

INVOLUTING INFRASTRUCTURES OF ASPIRATION: CHINESE EDUCATION-MIGRATION AND THE PURSUIT OF ELITE SCHOOLING IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how China's education-migration infrastructure, comprising State policies, commercial intermediaries, social media platforms, and international schools, sustains aspiration while simultaneously producing social and infrastructural involution (内卷, *neijuan*), a term widely used to describe the exhaustion generated by intensifying competition and diminishing returns. How do social and infrastructural forms of involution interact as mutually constitutive processes that intensify competition, emotional investment, and exhaustion within education-migration strategies? Drawing on longitudinal, multi-sited ethnography with families, children, and educators in mainland China and the United Kingdom (2021–2023), I argue that the China–United Kingdom education-migration infrastructure has become increasingly involuted: although it continues to operate through intensified effort, expanding intermediary systems, and growing emotional investment, its promise of distinction, security, and upward mobility has weakened. Once viewed as an exclusive route to global advantage, education migration has become saturated due to overcapacity, policy volatility, demographic decline, intensifying competition from Chinese international schools, and broader forms of social involution. Social and infrastructural involution are mutually constitutive processes: infrastructural saturation intensifies social competition, while social involution further sustains and expands the infrastructures through which competition is organised.

KEYWORDS

education-migration, infrastructural involution, social involution
(*neijuan*), China, elite boarding in the United Kingdom

INFRAESTRUTURAS EM INVOLUÇÃO DA ASPIRAÇÃO: MIGRAÇÃO EDUCATIVA CHINESA E A PROCURA DE EDUCAÇÃO ESCOLAR DE ELITE NO REINO UNIDO

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa de que forma a infraestrutura de migração educativa chinesa, constituída por políticas estatais, intermediários comerciais, plataformas de redes sociais e escolas internacionais, sustenta a aspiração, produzindo simultaneamente involução social e infraestrutural (内卷 *neijuan*), um conceito amplamente utilizado para descrever o esgotamento resultante da intensificação da concorrência e da consequente diminuição dos retornos. De que forma é que as formas sociais e infraestruturais de involução interagem como processos mutuamente constitutivos que intensificam a concorrência, o investimento emocional e o esgotamento no âmbito das

estratégias de migração educativa? Com base numa etnografia longitudinal e multissituada com famílias, crianças e educadores na China continental e no Reino Unido (2021–2023), argumenta-se que a infraestrutura de migração educativa entre a China e o Reino Unido entrou em processo de involução: embora continue a operar através da intensificação do esforço, da expansão de sistemas intermediários e do aumento do investimento emocional, a sua promessa de distinção, segurança e mobilidade ascendente tem enfraquecido. Anteriormente vista como uma via exclusiva para a vantagem global, a migração educativa tornou-se saturada devido ao excesso de capacidade, à volatilidade das políticas, ao declínio demográfico, à intensificação da concorrência proveniente das escolas internacionais chinesas e a formas mais amplas de involução social. A involução social e a infraestrutural são processos mutuamente constitutivos: a saturação infraestrutural intensifica a concorrência social, enquanto a involução social, por sua vez, sustenta e expande as infraestruturas através das quais essa concorrência é organizada.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

migração educativa, involução infraestrutural, involução social
(*neijuan*), China, internato de elite no Reino Unido

1. INTRODUCTION

In this article, I examine how the China–United Kingdom (UK) education-migration pathway is becoming an involuting infrastructure of aspiration, as involution emerges not only as a social condition of intensified competition and diminishing returns, but also as an infrastructural effect that is produced through the saturation of intermediated education-migration pathways. Social and infrastructural involution are mutually constitutive processes: infrastructural saturation intensifies social competition, while social involution further sustains and expands the infrastructures through which competition is organised. Although this infrastructure has not disappeared, its expansion and momentum have slowed as it now operates through intensified effort, expanding intermediary systems, and growing emotional investment, even as its promise of distinction, security, and upward mobility weakens.

Once a relatively exclusive route pursued by wealthy elites, education migration has become a normalised middle- and upper-middle-class strategy, reducing its capacity to generate social differentiation while intensifying competition for the same educational and professional outcomes. Yet families have not simply abandoned this pathway: it remains deeply embedded in practices of neo-familism, parental responsibility, child-centredness, and intergenerational obligation. The current tensions surrounding education migration are therefore not only economic or logistical, but also affective: parents and children question whether early overseas schooling can still deliver the “good life” once promised, particularly in the context of emotional strain, family separation, and growing concerns around wellbeing and mental health. At the same time, aspiration itself is not disappearing, but rather being reconfigured through new forms and infrastructures, including artificial intelligence-assisted tutoring, Chinese international schools, regional

education hubs in Asia, and State policies such as double reduction. These developments do not signal the end of aspiration-driven mobility, but rather its transformation into new and increasingly inward-oriented forms of educational and emotional labour.

“I’m not sure I’ll ever get married or have children” (Christy, personal communication, September 10, 2023). Christy is a 24-year-old research participant I first met in Shanghai 12 years ago, who now lives in London, pursuing a master’s degree in education in the city. On an autumn day in 2023, we are sitting at a Japanese soufflé pancake *café* in Soho, where we meet once a year for a friendly catch-up. She is smart, career-driven, and lives alone in an affluent neighbourhood in London, while her parents travel back and forth between the UK and their home base in Shanghai.

