# Intellectual Involution Among Scholar-Officials in Late Han China

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the phenomenon of intellectual involution among scholar-officials during late Eastern Han China. Although the term "involution" ( 内捲 ) has recently gained popularity in articulating present-day academic and professional pressures, this study argues that the term also possesses strong historical precedents. By sociologically re-interpreting Philip C. C. Huang's economic theory of involution, this paper identifies how education expansion during the late Han, credential inflation, and fluctuating standards in official selection created overqualified but underemployed scholar-officials. Based on the historical evidence as well as on intellectual history, the paper illustrates how the political institutions such as the chājǔ ( 察 舉 ) institution and the Imperial Academy (Tàixué, 太學 ) created conditions of intra-elite saturation. At the same time, the paper analyzes the ways in which reputation politics took the place of meritocratic ideals, perpetuating the culture where reputation and factional affiliations outweighed talents and virtues. In reply, the scholar-officials developed the recourse to pure critique (qīngyì, 清議 ), reclusion, and the metaphysical speculation (xuánxué, 玄學 ), thus programmatically foreshadowing the Wei-Jin ethos of individualism and detachment. In so doing, it identifies parallels between ancient and modern patterns of elite overproduction, talent bottlenecks, as well as the quest for expressive self-identity.

**Keywords:** Involution; Late han China; Scholar officials; Intellectual history

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## 1. Introdution

The term "involution" ( 内捲 , nèijuǎn) has gained significant traction in recent social media discussion, especially within international students, scholars, and overseas communities. Today, “involution” generally means the feeling of excessive, out-of-proportion competition that generates returns that yields diminishing returns—where individuals work harder yet achieve little corresponding payoff. The term evokes a widespread feeling of frustration, ranging from high school students' complaints to graduate students' anxieties, and resonates strongly within the Chinese cultural lives of prospective international students.

However, the concept of “involution” is often misapplied and blurred in contemporary discourse. Much of its current use reduces the term to a casual label for individual behavior, describing endless competition in school or work. Yet this is not its original meaning.

Academically, involution theory traces its origin in the works of Philip C. C. Huang ( 黃宗智 ), who explained it as an economic term founded on rural China's small agricultural economies. Involution, as Huang describes, is a process by which ever-increasing labor input per unit of land results in expanded total output but diminishing marginal returns per workday. His model emphasizes that involution is fundamentally an agricultural issue from an economic perspective. Especially, he pointed out that involution is something that peasants have to do, not something that high-level, highly productive individuals should engage in . Huang’s study provides a foundation but has rarely been extended beyond its original rural economic context. This model can be formalized and structured, highlighting that involution is a social process external to the individual rather than a psychological state.

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My analysis reinterprets this economic model from the conceptual template of knowledge sociology, tracing how involution takes place within elite intellectual and bureaucratic classes. Contemporary criticisms, such as Michael Sandel's *The Tyranny of Merit*, analyze the failures of meritocratic systems in selecting virtue, but do not perfectly overlap with the mechanisms of involution . Although meritocracy and involution may appear conceptually related, they represent fundamentally distinct phenomena. While Sandel analyzes whether meritocracy always produces virtue, involution speaks to a harsher reality—a frustrating competition that too many discover they are driven into by circumstance, often without meaningful outcomes.

This research applies the concept back to a historical context: the internal competition among Han dynasty scholar-officials ( 士 人 , shìrén). By examining the process of talent cultivation, social expectations, and public standards, it proposes a model of "intellectual involution". In this model, the tension between increasingly sophisticated training and persistently scarce opportunities drove the scholar-official class into a cycle of intensified competition that could not produce true breakthroughs. Drawing on this historical insight, I argue that Han dynasty bureaucratic and cultural setting gave rise to a distinct pattern of intellectual and social involution.

As a whole, this research situates the concept of involution not only as a recent social complaint or economic model but as a more deeply seated structural phenomenon with historical foundations rooted in Chinese elite politics and intellectual culture. Understanding this continuity is to gain valuable perspective on why individuals are having trouble with educational and professional competition today, as well as societal demands placed on talent and success.

## 2. The Concrete Manifestations of ScholarOfficial Involution in the Late Han

The involution phenomenon of the Han dynasty scholar-officials was not abstract but one that manifested itself in highly visible, concrete evidences. These are apparent both in the sheer scale of elite participation in education and in the ever-expanding skill requirements imposed on potential officials.

### (1) Scale of scholar enrollment: educational oversupply and symbolic demand

By the mid-Eastern Han, the state's policy of centralized education had brought together massive numbers of students in the capital, Luoyang. According to Kan Huaizhen, in the first year of Emperor Zhi's reign (146 CE), an edict required officials from the rank of General-in-Chief down to county magistrates to send their sons to study in the capital. By the time of Emperor Huan, in the mid-second century, attendance in the Imperial Academy (taixue) was a whopping 30,000. Such intensity understandably inflated competition for limited official positions—a dynamic which, to use a modern analogy, evokes the phenomenon of highly qualified individuals being forced into lower-level jobs, a byproduct of systemic "involution."

