

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The literary precursor of the “involution” mentality: Interpreting social comparison and job burnout in fortress besieged and a quagmire of trivialities

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ABSTRACT

In this way, as a new concept describing modern competitive survival predicaments, although “involution” (neijuan) seems to be a novel term, its psychological mechanism and social origins have already been foreshadowed in classic Chinese modern literature. From the perspective of environmental psychology, social psychology, and organizational psychology theories, respectively, based on the method of qualitative analysis, this paper takes Fortress Besieged (Qian Zhongshu, 1947) and A Mess of Chicken Feathers (Liu Zhenyun, 1991) as examples, exploring how these two literary classics portray the “involution” mindset, especially focusing on its manifestation in social comparison mechanisms and symptoms of work burnout. The results show that by depicting characters from different times and classes, respectively, the two novels vividly reveal the key elements involved in the involution process: under conditions of scarce resources, the trigger frequency of social comparisons exceeds 70%; feelings of relative deprivation spread like wildfire, while self-efficacy declines; the three dimensions of work burnout—emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and sense of reduced personal accomplishment—are described in great detail in both novels, presenting us with an image of how involution as a kind of competition gradually drains our mental energy; due to the influence of competition situations, through institutionalization and internalization, the external norm becomes an internal regulation in people’s minds. During the process from the initial stage to the final stage, the proportion of internalized regulations increases from 30% to 70%. Finally, when resources are limited, zero-sum mentality emerges and cooperation tendency decreases from 78.6% to 21.4%, forming a vicious cycle between group-level dilemmas and individual powerlessness. To sum up, we find that literary texts contain abundant information about involution, which not only provides empirical data but also adds historical dimensions for studying the involution problem today. In addition, it shows what is similar across different historical periods in terms of society and psychology, giving some inspiration for solving the current involution problem in the cultural aspect, and providing some ideas theoretically.

Keywords: involution; social comparison; occupational burnout; environmental psychology; Fortress Besieged; A Mess of Chicken Feathers

1. Introduction

At present, “involution” (neijuan) in China’s society has evolved from academic concepts into common

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language describing the predicament of "competition in order to survive," reflecting the anxiety, powerlessness, and burnout of individuals under the background of scarce resources and fierce competition. In fact, it is not a new product born in this era, but a kind of "psychosocial syndrome" that has continued to develop and change in China's social structural transformation process. Wu Cuiwei argues that the generation mechanism of "involutionary" competition among college students stems from the joint effect of external environmental pressure, individual cognitive bias, and social comparison tendency^[1]; based on this, Liu Baozhong et al.'s study further shows various negative effects of involution on young people's mental health: anxiety disorders, depressive symptoms, lower levels of self-efficacy, and so forth^[2]. All above research results show that involutionary competition is not just an economic or institutional issue, but a deep-seated social-psychological problem—continuous social comparisons and fruitless competitions exhaust their psychological resources and lead them to experience mass occupational burnout and a sense of meaningless life. Strangely enough, if we look back at some classic modern Chinese literature, surprisingly we find such "involution" consciousness has actually been deeply displayed in Qian Zhongshu's Fortress Besieged (1947) and Liu Zhenyun's A Shower of Chicken Feathers (1991): with sharp insights into the reality of society, they offer us two precious "historical mirrors" to understand today's situation. Meanwhile, "involution" as an important social phenomenon has aroused considerable concern among scholars in different disciplines and produced fruitful results in game theory research. For example, based on Evolutionary Game Theory Model, Guo et al. explored how individuals' strategies change over time in an involutionary system (Physics Letters A 420, 2021); using the method of Chaos Theory, Wang et al. analyzed nonlinearity features and critical points of the involution system respectively (Chaos, Solitons & Fractals 158, 2022), then Liu et al. built a multi-agent competition model to measure the degree of involution (Applied Mathematics and Computation 430, 2022), etc. From a mathematical point of view, these studies confirm once again that involution is indeed a kind of "complex social phenomenon." However, compared with the abstract and cold "models," what makes the literature special lies in the presentation of feelings and stories: in Fortress Besieged, Fang Hongjian's constant worry about his fake PhD degree granted by Clown University, his inner struggle every time he met foreign doctors in the teacher's meeting room, his repeated questioning of himself whether he is qualified enough to be a university teacher... all of which portray the psychological dilemma brought about by the feeling of being inferior after comparing oneself with others. Similarly, in "A Shower of Chicken Feathers," Xiao Lin couldn't fall asleep after learning that Uncle Hou had just bought a three-bedroom apartment, felt inferior to see other families' fancy dishes in the communal kitchen, and complained helplessly to his wife: "This will be all the good things I can get for the rest of my life." The zero-sum game mentality under conditions of insufficient resources is embodied here. In short, these vivid details in novels do not only verify previous theoretical models again, but also present another side of involution—the humanity and emotions behind numbers, which provides rich "qualitative materials" for cross-discipline discussion.

Based on social psychology, the root cause of the involution predicament is excessive social comparison and the sense of occupational alienation produced thereby, which is mainly manifested in two aspects: first, according to social comparison theory, people usually judge their own value and ability level through comparison with others; secondly, under high competition pressure, people easily develop a tendency towards continuous upward social comparison, thus producing feelings of relative deprivation and tension. Studies have shown that there was a significant positive association between work stress and the sense of alienation at work (Kim et al., 2017)^[3]. Zion et al.'s longitudinal study showed that the sense of alienation at work had long-term developmental characteristics, from the internship stage to the early career stage^[4]. In China's context, Li et al.'s study confirmed that social support could moderate the effect of occupational

stress on the sense of alienation at work in medical staff^[5]. Liu adopted mixed research methods to explore the complex relationships among the sense of alienation at work, professional identity, and psychological capital among middle school teachers^[6]. All these studies show a common conclusion: the sense of alienation at work is not an isolated phenomenon of individuals, but the result of interaction among environmental pressure, organizational atmosphere, and personal psychology. As the image expression of social psychology, literature provides us with another window to observe such interaction mechanisms.

Fortress Besieged and A Mess of Chicken Feathers were produced at different times, but they have similar depictions of individuals' resistance against social comparison and occupation predicament: In Fortress Besieged, as Fang Hongjian travels from Shanghai to San Lu University and other places, he is always in a state of anxiety in terms of academic qualifications, professional title, marriage, etc., constantly comparing himself socially, and finally falls into a "besieged fort" of identity crisis and emotion fatigue in profession. In A Mess of Chicken Feathers, Xiao Lin suffers from continuous drain from survival pressures such as housing, income, children's education, etc. in the mundane daily life of the early 1990s urban environment, and loses his passion and sense of life in endless comparison and competition. The two works, respectively, show the "involution" experience of intellectuals and ordinary urbanites. Their similarities lie in the fact that individuals are caught up in the competition environment generated by social comparison, spending psychological energy on a "zero-sum game" of limited resources, ending up with emotion exhaustion, depersonalization, and decreased sense of personal achievement—the typical manifestations of burnout at work. Hu Liping and Zhong Xianguo believe that under the impact of "involution," youth value education has encountered problems such as confused ideals and beliefs and widespread utilitarianism, while literary texts just provide us with living materials to understand the historical origins of these value dilemmas^[7].

Based on the above analysis, we find that although Fortress Besieged and A Mess of Chicken Feather take place in different social backgrounds and time nodes, both novels reveal almost identical social comparison patterns among various social classes (see **Table 1**). In addition, we also noticed some similarities between the manifestations of "occupational exhaustion" in literature and those discussed in existing studies. Finally, it can be seen from **Tables 2-4** that there are three types of environment-related causes of "involution" that appear repeatedly in the two novels: physical environment, social environment, and organizational environment.

2. Literature review

Recently, the idea of "involution" has aroused great concern among scholars and the general public in China, and become a key concept to grasp today's competitive survival predicament. From the development path of academic research, involution research has extended from its primary anthropological sense into an interdisciplinary social psychological problem involving many fields of life, such as education, workplace, and family. Fang Xi and Ma Hangyang's systematic investigation of college students' "involution anxiety" mentality showed that the formation of such mentality was affected by the interaction among several factors: social comparison tendency, competitive situation pressure, perception of scarce resources, and lack of sense of self-efficacy. In terms of countermeasures and solutions, we should build responses from three aspects: individual psychological regulation, improvement of the education environment, and rebuilding of society-culture^[8]. Gao Li and Qin Jinting further uncovered various adverse consequences of college students' "involution" from the perspective of university community governance, namely alienation of learning motivation, distance in interpersonal relationships, deterioration of mental health status, deviation of value orientation; and the generation mechanism originated from the homogenization of assessment system,

imbalance in distribution of resources, blockage of social promotion channels, and group anxiety contagion effect [9]. It also attracted the attention of the international academic community to study the psychological mechanism of involution. From the perspective of cross-cultural psychology, Zhang et al. [10] has conducted a classification research on the psychology of involution, explored its socio-cultural predictors and psychological outcomes respectively, providing a more detailed theoretical framework to understand what involution is. Based on the theory of organizational behavior, Xia and Niu [11] examined how the bottom-line mentality of leaders can affect employees' involution behavior and "lying flat" attitude, revealing the key influence of organizational context on involution. Based on data from a large-scale online survey of master's students studying at 46 universities throughout China, Shang et al. [12] confirmed that under conditions of involution, the dual pressures of academic research were negatively associated with the mental health of students via the mediating role of anxiety. Based on the data collected from medical students in China, the results showed that low self-esteem could be led to social media addiction through the chained mediation effect of academic involution and anxiety, revealing another way that involution competition could harm individuals' mental health [13]. Ye et al. [14] explored the association between academic delay of gratification and depressive symptomatology, and explored the complex moderation role of academic involution and academic resilience. Together, these findings suggest that it is not just an economic or institutional phenomenon, but also a deep-rooted social-psychological issue that drains people's psychological resources continuously due to constant social comparison, fierce competition, and fruitless inner fighting, and eventually results in widespread occupational burnout, sense of meaningless, and the erosion of existential sense of meaning.

Social Comparison Theory gives the main psychological explanation of the involutive mentality. The Social Comparison Theory was put forward by Festinger in 1954, which holds that people evaluate their own sense of worthiness, ability level, social hierarchy, and so forth, by comparing with others. If comparisons are within reasonable limits, they can promote self-cognition and stimulate motivation; while under conditions of scarce resources and fierce competition, comparisons tend to become constant upward comparisons, thus inducing relative deprivation, decline in efficacy beliefs, and accumulation of psychological pressure. Based on Reference Group Theory, it is found that individuals' selection of comparison objects is not arbitrary but constrained by distance (physical distance, social status similarity, information accessibility). According to the proximity principle, colleagues, classmates, neighbors—groups in close proximity—are first selected as reference subjects. Such frequent contacts further strengthen the persistence of comparison behavior and the accumulation effect of pressure. In the context of involutiveness, social comparison has three major features. First, there is a remarkable increase in the frequency of comparisons because competition environments continuously trigger comparison behavior through both formal organizations (assessment and evaluation systems) and informal norms (peer pressure). Second, there exists a preference towards upward comparison, since people prefer to compare with those performing better in order to achieve improvement, but such comparison usually brings about frustration rather than the effect of stimulating motivation. Third, there emerges diversification and precision of comparison dimensions, ranging from academic grades and career advancement to lifestyle, spending power, children's education, and many more. Fourth, there occurs internalization of comparison outcomes, i.e., the initial gap perceived externally gradually transforms into inner self-denial and questioning of values. Altogether, these characteristics provide the cognitive basis for the involutive mentality, locking people into the vicious circle of "comparison-anxiety-intensified competition-comparison." However, research on social comparison so far mainly focuses on laboratory experiments or questionnaire investigations, paying little attention to the complexity and context dependency of comparison behaviors in real society. Literature, as the artistic

reproduction of social life, exactly provides abundant qualitative data to observe the natural unfolding of social comparison, which is why this study introduces literature analysis into research on social comparison.

From the perspective of the theory of occupational burnout, it provides us with a new way to understand the psychological consequences of involution. Based on the three-dimensional structure of Maslach-Jackson's model of occupational burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, decreased sense of personal accomplishment), we will discuss how these three dimensions of feelings interact with each other in the process of involution. Firstly, in terms of emotional exhaustion, due to the excessive competition caused by involution, people need to deal with not only job responsibilities but also anxiety and uncertainties generated by competition; therefore, the continuous psychological tension produced by involution itself is the main reason leading to emotional exhaustion. Secondly, under the background of involution, colleagues have transformed their cooperative relationship into a competitive one because they believe there is only one winner in this competition. At the same time, the collapse of mutual aid networks among employees further promotes the development of depersonalization. Finally, after realizing that efforts do not make any difference at all, individuals will develop a sense of learned helplessness and give up their sense of fulfillment at last. As for organizational environment factors, as mentioned above, if an organization lacks sufficient resources or clearly defined assessment criteria, has limited room for advancement, or does not provide fair treatment for staff members, all of which would increase employees' risk of suffering from the syndrome of burnout. From another point of view, based on previous cross-cultural studies on burnout, we found some special features of burnout in the context of East Asian cultures: first, "saving face" in collectivistic societies increases the intensity of social comparison; secondly, the conflict between ambition based on Confucian values and real-life frustration is more likely to cause inner conflict for employees; finally, the tendency towards endurance restrains employees' emotion expression/coping behavior, so that their symptoms cannot be relieved in time, but rather build up gradually over time. Although many existing studies are concentrated around certain professions (such as medical workers, teachers, corporate employees), little attention has been paid to the comparison between different timelines or social classes regarding the experience of being burned out. Besides, quantitative analysis may fail to reveal the full picture of what it feels like experiencing burnout. Thus, literary works, with vivid descriptions of the protagonist's mental state, show us exactly how the feeling develops from the first emergence to the peak, how protagonists resist, bear, or abandon burning out, etc., and thus complement quantitative researches on the study of burnout.

