10 Buzzwords of 2020” in *Biting Words*. The core connotation of involution gradually evolved into “the endless superposition and entanglement, self-replication

of the original way of development of things to a certain extent, accompanied by increased internal consumption and self-locking” (Gao Shuihong, 2020). Since then, the use of the term has gradually expanded, not only to traditional smallholder economic studies, but also to grassroots organization management, social science research and school education and other fields.

Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions Theory

Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory is a framework developed by Dutch psychologist Gilder Hofstede to measure cultural differences across countries (Hofstede, 2008). He believed that culture is the mental programming that people share in an environment that distinguishes a group of people from others. Through his research, he categorized the differences between cultures into six basic dimensions of cultural values: Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism versus Collectivism, Masculinity versus Femininity, Long-term versus Short-term and Indulgence versus Restraint.

In light of the characteristics of “neijuan”, this paper explores the cultural differences between China and the West from the perspective of some of Hofstede’s cultural values, including Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism versus Collectivism and Masculinity versus Femininity.

Uncertainty Avoidance refers to whether a society is threatened by uncertain events and unconventional circumstances through formal channels to avoid and control uncertainty.

The Individualism versus Collectivism dimension is a measure of whether a society as a whole is concerned with the interests of the individual or the collective.

The Masculinity versus Femininity dimension looks at whether a society has more masculine qualities, such as competitiveness and assertiveness, or feminine qualities, such as modesty and caring, as well as defining masculine and feminine functions. Regarding the other dimensions, we will not repeat them here.

The Different Manifestations of “neijuan” in China and the West

Due to the different national contexts and social environments, involution is manifested differently in different countries. In this part, different manifestations of “neijuan” in China and the West will be analyzed.

The Manifestation of “neijuan” in China

Nowadays, China is still the world’s largest developing country and is in a critical transition period. Given that situation, this paper analyzes the manifestation of “neijuan” from these two aspects, including the main groups and main sectors of “neijuan”.

Firstly, the phenomenon of “neijuan” is mainly found among university students and the middle class and above. The migrant workers who are really struggling to survive in the cracks of the city may not yet know such an out-of-the-way word as involution. In addition, with the rapid development of online social media, university students and the middle class and above, as the main Internet users, are the most vulnerable to the impact of the new term involution. And as it’s mentioned before, several photos of university students reading books and using computers while riding bicycles have stirred up widespread discussion online. Since then, the phenomenon of involution has become increasingly common among university students. The main groups of involution also include the middle class and above that is because they have more social wealth and resources

than the average people, but they also have to work constantly to prevent their wealth and resources from being divided up by other hardworking people.

Secondly, involution gradually penetrates all walks of life. Today, the phenomenon of involution is mainly found in industries such as finance, internet, computers, banking and doctors, which are traditionally perceived as stressful and often linked to “996” and “social animals”. Many researchers have noted the phenomenon of involution in education sector. The double reduction policy enacted last year is one of the initiatives to address the involution of education.

Involution does not only occur in education system, but also in labour markets. While the normal working hours should be 8 hours per day and 5 day per week, the “996” work schedule refers to 6 days of working from 9 AM till 9 PM per week, and this is definitely not the worst case. It is important to emphasize that their boss did not explicitly ask them to work overtime, but with limited resources, they have to join the competition and work overtime in order to survive in the brutal workplace and keep their job.

The Manifestation of “neijuan” in the West

As we all know, most countries of the West are developed countries. To some extent, they have a better and more robust social welfare system. This system gives the population a higher level of livelihood security and allows people to devote themselves to their work without worry. But this is not to say that the phenomenon of involution does not exist in Western societies; it exists in them too, just relatively less severely than in China. Anyway, the phenomenon of involution is not unique to China.

In terms of the main groups of involution, the phenomenon of involution is mainly found in the middle and upper class of the West. As is mentioned before, the Western countries have a relatively robust welfare system, so most of the average people are usually satisfied with life as it is. Because even if they lost their job, they will get subsidies from the government. Wednesday Martin, Yale anthropologist, describes the phenomenon of involution in the American upper class in her book *Primates of Park Avenue*. When she moved to the Upper East Side with her husband and children, she had no idea of the rules of life there. Starting with finding a flat, buying a school house and applying for private schools for her children, she fought an uphill “battle” that was as intense as running for President of the United States (Xu Tianning, 2018).

Data gathered shows that the phenomenon of involution is mainly found in education sector in the West. According to a UNESCO report, the number of college students has more than doubled from the start of 2000s. In the United States, research shows four in ten millennials aged 25-37 have a bachelor’s degree or above, but earning less than the previous generation of the same education level. The British press has pointed out that in the UK many middle-class parents are moving to better school districts for their children, with some explicitly saying they would be willing to pay £50,000 or more for a “school district house” in order to ensure a good school place for their children. Many parents take out loans to pay for their children’s private school tuition, and some may take out a second or third mortgage to support their children’s education. Some parents even quit their jobs to help their children study at home until they find a good school.

The Cultural Differences Between China and the West Behind “neijuan”

Today, our society is in the dilemma of involution. But we cannot only talk about this phenomenon and trap in it but do not find the reasons why it gets more and more ubiquitous in our society and figure out how to address it. In this part, this article will explore the cultural differences between China and the West behind “neijuan”, in hope of providing some enlightenment for later research addressing the phenomenon of involution.