### (2) Expanding and idealized requirements for officials

In the section of *"Romance of the Three Kingdoms"* where Zhuge Liang is discussing "the way of generals ( 將帥之道 )" with Lu Su, he argues that the "aggressive and courageous warrior ( 勇悍之武夫 )," such as Lü Bu, is not worth mentioning, and therefore dismisses the importance of mere military skill. Instead, he emphasizes that "generalship is the way ( 將帥乃道也 )" (This idea can be traced back to Xunzi's philosophy in *Debate on Military Affairs 議兵篇* , where the role of the commander is elevated beyond mere force), meaning that a general should not only be a practitioner of military tactics but also possess knowledge of timing, geography, philosophy of life, military strategy, as well as an understanding of the laws of nature and the universe. This is the requirement of the scholar-official culture for "omniscience," even though in practice, such an ideal is very difficult to achieve.

By the late Eastern Han, Yet, as Yu Yingshi observes, opportunities for meaningful political office were becoming ever more scarce. The widening gap between expanding accomplishment and narrowing career prospects fostered disillusionment among the educated elite. In this context, many turned to qīngtán 清 談 as an alternative sphere

of competition and self-expression. Deprived of stable official outlets, scholars transformed gatherings into arenas where reputation could be won through eloquence, wit, and metaphysical speculation. This reflects how the surplus of cultivated talent, combined with a shortage of political opportunity, redirected ambition into intellectual display.

Cumulatively, these examples illustrate how the Han bureaucracy created a situation where scholar-officials are required to master wide-ranging knowledge. However, the limited opportunities for officials drive them to qīngtán 清談 instead of concrete duties, leading to meaningless "involutionary" situation.

## 3. Causes of Involution

### (1) Intellectual foundations

#### 1) The long road to confucianization

During Han dynasty, the development and institutionalization of Confucianism primarily regulated the political condition and culture of the scholar-official class. Han Wu Di established the state policy of "abolishing all other schools and promoting Confucianism" and made Confucianism the state religion and promoted it throughout the empire. The court instituted the offices of "Five Classics Doctor" and the Taixue (Imperial Academy), and scholars embraced Confucian classics as the foundation of governing.

Although the "abolishing the hundred schools and respecting only Confucianism" policy of Emperor Wu is often seen as a decisive moment marking the moment when Confucianism became the ideological core of the Han empire, recent scholarship has shown that the process was neither direct nor instantaneous. In fact, according to Cai Liang, the ascendance of the Confucian-oriented officials during Emperor Wu's reign was itself an unintended consequence of a series of political purges rather than the result of a coherent ideological project.

The turning point was the notorious "witchcraft scandal" of 91–87 BCE, which "was not simply an intrigue involving the imperial family but a turning point that permitted China to become a Confucian empire." In the last years of Emperor Wu's rule, accusations of black magic and treason "wiped out the established families who had dominated the court since the beginning of the Western Han dynasty." The resulting power vacuum "was filled by men from obscure backgrounds, including a group of officials identified with a commitment to the Confucian classics." As Cai stresses, "No mastermind engineered this five-year-long slaughter… From a power vacuum emerged an unexpected victor: Huo Guang seized power and filled the court with men utterly beholden to him."

Even after this outflow of Confucian-oriented officers, Confucianization remained incomplete for centuries. During the Western Han, "knowledge of the Five Classics was not yet a substitute for professional knowledge of law and economy" and "it was not expertise in Five Classics but in the legal and fiscal system that made one competitive." Among the seventy-seven great officials during this time, "only six—or 7.8 percent—were regarded as Confucians." Elite education, court administration, and bureaucratic promotion continued to place greater emphasis upon legal and fiscal expertise than upon classical scholarship. Correlative cosmology and some Confucian political rites, for instance, the imperial ritual of disaster acknowledgment, became really an organic part of state practice only at the time of Emperor Xuan. As Emperor Xuan himself said, "The Han court has its own system and laws… How could I rely merely on moral instruction and follow the policies of the Zhou dynasty?… How could [the ru] be trusted with responsibilities?" Indeed, far from arising from Emperor Wu's intentional reforms, the Confucianization of the Han government grew out of a relationship between political contingency and centuries-long institutional evolution before Confucian moral authority actually became fully embedded in the legal and bureaucratic frameworks of the empire.

#### 2) Reassessing the Qin legacy

The conventional history that Qin times constituted a rupture in the intellectual history of China—marked by the

"burning of books and burying of Confucians alive" and a wholesale rejection of the past—has been questioned with increasing strength by archaeological and epigraphic findings . As Martin Kern demonstrates, hymns and imperial stele inscriptions are "irreconcilable with… the notion of a total collapse of traditional learning in Ch'in and early Han times," revealing that the so-called cultural catastrophe is a "retrospective mid-Western Han fiction" .

Far from being anti-traditional, late pre-imperial Qin was "a highly traditional political entity," whose rulers carefully preserved ancestral rituals, invoked Zhou-era political and moral rhetoric, and used the newly unified script to signify political and cultural unification. The inscriptions exhibit an ideological continuity between Qin and early Han, with cross-references across the whole range of Zhou writings. This dispels the idea of ideologically opposed "Legalist" and "Confucian" groups, calling instead for a common political rhetoric with progressively opposing positions.

Han historiography, written to legitimize the new dynasty, gladly reinvented Qin as culturally illegitimate and attributed restoration of tradition to Han. The traditional Legalism-to-Confucianism formula thus oversimplifies a more complex reality: Qin domination integrated classical traditions with administrative and legal reforms, blending the lines between "schools" which eventually hardened into rigid categories. Recognition of this continuity is vital to realizing that Confucianization of the Han state was the result not of a sudden ideological shift, but of an evolving political culture on shared classical values.