It’s too expensive to have a child now (...) and anyway, I have no experience in dating whatsoever. I know how to study. And now I have to make it through my MA [master of arts] programme and then find a job that is stable and that I like. I want to find work in England and help teenagers’ mental health. (Christy, personal communication, September 10, 2023)

As she talks, she explains that she is struggling with this new career choice, so different from her original science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) degree. “My parents are so worried I won’t have a high salary and that I’ll have an unstable future. But I think, however hard it is, I still want to try. And reluctantly, they support me” (Christy, personal communication, September 10, 2023).

Christy was one of my first students in Shanghai in the early 2010s, when I was working as a private tutor and forming close relationships with families who later became participants in my doctoral research. Many of these families have since left China, settling in England temporarily or permanently, or moving back and forth, and we now meet regularly in the UK. Christy belongs to the first generation of self-funded overseas students from mainland China (Lindon-Morris, 2024), who travelled to England without their parents and whose mobility was enabled by a sophisticated global migration infrastructure, defined as: “the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility” (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014, p. S124). Coming from an urban Chinese background, her parents could afford international education through Early Study Abroad, described by Kang and Abelmann (2011, as cited in Fei, 2024) as the “education exodus of pre-college students” (p. 194). Rather than resolving educational anxiety, the UK pathway often reformulates it. The intense pressures associated with the *Gaokao* (高考, The Nationwide Unified Examination for Admissions to General Universities and Colleges) system were replaced by more diffuse anxieties surrounding employability, emotional wellbeing, selfhood, and the ability to convert elite educational credentials into secure futures. What families pursued as an escape from involution increasingly became another site through which uncertainty and pressure were reproduced transnationally.

Beyond the pursuit of globally convertible educational credentials and elite status, choosing a UK educational pathway was also widely perceived by parents as offering children a happier, more balanced childhood outside the intense pressures of the Chinese exam-oriented system. For many families, overseas education represented not only a strategy of class reproduction, but also an attempt to protect children from the emotional exhaustion associated with the *Gaokao* university entrance examination system, widely known for subjecting students to intense academic pressure from kindergarten through secondary school (Jia et al., 2025). In Shanghai, Christy attended an international school and received regular tutoring through a private education consultancy that supported her school placement in the UK, assisted with visa arrangements, and prepared her for boarding school entrance examinations and British-style assessments such as the Independent Schools Examinations Board, General Certificates of Secondary Education and Advanced Level examinations. All of the hundreds of students and the 25–30 families I have encountered since 2010 who pursued this pathway considered the services of such private firms essential for navigating the educational and migratory process, and minimising obstacles along the education-migration journey.

Having arrived in England at the age of 11, Christy enrolled in a prestigious boarding school in the north of England, and later completed a world-class engineering degree at a top university in London. This was never her dream, though. For better career prospects in the future, her parents encouraged her to choose a STEM field, while her heart was always in the arts and youth education. Now, after finishing her bachelor of Science she has finally been allowed to choose a study path of her own, while still being financially and emotionally supported by her parents. Although coming from an affluent family, she is anxious about her future and finding a job that is financially and creatively rewarding.

Between 2010 and 2015, the global education-migration infrastructure connecting wealthy Chinese families with world-class institutions, primarily in English-speaking countries, expanded rapidly. The number of primary and secondary school students coming to Britain from mainland China was reported as “2,893 new enrolments in 2014/15 — 800 more than last year. This is the first time China has overtaken Hong Kong as the top source country for ISC’s [Independent Schools Council] members, some 1,200 independent K–12 schools across Britain” (Smith, 2015, para. 3). This infrastructure facilitated every aspect of students’ educational trajectories, including testing, visa assistance, host-family placement, school matching, and mediation between school administrations in England and parents in Shanghai (Boarding Schools’ Association, 2021; Wei, 2011). This period coincided with my arrival in Shanghai when, working as a private tutor at an education consultancy, I began to hear more parents planning similar pathways for their children, preparing their departure for a boarding school in England as early as age 11. Many of Christy’s peers among overseas students from mainland China, who spoke English without a foreign accent and who studied at prestigious private boarding schools in the suburbs of Shanghai, can be described as “born international”, having followed a British-style curriculum since nursery.

However, over the past decade, following the steady expansion of the industry and families' willingness to invest in their children's concerted cultivation (Lareau, 2003/2011) and move children to the UK for education, application numbers have begun to fluctuate (Smith, 2025), generating increasing anxiety among education providers, parents, and students alike. One reason for this is the reduction in student numbers as fertility rates have dropped sharply in China. As demographer Chen (2023) writes, the "recent rapid decline in fertility is driven by the postponement of marriage, a large reduction in fertility for lower education groups, and a rising proportion of younger women accessing higher education" (p. 497).