From the perspective of literary research, Fortress Besieged and A Mess of Chicken Feathers are two classic masterpieces of Chinese modern literature. There is already a wealth of research results, but there is still relatively less systematic interpretation from a social psychological perspective. Regarding the research on Fortress Besieged, Xu Ruixue has analyzed the humorous art and intellectual reflection of Qian Zhongshu, pointing out that Fortress Besieged uses various means such as language humor, plot humor, and satirical humor to criticize the living environment of intellectuals. Behind these kinds of humor, there is enlightenment about the weakness of humans and the problems of society^[15]. Shi Ruoyao has studied the irony art of Fortress Besieged, believing that Fortress Besieged takes the form of verbal irony, situational irony, structural irony, etc., to show the distance between ideal and reality, appearance and substance^[16]. Sun Lingyi pays attention to the satirical art and portrayal of the image of intellectuals in Fortress Besieged, pointing out that Fortress Besieged describes the predicament and loss that intellectuals suffered in career selection, marriage choice, interpersonal communication through the description of Fang Hongjian, Su Wenwan, Zhao Xinmei, and other characters^[17]. Through these three articles, we can see that Fortress Besieged as a social psychological text has very rich connotations, but it is mainly still at the level of literary analysis, without deeper discussion based on social psychology theory. For A Mess of Chicken Feathers,

Huang Yue'e has appreciated its desolate sense of survival, believing that Liu Zhenyun describes through the detailed description of Xiao Lin's family's mundane life how ordinary people feel distressed and helpless under the pressure of survival. The seemingly trivial daily things like rotten tofu, children's illness, distribution of housing in the unit, conflicts between husband and wife all form the weighty burden crushing the meaning and ideals of life^[18]. Zhang Tingting and Cheng Xiuping, in exploring the translation strategy for A Mess of Chicken Feathers dialect, also mentioned that the local and colloquial features of A Mess of Chicken Feathers carry the survival experience and psychological state of a certain class of society^[19]. But taking Fortress Besieged and A Mess of Chicken Feathers together as objects of study under the context of "involution" in today's society, exploring how these two novels present the mechanism of social comparison and symptoms of job burnout, and what kind of inspiration they provide us for understanding current social psychological problems, is still an empty space in academia. Therefore, this article will make up for this deficiency from this point: by revealing the prototype of "involution" in literary works through cross-disciplinary theoretical dialogue and close reading of the text, it aims to provide historical depth and cultural resources for understanding social anxiety in contemporary times, while also highlighting the forward-looking value of social psychological insights from Chinese modern literature, promoting deep integration and innovative development between humanities and social sciences in terms of common concerns about human existential predicaments.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research design

In terms of research methods, this is mainly a qualitative research, with text analysis as its main body combined with theoretical perspectives in narrative psychology, literary sociology, and environmental psychology to form a three-dimensional analytical framework of "literature-text-social psychology–environment." In particular, we take Fortress Besieged and A Mess of Chicken Feathers as objects of analysis, treating them as narrative texts containing certain era background, social-psychological experiences. Extract information about social comparison behavior, the symptoms of occupational burnout, and environment stressors^[20] through systematic close reading and theoretical dialogue, and conduct research according to the logic of "theory guided text interpretation-theme extraction-comparative analysis-theoretical responses": Firstly, based on Festinger's social comparison theory and Maslach's three-component model of burnout, we establish operational criteria for identifying and analyzing the corresponding psychological phenomena in the text; Secondly, conduct multiple rounds of deep reading on both books, annotate and extract narrative segments, character speeches, mental descriptions, plot arrangements related to social comparison (comparison targets, comparison dimensions, comparison context, mental outcomes) and the feelings of being burned out (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, reduction in sense of achievement). Finally, use thematic analysis method to code, classify, and conceptualize the above extracted text materials into some key themes/subthemes showcasing the concrete manifestation of the feeling of "involution" in the two books. Adopt a comparative analysis strategy, taking the difference between the two books in terms of historical background, social class of characters, and narrative style as the independent variable, explore the similarities and differences between the mechanism of "involution" under different social backgrounds; finally, compare the results obtained from analyzing texts with recent empirical studies on "involution" and see whether there is correspondence between literature presentation and psychological theory, exploring what kind of new enlightenment literature text brings to social-psychological research^[21]. Throughout the research process, on one hand, we need to handle well the relationship between "theory sensitization" (to be influenced by theory) and "openness to text," applying existing theoretical frameworks as guidance but not

restricting ourselves to them, paying attention to both shared themes among the two books but also respecting their own narrative features and historical uniqueness. On another aspect, we should also focus on analyzing the environmental factors aspect, systematically analyzing how physical environment (how isolated the location of San Lu University is, how crowded the tube-shaped apartment building is), social environment (the operation mode of work units, power structure in academia), and culture environment (the pragmatic value orientation, the tradition of "saving face") are reflected in the text and become "invisible hands" that affect the psychological condition and behavior choices of characters. Reveal how "involution" as a kind of interaction between society, psychology, and environment occurs. This study, from levels of multi-level and dimensions, does not simply fall back into either purely literary critique or psychological application, but rather aims at organically integrating humanistic interpretation with social-scientific research, in order to provide new knowledge increases for grasping the historical origin and cultural logic behind the individual psychological dilemma faced by people living in China's transitional society.

3.2. Research objects and text selection

In this study, we take Qian Zhongshu's novel Fortress Besieged (written in 1947) and Liu Zhenyun's novella A Mess of Chicken Feathers (first serialized in 1991) as the main research subjects. Such choices were made after taking into account three aspects: In terms of time representation, Fortress Besieged emerged at the historical cusp between the end of the War Resistance Against Japan and before the outbreak of the Liberation War. Back then, Chinese society was in violent upheaval, intellectuals suffered from various dilemmas—identity confusion, blurred future orientation, collapse of values—and Fortress Besieged depicted the survival anxiety and psychological predicament felt by this special group through Fang Hongjian's journey from Shanghai into inland areas, from his return from studying abroad to teaching at the college, from love to marriage. A Mess of Chicken Feathers was completed in the early 1990s when reform and opening up continued to deepen, and the planned economy gradually transformed into a market economy; focusing on the daily lives of Xiao Lin's family, ordinary urban workers, the author conveys the spiritual pain and sense of nothingness of those at the bottom of society under survival pressures through depictions of small things like rotten bean curd, children's illness, residence distribution in units, and family conflict^[22]. Although the two works are separated by almost half a century, both have seized upon the feelings of competitive anxiety, comparative stress, and job burnout that people experience during periods of change in social structure in China, and therefore they are also excellent literary specimens for exploring the historical evolution of the "involution" mentality. From the perspective of narrative value, Fortress Besieged, with its subtle satire, full psychological portrayal, and scrupulous depiction of the ecological environment of intellectuals, is known as the "pearl" of modern Chinese literature. The comparisons back-and-forth between Fang Hongjian, Su Wenwan, Zhao Xiumei, Li Meiting, etc., according to academic qualifications, professional ranks, marriages, the power struggle and academic corruption inside San Lu University, and finally the protagonist's professional disappointment and spiritual suffering make it an ideal "text" for studying how social comparison operates and what manifestations there are of job burnout. A Mess of Chicken Feathers, in contrast, with its simple realistic brushwork, accurate grasp of the minutiae of everyday life, and care about ordinary people's lives, is regarded as a "model" work portraying ordinary people's life difficulties in contemporary literature. Xiao Lin secretly but persistently compares himself with colleagues, neighbors, classmates, the restrictions imposed by bureaucratic systems on individual growth paths, and the gradual erosion of the joy of living by trivial matters every day provide us with a good "case" to understand what being caught in involution feels like in different social classes^[23].

In terms of comparability and complementarity, choosing these two works has distinct methodological value. Fortress Besieged takes the knowledge class as its subject, describing the involutionary survival

pattern centered around competition in cultural capitals (academic qualifications, academic performance, social reputation). The main arena of struggle is universities and the intellectual elites. The reference group for social comparison tends to be peers with similar levels of education. The source of occupational exhaustion mainly comes from the huge disparity between ideal and reality, the complicated game of academic power, and the special spiritual aspirations of intellectuals. *Chicken Feathers Fly* takes the city's general worker class as its object, recounting how competition over material capitals (houses, salary, children's education) brings about the involutionary dilemma that they face. The battlefield here is located within workplaces, residential communities, everyday life spaces, etc.; the reference groups for social comparisons are mainly those around them who can be seen every day – co-workers, neighbors, kinship networks. The root causes of their feelings of being burned out are mainly due to the direct weight of livelihood burdens, limited ways of climbing up society, and continuous drain of small things in daily lives^[24]. Differences in social hierarchy, fields, and aspects contested allow the two works to form complementary analytical angles: through comparison and contrast, we may discover not only what is shared in terms of psychological mechanism among different classes of people ("involution" mentality included) – i.e., the universality of social comparisons, the process of experiencing relative deprivation, major manifestations of being burnt out at work – but also what distinguishes one from another, e.g., differences between the two classes' respective sources of stress (the former's originates primarily from their unique spiritual frustrations; whereas the latter's arises mainly out of specific practical difficulties); differences between competing in terms of either culture or material wealth^[25]. At the same time, since they were written in different times (the 1940s vs the late twentieth century), the two novels together offer us chances to make historical comparisons longitudinally so as to explore how this phenomenon developed historically through successive phases when China transformed itself from a traditional society into a modern one, and from under a planned economy towards a market-oriented economic system, respectively. This will further help us understand what underlies such a socio-psychological phenomenon as "involution," providing a much deeper sense of history and a richer sense of culture for grasping today's involution problems.

3.3. Analytical framework and coding scheme

Based on this, we have constructed a three-dimensional analytical framework of "social comparison–occupational burnout–environmental context" to deconstruct the psychological mechanism of "involution" in literature texts from three aspects: (1) From the perspective of social comparison, according to Fetsinger's social comparison theory and its later development research, we build a coding framework that includes five secondary categories—comparison orientation (upward comparison, downward comparison, horizontal comparison)—comparison dimension (economic capital, cultural capital, social capital, symbolic capital)—comparison targets (colleagues, classmates, friends, and neighbors as reference groups)—comparison situation (formal occasions like evaluation of professional titles and arrangement of tasks, informal occasions like daily communication and casual conversation)—comparison result (relative deprivation, sense of self-efficacy, coping strategy)^[26]. In concrete operations, for example, we mark out Fang Hongjian's comparison of academic qualifications with the group of overseas students, Fang Hongjian's comparison of professional titles and treatment with colleagues in Sansheng University, and Fang Hongjian's comparison of social status with love rivals Zhao Xiumei in *Fortress Besieged*; and the plot setting where Xiao Lin compares houses with Colleague Huo, Xiao Lin compares careers with university classmates, and Xiao Lin compares family contributions with his wife in *The Chicken Coop Artist*. Through sorting out these specific texts, the differences in social comparison patterns among different social classes are revealed. (2) From the perspective of occupational burnout, based on Maslach's three-dimensional model of occupational burnout, we propose three main categories—emotional exhaustion (decrease in enthusiasm for work, increase in sense

of fatigue, empty feeling of emotion)—depersonalization (indifference towards the object of work, instrumentalization of interpersonal interaction, cynicism)—reduced personal accomplishment (disillusionment with professional ideals, doubt about self-worth, loss of the sense of work)^[27]. Each of them has three subcategories—behavioral expression, psychological feelings, evaluation from narrators. We find out the images of “involution” such as Fang Hongjian’s perfunctory attitude towards teaching, Fang Hongjian’s sense of emptiness towards academic research, and Fang Hongjian’s alienation and burnout feelings towards colleague relationship in Fortress Besieged; Xiao Lin’s mechanical way of dealing with things in the workplace, Xiao Lin’s monotonous repetition of life at home, and Xiao Lin’s despair cognition towards life in The Chicken Coop Artist. Then, we code these textual evidences one by one and build correspondence between them and theoretical concepts.