**(2) Political background**

**1) The chaju 察舉 system**

The "chaju 察 舉 " system was the core mechanism for selecting officials in the Han dynasty, whereby local officials recommended candidates based on the central government's standards. Its original intention was to select individuals based on virtue, emphasizing qualities such as filial piety and personal conduct, reflecting Confucian ideals of governance. However, the concept of "virtue" was difficult to quantify, leading to arbitrary recommendations often influenced by personal biases.

To improve the quality of officials, the late Han period began to emphasize selecting individuals based on competence, with the court requiring candidates to demonstrate tangible achievements, and even introducing "trial positions" to assess their administrative capabilities.

By the late Eastern Han period, a tendency to select officials based on reputation emerged. Distinguished scholars sought to gain recognition in the scholarly community through their words and deeds, and reputation became a pathway to officialdom. While this practice appeared to break the limitations of family background, allowing those with reputations to rise, it also fostered an excessive pursuit of "reputation," leading to competition based solely on external recognition, and superficial self-promotion among scholars.

Simultaneously, the issue of "selecting officials based on family background" became increasingly severe. Powerful families used their status and cultural legacy to dominate official resources, with generations of officials receiving public acclaim. As family lineage and reputation began to merge, the fairness of the chaju 察 舉 system gradually eroded. A fixed "upward path" formed within the scholar-official class, making it difficult for ordinary individuals to break through.

In summary, as the chaju 察舉 system evolved, it shifted from being based on virtue, ability, reputation, and family background, progressively leading to a system of official selection driven by reputation and bloodlines. The Eastern Han official selection system, which originally encouraged virtuous advancement, declined into stagnation, and the bureaucratic structure became increasingly rigid, laying the institutional and social foundation for the emergence of the aristocratic system of the Wei-Jin periods.

**2) Taixue's expansion**

By the middle stage of the Eastern Han, the Imperial Academy of Luoyang ( 太 学 , Taixue) was already a state-

sponsored academy on an unprecedented scale. Historical records illustrate this expansion: Fan Ye's *History of the Later* Han notes that by Emperor Huan's time, "the students of the Imperial Academy numbered over 30,000 ". This astonishing figure suggests that official higher education reached a peak of mass enrollment, concentrating scholar-official trainees in the capital. The Taixue's role as the empire's ideological training ground for Confucian talent was clear: its student body swelled from only 50 students at its Western Han inception to thousands in Eastern Han, as the court funneled gentry youth into Confucian studies.

However, modern scholarship urges caution in taking the "30,000 students" literally. Zhu Zongbin has critically examined the Hou Han Shu account, arguing that the figure is likely exaggerated or a copyist's error . He notes the physical facilities of the academy could not have accommodated such a multitude, and posits that "30,000" was perhaps miswritten for 3,000. Indeed, other sources differ: some contemporaneous reports describe Taixue enrollment in the "several thousands" , which is still enormous but more plausible. By citing these studies, we recognize that while the Taixue's scale was undoubtedly large, the exact number "30,000" may have been inflated for effect.

Even if we accept a lower estimate, the trend is undeniable – state education ballooned in late Han. The court not only expanded the academy's intake, but also turned the Taixue into a symbol of imperial ideology triumph. Confucian orthodoxy became the core curriculum, delivered by an increasing staff of Academicians ( 博　士 ). Attending the Imperial Academy thus became a virtual prerequisite for ambitious young men. It produced, in effect, a surplus of qualified scholars over offices available – a dynamic which demonstrates the involutionary logic of late Han education. Once elite education had reached a certain scale, the system could no longer generate upward mobility commensurate with effort expended. Instead of opening up new channels of organic growth, it produced instead lateral competition among an inflated class of scholars. This is the precise definition of involution: when a structure reaches a limit of growth, energies that might have been directed upward get locked in place, turning into wasteful, self-consuming competition.

Crucially, historians like Lü Simian and Hans Bielenstein have pointed out that the Hou Han Shu's large student tallies likely include many who were students in name only. Lü Simian argued that many so-called "registered disciples" were actually hangers-on and clients of officials, flocking to the capital for networking rather than genuine scholarship . Supporting this, Bielenstein notes that across the entire Eastern Han, only forty-nine Taixue students are individually recorded in the standard histories – a "laughably small number" if tens of thousands truly received substantive training and entered officialdom. These findings suggest that the Taixue's swollen enrollment was partly a product of policy (e.g. the 146 CE edict), and partly a reflection of reputation politics: many youths assumed the title of "Imperial Academy student" without necessarily obtaining posts or skills, inflating the ranks of the educated beyond what the bureaucracy could absorb.

In sum, the late Han Taixue exemplified an "involutionary" expansion of elite education. The academy became a prestige institution boasting tens of thousands of nominal students – a dramatic increase from earlier eras – yet this very scale carried the seeds of frustration. As we shall see, the glut of degree-holders would diminish the marginal value of education and alter how merit was measured in Han officialdom.

**3) Credential inflation and the oversupply of qualified scholars**

The massive expansion of Confucian education through the Taixue and the chājǔ recommendation system generated a phenomenon of credential inflation in late Eastern Han. What had formerly been markers of exceptional talent, proficiency in the Confucian classics, reputations for filial piety or integrity, over time became bare minimum qualifications for entry into office. That is, the "knowledge currency" of ruling elite was debased by overissuance.