There is a complex set of other reasons for the decrease in the number of early-study-abroad students coming to the UK. As a general trend, there has been a decline in application numbers to independent boarding schools in the UK, particularly since the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019–2020. Shifts in strategies and perceptions of education-migration during this period reflect a complex set of underlying factors. While seeking international education, both within China and abroad, has increasingly become a default family strategy for managing anxieties about class reproduction, studying overseas, even through elite pathways, does not necessarily alleviate educational pressure. Instead, these pathways generate new forms of uncertainty and emotional strain, revealing that educational privilege does not necessarily guarantee security or wellbeing.

This development forms part of a broader trend of infrastructural involution, which Xiang and Lindquist (2014) describe as "the interplay between different dimensions of migration infrastructure [that] make it self-perpetuating and self-serving, and impede rather than enhance people's migratory capability" (p. S122). As the term *neijuan* (内卷, rolling or curling inward, involution) entered popular discourse around 2020, it provided a vocabulary for diagnosing exhaustion, a recognition that ever-greater effort yields diminishing returns. The term was quickly adopted to capture the everyday hardships of families, became ubiquitous in online forums and academic discussions, and offers insight into how parents interpret the global education race.

As Christy's story suggests, parents face uncertainty about the future, and education-migration no longer functions as the reliable solution it was once believed to be. Young people experience a contradictory process of individualisation, asserting their own aspirations for the future, alongside enduring expectations of filial compliance rooted in earlier generations. These tensions become visible when children do not follow parental advice, as with Christy's decision not to work in STEM and not to follow her parents' expected life trajectory, such as early marriage and parenthood. Instead, young people pursue study and career paths that their parents would not have supported only a few years earlier, when such choices were not perceived as secure or profitable.

These responses signal both resistance and resignation to educational and migratory systems shaped by the dynamics of involution. While existing scholarship and public

discourse often deploy *neijuan* as shorthand for hyper-competition leading to burnout, typically focusing on middle-class students and market saturation, my ethnographic research suggests that these dynamics are equally salient among elite and upper-middle-class families. Financial and social privilege, in this sense, does not insulate families from systemic pressures. Drawing on the concept of “migration infrastructure” (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014), I suggest that the current crisis within the China–UK education-migration system is becoming affective rather than material. What is eroding is not simply the economic or logistical viability of transnational schooling, but the emotional foundations that once sustained faith in its transformative promise. Contemporary migration strategies thus exceed a Bourdieusian logic of capital accumulation, as families prioritise forms of value centred on wellbeing, mental health, and harmonious family life, which may sit uneasily with policy narratives focused on affordability, labour markets, and institutional rankings.

This article contributes to anthropological debates on social and infrastructural burnout by arguing that infrastructures of aspiration ultimately tend to self-neutralise: once participation becomes widespread, the distinction and prestige they promise begin to dissolve. By situating Chinese families’ experiences within broader discussions of class reproduction, aspiration, moral personhood, and structural constraint, the article advances ongoing work in anthropology and China studies on why involution has become such a powerful conceptual and affective language for making sense of contemporary life. It further contributes to the conceptualisation of “involution” by bringing together infrastructural and social involution as analytical categories grounded in everyday practice, demonstrating that involution exceeds narrow understandings of hyper-competition leading to burnout, and cannot be reduced solely to the effects of neoliberal restructuring in education and labour markets.

2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The article draws on longitudinal ethnographic research conducted between 2020 and 2023 among education consultants, teachers, and wealthy families in Shanghai (four families whose migration journeys I have followed closely since 2010 and about 25 others I met through my job as a private tutor who later agreed to become research participants in my doctoral studies). I first established relationships with my interlocutors while living in China between 2010 and 2019, and subsequently carried out doctoral fieldwork in England and online. In addition to regular participant observation at international schools and informal time spent with parents and their children, I conducted semi-structured interviews, observed parents’ public online chat groups, and analysed public posts on Chinese social media platforms (WeChat, Red Note and Sina Weibo) as well as English-language platforms (LinkedIn and South China Morning Post). I also followed Chinese- and English-language media coverage of contemporary parenting styles and international education, both of which are currently widely debated in China.

3. THE GENEALOGY OF THE TERM “INVOLUTION”

3.1. EARLY USE OF THE TERM “INVOLUTION”

In the humanities and social sciences, many scholars (Des Forges, 2022; Liang, 2024) associate the term “involution” with American anthropologist and cultural theorist Goldenweiser (1936), who used it to describe a process of internal elaboration without structural change: patterns that grow gradually more complex but remain confined within an existing cultural frame. Later, Geertz (1963) repurposed the concept in his analysis of Javanese wet-rice cultivation, defining “agricultural involution” as the intensification of labour and social complexity in the absence of technological or institutional transformation, in other words describing societies with more labour but no increased output, a formulation now used in China to describe greater effort without growth.

3.2. “INVOLUTION” IN THE CHINESE CONTEXT AND IN ANTHROPOLOGY

Although the term “involution” is widely used in both public and scholarly discourse, it has often been deployed with limited critical reflection. In media, everyday language, and academic debates alike, involution serves as a shorthand for burnout and the trap of hyper-competition. Anthropologists have critiqued this contemporary usage for its conceptual overextension and depoliticising effects. Originally developed as a historically specific structural diagnosis, involution has been repurposed in popular and policy discourse to describe individual exhaustion, thereby shifting attention away from questions of institutional design, governance, and political economy. In the Chinese context, *neijuan* functions less as an explanatory concept than as a moralised idiom of distress, one that articulates anxiety while simultaneously pointing to systemic problems within an accelerated educational race to the top.