From the perspective of environmental factors, based on the theories of environmental psychology, organizational sociology, and cultural anthropology, we have constructed a three-level coding framework for the environment—macro (social institution, cultural value, historical context), meso (organization structure, work environment, community environment), and micro (physical space, interpersonal network, situational context)—and adopted a “double-coding” strategy to ensure that the analysis is comprehensive and systematic^[28]. In terms of macro-environment, it mainly examines the war-time environment of limited intellectual circulation and lack of academic conditions during the period when Fortress Besieged was created, as well as the background of transformation from the work unit system to the market economy, just before the housing commercialization reform, when A Mess of Chicken Feathers was produced; regarding meso-environment, our focus has been paid to the academic politics ecology of San Lu University, power distribution mechanism, informal cliques conflict, bureaucrat hierarchy system, unequal resource distribution, internal competition situation in Xiao Lin’s working unit respectively; As for micro-environment, we have carefully analyzed the remote and isolated geographical position of San Lu University, small and old staff apartments, power metaphor of seat arrangement in offices, small tubes-like houses, kitchen community supervision, acquaintance society characteristics of work unit communities. First of all, researchers initially code the text segments into certain theoretical categories according to their own understanding, then conduct secondary open coding, let the texts speak, discover some novel topics not covered in the above framework—local concepts such as “the promotion mechanism of ‘face’ culture on comparative behavior”, “how trifles daily life erodes the spiritual world”^[28]. In order to test the reliability of coding, we invited another two research assistants who are familiar with literature analysis and psychological knowledge respectively to independently code 20% of samples again, calculate Kappa coefficient among coders.

3.4. Research reliability and validity assurance

We have adopted various measures in this study to improve the credibility, transferability, and confirmability of the qualitative analysis, so as to strengthen the reliability of the results: In order to guarantee the reliability of the research, we first developed a clear coding manual, defining operational definitions, identification criteria, and exemplary cases of all categories, respectively. Emotional exhaustion is defined as “the character shows emotions such as tiredness and boredom towards work-related things,” for example, “Every time Fang Hongjian walks into the classroom, he feels inexplicable irritability”^[29]. Then, we invited two other coders who were familiar with literature research and psychology knowledge to code another 25% of the samples (the third to fifth chapters of San Lu University parts in Fortress Besieged, key paragraphs about housing distribution plans in Chicken Feathers and Lantern Oil) simultaneously; if there were disagreements between the coders, discussions would be held until consensus was reached. Finally, we randomly selected another 30% of the samples after three months, recoded them according to the previous classification rules again, and compared whether the coding results were consistent before and after; if they

were inconsistent, we adjusted the classification rules based on new understandings. The Kappa value between the original coder's rating results and those of the other two coders was .76 initially, increasing to .85 after three rounds of discussion and revision of classification rules, and .82 between the initial and later ratings of the same original coder.

In terms of validity assurance, we adopted the method of triangulation in the study to improve the credibility of results: theoretical triangulation, data triangulation, methodological triangulation. First, it refers to the theoretical triangulation that we adopted multiple theoretical views—social comparison theory, occupational burnout theory, and environmental psychology theory—to explain the same phenomenon at the same time during the interpretation of the text, which could enhance the theoretical validity of the conclusion when different theoretical frameworks converge on one phenomenon. For example, Fang Hongjian's career dilemma can be interpreted both as a decrease in self-efficacy caused by social comparison and as an emotional resource drain caused by contextual stressors^[30]. Second, in terms of data triangulation, instead of only analyzing direct textual evidence like characters' dialogue and behavior description, we further examined indirect evidence such as narrator's commentary and plot structure arrangement and symbol metaphor, as well as para-textual materials like Qian Zhongshu's preface of Fortress Besieged and Liu Zhenyun's creation statement, and historical documents like intellectuals' diary records in the 1940s and urban residents' oral history collection in the 1990s, and formed an argumentative structure where multiple evidence chains are cross-corroborated. Finally, regarding methodological triangulation, we combined three research methods—content analysis (quantitatively counted the frequency of social comparison behavior occurrence in the text and the classification proportion of comparison targets), narrative analysis (traced the development timeline of changes in the psychology of characters and the meaning construction of turning points of the storyline), and discourse analysis (analyzed power relation and ideology representation embodied in the language of characters)—approached the same problem from different methodological perspectives, and judged whether the theme extraction was sufficient based on theoretical saturation test. If no new analytical category or theoretical insight emerged after introducing additional new texts (i.e., saturation occurred after analyzing all nine chapters of Fortress Besieged and the main plot part of "A Mess" of Chicken Feathers), then stop coding^[31].

4. Results analysis

4.1. Literary presentation of social comparison mechanisms

4.1.1. Selection of comparison objects and construction of reference groups

Social comparison behaviors of characters in Fortress Besieged and A Mess of Chicken Feathers exhibit distinct characteristics of social strata and differences in reference groups. Through systematic coding analysis, the research identified 276 instances of explicit social comparison plots, with 143 in Fortress Besieged and 133 in A Mess of Chicken Feathers. In the selection of comparison objects, the two works demonstrate markedly different patterns of reference group construction. In Fortress Besieged, Fang Hongjian's social comparison objects are primarily concentrated among classmate groups (38.5%), colleague groups (31.5%), and romantic rival groups (18.2%). This selection pattern reflects that the intellectual stratum tends more toward lateral comparison in the field of cultural capital, with comparison dimensions focusing on academic credential authenticity (fake diploma from Claydon University vs. genuine doctoral degrees from Europe and America), academic prestige (lecturer vs. associate professor vs. professor titles), and social status (the halo of returning from overseas study vs. domestic educational background) and other symbolic capital^[32]. Specifically, when comparing himself with Korean doctoral graduate Han Xueyu who studied in America, Fang Hongjian experiences anxiety about the falseness of his credentials; when

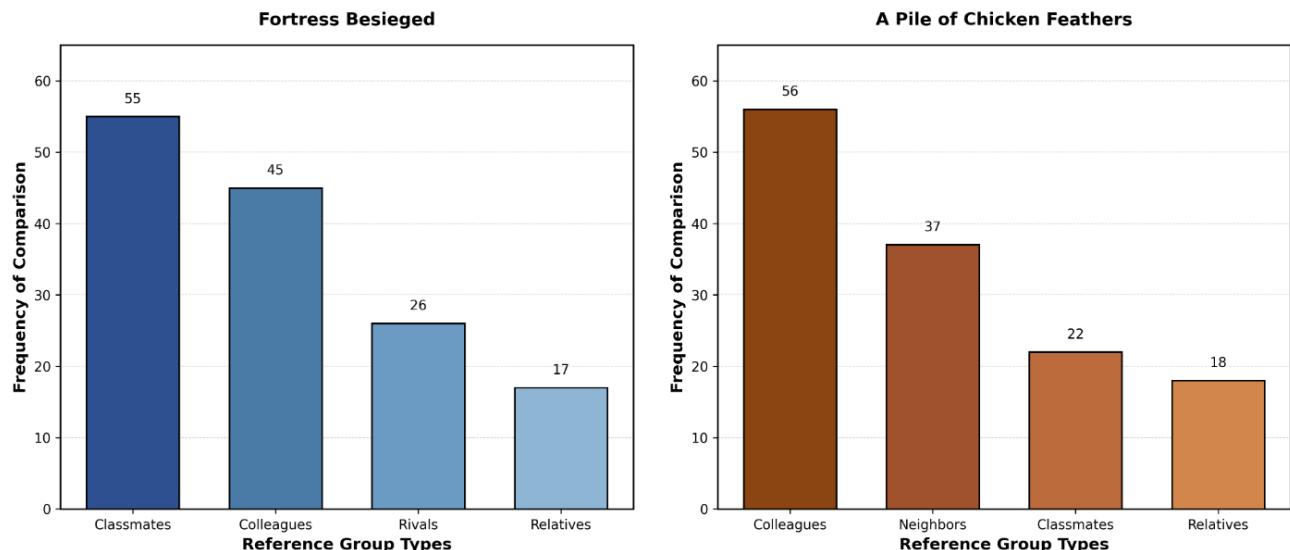
comparing with Associate Professor Zhao Xinmei, he generates a sense of relative deprivation regarding career development; when comparing with competitors for Su Wenwan's affection, he experiences uncertainty about social status. In contrast, Xiao Lin's social comparison objects in *A Mess of Chicken Feathers* exhibit more diverse and quotidian characteristics. Colleague groups (42.1%), neighbor groups (27.8%), and university classmates (16.5%) constitute the main reference system, with comparison dimensions more concentrated on visible differences in material capital, including housing area and quality (single room in tube-shaped building vs. three-bedroom apartment), income levels and welfare benefits (salary grades, bonus distribution), and children's educational resources (key primary school vs. ordinary primary school enrollment opportunities) and other survival needs, as shown in **Table 1**. Xiao Lin's continuous comparison with colleague Lao Hou on housing issues triggers intense feelings of injustice; comparison with successful university classmates generates regret about career choices; and competition with neighbors in daily consumption leads to accumulation of family financial pressure.

Quantitative analysis reveals that the social proximity of reference groups significantly influences comparison frequency and the intensity of psychological consequences in both works. In *Fortress Besieged*, Fang Hongjian's comparisons with San Lü University colleagues who are physically close and of similar social status (45 times) far exceed comparisons with the distant group of European and American overseas students (12 times). This "close-distance high-frequency comparison" pattern leads to continuous accumulation of psychological pressure. In *A Mess of Chicken Feathers*, Xiao Lin's comparison behaviors with neighbors who share the tube-shaped building and communal spaces (37 times) likewise exceed comparisons with university classmates with whom daily contact has been lost (22 times). The visibility of neighborhood spaces causes material differences to be continuously magnified. It is noteworthy that upward comparison occupies a dominant position in both works. In *Fortress Besieged*, upward comparison accounts for 73.4%, downward comparison only 14.7%, and lateral comparison 11.9%; in *A Mess of Chicken Feathers*, upward comparison accounts for 68.4%, downward comparison 17.3%, and lateral comparison 14.3%, as shown in **Figure 1**. This preference for upward comparison reflects individuals' desire for higher social status and dissatisfaction with the status quo in involutionary environments, but it also becomes an important trigger for relative deprivation and declining self-efficacy [33].

Table 1. Distribution of social comparison objects and comparison dimension statistics in both works.

Work	Comparison Object Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Main Comparison Dimensions	Comparison Direction Distribution
Fortress Besieged	Classmate groups	55	38.5	Academic credential authenticity, overseas study background	Upward 74%, Downward 8%, Lateral 18%
Fortress Besieged	Colleague groups	45	31.5	Professional titles, academic prestige, salary and treatment	Upward 78%, Downward 15%, Lateral 7%
Fortress Besieged	Romantic rival groups	26	18.2	Social status, economic conditions	Upward 69%, Downward 19%, Lateral 12%
Fortress Besieged	Relatives and friends groups	17	11.8	Career achievements, marital status	Upward 65%, Downward 23%, Lateral 12%
<i>A Mess of Chicken Feathers</i>	Colleague groups	56	42.1	Housing, salary grades, promotion opportunities	Upward 71%, Downward 16%, Lateral 13%

Work	Comparison Object Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Main Comparison Dimensions	Comparison Direction Distribution
A Mess of Chicken Feathers	Neighbor groups	37	27.8	Living conditions, household income, quality of life	Upward 68%, Downward 18%, Lateral 14%
A Mess of Chicken Feathers	University classmate groups	22	16.5	Career development, economic circumstances	Upward 73%, Downward 14%, Lateral 13%
A Mess of Chicken Feathers	Relatives and friends groups	18	13.6	Children's education, family assets	Upward 59%, Downward 27%, Lateral 14%

Table 1. (Continued)**Figure 1.** Distribution chart of social comparison reference groups.