There is a single poignant contemporary proverb that sums up this dynamic: "To leave your son a chest of gold is not as good as leaving him a single classic." Ownership of a Confucian text (and thus the scholarly credentials it conveyed) was held in Han society to be a better legacy than riches. It came close to guaranteeing a chance at official

employment. By Eastern Han, both commoner and aristocratic families had discovered that classical learning was the route to upward mobility. The Imperial Academy diploma or a successful xiàolián 孝廉 recommendation had become the standard entry ticket into the bureaucracy.

But as thousands and thousands of people acquired these credentials, their relative advantage declined. A recent estimate by Zhu Zongbin puts the number of men who can be counted as "scholar-officials" (shìrén) at around 150,000–160,000 for the two centuries of Eastern Han rule. This averages out at some 30,000 per generation, a vast educated class competing for a limited number of posts. The Eastern Han government itself had only a few thousand salaried official posts at any given time. The unavoidable result was a surplus of degree-holders.The prestige of being a Taixue graduate or a recommended "filial and honest" man (xiàolián 孝廉 ) fell, since so many now shared the same qualifications. Essentially, what had once set a candidate apart (a Confucian education) was now merely the threshold for consideration.

This credential inflation was also driven by changes in the selection process itself. Early Han nominations were founded on local reputation or personal virtue, but later Han emperors introduced additional academic and competitive elements. Special recommendation categories such as "worthy and upright" (xiánliáng fāngzhèng 賢良方正 ) and "classics expert" (míngjīng 明經 ) required the candidates to demonstrate learning through imperial policy question (duìcè 對策 ) examinations. For instance, candidates who were nominated as xiánliáng were summoned to the capital to be interrogated on administration, economics, and classics – an early model of written exam – in order to let the emperor evaluate their talents. By Eastern Han, even the regular xiàolián 孝廉 annual recommendations had formal qualifications that included moral character, knowledge of a classic "to the level of a Professor," understanding of law, and administrative ability. These shifting norms were what made scholarly attainment a prerequisite for office, effectively making learning a credential that no one could resist acquiring.

The effects of this trend were paradoxical. On the one hand, it professionalized the civil service: never before had so many scholarly men been available for service, and the quality of officials might potentially be enhanced. On the one hand, it created an enormous class of frustrated intellectuals for whom official careers were impossible, the aspirants who were "qualified" far outnumbered the places available to them. This meritocratic bottle-neck generated what we can call involution: intense competition among highly educated individuals for relatively fixed rewards. Many scholars were under-employed or stuck in lower-rank jobs despite their long training, a phenomenon comparable to the current trend of over-education. In effect, late Eastern Han society saw an early instance of " 學歷貶值 ", the devaluation of academic capital.

By way of example, by 184 CE, when the system was strained on the eve of collapse, hundreds of men with classicist qualifications were still unknown or in inactive positions. The value of a Taixue degree or a brilliant reputation for virtue had taken a steep fall in furthering one's career. Those who possessed learning but not office were inclined to put their energy into literary and reputational ventures, still fueling the cycle of competition in name (as we explore in Section 3.3). The late Han meritocratic ideal of mobility upward through learning was therefore frustrated in its own achievement in the production of learned men, leaving many to feel involuted – trapped in fruitless effort with diminishing returns.

**(3) The rift between "Virtue" and "Reputation"**

**1) Ideal vs. reality**

Under Eastern Han, official recruitment ideology was based on the ideal of "virtue" ( 德 ), on the hope that candidates would possess filial obedience and integrity (the 孝廉 ideal). In reality, though, an expanding disconnect appeared: fame in one's personal reputation ( 名聲 ) and social connections became what is important in promotion. Historical evidence illustrates this tendency. Hou Han Shu reports that over 30,000 scholars rushed into the Imperial Academy at Luoyang during Emperor Huan's reign and revered some "pure and upright" leaders . They had a saying that went around: "Li Ying ( 李膺 ) is the model for the realm; Chen Fan ( 陳蕃 ) fears no powerful crook; Wang Chang

( 王暢 ) is the foremost talent of the age." To be acknowledged by Li Ying, a renowned arbiter of virtue, was a career breakthrough, "like leaping the Dragon Gate," more important than any formal title. This indicates that institutional credentials were increasingly overshadowed by gentry status—particularly because the gentry habitually recommended one another, making the approval of an arbiter such as Li Ying hardly attainable for those outside elite families. As historian Yu Yingshi points out, by late Eastern Han a statesman's honor depended less on official rank and more on reputation in literati public opinion, the explicit demonstration that moral standards and reality had disintegrated. Personal relationships and clique networks took the reins instead. Prominent scholars recruited bands of disciples and friends; e.g., the virtuous officials Li Ying and Fan Pang ( 範滂 ) had numerous followers in the provinces. In 166 AD, eunuch officials charged Li Ying with "keeping Academy scoundrels, forming partisan cliques and slandering the court ( 養太學遊士，交結諸部生徒，更相驅馳，共為部黨，誹訕朝廷 )" – a charge which reveals how formidable his social following had become. Such influence could serve to protect protégés and push careers, even if it subverted the Confucian ideal of meritocracy. Ultimately, the result was a discrepancy between word and deed: the state taught virtue, but reputation and acquaintance were the reality of rung advancement.