In recent years, the term “involution” has become a central idiom in contemporary China for articulating experiences of pressure, stagnation, and intensifying competition. Once a specialist anthropological concept, *neijuan* has moved into everyday language and public debate, particularly since around 2020 when it began circulating widely across social media, education discourse, and discussions of work and social mobility in post-reform China. As the term travelled through online interaction and popular vernacular usage, its meaning also shifted significantly beyond its earlier analytical formulations. As anthropologist Lin (2023) notes, contemporary academic uses, and occasional misuses, of “involution” borrow from this popular vernacular, applying the concept across diverse geographical and cultural contexts in ways that obscure its genealogy. Rather than a stable analytical category, *neijuan* has become a fluid and evolving idiom for expressing the affective experience of intensified competition and diminishing returns. The term has been widely taken up by students, parents, migrant workers, and white-collar employees to express the sense of doing more for less, a feeling associated with diminishing returns in an era of slowed economic growth and heightened class anxiety. Furthermore,

involution in the Chinese context has a special relevance due to the economic and social transformations that have occurred since Deng Xiaoping's opening reforms (开放, *kaifang*) at the end of the 1970s, which led to the meteoric development of the economy and technology, and a steady slowdown in the 2020s.

While the literal meaning of *neijuan* is rolling or curling inward, its social meaning is often conveyed through metaphor. Lin (2023), for example, likens popular understandings of involution to Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, in which the Red Queen explains that in a "slow sort of country" one must run as fast as possible merely to stay in the same place, and twice as fast to get anywhere else. Similar metaphors circulate widely in Chinese popular culture. The viral figure of the "Tsinghua involution king" (Wang & Wang, 2021), a student completing coursework while cycling home, became emblematic of exhaustion, endless competition, and the perceived futility of excessive effort. The South Korean television series *Sky Castle* (Ji-Hyun, 2019), widely viewed in China, likewise resonates for its portrayal of hyper-competitive education, encapsulated in a scene where one character compares social competition to standing up in a cinema: once everyone stands, no one sees better. Other popular, albeit sensationalist, metaphors, such as "Sisyphus on a peloton" (Liu, 2021), similarly combine classical imagery of endless struggle with contemporary symbols of self-optimisation and performance.

In the Chinese context, scholars have used "involution" to examine a wide range of social transformations. Although the popular use of involution emerged around 2020, the concept has a longer intellectual lineage. Historian Duara (1987) introduced the notion of "State involution" to describe situations in which State-building efforts, rather than strengthening State capacity, produce dysfunctional State-society relations. State involution occurs when modern governance institutions are established but become captured by administrative intermediaries, such as local elites or bureaucrats, who divert them toward their own interests. The result is a State that appears active yet remains weak or ineffective. Duara's use of the term shifts attention away from cultural or institutional explanations of State weakness and toward the dynamics of governance itself, showing how attempts to implement modern administration can enable existing social powers to undermine formal processes. Drawing on examples from China and India, particularly rural North China, Duara (1987) demonstrates how this dynamic unfolds across different historical and social contexts.

Sociologist Huang (2021) extended the concept in his analysis of China's rural economy, using it to describe a condition in which expanding labour inputs coexist with diminishing individual returns. In this sense, involution captures a pattern of "growth without development", in which increased effort fails to translate into improved outcomes (Dong et al., 2025; Huang, 2021). While other scholars may not always name the process explicitly as involution, a broad body of literature has examined closely related dynamics that are highly relevant to contemporary China. Earlier studies offer further insight into this affective field in a broader global context, foregrounding questions of

aspiration and the tightening link between achievement and exhaustion (Bayly, 2013; Berlant, 2011; Rosa & Henning, 2017), which resonates within the Chinese context of self-improvement, moral obligation, and family responsibility as central to the lived experience of China's post-socialist transformation (Anagnost, 2008; Fong, 2011; Sun & Yu, 2022; Yan, 2018, 2009/2020, 2021). Taken together, this literature suggests that the current popularity of involution is deeply embedded in longer-standing socio-cultural processes, rather than being a purely recent discursive phenomenon.

Extending the notion of infrastructural involution, I slightly diverge from Xiang and Lindquist's (2014) conceptualisation of migration infrastructure as self-perpetuating and self-serving. In the China–UK education-migration context, rising costs, expanding intermediary systems, and intensified parental investment no longer necessarily generate sustained growth in student mobility. Rather than focusing on institutional expansion alone, I use infrastructural involution to describe the saturation, slowing dynamism, and affective exhaustion emerging within the industry facilitating Chinese student migration to UK independent boarding schools. In doing so, I connect involution not only to institutional processes, but also to everyday social experiences, emotional labour, and broader socio-cultural transformations.

While Yan does not explicitly theorise involution as a central concept, his work provides some of the strongest anthropological foundations for understanding why involution has become such a powerful social condition in contemporary China. Yan's (2009/2020, 2021, 2023) analyses of moral crisis, rising individualism, and the growing complexities of personhood are particularly relevant here, as they illuminate the kinds of social pressures that the term *neijuan* has come to name. His work on moral personhood demonstrates how parental responsibility and moral obligation have intensified under conditions of post-socialist individualisation, while aspirations have become tethered to intensified labour, emotional strain, and deferred promises of future security. These dynamics closely align with the contemporary popular understanding of *neijuan* in China.