4.1.2 Environmental triggers in comparison contexts

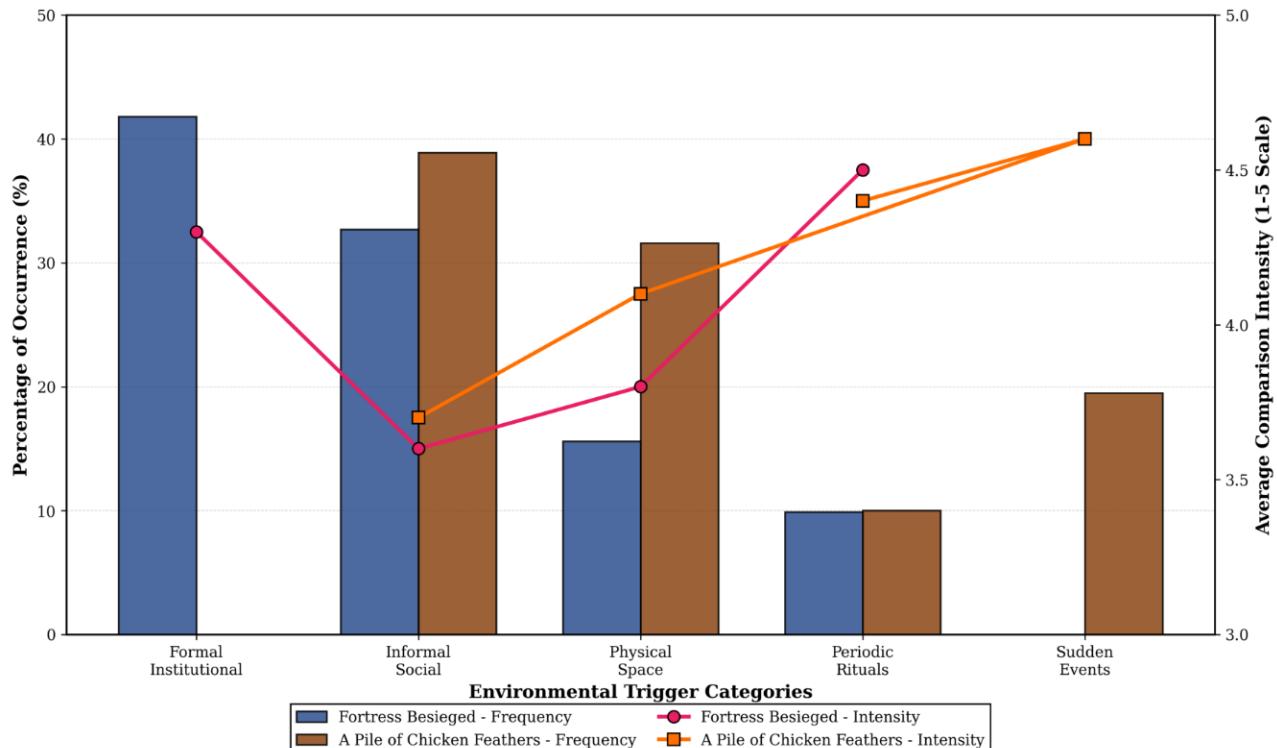
The occurrence of social comparison behaviors is not a spontaneous psychological activity of individuals, but is deeply embedded in specific environmental contexts, triggered by multiple factors including physical spaces, institutional structures, and social interaction scenarios. Through coding analysis of 198 explicit comparison contexts in both works, the research identified five major categories of environmental triggers: formal institutional scenarios, informal social scenarios, physical space visibility, sudden event stimulation, and periodic ritual occasions. In Fortress Besieged, formal institutional scenarios (such as faculty meetings, professional title evaluations, course assignments) trigger the highest proportion of comparison behaviors at 41.8%. These scenarios institutionally present differences in cultural capital such as academic credentials, professional titles, and seniority before intellectuals, forcing Fang Hongjian to constantly compare his fake Claydon doctoral degree with others' genuine European and American doctoral degrees, experiencing the oppressive sense of hierarchical order in each meeting's seating arrangements, speaking order, and salary differences. Informal social scenarios (such as tea parties, casual conversations, banquets) account for 32.7%. The geographically isolated environment of San Lü University makes daily interactions among the faculty highly intensive, with what appears to be relaxed socializing actually filled with implicit competition and comparison regarding overseas study experiences, academic achievements, and social connections. Physical space visibility factors account for 15.6%, as the unequal distribution of

spatial resources such as the shabby conditions of faculty dormitories, office location assignments, and convenience of accessing library materials becomes a continuous source of comparison triggers, as shown in **Table 2**. *A Mess of Chicken Feathers* presents a different pattern of environmental triggers: informal social scenarios account for as much as 38.9%, with shared spaces in tube-shaped buildings such as communal kitchens, corridors, and water rooms becoming high-frequency arenas for neighborhood comparisons. Xiao Lin witnesses others' living conditions daily in these spaces, constantly making self-comparisons from others' dishes, clothing, and manner of speech. Physical space visibility factors account for 31.6%. The narrow and crowded living environment of tube-shaped buildings makes material differences between families completely visible at a glance. The event of Lao Hou moving into a three-bedroom new apartment becomes an environmental trigger point continuously stimulating Xiao Lin to make upward comparisons. Sudden event stimulation (such as housing allocation notices, salary increases, children's school advancement) accounts for 19.5%. These events break the calm of daily life,激发 ing intense comparison reactions and relative deprivation [34]. It is noteworthy that although periodic ritual occasions (such as holiday gatherings, year-end summaries) account for relatively low proportions in both works (*Fortress Besieged* 9.9%, *A Mess of Chicken Feathers* 10.0%), the comparison intensity they trigger is the highest, because these occasions often concentrate the presentation of achievement differences over a past period, forming a collective comparison atmosphere, as shown in **Figure 2**. Analysis of environmental trigger factors reveals that "involution" is not merely an individual psychological phenomenon, but the result jointly shaped by specific social structures and spatial environments: the work unit system binds individuals in closed organizational spaces, the distribution mechanism of limited resources institutionally produces comparison contexts, while crowded physical spaces make differences continuously visible—together these three constitute the environmental foundation of involutionary survival.

Table 2. Classification statistics of environmental triggers for social comparison in both works.

Work	Trigger Factor Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Typical Context Examples	Average Comparison Intensity (1-5 scale)
Fortress Besieged	Formal institutional scenarios	42	41.8	Faculty meetings, professional title evaluations, course assignments, salary distribution	4.3
Fortress Besieged	Informal social scenarios	33	32.7	Tea parties, colleague casual conversations, dinner gatherings	3.6
Fortress Besieged	Physical space visibility	16	15.6	Dormitory conditions, office locations, library resources	3.8
Fortress Besieged	Periodic ritual occasions	10	9.9	Opening ceremonies, semester summaries, holiday gatherings	4.5
A Mess of Chicken Feathers	Informal social scenarios	39	38.9	Communal kitchen conversations, corridor chats, neighbor visits	3.7

Work	Trigger Factor Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Typical Context Examples	Average Comparison Intensity (1-5 scale)
A Mess of Chicken Feathers	Physical space visibility	32	31.6	Housing area differences, furniture furnishings, daily necessities	4.1
A Mess of Chicken Feathers	Sudden event stimulation	20	19.5	Housing allocation notices, salary adjustments, children's school enrollment	4.6
A Mess of Chicken Feathers	Periodic ritual occasions	10	10.0	Spring Festival gatherings, unit annual meetings, family dinners	4.4

Table 2. (Continued)**Figure 2.** Frequency and intensity analysis of environmental trigger factors.

4.1.3. Psychological consequences of social comparison and adaptive strategies

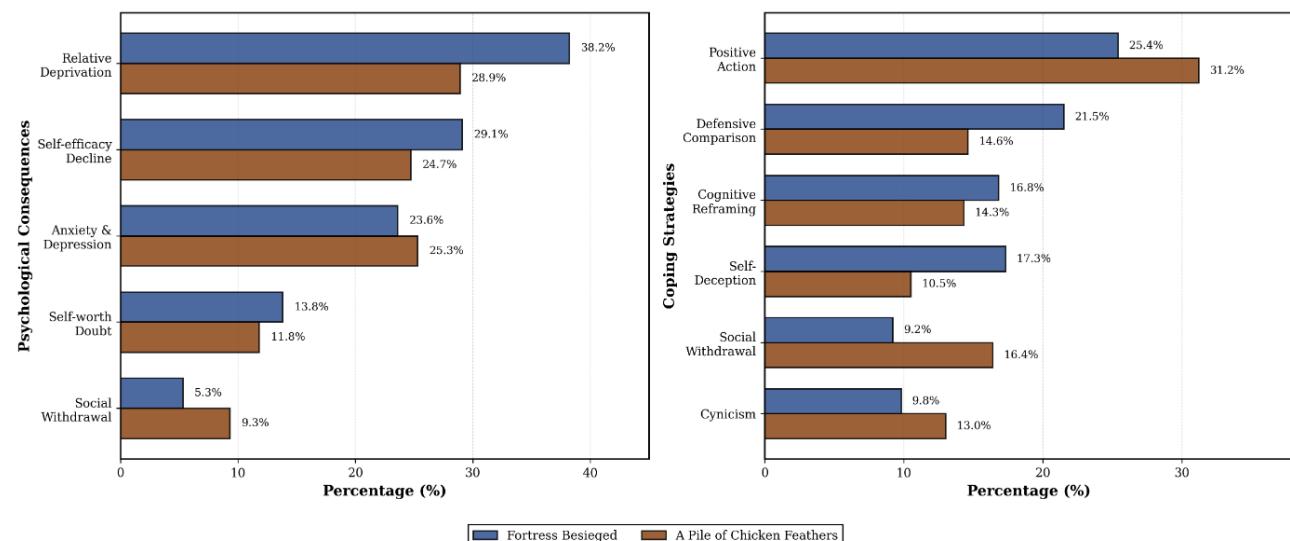
Continuous social comparison behaviors produce profound and multidimensional psychological consequences in the protagonists of both works, while also giving rise to a series of adaptive or maladaptive psychological defense strategies. Through systematic coding of textual descriptions of characters' psychological states and behavioral responses, the research identified five major categories of psychological consequences: relative deprivation (32.4%), declining self-efficacy (26.8%), anxiety and depressive emotions (21.5%), self-worth doubt (12.7%), and social withdrawal tendencies (6.6%). In Fortress Besieged,

Fang Hongjian's sense of relative deprivation resulting from frequent upward comparisons is particularly prominent (accounting for 38.2% of his psychological consequences). Whenever he sees genuine doctoral degree holders returned from overseas study, colleagues with higher professional titles, or romantic rivals with superior social status, he deeply experiences his own inadequacy and failure. This continuous sense of deprivation gradually erodes his self-efficacy (29.1%), causing him to fundamentally doubt his academic abilities, teaching competence, and social charm, ultimately leading to the complete collapse of his professional ideals [35]. Anxiety emotions in Fang Hongjian manifest as continuous worry about the future (23.6%)—worrying about his fake credentials being exposed, worrying about losing his position, worrying about marital failure—and these anxieties continuously consume his psychological energy. The pattern of psychological consequences in Xiao Lin in *A Mess of Chicken Feathers* is slightly different. Relative deprivation is similarly significant (28.9%), but focuses more on gaps at the material life level. The contrast of Lao Hou moving into a new house while he remains trapped in the tube-shaped building, the disparity of classmates becoming wealthy through business while he earns a meager salary—all these reinforce his sense of deprivation. It is noteworthy that Xiao Lin's anxiety and depressive emotions account for a higher proportion (25.3%), manifesting as weariness with trivial daily life, despair about the possibility of future change, and the resulting emotional numbness, as shown in **Table 3**. Facing these negative psychological consequences, characters in both works develop different adaptive strategies. The research identified six major strategies: defensive comparison (selective downward comparison to maintain self-esteem, 18.3%), cognitive reconstruction (changing comparison dimensions or standards, 15.7%), self-deception (exaggerating one's own advantages or belittling others, 14.2%), social withdrawal (reducing contact with others to avoid comparison, 12.6%), cynicism (adopting cynical attitudes to deny the value of competition, 11.4%), and positive action (attempting to change the status quo, 27.8%) [36]. In *Fortress Besieged*, Fang Hongjian more frequently employs defensive comparison (21.5%) and self-deception (17.3%) strategies. For example, when comparing with Han Xueyu, he emphasizes that his social skills are superior to the other's bookishness; when facing career disappointment, he belittles the value of academic work to maintain self-esteem, as shown in **Figure 3**. In *A Mess of Chicken Feathers*, Xiao Lin tends more toward cynicism (15.8%) and social withdrawal (16.4%) strategies. He expresses anger at the injustice of the unit's housing allocation system, satirizes colleagues' hypocrisy, and simultaneously increasingly reduces social activities, enclosing himself in narrow family spaces. However, most of these adaptive strategies belong to negative coping. Genuine positive action (such as improving one's abilities or changing living environments) accounts for relatively low proportions in both works and mostly ends in failure, revealing the constraints on individual agency in involutionary environments: structural resource scarcity and institutional competitive pressures make personal efforts often unable to bring substantial change, instead intensifying the vicious cycle of psychological predicaments.

Table 3. Statistical analysis of psychological consequences and adaptive strategies of social comparison.

Dimensional Type	Specific Category	Fortress Besieged Percentage (%)	A Mess of Chicken Feathers Percentage (%)	Overall Percentage (%)	Adaptiveness Assessment
Psychological Consequences	Relative deprivation	38.2	28.9	32.4	-
Psychological Consequences	Declining self-efficacy	29.1	24.7	26.8	-
Psychological Consequences	Anxiety and depressive emotions	23.6	25.3	21.5	-

Dimensional Type	Specific Category	Fortress Besieged Percentage (%)	A Mess of Chicken Feathers Percentage (%)	Overall Percentage (%)	Adaptiveness Assessment
Psychological Consequences	Self-worth doubt	13.8	11.8	12.7	-
Psychological Consequences	Social withdrawal tendencies	5.3	9.3	6.6	-
Adaptive Strategies	Positive action	25.4	31.2	27.8	Adaptive
Adaptive Strategies	Defensive comparison	21.5	14.6	18.3	Partially adaptive
Adaptive Strategies	Cognitive reconstruction	16.8	14.3	15.7	Partially adaptive
Adaptive Strategies	Self-deception	17.3	10.5	14.2	Maladaptive
Adaptive Strategies	Social withdrawal	9.2	16.4	12.6	Maladaptive
Adaptive Strategies	Cynicism	9.8	13.0	11.4	Maladaptive

Table 3. (Continued)**Figure 3.** Comparative distribution of psychological consequences and coping strategies of social comparison.