**2) Evolving evaluation criteria – from ethics to "reputation politics"**

Throughout the Eastern Han, the selection system ( 察舉 ) evolved gradually from strictly moral character to what historians term "prestige politics" ( 名聲政治 ). In theory, local patrons would propose "worthy and upright" men (e.g., 孝廉 for filial and honest), but in reality, recommendations more and more accrued to those with general reputation, aristocratic family backgrounds, or powerful patrons. Recent works corroborate this shift. Historian Yan Buke indicates that Eastern Han recruitment went so far as to "base itself on the candidate's reputation ( 名 望 ) as judged by the gentry's consensus, rather than on the court's own criteria", fundamentally restructuring the way in which officials were chosen. This was not to say that intellectual reputation and social standing, often cultivated through "pure critique" ( 清議 ) and philosophical cliques – no longer mattered for office. On the contrary, community opinion ( 鄉論 ) and "clean reputation" often counted more than actual deeds. Subsequent critics like Gu Yanwu observed this: "Under the Han system of recommendation, one's life behavior was scrutinized – one blemish on one's clear reputation ( 清議 ) would damn him, never to be introduced into office ( 鄉舉里選，必先考其生平，一玷清議，終身不齒 )." That is, only those who were pure in the sight of their peers could go forward, which enhanced reputation over true excellence. As things stood, rivals competed to win over the "court of public opinion" ( 士 林 共 識 ). They sought endorsements from prominent scholars and membership of distinguished academic lineages ( 學派 ), knowing that these immaterial assets now took precedence over official credentials. For example, in the late Eastern Han, the court repeatedly issued direct summons for eminent figures such as Chen Shi and the classical master Zheng Xuan to assume high office at court, valuing above all their already well-established reputations and scholarly authority. The system of appraisal and recommendation was thus overhauled – it became dominated by social evaluation. Success was more frequently determined by a candidate's renown, education, and connections rather than his actual nature or ability. This imbalance between ethical principles and prestige indicators not only undermined the legitimacy of the selection procedure, but also created a reputation-seeking culture in late Han politics. Overall, by the end of Eastern Han, the normative ideal of "virtue" had given way to the "fame" regime, opening up a politics of reputation that substituted for meritocratic values.

**(4) Functional failure of the knowledge structure**

The Eastern Han administration required its local administrators to be versatile generalists – "all-round" administrators who were proficient in law, economics, engineering, ritual, and even disaster relief. A magistrate of a county or commandery was expected to handle public security, judge disputes, manage granaries and irrigation, conduct tax collection, provide medical relief, and perform sacrifices. Yet the Han system of education that produced these officials was weighted heavily on the side of Confucian classics and moral philosophy and lightly on technical or practical training. This structural imbalance engendered a serious mismatch between knowledge and practice, a situation that ancient and modern scholars have deplored.

The 3rd-century Renwu Zhi ( 人物志·效難 ) essay by Liu Shao already lamented the problem of talents being inappropriate to their intended uses: " 中情之人，名不副实，用之有效 " ("a person of balanced character may have an unmerited reputation, yet still prove effective in employment"), implying that scholarly renown did not automatically denote administrative ability. Qing dynasty scholars retrospectively viewing Han history also commented that many officials "had name but no substance", and that Han emperors regularly misemployed men whose talents were inappropriate to their offices. In Eastern Han, practical fields of knowledge were, in practice, sealed off from the elite educational stream. The standard curriculum concentrated on 经学 (Classical Studies) and belletristic writing, and specialization in agriculture, law, engineering, medicine, and other "technical arts" was pushed outside of the scholarly mainstream. Notably, the Han imperial histories include specialized treatises on such subjects as astronomy, hydraulics, and medicine – implying the presence of technical expertise – but these were typically left to low-level specialists or local experts rather than to the high officials. The governing class, steeped in classical education, was often deficient in the practical expertise that their posts demanded. Reformers were not unaware of this strain.

In AD 214, warlord-turned-chancellor Cao Cao ( 曹操 ) issued a famous decree, "On Not Rejecting Men of Partial Talent ( 敕有司取士毋廢偏短令 )", wherein he explicitly condemned the Han practice of celebrating only well-rounded Confucian generalists. "A person may be good in one aspect and bad in another – do we refuse him for a fault? ( 士有偏短，庸可廢乎 )" Cao Cao wrote, urging specialist professionals to be employed according to their strong points so that "no ability goes unused and no office remains idle ( 則士無遺滯，官無廢業矣 )". His edict acknowledged the structural imbalance between intellectual preparation and administrative needs under the Eastern Han was already so severe as to require special remediation in manpower policy, reflecting that the classical model of the morally integrally, omnibus scholar-official was not realistic.

Modern scholars like Li Ling also criticized the Han scholarly environment for favoring office-seeking over practical knowledge. Under these conditions, innovative knowledge and pragmatic rationality necessary for governance remained underdeveloped.

Taken together, these trends imply a systemic functional breakdown of the Eastern Han knowledge regime: it transmuted ethical–textual capital into status rather than capacity, offices starved for applicable expertise even as credentials proliferated, and thereby eroded the foundations of imperial rule.

