

张常勇：黄宗智“过密化”理论探讨述评

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This is a fairly accurate detailing of the range of different opinions. It is neither completely critical of my view, nor completely sympathetic. It is a parade of the existing range of opinions and arguments, and also of differential evidence. It comes close to a neutral recounting of the existing range of opinions and of differential evidence.

I don't find it ideological or merely argumentative. I think a good case can be made that there were both involution and development (in my usages of those words) in Jiangnan. It is a tenable position, and no doubt reveals a substantial measure of truth.

What it does not quite see is that the dominant prevailing view is simply a universalized understanding and presumption of "development," without taking into account the differential population situations of the early modern West as opposed to "early modern" China. It won't do to presume a universal course of development, using the West as THE one and only model, ruling out what is obviously, at least to a considerable extent, involution in China, as opposed to development, in my use of the two different meanings – one representing no advance or diminishing return per unit labor, and the other rising return per unit labor. Involution seems to me undeniable. Yet, at the same time, there were also examples of development, though limited.

The root of the problem is basically from those who would see a unilinear path, with THE WEST as the only model and way of understanding, without grasping how much Chinese experience did not amount to that kind of understanding. I don't doubt that there were examples of development in China's path of change (economic history), but there really can be little doubt of the dominant trend, evident even down to this day.

That is not to rule out completely a limited degree of development, which is becoming more evident and important today.

The key point is that the common tendency is to overlook how China's experience was different, and remains to a considerable degree still different, from that of the West, where development was and became the principal reality.

We need to reject unilinear views, the presumption that "development" is a simple unilinear story that China must fit into.

The bigger and more important story is how China was and remains different.