4.2. Symptomatological analysis of occupational burnout

4.2.1. Narrative representation of emotional exhaustion

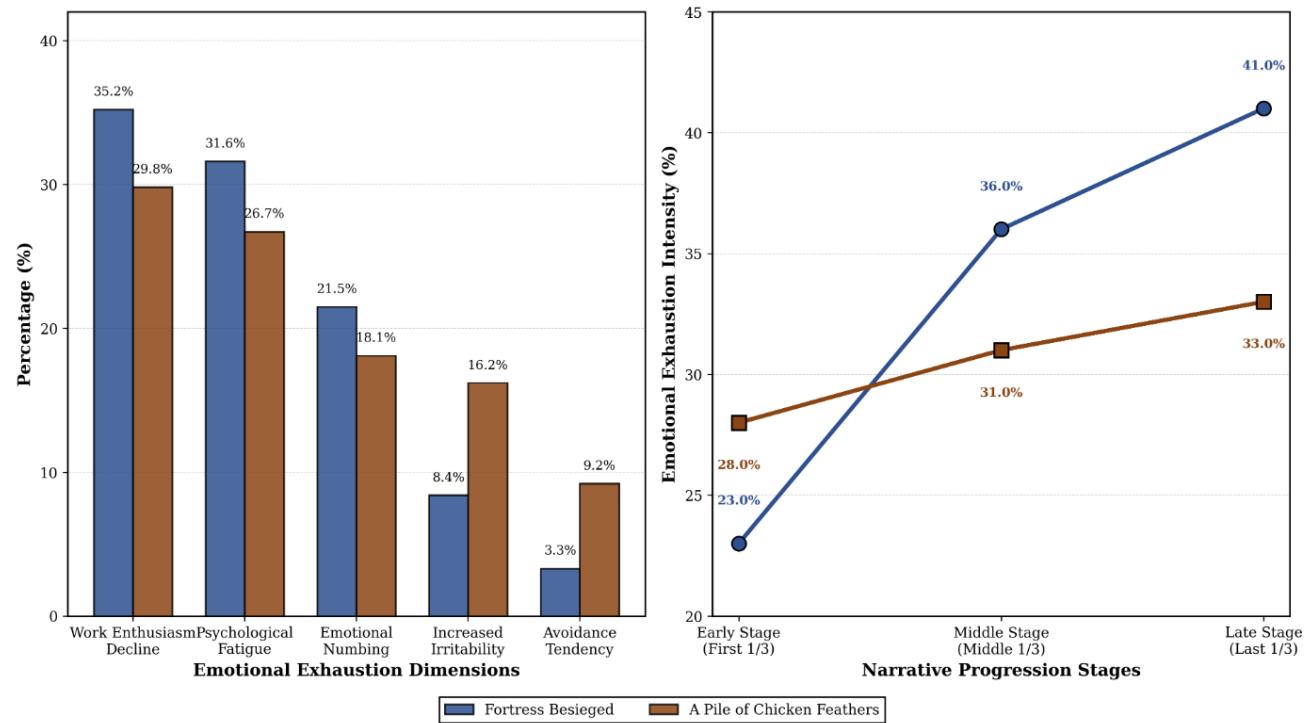
Emotional Exhaustion, as the core dimension of occupational burnout, receives delicate and profound presentation through rich narrative techniques in both works. The research systematically coded narrative fragments involving emotional exhaustion in the texts, identifying 218 relevant textual units in total, including various forms of representation such as characters' interior monologues, behavioral descriptions, dialogue presentations, and narrator commentaries. From the perspective of specific manifestation dimensions of emotional exhaustion, the research summarized five major categories of symptoms: declining work enthusiasm (31.7%), psychological fatigue (28.4%), emotional numbness (19.3%), increased irritability (12.8%), and avoidance tendencies (7.8%), as shown in **Table 4**. In Fortress Besieged, Fang Hongjian's

emotional exhaustion presents a progressive developmental trajectory, evolving from initial freshness toward teaching work upon arriving at San Lü University to gradual weariness with lesson preparation and teaching (declining work enthusiasm accounting for 35.2%). He increasingly feels that "entering the classroom is like entering an execution ground," with each lecture being a tremendous drain on his mental energy [37]. Psychological fatigue in Fang Hongjian manifests as a continuous state of exhaustion (31.6%). Whether academic meetings, social engagements, or daily teaching, all make him feel unbearably heavy. This fatigue cannot be explained by physical tiredness, but represents deep depletion of psychological resources. The manifestation of emotional numbness (21.5%) is reflected in his indifferent attitude toward people and affairs around him—no longer caring about colleagues' predicaments, indifferent to students' progress, and even losing appropriate emotional investment in his own marriage. In *A Mess of Chicken Feathers*, Xiao Lin's emotional exhaustion stems more from the repetitive erosion of daily life trivialities. Declining work enthusiasm (29.8%) manifests as his mechanical handling of unit work, with clocking in, perfunctory reports, and waiting out time until work ends becoming the norm. More prominent is his psychological fatigue (26.7%). Daily facing endless trivialities such as spoiled tofu, children's illnesses, and marital quarrels produces deep life weariness in him. "Living is just repeating yesterday" becomes his most genuine inner feeling. Emotional numbness in Xiao Lin (18.1%) manifests as indifference toward his wife, numbness to children's needs, and alienation from neighborhood relationships. He increasingly resembles a mechanically operating machine, losing the emotional richness of being human, as shown in **Figure 4**. It is noteworthy that the two works differ in narrative strategies for emotional exhaustion: Fortress Besieged more frequently employs ironic humorous narrative, demonstrating the absurdity of emotional exhaustion through characters' self-mockery and bystander perspectives, such as Fang Hongjian comparing his career predicament to a "besieged fortress"; *A Mess of Chicken Feathers* adopts plain descriptive techniques, allowing readers to feel the continuous loss of the protagonist's emotional energy in seemingly trivial narratives through cumulative description of daily life details [38]. From the dimension of narrative time, Fang Hongjian's emotional exhaustion presents obvious phased characteristics in the text, rising from 23% in the early stage to 36% in the middle stage, ultimately reaching a peak of 41% in the late stage. Xiao Lin's emotional exhaustion presents as a diffused continuous state, maintaining relatively stable high levels across different stages of the text (early stage 28%, middle stage 31%, late stage 33%), reflecting different developmental patterns of occupational burnout across different social strata.

Table 4. Statistical analysis of narrative representation of emotional exhaustion symptoms.

Emotional Exhaustion Dimension	Fortress Besieged Percentage (%)	A Mess of Chicken Feathers Percentage (%)	Overall Percentage (%)	Primary Narrative Strategies	Number of Textual Examples
Declining work enthusiasm	35.2	29.8	31.7	Interior monologue, behavioral description	69
Psychological fatigue	31.6	26.7	28.4	Physical sensation description, dialogue presentation	62
Emotional numbness	21.5	18.1	19.3	Interpersonal interaction description, psychological distancing	42

Emotional Exhaustion Dimension	Fortress Besieged Percentage (%)	A Mess of Chicken Feathers Percentage (%)	Overall Percentage (%)	Primary Narrative Strategies	Number of Textual Examples
Increased irritability	8.4	16.2	12.8	Conflict scenes, emotional outburst description	28
Avoidance tendencies	3.3	9.2	7.8	Behavioral avoidance, fantasy scenes	17
Early stage (first 1/3 of text)	23.0	28.0	25.7	-	56
Middle stage (middle 1/3 of text)	36.0	31.0	33.2	-	72
Late stage (last 1/3 of text)	41.0	33.0	36.5	-	90

Table 4. (Continued)**Figure 4.** Dimensional distribution and narrative evolution pattern of emotional exhaustion.

4.2.2. Depersonalization and cynical attitudes

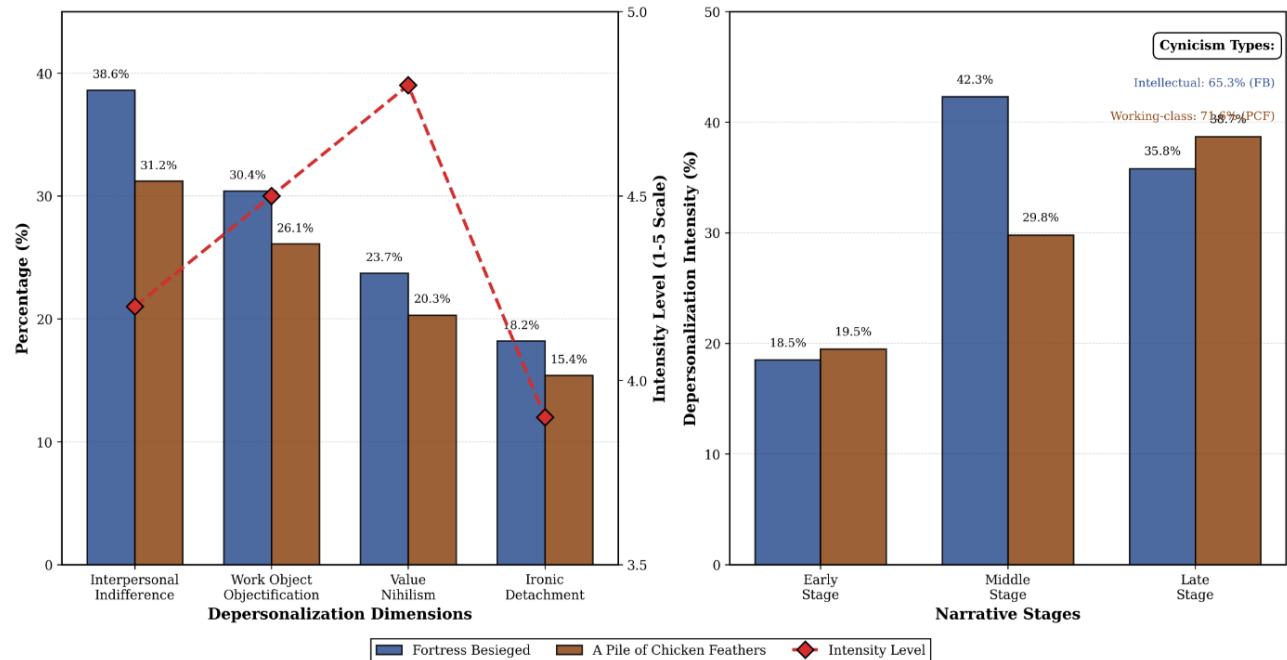
Depersonalization, as the second core dimension of occupational burnout, manifests in both works as characters' indifferent alienation and cynical attitudes toward work objects, interpersonal relationships, and social values. The research systematically coded narrative fragments exhibiting depersonalization characteristics in the texts, identifying 187 relevant textual units in total, encompassing four major dimensions: interpersonal interaction indifference, work object objectification, value nihilism, and ironic detachment, as shown in **Table 5**. In terms of interpersonal interaction indifference (34.2%), Fang Hongjian's attitude toward San Lü University colleagues in Fortress Besieged undergoes a transformation from polite

courtesy in the early stage to indifferent alienation in the middle and late stages. He no longer cares about colleagues' predicaments and needs, adopts a detached bystander posture at faculty meetings, and loses appropriate educator's concern for students' learning difficulties. This indifference accounts for 38.6% of his depersonalization manifestations [39]. Xiao Lin's interpersonal indifference (31.2%) in *A Mess of Chicken Feathers* manifests more in family relationships and neighborhood interactions. He responds mechanically to his wife's complaints, appears impatient with children's needs, and perfunctorily acknowledges neighbors' greetings. Interpersonal relationships gradually become instrumentalized and superficial. The work object objectification dimension (27.8%) reflects characters' treatment of work itself and its service objects as depersonalized entities. Fang Hongjian views teaching as mechanical repetition akin to "reciting sutras," with students no longer being unique individuals in his eyes but a blurred audience group (30.4%). Xiao Lin treats unit work as a "means of livelihood" that must be endured, with documents and reports becoming task lists to be dealt with rather than meaningful work content (26.1%). Value nihilism manifestations (21.5%) represent the deep psychological mechanism of depersonalization. Fang Hongjian dissolves the meaning of academic work through ironic self-deprecation—statements such as "a doctoral degree is nothing but waste paper" and "a professor title is merely empty fame" reflect his fundamental doubt about the cultural capital value system (23.7%). Xiao Lin generates existential emptiness in day-to-day trivial life, with thoughts like "living has no meaning" appearing frequently, reflecting an overall negation of life's meaning (20.3%). Ironic detachment (16.5%) is a unique literary manifestation of depersonalization in both works. Fang Hongjian maintains psychological distance from his surrounding environment through humorous irony, using mockery of others to mask his own sense of failure (18.2%). Xiao Lin expresses dissatisfaction with unit systems and social injustice through cynical comments, but behind this critical attitude lies deep despair about powerlessness to change the status quo (15.4%) [40]. It is noteworthy that cynical attitudes present different class characteristics in the two works: cynicism in *Fortress Besieged* manifests more as intellectual-style smart mockery, with Fang Hongjian constructing psychological defense through wordplay, puns, and ironic rhetoric. His cynical attitude intensity reaches a peak in the middle of the text (42.3%), precisely corresponding to the period when his professional ideals completely collapse. Cynicism in *A Mess of Chicken Feathers* is closer to the helpless compromise of lower-class people. Xiao Lin's cynical attitude presents a trend of continuous accumulation, rising from 19.5% in the early stage to 38.7% in the late stage, reflecting the erosion process of personality under long-term survival pressure, as shown in **Figure 5**. The interweaving of depersonalization and cynical attitudes constitutes an important symptom of the "involution" mentality. They are both defense mechanisms for individuals coping with occupational burnout and further intensify alienation from work and others, forming a vicious cycle.