## 4. Consequences of Involution

### (1) Distortion of elite selection: the public sphere of qīngyì ( 清議 )and clan alliances

#### 1) Qīngyì 清議 as a "public opinion" space

In the late Eastern Han, there was an informal field of public opinion known as qīngyì ( 清議 pure critique) among the scholar-official class, through which it acted as a moral tribunal evaluating officials. It began in gentry outrage at eunuch despotism. Prominent literati, ashamed to be seen socializing with bribed eunuchs, openly criticized court matters; they condemned top ministers' conduct and debated policy right and wrongs, until their criticisms became accepted . These opinion leaders, normally absent-minded scholars or students of the Imperial Academy, employed such forums as the Imperial Academy to denounce powerful individuals and call for a restoration of Confucian values. For example, when in 153 AD Governor Zhu Mu was incarcerated for defying eunuchs, there were several thousands of students of the Academy who petitioned the throne and even came forward to accept penal servitude on his behalf, compelling Emperor Huan to exercise clemency .

Initially, qīngyì 清議 had a strong ethical content: by mobilizing public opinion to call to account abuses of power. But as its political influence grew stronger, local factions and aristocratic houses began to employ qīngyì 清議 as

a tool to strengthen their own prestige. The moral guardian hence acquired factional overtones. At the height of Emperor Huan and Ling, qīngyì 清議 reached its heights; celebrated "pure officials" like Li Ying and Chen Fan were centers of literati opinion, and their opinions could make or break reputations and court careers. Although the rise of this literati public sphere was designed to counter misuses, it sowed seeds for eunuch anxiety and ultimate repression of the gentry.

**2) Pursuit of fame and the substitution of merit**

The qīngyì 清議 ascendancy had the consequence that official appointment—ideally on the basis of virtue and ability—was increasingly overshadowed by competition for reputation ( 名 ). Because the recommendation system came to rely so heavily on social reputation, aspirants diverted their efforts into building fame rather than achieving concrete performance. Gaining "prestige capital" was most crucial: scholars would refer to each other to gain mutual fame, be affiliated with renowned teachers, or stage performances of high integrity in order to gain a "pure name." Historians have documented that individuals who cherished integrity "began to differentiate one another, referring to the prominent men of the kingdom by titles" such as "Three Lords" and "Eight Jun (Talents)," etc., based purely on reputation . This outcome of reputation-driven advancement essentially substituted significant governance as the path to advancement, perverting the criteria for selection. In effect, merit and character were no longer the leading factors for promotion; literati approval and publicly acknowledged renown became preeminent. Sociologically, this is suggestive of the politicization of "prestige capital": prestige, which ideally ought to be the byproduct of talent and virtue, was turned into a currency for power. The outcome was shallowness in recruitment and an introverted competition: scholars invested their energies in networking, faction-building, and image-making rather than practical statecraft. More importantly, the period saw a shift in elite priorities. By the latter half of the 2nd century, the interest of many educated elites had shifted “from the larger world of imperial service to the smaller world of family, clan and region” . That is, party and kin interests came to dominate the public ideals, and office seeking was hijacked by reputation politics and clan alliance. This is representative of how the Han's meritocratic machinery, under involution's pressure, was warped: formally retaining Confucian virtue, but actually driven by internecine status competition, a self-consuming cycle from which the system was unable to extricate itself. At the same time, however, the rise of manorial families transformed the economic foundations of elite life. As Holcombe observes, by the late third century magnates such as Wang Jung possessed vast fields and water mills across the empire, while Eastern Jin clans like the Tiao family commanded “ten thousand ch’ing of fields” and thousands of slaves. Unlike the Qin and Western Han, when wealth was contingent on service to the state, these new landed gentry could sustain themselves independently of official salaries. This autonomy reinforced hereditary privilege and further eroded the incentive for merit-based participation in state service.

**(2) Bureaucratic rejection and institutional squeeze: why virtue could not rise**

**1) The “partisan prohibitions”: direct suppression of the upright**

The two infamous crackdowns known as the "Disasters of the Partisan Prohibitions" vividly record Han bureaucracy's banishment of upright critics. In 166 AD (Emperor Huan) and also in 169 AD (Emperor Ling), the court controlled by eunuchs attacked a group of outspoken Confucian administrators led by the likes of Li Ying and Chen Fan. They were branded “partisans” (dangren) against the oppression of eunuchs, and hundreds of scholars and students were arrested; some were immediately executed, while many others, while later released, had their civil rights taken away from them and were excluded from office for all time . The first purge led to a general amnesty and was relatively bloodless, but the second followed an attempted coup by Regent Dou Wu and Grand Tutor Chen Fan to eliminate the eunuchs, after which the eunuch faction took bloody revenge. Major men were killed, and remaining partisans were put under an imperial edict forbidding them from ever holding office or being involved in appointments. This professional prohibition persisted until 184 AD, when Emperor Ling, fearing these gentry would unite with the Yellow Turban rebels, finally abolished the ban in name only . These crises reveal a grim reality: not only did the late Han

state fail to make space for a growing class of morally oriented literati, but it drove them from public life by charging them with "factionalism." Those who advocated moral government were treated as threats and struck down, which added further erosion to the political system. As recorded in *the Book of the Later Han,* by killing or silencing these loyal scholar-officials, the eunuchs "injured the very foundation of the dynasty," deepening the systemic crisis that would later erupt in the Yellow Turban rebellion. Rather than a cause of collapse, the rebellion should be seen as a symptom of the dynasty's long-standing decay. . Short of calling on reformist capability to placate its domestic crisis, the Eastern Han government, bound in a cycle of involution, utilized legal and coercive methods to shut out these would-be reformers, thereby depriving itself of any capacity to reform.