The circulation of involution across platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, Douyin, and Red Note, as well as in English-language outlets including Sixth Tone and the *South China Morning Post*, reflects a broader public preoccupation with affective exhaustion rather than material deprivation alone. In popular discourse, involution describes excessive, self-defeating competition, whether in 996 hustle culture (Bao, 2022) schedules, educational escalation, or price wars in technology and consumer goods, which may yield short-term gains while eroding long-term wellbeing, investment, and social trust. Crucially, as my ethnographic findings show, these anxieties are not confined to economically precarious groups. They are equally present among upper-middle-class and affluent families, for whom financial investment in elite international education is feasible, yet experienced as emotionally costly and morally ambivalent rather than as a clear pathway to security.

4. INVOLUTING INFRASTRUCTURES OF ASPIRATION

Social and infrastructural forms of involution interact and mutually reinforce one another within China–UK education-migration. I identify six interconnected dynamics that illustrate this process: (a) the shift from scarcity to saturation, as overseas education has expanded from an elite exception into a normalised middle-class strategy with a diminishing capacity to produce distinction; (b) shrinking population and neo-familism, which help explain why families remain deeply invested in education-migration despite growing doubts about its value; (c) the emergence of regional educational alternatives, reflecting the declining inevitability of the UK as the dominant destination for elite education; (d) digitally-assisted learning technologies, which demonstrate how aspiration is being reconfigured rather than abandoned; (e) growing concerns surrounding wellbeing and mental health, and (f) Chinese State policies such as double reduction, which reveal mounting affective exhaustion and State attempts to manage the social consequences of involution. Together, these dynamics demonstrate how educational aspiration persists through intensified competition, emotional investment, and infrastructural saturation.

4.1. FROM SCARCITY TO SATURATION

The China–UK education-migration pathway was once a rare and prestigious route into global mobility. In the early 2000s, studying abroad, particularly at British boarding schools and elite sixth forms, was accessible only to wealthy elites who possessed the financial, cultural, and social capital needed to navigate constantly changing admissions systems. For these families, overseas schooling symbolised the pursuit of global elite status and signalled a distinctive cosmopolitan orientation in post-reform China. Children who were sent to the UK formed a small, socially distinguished cohort whose mobility represented a strategic intervention in their families' efforts to secure future advantage in a rapidly stratifying society.

However, with the rapid expansion of the education-migration industry, including consultancies, agencies, guardianship networks, and private tutors, alongside the growth of the middle class in post-reform China, application numbers from mainland China experienced a meteoric rise from the early 2000s onward, making China “the largest global source of transnational students” (Hansen & Thøgersen, 2015, p. 3). Approximately 40,000 Chinese students studied abroad in 2000, increasing to 180,000 by 2008 and 460,000 by 2014, while United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization estimates that more than 700,000 Chinese students were enrolled in overseas higher education by 2012 (Hansen & Thøgersen, 2015). What was once a relatively exclusive route into global mobility gradually became normalised among middle- and upper-middle-class families. As a result, the education-migration infrastructure became increasingly saturated, while the symbolic and practical value of elite overseas education began to weaken. As middle-class and elite strategies converged, reaching the top of the educational hierarchy required ever greater investment, coordination, and

emotional labour, with growing numbers of families competing for the same educational and professional outcomes.

An intricately and globally connected ecosystem of education consultants, guardianship firms, and British school recruitment networks now coordinates and routinises what was previously an elite niche. In major Chinese cities, such as Shanghai, Beijing, Hangzhou, Shenzhen, and Chengdu, entire industries have emerged: education agencies now offer admissions coaching, personal statement workshops, critical thinking courses, interview training, John Locke Institute essay (John Locke Institute, n.d) and STEM competitions, which may strengthen university applications, and participation in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award youth development programme, tailored specifically for UK school applications. Furthermore, guardianship agencies have expanded in tandem, offering 24-hour welfare support, host-family placements, and cultural mediation. British schools likewise maintain Mandarin-speaking admissions teams and targeted recruitment pipelines. What was once navigated through informal advice and personal connections is now organised through a sophisticated market of expert services.

This shift has created what I describe as “infrastructural saturation” that leads to processes of involution. Due to overcapacity, an infrastructure that used to produce distinction through scarcity now generates sameness through scale. A growing number of parents I talked to comment that “everyone’s child goes abroad” or “there is no other choice”. These statements reveal not confidence, but a sense of compelled conformity: the feeling that opting out has become impossible because the stakes of falling behind seem too high. Saturation thus manifests not only as quantitative expansion, but as an affective condition, one in which aspiration persists but meaning and distinction erode. The result is a field of flattened distinction.

4.2. DEMOGRAPHY, DISTANCE, AND THE MORAL WEIGHT OF THE “TREASURED CHILD”

Existing scholarship has long described the emergence of the treasured child or little emperor (Yan, 2021) as a central outcome of the one-child policy era, characterised by intensified emotional, educational, and economic investment in children (Fong, 2011; Yan, 2021). Under conditions of neo-familism, the child increasingly becomes the emotional and moral centre of family life, concentrating familial hopes, anxieties, aspirations, and future security within a shrinking number of offspring.