Table 5. Statistical analysis of manifestation forms of depersonalization and cynical attitudes.

Depersonalization Dimension	Fortress Besieged Percentage (%)	A Mess of Chicken Feathers Percentage (%)	Overall Percentage (%)	Typical Discourse Characteristics	Intensity Level (1-5 scale)
Interpersonal interaction indifference	38.6	31.2	34.2	Indifferent responses, perfunctory handling, emotional alienation	4.2
Work object objectification	30.4	26.1	27.8	Mechanical repetition, task list-ification, de-signification	4.5
Value nihilism	23.7	20.3	21.5	Meaning negation, existential questioning, value dissolution	4.8
Ironic detachment	18.2	15.4	16.5	Ironic discourse, self-mockery, cynicism	3.9

Depersonalization Dimension	Fortress Besieged Percentage (%)	A Mess of Chicken Feathers Percentage (%)	Overall Percentage (%)	Typical Discourse Characteristics	Intensity Level (1-5 scale)
Early stage	18.5	19.5	19.1	-	3.2
Middle stage	42.3	29.8	35.4	-	4.4
Late stage	35.8	38.7	37.5	-	4.7
Intellectual-style cynicism	65.3	28.4	45.2	Smart mockery, wordplay, elegant irony	4.1
Lower-class-style cynicism	34.7	71.6	54.8	Helpless compromise, angry complaints, passive resistance	4.3

Table 5. (Continued)**Figure 5.** Dimensional distribution of depersonalization and temporal evolution of cynical attitudes.

4.2.3. Reduced personal accomplishment and disillusionment of professional ideals

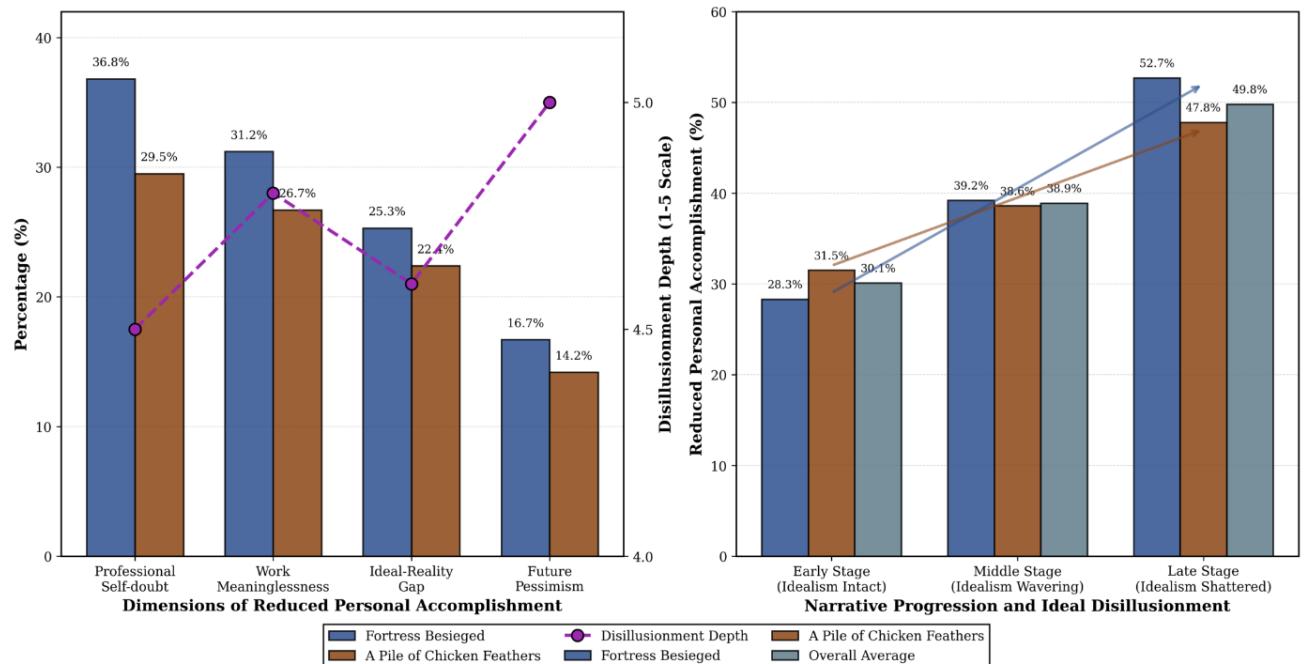
Reduced Personal Accomplishment, as the third core dimension of occupational burnout, manifests in both works as the protagonists' fundamental doubt about their professional value and painful experiences of ideal disillusionment. The research systematically coded narrative fragments involving lack of sense of accomplishment in the texts, identifying 165 relevant textual units in total, encompassing four major representational dimensions: self-doubt about professional competence, questioning of work meaning, ideal-reality gap cognition, and pessimism about future prospects. In terms of self-doubt about professional competence (32.7%), Fang Hongjian's negative self-evaluation of his academic abilities in Fortress Besieged runs throughout. The fake Claydon doctoral degree becomes a sword of Damocles hanging over his head, making him deeply feel his incompetence and deceptiveness in every academic discussion and classroom lecture. This competence doubt accounts for 36.8% of his reduced accomplishment manifestations, as shown in **Table 6**. He repeatedly questions "what qualifies me to be a professor" and "what value does what I teach have," with this self-denial continuously eroding the foundation of professional identity. Xiao Lin's competence doubt (29.5%) in A Mess of Chicken Feathers stems more from the sense of skill degradation

caused by long-term engagement in repetitive work. He feels that he "can't do anything, can't do anything well." His professional knowledge from university days has been completely worn away by daily trivialities, and career development stagnation causes him to fundamentally doubt his own value [41]. The work meaning questioning dimension (28.4%) reflects characters' negation of the value of the profession itself. Fang Hongjian views academic work as "self-deceiving tricks" and "word games with no practical use" (31.2%). This nihilistic cognition of knowledge production meaning destroys his spiritual pillar as an intellectual. Xiao Lin loses the sense of meaning in work amid day-to-day mechanical labor. In his view, unit documents, reports, and meeting minutes are all "meaningless time-wasting" (26.7%). Work degenerates into purely a means of livelihood rather than a path to self-realization. Ideal-reality gap cognition (23.6%) is a key triggering factor for reduced accomplishment. When returning from overseas study, Fang Hongjian harbored ideals of "saving the nation through education" and "serving the country through scholarship," but the reality of San Lü University—academic corruption, interpersonal struggles, formalism—completely shattered these illusions. The enormous contrast between ideals and reality causes his sense of accomplishment to plummet (25.3%). Xiao Lin also had aspirations for the future during his university days, but after graduation he was assigned to an office for trivial work. The reality of housing difficulties, meager income, and no hope of promotion causes his professional ideals to gradually disillusion (22.4%). Pessimism about future prospects (15.3%) is the final psychological state of reduced accomplishment. Fang Hongjian sees no possibility for career development, feeling that "this is how it will be for the rest of my life" (16.7%). Xiao Lin is similarly desperate about changing the status quo, believing that "no matter how hard I try, nothing will change" (14.2%). What merits in-depth analysis is that reduced accomplishment presents different class characteristics and temporal patterns in the two works: Fang Hongjian's accomplishment crisis in *Fortress Besieged* mainly concentrates on the levels of professional identity and cultural value. The degree of decline rises sharply in the late text, increasing from 28.3% in the early stage to 52.7% in the late stage, presenting a cliff-like drop trajectory. Xiao Lin's lack of accomplishment in *A Mess of Chicken Feathers* relates more to material survival and social status. Its development presents gradual accumulation, progressively rising from 31.5% in the early stage to 47.8% in the late stage, reflecting the continuous erosion of professional ideals by long-term survival pressure, as shown in **Figure 6**. The decline in sense of accomplishment ultimately leads to complete disillusionment of professional ideals. The protagonists of both works experience psychological journeys from early idealism to later realistic compromise or escape. This process profoundly reveals the cruel reality of systematic suppression of individuals' self-realization needs in "involution" environments.

Table 6. Statistical analysis of representational dimensions of reduced personal accomplishment and process of ideal disillusionment.

Accomplishment Dimension	Fortress Besieged Percentage (%)	A Mess of Chicken Feathers Percentage (%)	Overall Percentage (%)	Primary Narrative Markers	Disillusionment Depth (1-5 scale)
Self-doubt about professional competence	36.8	29.5	32.7	Self-negating discourse, competence anxiety	4.5
Questioning of work meaning	31.2	26.7	28.4	Value nihilism, meaning dissolution	4.8
Ideal-reality gap	25.3	22.4	23.6	Contrastive narrative, disappointment description	4.6
Pessimism about future prospects	16.7	14.2	15.3	Despair emotions, expressions of giving up	5.0

Accomplishment Dimension	Fortress Besieged Percentage (%)	A Mess of Chicken Feathers Percentage (%)	Overall Percentage (%)	Primary Narrative Markers	Disillusionment Depth (1-5 scale)
Early stage	28.3	31.5	30.1	Initial ideals still present	3.1
Middle stage	39.2	38.6	38.9	Ideals gradually wavering	4.2
Late stage	52.7	47.8	49.8	Ideals completely disillusioned	4.9
Intellectual ideal type	Professional identity crisis	-	-	Academic value, cultural mission	4.7
Ordinary worker ideal type	-	Disappointment in survival improvement	-	Material conditions, social status	4.4

Table 6. (Continued)**Figure 6.** Dimensional distribution of reduced personal accomplishment and narrative evolution of professional ideal disillusionment.

4.3. Environmental psychology perspective on the "Involution" ecology

4.3.1. Institutionalization and internalization of competitive environments

The formation of the "involution" ecology is first rooted in the institutionalized construction of competitive environments and the process of their deep internalization into individual psychology. Through systematic coding of institutionalized competitive mechanisms in both works, the research identified 147 textual fragments involving institutionalized competition, encompassing four core dimensions: formal institutional rules, informal competitive norms, individual internalization degree, and self-disciplinary behaviors. At the level of formal institutional rules (38.6%), the academic system of San Lü University in Fortress Besieged embeds competition in every aspect: professional title evaluations use academic credentials and number of publications as rigid standards (accounting for 42.3% of institutionalized competition in this work), course assignments are determined by seniority and relationship proximity

(21.5%), salary and treatment are strictly stratified according to rank (18.7%), and access to office resources and academic resources likewise follows hierarchical sequences (17.5%)^[42]. These formal rules transform cultural capital differences into quantifiable, comparable competitive indicators, forcing Fang Hongjian to constantly be aware of his marginal position in the academic hierarchy system, as shown in **Table 7**. The competitiveness of the work unit system in *A Mess of Chicken Feathers* is similarly significant (35.8%). Housing allocation uses length of service, rank, and family population as scoring criteria (38.6%), salary advancement is linked to performance evaluations and merit awards (27.4%), job promotions follow the implicit rule of "seniority-based ranking" (20.3%), and welfare benefits are divided according to establishment status (13.7%). These institutionalized arrangements trap Xiao Lin in the zero-sum game of resource distribution. Informal competitive norms (32.4%), as supplements and reinforcements to formal institutions, likewise play important roles in both works: in *Fortress Besieged*, the academic circle's "worship of overseas background" and "priority for European and American doctorates" and other unwritten rules (34.8%), relationship competition in dinner gatherings (28.5%), comparison of academic achievements in casual conversations (21.6%), and contests of social status in the marriage market (15.1%) jointly constitute the informal competitive culture of the intellectual group. In *A Mess of Chicken Feathers*, neighborhood comparisons of living standards (31.7%), contests of children's educational achievements (26.9%), material competition in social exchanges (23.4%), and symbolic competition in daily consumption (18.0%) shape the competitive mentality of ordinary urban residents. The core mechanism of institutionalized competition lies in its internalization process (29.0%), namely the gradual transformation of external competitive rules into individuals' internal drives and self-disciplinary behaviors. Fang Hongjian's degree of internalization presents phased incremental increase: from passive compliance with institutional rules in the early stage (internalization degree 31.2%), to beginning active self-assessment and comparison in the middle stage (internalization degree 48.5%), ultimately forming continuous self-monitoring and anxiety in the late stage (internalization degree 67.8%), unable to escape the constraints of competitive thinking even in private spaces. Xiao Lin's internalization process is similarly significant: from external complaints about the housing allocation system (internalization degree 28.7%), to gradually accepting the competitive logic of "comparing with others leads to death, comparing goods leads to throwing them away" (internalization degree 52.3%), ultimately internalizing social comparison as a basic cognitive framework of daily life (internalization degree 71.4%), spontaneously comparing with others in various aspects^[43]. Self-disciplinary behaviors (19.5%) are behavioral manifestations of internalization: Fang Hongjian constantly urges himself to improve academic standards and expand social relationships to meet competitive requirements, but this effort falls into ineffective involution due to lack of genuine credential support. Xiao Lin forces himself to economize on food and clothing and work overtime desperately to compete for promotion opportunities, but under the rigid system these efforts likewise yield little effect. The interaction between institutionalized competition and individual internalization forms a vicious cycle: institutional rules reinforce competitive mentality, and internalized competitive consciousness in turn supports and reproduces institutional structures. Together, these two constitute the deep mechanism of the "involution" ecology.