By the late Eastern Han, official advancement was no longer determined chiefly by ability or integrity but increasingly by factional influence and inherited position, so that honest men were blocked while sycophants advanced. This "survival of the unfittest" not only hollowed out the meritocratic system but also foreshadowed the aristocratic gatekeeping that would become entrenched in the Wei-Jin era.

**(3) Scholar-officials' anxiety and self-rescue strategies: cliques, learning, and withdrawal**

**1) Factional alliances and patronage: huddling for warmth**

Confronted with an uneven career system and political repression, many late Han scholars adapted to clique-building and patron-client-seeking as their means of survival. Intellectuals grouped themselves by regions, lineages, or teacher-disciple affiliations, gathering around like-minded colleagues in order to mutualize their reputation and security. During the Partisan Prohibition, for example, gentry throughout the empire held some moral models in esteem and bestowed group honorifics such as "Three Lords," "Eight Talents," "Eight Eminents," etc., essentially creating revered cohorts as moral buffers . These titles corresponded to informal circles of literati who protected one another and positioned themselves as moral models, thus challenging, at least in the eyes of the public, the eunuchs' oppression. Meanwhile, numerous lower-ranking scholars took shelter by attaching themselves to powerful magnate families or warlord patrons and obtaining protection through the patron's power. In practice, "crouching together for heat" became automatic: by joining successful factions or allying themselves with influential clans, scholars tried to create a cushion of group prestige and patronage. But this same patronage and faction approach further intensified rivalry and internecine struggle. In order to excel even within a clique, individuals still had to practice constant posturing, politicking, and networking, thus transferring the involution of reputation from the individual to the group level. What began as an experiment to counter systemic ailments ended up further exacerbating the fragmentation of the scholarly world and politicization of reputational competition.

**2) Teaching, scholarship, and local refuge**

Most of those scholars whose official careers were denied them or who were persecuted made a switch to the educational and scholarship profession as a way of finding their continuation outside the court. They accomplished this by retreating to the local sphere in order to form private academies, accumulate students, and write scholarly texts, essentially channeling political ideals into cultural activities. After retiring from public service (or being removed from office), some prominent individuals set up lecture halls in their hometowns, as local "scholars" who taught the classics and built individual followings. The hegemony of the Runan scholar Guo Tai, for instance, spread because he became renowned for his integrity in the local community and taught a large number of disciples. He would praise worthy talents and guide younger scholars; even prominent officials like Li Ying owed their rise in part to Guo Tai's recommendation. The Hou Han Shu notes that Guo Tai deliberately refrained from directly criticizing powerful courtiers, focusing instead on nurturing virtue among the common folk, a tactic that allowed him to escape harm during the Partisan purge. A second example is Zheng Xuan, the great master of classical interpretation. On account of his association with the partisan Du Mi, under whom he studied, he was implicated and placed under proscription by the court for as many as fourteen years. Then he shut his doors to visitors and devoted himself to the classics, completing, among other significant works, the Commentaries on the Three Ritual Classics (Sanli zhu) . In Zhongping

1 (184 CE), when the court, in a spirit of necessity, abolished the partisan prohibitions, adherents of his scholarship from throughout the realm thronged to his gate by the thousands; notwithstanding, Zheng Xuan declined repeatedly imperial invitations and continued to teach and write .

These "unofficial" cultural pursuits became a vehicle for scholars to mitigate political disillusionment: by teaching and writing they defended themselves and sustained the literati tradition. At the societal level, it was a replication of cultural capital: vast numbers of unemployed or retired scholars spread all over the provinces, maintaining Confucian learning and gentry values at the local level until better times arrived. It must be added, however, that this localized cultural self-help did not immediately redesign the flawed selection system at the imperial center. Rather, it provided a spiritual and intellectual base in addition to the official sphere: scholars, choosing to seek learning and composition over administration, were able to maintain tradition and ethical argumentation, thereby creating space for the transformation of elite culture towards scholarly and metaphysical concerns by the Wei-Jin era.

**3) Retirement and reclusion: individual exit and the foreshadowing of wei-jin ethos**

When the political involution and obscurity of the late Han had become irretrievable, some literati opted for reclusion or voluntary retirement, withdrawing from office to preserve their principles and safeguard themselves. Such individual withdrawals were motivated both by a desire for life and moral integrity and by an implicit protest against a disordered government. There was no lack of principled gentlemen during the declining Han who opted for the mountains and forests. Sources observe that the eminent Yingchuan scholar Xu Shao, not wishing to consort with the powerful, took refuge in character evaluation and would not serve a corrupt court; similarly, the eminent classicist Cui Lie repeatedly pleaded illness and refused appointment, spending the remainder of his life in retirement. These actions were admired in their own time as "lofty withdrawal," becoming a paradigmatic style in which scholars maintained moral integrity amid disorder. Withdrawal, here, was not mere avoidance; it was the cultivation of the Confucian principle that "when frustrated, one cultivates one's own virtue." As Alan J. Berkowitz has observed, reclusion in early China was usually secular, signifying withdrawal from official service rather than retreat into monasteries. Many of those who chose seclusion in the Later Han were not mythic figures but real historical actors who deliberately refused or abandoned office as a means of preserving moral integrity. By the end of the Han dynasty, most of the essential features of the Chinese reclusive tradition had already crystallized, providing the cultural model that would later be expanded during the Six Dynasties.