Although the Chinese State formally ended the one-child policy in 2015 (Wang et al., 2016) and subsequently introduced fertility-boosting measures encouraging larger families, birth rates have continued to decline sharply, reaching historic lows in recent years (Fan, 2026). Despite the transition from the one-child to the three-child policy, China’s population continues to shrink, with births falling to 7.92 million in 2025 according to data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China (2026).

In this context, education-migration does not merely move children; it reorganises kinship temporality and emotional life. As fewer children carry increasingly concentrated

familial hopes and investments, long-term overseas separation becomes more difficult to justify emotionally and morally. Yan's (2023) concept of "neo-familism" is particularly useful here, highlighting transformations in contemporary Chinese family life through intensified child-centredness, emotional intimacy, parental responsibility, and the pursuit of family prosperity. These dynamics help to explain why families remain deeply invested in overseas education, even as doubts about its value intensify.

4.3. REIMAGINING THE GLOBAL: CHINA AS A "GOOD PLACE"

In contemporary education-migration, mobility is often imagined as a route to the "good life", yet the UK is gradually losing its taken-for-granted status as the most desirable destination. However, as families increasingly reassess education-migration in light of the pressures outlined above, the UK imaginary gradually weakens alongside the rise of regional alternatives. Among my participants, the fading allure of Britain is not explained solely through structural constraints such as tightening immigration regimes, but also through everyday affective and cultural disappointments that reshape aspiration (including, tellingly, repeated complaints about food and quality of life). More importantly, the decline of the UK imaginary is accompanied by the diversification of what counts as "international". Families map their ambitions onto a regional geography of prestige, in which Singapore, Japan, Hong Kong, and other intra-Asian hubs become new nodes of global schooling. At the same time, the growing concentration of Chinese students in UK selective schools is perceived to dilute the promise of cultural immersion: some parents argue that the ethnic composition of elite institutions no longer reflects British society, weakening the symbolic value of "going abroad" as a transformative encounter with difference.

This shift signals a rescaling of aspiration from transcontinental mobility toward what might be described as "global but near": sites that offer English-medium education, safety, and cultural familiarity without the risks and emotional costs of long-distance separation. The UK continues to carry prestige, but is no longer viewed as the default route to global elite education, as families move from "dreaming of the West" to curating proximity, flexibility, and strategic timing. A key driver of this reorientation is the rapid rise of Chinese international schools which, as Probert (2024) argues, are ideologically and culturally aligned with Chinese values, while maintaining international credentials. These institutions often loosen the *hukou*-based residential restrictions (户口, traditional household registration system used in mainland China) that once limited access to Shanghai's elite educational resources, enabling students from outside the city to enter prestigious "abroad-path" tracks. As market competition intensifies, long-term study in the UK becomes less attractive and, for many families, unnecessary; instead, they frame overseas education as a short, targeted investment, often limited to sixth form as preparation for university. In this context, nationalist discourses such as "anti-involution", patriotism, and forms of "cosmopolitan nationalism" align neatly with State agendas, while

also serving parental desires for stability. China is now reimagined not as a place to leave behind, but as a “good place”: safe, culturally familiar, and, despite economic slowdown, comparatively stable in an uncertain global landscape.

4.4. THE DIGITALISATION OF ASPIRATION

Another key driver of infrastructural and social involution is the rapid expansion of digital learning, which is reshaping private tutoring, educational labour, and broader processes of digitalisation in China (Hu et al., 2025; Liu, 2026). As online tutoring becomes embedded within everyday educational practices, it accelerates the tempo of learning by making support available 24/7 at home, often at a fraction of the (emotional and financial) cost of relocation, making elite tutoring widely accessible. At the same time, although the “always-on” model reduces the need for relocation, it intensifies educational productivity by extending study time into what was previously considered leisure or recovery time, thereby stretching the boundaries of the school day and collapsing the distinction between work and rest. Thus, this digital turn disrupts older business models in the tutoring economy, while producing new forms of stress and health-related concern.

Parents therefore encounter a paradox: the removal of temporal constraints — no travel, no hourly limits, and no clear ending to the learning process — transforms tutoring and self-study into potentially limitless practices that extend into evenings, weekends, and children’s supposed free time. In this sense, digital learning intensifies both infrastructural and social involution simultaneously. The increasing availability of elite educational support within China reduces the perceived necessity of long-term overseas schooling, as some families postpone migration until later educational stages or replace it with shorter-term programmes such as summer schools. At the same time, digitalisation intensifies social involution by accelerating the tempo of educational competition itself: children are expected to remain continuously engaged in practices of self-optimisation and productivity. Rather than alleviating educational pressure, digital technologies relocate and deepen involution within both domestic and transnational educational systems.

4.5. WELLBEING AS A NEW DISTINCTION

In this climate of the accelerated production of educational credentials, a popular trend has emerged: the psychologisation of aspiration. As Kuan (2015) has shown in her work on love, uncertainty, and middle-class parenting in China, emotional cultivation increasingly becomes central to how families navigate educational pressure and uncertain futures. As Kuan (2015) argues, parents are not simply nurturing children emotionally, but managing uncertainty through forms of emotional cultivation that themselves become part of parental responsibility. My research extends this argument by showing how uncertainty is also infrastructurally reproduced through increasingly saturated transnational educational systems.