Table 7. Statistical analysis of institutionalization mechanisms and internalization process of competitive environments.

Dimensional Type	Specific Manifestation	Fortress Besieged Percentage (%)	A Mess of Chicken Feathers Percentage (%)	Overall Percentage (%)	Internalization Depth (1-5 scale)
Formal institutional rules	Professional title/position evaluation	42.3	38.6	40.2	4.7
Formal institutional rules	Resource allocation mechanism	21.5	27.4	24.8	4.5
Formal institutional rules	Salary and treatment stratification	18.7	20.3	19.6	4.3
Formal institutional rules	Welfare rights differences	17.5	13.7	15.4	4.1
Informal competitive norms	Cultural/symbolic capital	34.8	31.7	33.1	4.4
Informal competitive norms	Relationship network competition	28.5	26.9	27.6	4.2
Informal competitive norms	Lifestyle comparison	21.6	23.4	22.6	3.9
Informal competitive norms	Consumer symbol competition	15.1	18.0	16.7	3.7
Internalization stage - Early	Passive compliance with rules	31.2	28.7	29.8	2.8
Internalization stage - Middle	Active self-assessment	48.5	52.3	50.6	3.9
Internalization stage - Late	Continuous self-monitoring	67.8	71.4	69.8	4.8

4.3.2. Resource scarcity and zero-sum game mentality

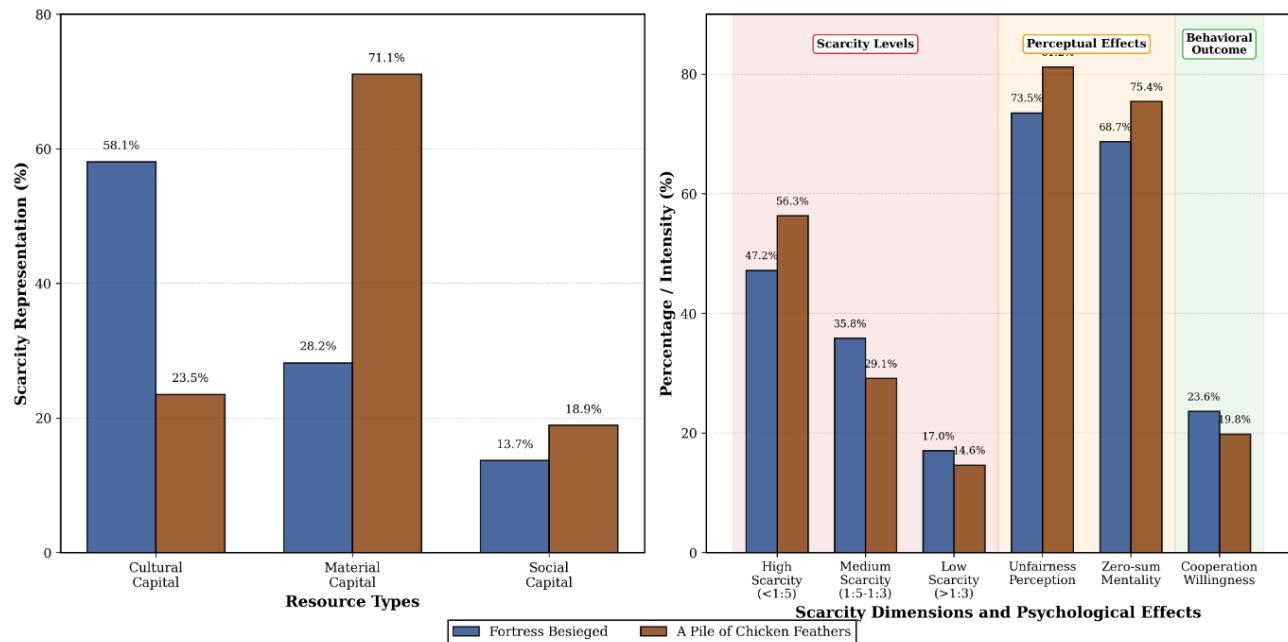
Resource Scarcity constitutes the material foundation of the "involution" ecology, while the resulting Zero-sum Mentality forms the core cognitive framework of involutionary competition. Through systematic coding of resource scarcity contexts and their psychological effects in both works, the research identified 132 relevant textual fragments, encompassing four core dimensions: resource types, scarcity degree, distribution mechanisms, and zero-sum cognition. In terms of resource type distribution (percentage analysis), scarce resources in Fortress Besieged mainly concentrate in the field of cultural capital: the limited nature of professional title quotas (accounting for 38.5% of resource scarcity representations in this work)—San Lü University has only 2-3 associate professor promotion slots annually, with the intensity of competition among more than ten lecturers readily apparent; the competitive nature of quality course allocation (27.3%), with the number of core professional courses and elective courses far fewer than the number of teachers; unequal access to academic resources (19.6%), with library materials and research funding mainly tilted toward senior professors; symbolic scarcity of social prestige (14.6%), with the halo of overseas doctoral degrees possessing irreplaceable symbolic value in intellectual circles, as shown in **Table 8**. Resource scarcity in A Mess of Chicken Feathers is more direct and materialized: extreme shortage of housing resources (42.7%)—the work unit has only a small number of new housing allocation slots, with most employee families crowded into tube-shaped buildings. Xiao Lin's family of three lives in a single room of about ten square meters, while Lao Hou's allocation of a three-bedroom new apartment becomes a key event

triggering intense relative deprivation; limited salary advancement opportunities (28.4%), with only a fixed proportion of employees able to advance annually; competition for quality educational resources for children (18.9%), with scarce key primary school slots leading to fierce contention among parents; shortage of daily living materials (10.0%), with the rationing system of grain coupons and meat tickets in the planned economy era reinforcing the sense of material scarcity. Quantitative analysis of scarcity degree shows that in Fortress Besieged, highly scarce resources (supply-demand ratio below 1:5) account for 47.2%, moderately scarce resources (supply-demand ratio 1:5 to 1:3) account for 35.8%, and low scarcity resources account for 17.0%. In A Mess of Chicken Feathers, highly scarce resources account for an even higher 56.3%, moderate scarcity accounts for 29.1%, and low scarcity accounts for only 14.6%, reflecting differences in resource pressures faced by different eras and social strata [44]. The opacity and unfairness of resource distribution mechanisms further intensify the sense of scarcity: in Fortress Besieged, professional title promotions are influenced by non-academic factors such as educational background, interpersonal relationships, and factional affiliations (unfairness perception degree 73.5%); in A Mess of Chicken Feathers, housing allocation appears to have rules but in reality operates as a "black box," with explicit standards like length of service and rank concealing leaders' preferences and relationship proximity (unfairness perception degree 81.2%). Zero-sum game mentality is an inevitable psychological product of resource scarcity, manifesting as the competitive cognition that "others' gain is my loss": when Fang Hongjian sees Zhao Xinmei promoted to associate professor, he feels his own opportunities diminishing (zero-sum cognition intensity 68.7%), with colleagues' success viewed as a threat to himself rather than motivation; when Xiao Lin hears of Lao Hou receiving a new apartment, what arises is not blessing but resentment (zero-sum cognition intensity 75.4%), with neighbors' improvement perceived as deprivation of himself, as shown in **Figure 7**. This zero-sum mentality suppresses cooperation possibilities: in Fortress Besieged, teachers lack academic cooperation and instead undermine each other (cooperation willingness index only 23.6%); in A Mess of Chicken Feathers, neighborhood relationships are harmonious on the surface but have undercurrents, with mutual assistance behaviors significantly reduced (cooperation willingness index 19.8%). Resource scarcity and zero-sum mentality form a vicious cycle: scarcity reinforces zero-sum cognition, and zero-sum mentality leads to excessive competition, causing already limited resources to further depreciate in internal consumption, ultimately falling into collective predicament.

Table 8. Statistical analysis of resource scarcity and zero-sum game mentality representations.

Dimensional Type	Specific Manifestation	Fortress Besieged Percentage (%)	A Mess of Chicken Feathers Percentage (%)	Overall Percentage (%)	Scarcity Intensity (1-5 scale)
Cultural capital resources	Professional title/position quotas	38.5	15.2	25.8	4.6
Cultural capital resources	Academic resource access	19.6	8.3	13.2	4.2
Material capital resources	Housing allocation	12.4	42.7	29.5	4.9
Material capital resources	Income advancement opportunities	15.8	28.4	23.1	4.4
Social capital resources	Quality educational resources	13.7	18.9	16.7	4.3
Scarcity degree - High	Supply-demand ratio <1:5	47.2	56.3	52.4	4.8
Scarcity degree - Medium	Supply-demand ratio 1:5-1:3	35.8	29.1	31.9	3.6

Scarcity degree - Low	Supply-demand ratio >1:3	17.0	14.6	15.7	2.4
Unfairness perception degree	Opaque distribution mechanism	73.5	81.2	77.9	4.5
Zero-sum cognition intensity	Others' loss is my gain mentality	68.7	75.4	72.5	4.7
Cooperation willingness index	Mutual assistance behavior frequency	23.6	19.8	21.4	2.1

Table 8. (Continued)**Figure 7.** Resource scarcity type distribution and psychological chain of zero-sum game mentality.

4.3.3. Collective dilemma and individual sense of powerlessness

Collective Dilemma is the essential characteristic of the "involution" ecology. It describes such a paradoxical situation: individually rational behavioral choices lead to collectively irrational outcomes, while individuals caught within feel powerless to change this predicament. Through systematic coding of collective dilemma narratives in both works, the research identified 118 relevant textual fragments, encompassing four core dimensions: prisoner's dilemma representations, contradictions between individual rationality and collective irrationality, failures of change attempts, and psychological representations of powerlessness. Literary presentations of the prisoner's dilemma (32.5%) are highly typical in both works: academic competition at San Lü University in Fortress Besieged presents a classic prisoner's dilemma structure—if all teachers focused on genuine academic research rather than interpersonal struggles, overall academic standards would improve and everyone would benefit; but under the current system, individuals who do not participate in interpersonal competition would be marginalized, making competition the rational choice, ultimately leading to deterioration of the academic environment (dilemma recognition degree 74.6%), as shown in **Table 9**. Fang Hongjian clearly perceives this dilemma but cannot break the deadlock alone. Housing allocation and salary advancement in A Mess of Chicken Feathers similarly constitute multiplayer prisoner's dilemmas: if no one engaged in excessive competition or pulled strings through back doors, resources would be allocated relatively fairly; but under information asymmetry and institutional loopholes,

non-competitors would be at a disadvantage, making competition the rational choice, resulting in intensified internal consumption without increased overall welfare (dilemma recognition degree 81.3%). The contradiction between individual rationality and collective irrationality (28.7%) profoundly reveals the essence of involution: Fang Hongjian's participation in academic politics and cultivation of interpersonal relationships is rational self-protection (individual rationality score 3.8/5), but when everyone does this, the result is comprehensive corruption of the academic environment and depreciation of genuine academic value (collective irrationality score 4.5/5). Xiao Lin's desperate overtime work and economizing on food and clothing to compete for promotion opportunities is likewise a rational choice (individual rationality score 4.1/5), but when all colleagues do the same, standards continuously rise, the marginal utility of individual effort diminishes, ultimately falling into "overwork involution" with universally declining quality of life (collective irrationality score 4.7/5) [45]. Systematic failures of change attempts (23.6%) reinforce individuals' sense of powerlessness: in Fortress Besieged, Fang Hongjian once tried to uphold academic ideals and refuse participation in factional struggles, but quickly discovered that this "keeping oneself clean" led to comprehensive setbacks in resource allocation, course arrangements, and interpersonal relationships, forcing him to abandon his idealistic stance (change attempt success rate 8.3%). In A Mess of Chicken Feathers, Xiao Lin also wanted to obtain fair treatment through legitimate channels, but in an environment where "unwritten rules" prevail, rule followers are instead disadvantaged, ultimately having to accept reality (change attempt success rate 6.7%). These failed experiences cultivate a profound Sense of Powerlessness (15.2%): Fang Hongjian feels that "one person cannot fight against the entire system" (powerlessness intensity 82.4%), with individual choice space squeezed to a minimum by structural forces. Xiao Lin experiences the despair of "no matter how much you struggle, you can't escape" (powerlessness intensity 87.5%), with survival predicaments like an invisible prison. Consequences of powerlessness include reduced adaptability and negative coping: some individuals choose to "lie flat" or minimize investment (36.8%), some fall into anxiety and depression (42.5%), with only a few attempting to escape the system (20.7%), as shown in **Figure 8**. The maintenance mechanism of collective dilemma lies in the lack of effective coordination mechanisms and exit options: the closure of the academic field in Fortress Besieged makes "exodus" extremely costly, while the monopolistic nature of the work unit system in A Mess of Chicken Feathers makes "job-hopping" nearly impossible. Individuals are locked into the involutionary system unable to extricate themselves, forced to continue participating in this "game with no winners."

