

# Why Is Involution (Not Evolution or Revolution) the Central Concept in My Understanding of Chinese History?

Philip C. C. Huang

Institute for Advanced Historical and Social Research, Beijing, China, and

Los Angeles, USA

Department of History, University of California, Los Angeles, USA

[huang@history.ucla.edu](mailto:huang@history.ucla.edu)

NO OCRID

为什么内卷（而非演化或革命）是我对中国历史的理解的主要用词？

黄宗智

历史与社会高等研究所、加利福尼亚大学洛杉矶校区历史系

*Received 15 May 2025 | Accepted 15 June 2025*

## Abstract:

**Involution** has been the key concept in my studies of Chinese history over the “longue durée.” It spotlights the reality of relatively high population pressure on farmland, with ever-decreasing farm size per capita throughout later imperial Chinese history, especially in the Ming-Qing era. Distinguished from gradually changing **evolution** or radical **revolution**, involution is characterized by mainly stationary technologies and methods of farming under ever-increasing population-to-land ratios.

**Keywords:** population, farm land, involution, evolution, revolution

**摘要：**内卷（和内卷化）是我研究中国长时段历史变迁的关键概念。它突出的是，在中国的帝国历史后期，尤其是明清时期，递减的人均耕地面积。与逐步的**演变**和急剧的**革命**不同，内卷的特点是，在基本不变的技术和方法下，越来越严峻的人地压力。

**关键词：**人口、耕地、内卷、演变、革命

My thinking about the three categories of evolution, revolution, and involution has come initially and principally from my studies of Chinese agriculture. In the past two millennia, there have

been only relatively minor **evolutionary** adjustments and changes over time in the use of different kinds of crops and in the technologies of farming. Those kinds of changes should be distinguished from sea changes such as that from dry farming to wet farming with the use of flooded fields, especially in rice—a **revolutionary** change of profound consequences. But after that revolutionary change, there were only minor evolutionary refinements, such as adjustments to the widths and lengths of fields and the rows within a field, which soon reached optimal or near-optimal states. Thereafter, further refinements would soon become **involutionary**, with diminishing benefits from further adjustments, each one producing diminished new benefits. The basic system rolled more and more tightly within itself, a condition in which further changes became ever more difficult.

I have since applied the categories of evolutionary, revolutionary, and involutionary change also to my thinking about other topics in Chinese history, such as social-political arrangements, including the historic **revolutionary** transition from “feudalism” 封建 to centralized administrative “prefectures and counties” 郡县, followed by fine adjustments thereafter, which were more **involutionary** than revolutionary.

Whether economic or administrative-political, the distinctions among evolutionary, revolutionary, and involutionary seem to me useful categories for organizing our thinking.

While evolution and revolution have been commonly used categories in Western historical scholarship, involution has been little employed. My work in Chinese agricultural and institutional history, by contrast, has perhaps been distinctive mainly for its highlighting of **involution**, which I have rendered in Chinese as “neijuan” 内卷, literally “rolling up inward,” to reach a tighter and tighter and more and more difficult to change condition.

Compared to Western European history, Chinese history is perhaps most distinguished by its prolonged high population density, best shown by its increasingly low per capita farmland size, long measured in mu (or one-sixth of an acre), as opposed to the “acre” employed in English and American agricultural history or the hectare (2.471 acres) employed in French agricultural history. That difference in fundamental units of measure for farmland tells a good part of the story. Chinese agriculture, in general, has been far more “intensive” in terms of relatively high human labor input per unit land, and relatively small farm size per person, than Anglo-American or French agriculture. The term “involution,” not surprisingly, has been far less employed or important in Anglo-American or French agriculture and history than in Chinese.

In Chinese history, relatively low density of population in farming had been closely related to the “feudalism”封建 of the pre-Han period, and relatively high population density to the centralized administration of prefectures and counties 郡县 of the Han, then followed by a sustained period of a kind of tug-of-war between centralization and decentralization, to end in the predominantly centralized history and gradual long-term involution in agriculture after the Tang-Song period. In other words, the differences between low-density agriculture cum decentralized feudal rule and high-density agriculture cum centralized rule are not just obvious between Europe and China, but also within Chinese history itself. There is a clearly a close interconnection among the high population density, centralized rule and administration, and involuted agriculture that came to typify so strongly late imperial Chinese history of the Ming and Qing.

In other words, relatively low population density and decentralized rule, on the one hand, and relatively high population density and centralized rule, on the other hand, have been closely associated and interconnected in Chinese history. It was no accident that China from the Tang-

Song to the Ming-Qing was, in the main, characterized by ever-increasing population density as well as highly centralized rule.

Those were the main institutional characteristics and background for the Chinese phenomenon of “involution,” something relatively rare and far less important in Western Europe than in China. By the Ming-Qing period, China had become predominantly an increasingly highly involuted society-economy, as well as an increasingly centralized and bureaucratized state. That is why involution, not evolution or revolution, has become the central concept in my understanding of Chinese history since the Ming and Qing, as well as the critical difference between China and Western Europe.

### **Author's Bio**

Philip C.C. Huang's life-long studies of agriculture-peasants and the “informal economy” in five volumes (of which the “North China” and “Yangzi Delta” books are now in their sixth and seventh editions, respectively), law and the justice system in four volumes, and the method and theory of “the social science of practice,” also in four volumes, have just been republished by the Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe in a complete set of 13 volumes.