Psychology and mental health have become new idioms of care, but also of self-management and moral evaluation within China's increasingly competitive educational landscape. Parents now routinely exchange advice on counselling, mindfulness workshops, therapy apps, emotional resilience, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, and physical fitness techniques through WeChat parent groups. These discussions are not limited to clinical wellbeing; they are moral conversations about how to be a good parent, and a good person, under pressure. Rather than understanding educational stress primarily as a structural condition, parents and children interpret it through the language of self-regulation, resilience, emotional adjustment, and psychological wellbeing. In this context, counselling, mindfulness, and physical training function as technologies of endurance, helping children cope with educational pressure without withdrawing from competition. As many children also expressed, the response to *neijuan*, and to *tangping* (躺平, lying flat) as a counter-logic, is not necessarily refusal of competition, but the cultivation of emotional discipline within it. Yet mental wellbeing is also framed as a long-term investment in future productivity. As one mother explained in a British boarding school parent social media group:

we used to talk about which tutor or school is best. Now we talk about how to keep the children from breaking down. Sometimes children don't deliver results after all the investments. They finish school and don't work hard to find a well-paid job. They just want to *tangping* (to lie flat) and do nothing.
(Linda [pseudonym], personal communication, May 9, 2023)

At the same time, although the language of mental health has become widespread, many families still struggle to discuss emotional distress openly within everyday family relationships. In practice, families and students oscillate between silence and confession, between stoicism and breakdown. For many parents, seeking therapy for a child becomes a sign of moral responsibility — doing the right thing — even as it sits uneasily alongside continued insistence on academic excellence and the social stigma that still surrounds psychological support. Therapy thus becomes another investment in the global child: a technology of optimisation cloaked in care.

Within China's current moral economy, wellbeing itself is becoming a new form of distinction. The infrastructure of aspiration has not disappeared; instead, aspiration itself has become increasingly emotionalised and inward-oriented. Parents who can afford counselling (both domestic and overseas), mindfulness retreats, or international therapy programmes demonstrate not only wealth, but also moral awareness. Attunement to mental and emotional wellbeing has itself become a form of elite cultural capital, signalling cosmopolitan sensitivity and what many parents in my research described as good parenting: ensuring that the child is not only academically successful, but emotionally healthy and happy. Social involution therefore generates new therapeutic and emotional infrastructures designed to manage exhaustion, yet these infrastructures simultaneously

deepen involution by transforming wellbeing itself into another site of optimisation, investment, and competition.

In this sense, the pursuit of wellbeing mirrors the logic of the involution it seeks to resist. The therapeutic turn does not abolish competition; it adds another layer to it. Parents compete not only based on grades and schools, but also through their ability to manage anxiety gracefully. WeChat support networks, therapy, mindfulness practices, and self-care rhetoric attempt to re-enchant effort by making emotional management meaningful. Yet they also reveal the system's paradox: the search for peace reproduces the very logics of performance it claims to escape.

Finally, this psychologisation reflects parental fatigue with long-term education-migration, especially to the UK, well before university. Parents increasingly question whether sending a child abroad early can deliver the personal growth and happiness promised by glossy brochures. Some expressed regret about early boarding, suggesting instead that overseas education should begin later, at age 16 for sixth form only: "they only need to prepare for entry to a good university. There is no need to separate the family so early" (Sarah, personal communication, June 20, 2022). Such statements point to the moral exhaustion at the heart of elite mobility. Migration remains materially possible, but emotionally vulnerable: sustained less by conviction than by habit, sunk costs, and the fear of falling behind.

4.6. DOUBLE REDUCTION AS ANTI-INVOLUTION POLICY

This turn to wellbeing is also evident within the education sector in China as the Chinese State introduced measures to ensure children's wellbeing. Recent media and policy discourse frame China's double reduction (双减, *shuangjian*) policy as a key institutional response to *neijuan* within the education sector. Introduced in 2021, the policy targets what policymakers describe as excessive academic burden by restricting homework loads and severely curbing the private tutoring industry, particularly in core curriculum subjects. Officially articulated as an effort to promote educational equity and healthy child development (Xue & Li, 2023), the policy reflects broader State concerns about demographic decline, declining fertility, and the long-term sustainability of human capital formation under conditions of hyper-competition.

At the policy level, double reduction seeks to interrupt an escalating cycle in which ever-greater parental investment yields diminishing educational returns. By regulating off-campus tutoring, limiting school-based assessments, and promoting quality-oriented education (素质教育, *suzhi jiaoyu*), the policy attempts to recalibrate family expectations around achievement and success. Official narratives emphasise reduced pressure, improved mental health, and the cultivation of well-rounded children through physical education, arts, and creative subjects, aligning with a vision of happy education as an antidote to exam-driven competition.