Uncertainty Avoidance

To put it simply, uncertainty avoidance means that when faced with uncertain factors, human beings take some approaches to solve and reduce the harm and impact of these factors on themselves. Compared with many Western countries, China has a higher degree of uncertainty avoidance. Traditionally, Chinese people often see the inherent uncertainty in life as a threat that they always want to overcome. Chinese people are good at foreseeing future dangers, so they obviously avoid things that cannot be determined, in order to “seek advantages and avoid disadvantages”. Most Westerners are receptive to uncertainty, they think it is a characteristic of life, and they are optimistic and anticipating the arrival of each day (Luo Mingxu, 2007).

In most Western countries, many people still do not wear masks, although there are already many death cases due to the pandemic. They think freedom to breathe and talk is more important, and they do not seem to be afraid of death threats. In America, some people who lost their jobs during the pandemic do not worry about it and even do not want to find a new job because even if they do not work, they still have unemployment benefits from the government. So, there is less the phenomenon of involution in their labor markets.

At present, China is in a period of reform and transformation. The rapid changes in politics, economy and culture have aggravated social uncertainty and risk factors, and also caused shocks and fluctuations in social mentality. The complexity and uncertainties are increasing in the process of social development. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic is still circulating around the world, which also increases the uncertainty of life. Seeing these increasing uncertainties, in China, many university students are choosing to study in graduate schools, study abroad, take teaching exams and civil service exams in search of a secure job within the system; many office workers are working harder to prevent redundancy. In recent years, it has become increasingly difficult to take either the teaching or civil service examinations, as more and more people want to enter the system in search of a secure job. For example, a doctoral student in management from a “double first-class” university said he would consider returning to his hometown to take the civil service exam after graduation. This shows that even for those with high qualifications, they have a high sense of avoiding uncertainty and are reluctant to risk trying other jobs, just to find a secure job. Therefore, the phenomenon of involution is more common in China.

Individualism versus Collectivism

To be specific, Individualism versus Collectivism refers to the degree to which members of a particular culture remain individually independent or integrated into the group. Western culture is typically an individualistic culture in which the values of the individual are paramount and cultural behaviour is individual-oriented, while Chinese culture is typically a collectivist culture in which the values of the community are paramount and cultural behaviour is other-oriented (Jiang Yan, 2013).

Westerners attach more importance to personal feelings. Individual values and ethics encourage the pursuit of personal achievement, personal power and self-independence, and people tend to take responsibility for themselves and not be emotionally dependent on the group, for example. However, China is a typical collective society. People in a collective society are prone to be influenced by others. Traditionally, Chinese people like comparing themselves with others in terms of class, wealth, diplomatic, and so forth. Mostly importantly, involution must be a group behaviour, a process where a group of people intensify each other's anxieties. When we see others working hard, we have to work harder to prevent falling behind, even if we are forced to do so. A prime example of this is the corporate culture of overtime, when you see that others are still working overtime, even though your own work has been completed but you still have to continue working overtime with others. But in the West, there is basically no overtime culture, they have an eight-hour working day and usually finish at 5pm. In this sense, different cultures have the different degree of involution.

Masculinity versus Femininity

Cultures high in the masculinity dimension focus on achievement, power, and possessions, regarding work as more central to one's life, differing gender roles more than feminine culture. Cultures high in the femininity dimensions value interpersonal relationships, compassion, and quality of life. China is a typical performance society, whereas most western countries are welfare society.

Since ancient times, the Chinese people have been known for their industrious and brave characteristics. Many Chinese idioms, such as “diligence makes up for lack”, “Heaven rewards diligence” and “work hard to get rich”, indicate that the Chinese people value the quality of hard work. In Chinese society, people values competition, performance, and achievement. As a result, people tend to openly talk about their successes and status. Moreover, China has a population of 1.4 billion, but resources are limited, especially in terms of jobs. So, the competition between people is fiercer. Everyone wants to take more efforts to get greater achievements and higher status than others.

By contrast, the Netherlands is a highly feminine country, placing more importance on caring for others and quality of life. Standing out from the crowd or being different from others is not admirable. In the Netherlands, it is common to say about someone who is showing off or showing too much personality that they should “act normal”, to which might be added: “that's already crazy enough!” Being “different” from what is considered “normal” is not admired nor appreciated. Other highly feminine countries can be found in Scandinavia, where a similar cultural attitude is expressed in the *Law of Jante*: don't think you are special or better than others. In addition, most Western countries have a robust social welfare system and people attach more importance to personal values once they have secured their livelihood.

Conclusion

In China, although the term “neijuan” has only become popular in recent years, the phenomenon of involution has existed in society for a long time and has only come to the attention of researchers in the last few years. Some researchers explored the reasons of its popularity and the other analyzed its trend and application in reality. This paper, based on some of Hofstede's cultural values, including Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism versus Collectivism and Masculinity versus Femininity, explores the cultural differences between China and the West behind the phenomenon of involution.

Through analysis, it found that China has a culture high in uncertainty avoidance, collectivism and masculinity dimensions. In addition, it is a more competitive society in terms of its current national situation. Therefore, the phenomenon of involution is relatively more severe than in most Western countries. Given that, this paper hopes to provide some enlightenment for further studies addressing this problem.

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