To frame late-Han literati withdraw more analytically, we can read it through Albert O. Hirschman's classic *Exit–Voice–Loyalty* model. When an organization deteriorates, members can either *"Some customers stop buying the firm's products or some members leave the organization: this is the exit option."* or they can *"express their dissatisfaction directly to management or to some other authority to which management is sub ordinate or through general protest addressed to anyone who cares to listen: this is the voice option,"* both routes pressuring leaders to respond. In Hirschman's concise contrast, "that between economics and politics. Exit belongs to the former realm, voice to the latter." "Exit" is "the sort of mechanism economics thrives on", while "voice is political action par excellence". Read this way, the late-Han wave of reclusion was a paradigmatic exit when voice was foreclosed by partisan proscriptions; "loyalty"—in Hirschman's sense—could not stabilize the system, and the Wei–Jin reclusive ethos emerged as an enduring cultural resolution.

The Han late spirit of "refusing to conform to the vulgar" anticipated the Wei–Jin culture that esteemed pure conversation (qīngtán 清 談 ) and metaphysical speculation over official glory. Later events vindicate this: the generation of intellectuals who were disillusioned at the end of the Han either returned to public life lightly armed—emerging to serve new regimes—or disengaged altogether, devoting themselves to landscape, leisure, and qīngtán 清談 and thereby establishing the distinctive style of the metaphysical worthies. The shift from qīngyì 清議 to qīngtán 清談 is a profound transformation in scholarly mentality. As Yu Yingshi has argued, intellectuals during the Han–Jin transition arrived at a "new self-awareness," a revaluation of personal worth and spiritual transcendence . Developed

under the pressure of an ugly late-Han reality in which public achievement was closed off, this self-awareness deflected moral ambition inwards, with qīngtán 清 談 and xuánxué 玄 學 offering the instruments of existential commitment. In this regard, reclusion was not the opposite of passivity; it generated new intellectual trends. Wei–Jin metaphysics and reclusion culture may therefore be seen as cultural resolutions to the Eastern Han crisis of intellectual involution—acts of transcendence by which scholars registered dissatisfaction with, and transcended, the current order. On the institutional level this was a substitution of Han classical idealism with the Wei–Jin penchant for the esoteric; on the personal level it was the resolve to "leave where one is not welcome and find a place where one is," through a self-aware retreat from official life. Cumulatively, the retreat of the literati both heralded the end of the old Han order and created a lasting cultural legacy—"philosophical cultivation in retirement," the "bamboo-grove sages"—whose influence has been immense.

## 5. Conclusion

This research has traced the evolution of "intellectual involution" among scholar-officials in Late Han China, discussing how institutional expansion, credential inflation, and shifting standards of selection jointly created a structurally saturated elite class. The main thesis is that Imperial Academy overdevelopment, the move from virtue to reputation and lineage as standards of selection, and the low real administrative demand all contributed to the production of involution.

Our findings reveal some significant conclusions. First, the massive intake in Taixue turned what was once unique about credential into a minimum requirement, causing credential overload. Second, local mechanisms of recommendations shifted from merit-based ( 德 ) to name-based ( 名 ) selection, weakening true talent evaluation. Thirdly, the Qin-Han transition was not a sudden ideological break but instead a perpetuation of classical tradition; the "cultural catastrophe" thesis is a post-Han historiographical construct.

This research offers not only historical insight but also contemporary relevance. The institutional challenges of overeducation, job market misalignment, and “involution” with which today’s readers are likely to identify are parallel to the Late Han experience. To grasp this continuity is to recognize that today’s “credential glut” and “talent bottleneck” are driven not only by generational pressures—such as the demographic pyramid producing too many qualified candidates for too few jobs—but also by systemic factors within educational and bureaucratic institutions. Both dimensions indicate that the problem requires deeper institutional transformation rather than being reducible to demographic shifts alone.

At the same time, the value of analyzing this “intellectual involution” lies in using the past as a mirror for the present. In the Eastern Han, the standards of selection and the intellectual attainment of the scholar-officials reached an extreme, creating an appearance of prosperity with “talent in abundance.” Yet this prosperity concealed severe imbalances: their knowledge system emphasized classical exegesis over practical skills, the political order became increasingly dysfunctional, and the economic structure deteriorated. In other words, the Eastern Han as a state was deeply unhealthy, and its cultural brilliance was inseparable from systemic weakness. This paradox of excessive effort and overall fragility formed a striking irony. For us today, the lesson is sobering: many modern states face similar contradictions, with ever-intensifying systems of education and talent cultivation paired with stagnant or weakening political and economic structures. History has already shown that such misalignment can endanger the foundations of a polity, and thus we must seriously consider how to avoid repeating the fate of the Han.

As Peter Brown’s study of Late Antiquity suggests, once a society’s core faiths collapse and its system of trust disintegrates, a civilization is propelled into a prolonged and painful transitional era—a “Middle Age” born of distrust and uncertainty. From this perspective, the fall of the Han Empire was not an isolated event, but part of a wider global problem of “crises of trust.” Modern society, too, is shadowed by such dilemmas: when we no longer know what

values to believe in, and when institutional confidence begins to erode, latent crises emerge. Brown's insight warns us that the loss of foundational belief and trust may usher in not institutional renewal, but a long epoch of uncertainty.

History teaches us that when institutions can no longer channel talent toward meaningful ends, the true renewal of society begins not with more competition, but with the courage to redefine what is worth striving for.

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