Yet, academic research and ethnographic accounts suggest that double reduction has not so much eliminated competitive pressures as displaced and reconfigured them

and reconfigured them (Zhang, 2023). For many parents and children I spoke to, restrictions on tutoring have intensified anxieties about differentiation, prompting renewed investments in alternative forms of advantage including international curricula, overseas schooling, and extracurricular credentials. Rather than resolving involution, the policy has rendered its dynamics more complex, shifting competition into less regulated domains and reinforcing perceptions that educational success remains both indispensable and increasingly unattainable within domestic systems. In addition, digital tools (online tutoring and education apps for self-study) enable families to circumvent State policies, including the 2021 double reduction reforms.

These tensions are especially visible among families already oriented toward transnational education pathways. Parents frequently describe the double reduction policy as symbolically appealing but practically insufficient, noting that while overt academic pressure is discouraged, expectations for excellence persist, often in quieter and more indirect forms. As one parent reflected in conversation: “we welcome the policy, as children should rest more now. But in practice, everyone is still afraid of falling behind because the system, the competition stays the same” (Sarah [pseudonym], personal communication, September 18, 2021).

5. CONCLUSION: THE AFTERLIFE OF ASPIRATION

This article has examined why UK-bound education-migration persists even as growing numbers of families question its value. It has outlined the emergence and genealogy of involution in the contemporary Chinese context and argued for its renewed analytical value within anthropology. The article has shown how involution operates not only as a social process but also as an infrastructural effect: a patterned condition produced through increasingly intermediated educational pathways abroad in which escalating effort is required to secure diminishing returns. As imaginaries of early overseas schooling shift, and as the moral tolerability of long-term family separation declines, these infrastructures do not simply dissolve. Instead, they become stickier and more complex, intensifying pressures on those who remain invested in them. By linking processes of social involution to dynamics of infrastructural saturation, this article contributes to anthropological debates on educational migration by demonstrating how mobility infrastructures reorganise temporalities of effort, reshape kinship obligations, and redistribute uncertainty across transnational spaces.

With the expansion of the middle class and the normalisation of elite schooling trajectories once reserved for a narrow social stratum, contemporary educational infrastructures are shaped as much by moral and affective perceptions as by material constraints. The central tension of the current system is therefore not simply financial limitation, but existential fatigue: logistical solutions to international schooling and mobility often multiply rather than alleviate labour, responsibility, and emotional strain. As parents outsource educational tasks to consultants, guardianship networks, and private

agencies, these intermediaries become infrastructural actors who coordinate applications, manage reputational risk, and translate uncertainty into actionable strategy. In this context, the symbolic value of UK education remains high, yet its inevitability is weakening. Educational trajectories are becoming shorter and more strategically segmented: families postpone long-term migration until undergraduate study, while primary and secondary education is more often completed in China or elsewhere within the region. Short-term mobility, summer programmes, single-term placements, and sixth-form-only pathways appear to persist as compromise forms that preserve symbolic capital while reducing affective cost.

At the same time, the UK-bound education-migration infrastructure has matured and professionalised. Emerging from post-reform China and expanding rapidly from the 2010s onward, it has become increasingly regulated and sustained by an industry of experts promising predictability and successful outcomes. Yet it now reveals signs of systemic fragility. Market saturation, demographic contraction, and the rise of digitally-mediated learning have hollowed out some of the symbolic and emotional substance that once powered mobility. Migration, in many cases, has shifted from a technology of transformation to a technology of class maintenance. Meanwhile, the moral economy of aspiration has become increasingly oriented toward affective governance, reflected in intensified attention to children's psychological wellbeing, emotional resilience, and mental health. This is not merely a therapeutic add-on, but a broader reconfiguration of what educational labour is expected to produce. Families remain attached to world-class, English-speaking institutions as aspirational horizons, yet they pursue alternatives that promise global outcomes with reduced distance, including Chinese international schools and regional destinations such as Singapore and Japan, as proximity, safety, and cultural familiarity become newly valued.

These findings suggest that mobility infrastructures are not reducible to economic calculations or bureaucratic mechanisms. They are sustained through moral imaginaries, affective obligations, ritualised hope, and historically sedimented aspirations. Families remain invested not only in outcomes, but also in the moral narratives that mobility makes available: responsibility, cosmopolitan personhood, intergenerational obligation, and the promise of a better future. The Chinese case is distinctive in both the speed and scale with which this infrastructure expanded, producing one of the world's largest outbound student flows. Yet its rapid exhaustion also reveals a broader structural pattern: globalised regimes of aspiration generate infrastructures that become simultaneously self-perpetuating and self-exhausting. The China–UK case therefore demonstrates how mobility pathways can persist even as their symbolic returns diminish, held in place by the belief that elite education in the UK will secure a better future, alongside sunk emotional investments and the fear of falling behind.

In sum, the China–UK education-migration infrastructure has undergone a historical shift from scarcity to saturation, from exception to normative expectation, and from

prestige to routine. Yet it persists because families remain entangled in the affective and moral logics that sustain it, even as guarantees of future certainty weaken. This paradox is characteristic of contemporary mobility infrastructures more broadly: they endure through emotion, obligation, and historical momentum, as much as through material advantage. It is precisely this condition of continued participation amid declining conviction that provides a foundation for understanding the exhaustion, disillusionment, and involution that increasingly shape Chinese educational mobility today.

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