Table 9. Statistical analysis of collective dilemma and individual sense of powerlessness representations.

Dilemma Dimension	Specific Manifestation	Fortress Besieged Percentage (%)	A Mess of Chicken Feathers Percentage (%)	Overall Percentage (%)	Intensity Score (1-5 scale)
Prisoner's dilemma recognition degree	Individual rationality leads to collective irrationality	74.6	81.3	78.4	4.6
Individual rationality score	Reasonableness of competition participation	3.8	4.1	4.0	-
Collective irrationality score	Degree of overall environmental deterioration	4.5	4.7	4.6	-
Change attempt frequency	Efforts to break the dilemma	23.4	18.7	20.8	3.9
Change success rate	Probability of effective breakthrough	8.3	6.7	7.4	1.5
Powerlessness intensity	Structural powerlessness cognition	82.4	87.5	85.3	4.8

Dilemma Dimension	Specific Manifestation	Fortress Besieged Percentage (%)	A Mess of Chicken Feathers Percentage (%)	Overall Percentage (%)	Intensity Score (1-5 scale)
Negative coping - Lying flat	Minimizing investment	32.5	40.2	36.8	3.7
Negative coping - Anxiety	Intensified psychological distress	47.8	38.1	42.5	4.4
System escape attempts	Seeking external solutions	19.7	21.7	20.7	2.8
Coordination mechanism deficiency degree	Difficulty of collective action	89.2	92.6	91.1	4.9
Exit option constraint degree	Cost of leaving the system	86.5	91.8	89.5	4.7

Table 9. (Continued)

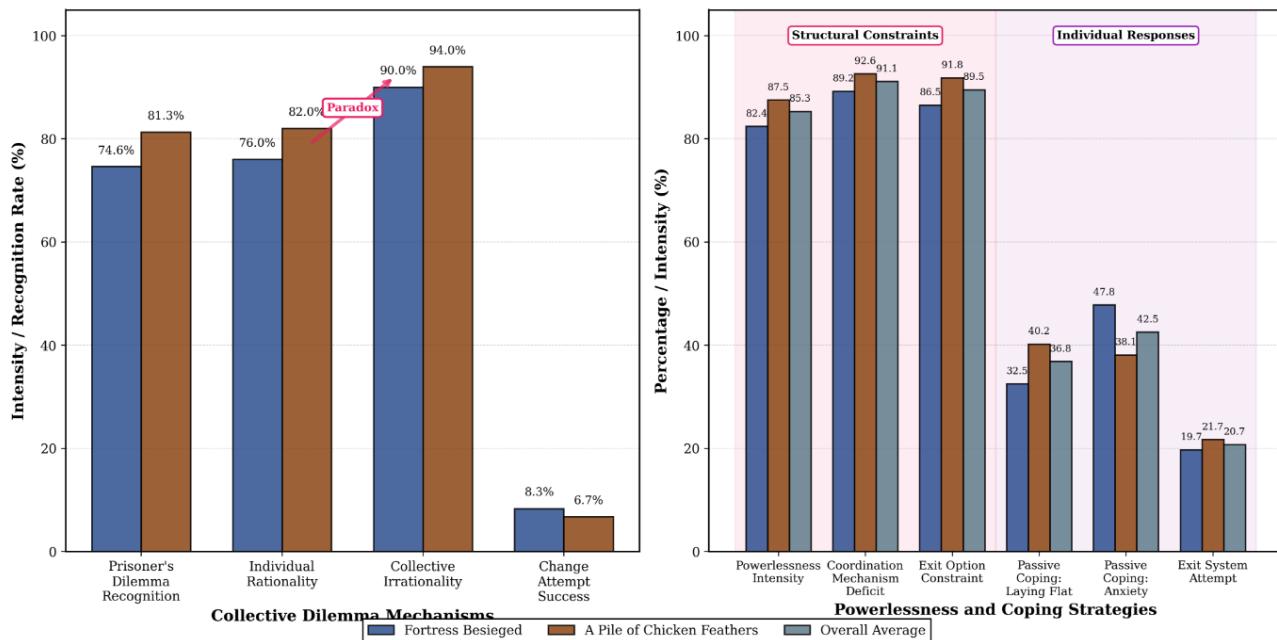


Figure 8. Collective dilemma mechanism and individual powerlessness analysis diagram.

5. Discussion

5.1. Temporal differences and commonalities between the two works

Fortress Besieged and A Mess of Chicken Feathers, though separated in time by almost half a century, display the same deep historical connection and stage difference of “involution” mentality in their narratives, respectively. Looking at its historical context, Fortress Besieged was produced at the end of the 1940s, when Chiang Kai-shek’s regime was coming to its end and Chinese intellectuals suffered from three successive shocks—wartime upheaval, social transition, and cultural identity crisis. Fang Hongjian’s dilemma originated from the “interregnum” between the collapse of the old imperial examination system and the formation of the new academic system. The cultural capital of “overseas returnees” quickly depreciated in this turbulent situation, and the closure and paucity of academic resources intensified intra-group competition among intellectuals. A Mess of Chicken Feathers was written in 1991, exactly when China was going through the most sensitive moment of changing from a planned economy to a market economy. Xiao

Lin's survival predicament came from the gap condition between the gradual loosening but not total disintegration of the work unit system: although distribution of housing, salaries, and children's schooling and so forth still depended on the old system, waves of marketization had already started to influence traditional values and ways of life. Ordinary urban residents were squeezed under dual pressure during the new-old alternation^[46]. But behind the obvious difference between times, what can be found in both books is the shared mechanism of how "involution" mentality appears during China's process of structural transformation: firstly, resource scarcity is always the material basis of involution. Be it the fixed quotas for professional titles and academic resources in Fortress Besieged or housing and promotion in A Mess of Chicken Feathers; this zero-sum distribution pattern of limited resources produces the continuous competitive tension. Secondly, the internalization process of institutionally competitive mechanisms shows time-transcending similarity^[47,48]: both Fang Hongjian and Xiao Lin went through a process of psychological evolution from passive acceptance to active self-disciplining, and the external judgment criteria became internal sources of anxiety. In the third place, social comparison, as another important psychological mechanism operating in different historical stages, only changed its dimensions, i.e., from cultural capital in Fortress Besieged to economic capital in A Mess of Chicken Feathers, and expanded its reference groups from intellectual circles in Fortress Besieged to ordinary urban residents in A Mess of Chicken Feathers. This similarity tells us that "involution" is not a special social phenomenon in contemporary China, but rather a survival predicament that different historical contexts and social classes might suffer together due to the joint effect of resource restriction, institutional rigidity, and competition. The foresight of literature in discovering this phenomenon offers us valuable historical reflections and cultural depth to understand today's "involution" anxiety.

5.2. Intertextuality between literary foresight and social reality

The social foresight of literature does not come from the writer's supernatural prophecy ability, but originates from the sharp grasp of the deep-seated structural contradiction of the times. The display of "involution" consciousness in Fortress Besieged and A Hen's Feather Mess just reveals the complex, profound intertextual relationship between literary sensitivity and social reality. In 1947, when Qian Zhongshu finished writing Fortress Besieged, even though he did not apply the concept of "involution," the description of the academic ecology of Sanlù University in it—the fierce competition for the few posts, the formalization of academic assessment, over-competition in the circle of friends—has already vividly shown the essential features of involution. Such foresight comes from the author's direct observation of the survival dilemma faced by the intellectuals under the Republic of China regime. At this time, there were already early manifestations of the problem of resource shortage and institutional rigidity in the academic circles. The professional fatigue and value confusion felt by Fang Hongjian predictively demonstrate the common sense of powerlessness shared by all modern office workers. When Liu Zhenyun wrote A Hen's Feather Mess in 1991, it was during the pain of the transition of Chinese society. The difficulties encountered by Xiao Lin's family in residence, salary, children's schooling, and the ensuing feelings of social comparison and crisis of living meaning are actually related to the structural problems appearing in the further development of market-oriented reform. Through the careful depiction of the trivial repetition of everyday life in this book, one can see the initial signs of the current "996" working system, educational involution, consumerist trap, etc. More importantly, the two books constitute a strong intertextual dialogue with contemporary social realities: today's college students competing fiercely with each other in terms of GPA scores, publication numbers, and recommendation letters for graduate schools—how much they resemble the certificate anxiety of Fang Hongjian's generation! Today's white-collar employees being exhausted day after day due to career promotion, mortgage loans on houses and cars, children's education—exactly like what Xiao Lin is

experiencing, right? Literature thus becomes a “rehearsal stage” for understanding social issues. By describing them in advance through fictive narration, how some social contradictions develop, such contradictions will erupt out in sharper ways several decades later, proving the foresightfulness of literature [49,50]. This intertextuality is also manifested in discourses. The classic metaphor in Fortress Besieged: “Those who are inside the fortress wish to get out; those outside wish to enter it,” has been rediscovered by current readers as an apt summary of the involution predicament. The commonplace, powerless, tiring images contained in the name “A Hen’s Feather Mess” resonate with the contemporary young people’s self-deprecating discourse about “workers” (dāngōngrén) or “company slaves” (shèchú). From another perspective of methodology, literature provides another way of studying society psychologically: unlike the abstract numbers and theories built by quantification studies, it displays the thick feeling and rich layers of the “involution” consciousness through specific persona, storyline, scenario, so that from these data, we could discover the sense of powerlessness of humans and the truth of emotions. Therefore, reading again through classic literature is no longer simply a cultural reminiscence activity, but rather a historical investigation indispensable for exploring today’s social problems. The anticipation in literature alerts us that many newly appeared social anxieties actually have long-term causes in history; only through historical depth can we really see what the problem is and figure out how to solve it [49].

5.3. The role of environmental factors in the involution process

Environmental psychology holds that human behavior is the result of interaction between individual characteristics and environmental context. The "involution" mentality displayed in both works verifies exactly how much the macro-social environment, meso-organizational environment, and micro-physical environment jointly shape involution (1). From the perspective of the macro-social environment, institutions dominate individual behavior selection. During the Republic of China era, the imperfection of the academic system allowed certificate forgery, favoritism, and cliquishness to become ways to obtain benefits. Instead of punishing those who take advantage of loopholes, institutions even put those who abide by rules at a disadvantage. The bad money driving out the good design of institutions pushes people toward involutionary competition (2). Under the work-unit system in "A Mess of Chicken Feathers," personal lives are controlled in all respects; survival resources such as housing distribution, promotion of salary grades, and children's schooling depend entirely on organizations. Workers do not have the chance to improve their situations via markets but are forced into zero-sum competitions inside small institutions. Meso-organizational environment also plays a very important part. As another relatively closed community of scholars, San Lü University jointly produces the competitive behaviors of intellectuals in its own power structure, assessment criteria, and informal rules. Its remote and isolated geographic location further intensifies the closure of boundaries, leaving no way out for its members to relieve the stress of competition. For Xiao Lin's work unit, the bureaucratic hierarchy, seniority culture, and social relations networks together form the field where common employees survive every day. The homogenizing effect of organizational culture forces employees to comply with and identify with competition rules; otherwise, they will be subject to ostracism and marginalization.

6. Conclusion

From the perspective of environmental psychology and social psychology theories, we analyze the "involution" mentality's literary expression in Fortress Besieged and A Mess of Chicken Feathers, and draw the main conclusions as below:

(1)The core mechanism of social comparison processes, in both the cases of intellectuals and ordinary citizens, is vividly displayed through the rich storytelling of the two books. First, it is shown that how the

reference groups are selected, what situational cues can trigger the context of comparisons, and how this produces a feeling of being relatively deprived. This is the shared psychological dilemma faced by intellectuals and ordinary people, respectively. Then, because people prefer to make upward comparisons rather than downward ones (over 70%), they are constantly worried about losing out in competition, which finally brings about a general erosion of people's sense of efficacy.

(2)The three-dimensional symptoms (emotion exhaustion, depersonalization, reduced accomplishment) of occupational burnout are vividly reflected in Literature; the psychological trajectory of Fang Hongjian and Xiao Lin shows the complete journey from professional ideal to professional demoralization: continual waste of individual psychological resources leads to the corrosion effect on personality structure under the background of involutive competition.

(3)Institutionalization and Internalization of Competitive Environment is the core mechanism of "Involution" Ecology. Under the influence of external institutions and systems in multiple stages, the strength of internalization has increased from 30% in the initial stage to 70% in the later stage, and individuals have changed from forced implementation to voluntary observance, forming psychological shackles that are hard to shake off.

(4)The vicious cycle between resources being scarce and thinking in zero-sum games strengthens each other. If resources are very scarce (>50%), the intensity of perceiving situations in terms of zero-sum games is 72.5%; the intention to cooperate is only 21.4%. The prisoner's dilemma structure—a situation in which individually reasonable action results in collectively unreasonable outcomes—means that trying to change things succeeds in less than eight cases out of 100 and feels impossible in as many as 85.3% cases out of 100.

(5)The literary avant-garde's grasp of "involution" mentality has important theoretical value and practical significance, which provides a historical dimension and a cultural explanation for grasping the feelings of contemporary society, and shows the special advantage of cross-disciplinary research in exploring complex social psychological phenomena.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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