

**“MODERNIZATION” (现代化) AND CHINESE
CONSTITUTIONALISM’S “LIFEWORLD”; CONSTITUTIONALISM
AS THE INSTITUTIONALIZED PHENOMENOLOGY OF
MODERNIZATION**

*A Semiotic-Phenomenological Analysis of Modernization Discourse
in Chinese Marxist-Leninist Political-Legal Theory*

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Abstract: This paper argues that modernization is not simply one policy goal among many in contemporary China. It is the organizing framework — the taken-for-granted horizon — through which the Chinese Communist Party and the state define problems, justify institutions, evaluate governance, and project China's future. The paper's central claim is that modernization functions as what phenomenology calls a "lifeworld" (*Lebenswelt*): the pre-given background of shared assumptions so deeply embedded in institutional practice that it operates as a condition of intelligibility rather than an object requiring justification. Within this framework, the Party's periodic reformulation of the "principal contradiction" — the system's official diagnosis of its most pressing social problem — serves as the mechanism by which the modernizing framework recalibrates itself to new conditions without ever being abandoned or fundamentally questioned. The paper proceeds in two registers. The first is historical and textual: six sections trace how the concept of modernization traveled from Soviet Marxism-Leninism through its Chinese transformation, evolved across twenty Party congresses, and was progressively embedded in legal texts from the Constitution down to local regulation — a process the paper calls "juridification." The second register is theoretical: a final major section draws on these findings to construct an argument about how modernization organizes meaning within Chinese constitutionalism, using tools from phenomenology (Husserl's lifeworld, Li Zehou's concept of cultural sedimentation), semiotics (how signs relate to one another in systems), Foucault's analysis of how governmental power shapes conduct, Nietzsche's genealogical method for uncovering buried struggles beneath apparently natural arrangements, and Luhmann's systems theory. The paper advances five innovations. First, it identifies nine historical layers of political meaning — from early experiences of national vulnerability through revolution, socialist construction, reform, and the current "Chinese modernization" — that persist simultaneously rather than simply replacing one another, forming what the paper calls a "sedimentary ontology." Second, it argues that modernization functions as a "metasignifier": a sign that organizes the relations among other political concepts (socialism, Party leadership, reform, rule of law, common prosperity, ecological civilization, national rejuvenation) without emptying them of their distinct content. Third, it proposes a four-level model showing how abstract political theory becomes lived experience — moving from Party doctrine through institutional practices and evaluation systems down to the formation of subjects who experience their world through modernization categories, with feedback loops running back to the top. Fourth, it reconceives the Constitution not as a "container" holding political propositions but as an "expression" of an already-constituted political lifeworld — one that the Constitution simultaneously articulates and helps to reproduce. Fifth, it defends the paper's central claim of necessity ("must") as interpretive rather than empirical or causal: the system's internal relations become unintelligible if the modernizing lifeworld is bracketed, but this does not mean modernization mechanically causes every outcome or that the word literally appears in every document. For comparative constitutional theory, the most immediate consequence is diagnostic: analyses that treat Chinese constitutional texts as failed approximations of liberal constitutionalism commit what the paper calls a "Lebenswelt category error" — they project the assumptions of one constitutional order onto another and mistake the resulting mismatch for criticism. The paper does not defend Chinese constitutionalism or endorse its institutional choices. It insists that accurate reconstruction must precede normative evaluation: one cannot meaningfully criticize a system one has not first correctly identified.

Keywords: Chinese constitutionalism, modernization, Chinese-style modernization (中国式现代化), lebenswelt, semiotics, phenomenology, CPC Constitution, Marxism-Leninism, principal contradiction (主要矛盾), dual constitutional system

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Executive Summary: For Policymakers and the General Public.

This paper argues that modernization is not simply a Chinese policy for increasing wealth or adopting technology; it is the organizing framework through which the Party and state define problems, justify institutions, and describe China’s future.

This matters because outside observers often read Chinese governance through categories developed for liberal democracies or Western development policy. That can make Chinese conduct appear inconsistent: economic opening alongside strong Party control, market experimentation alongside socialist commitments, and international engagement alongside a sharper emphasis on security. The paper’s claim is not that these tensions are imaginary. It is that they become more intelligible once modernization is understood as the framework that connects them.

(a) What does “modernization” actually mean in Chinese political and legal discourse?

In Chinese official discourse, modernization does not mean only the transition from a traditional economy to an industrial or technologically advanced one. It carries a century of political meaning: experiences of national weakness and foreign domination; revolution and national independence; socialist construction; industrialization and the Four Modernizations; reform and opening; the socialist market economy; governance modernization; ecological civilization; common prosperity; national rejuvenation; and, most recently, Chinese modernization.

This is why the word cannot be read as a neutral synonym for the language used by Western development economists. Chinese discourse recognizes familiar tasks—industrial capacity, science, infrastructure, education, and economic growth—but places them inside a Party-led socialist and civilizational project. Modernization is therefore both a destination and a method: it names the future China seeks and the institutional activity through which the Party claims that future can be reached.

The term is also flexible without being empty. Reform, law, security, science, redistribution, environmental protection, and national rejuvenation can each be described as modernizing activities because each is assigned a place within the larger project. The Party’s reformulation of the principal contradiction—the system’s official diagnosis of its most important social problem—changes what modernization must address at a particular historical moment.

(b) Why does it matter that modernization is embedded in China’s constitution and legal system at every level?

Embedding modernization in the Party Constitution and the State Constitution gives it a status different from an ordinary policy preference. The Party Constitution supplies the political direction and the current account of the project; the State Constitution gives that direction formal legal expression. National laws then translate general commitments into rules for education, science, national security, development, and governance, while provincial and local measures adapt them to particular places.

The practical result is a chain of translation: political theory becomes constitutional purpose; constitutional purpose becomes legislative method; legislation becomes administrative organization; and administration becomes local practice, planning targets, evaluation standards, educational priorities, and governance measures. Modernization is not merely mentioned at the top of the system. It helps determine what counts as an adequate law, a capable institution, a successful plan, or a correct implementation.

This embedding also explains apparent contradictions. Market mechanisms can be accepted as tools for developing productive capacity without being treated as a replacement for Party leadership. Opening can be pursued as a way to obtain knowledge, capital, and technology while national security is emphasized as protection for the conditions of development. The relationship is not necessarily liberalization versus control; within the Chinese framework, both may be judged by whether they advance the modernizing project.

(c) What are the implications for engagement with China?

For trade negotiators and diplomats, the first implication is interpretive discipline. When Chinese officials describe a measure as supporting high-quality development, governance modernization, security, or national rejuvenation, the terms carry institutional and historical assumptions. A negotiation that addresses only the immediate commercial issue may miss the political purpose attached to it. The relevant question is not whether China is moving toward a Western endpoint, but what role the measure is assigned within China’s own modernizing sequence.

For development institutions and other external partners, the analysis counsels against assuming that institutional borrowing implies political convergence. China may adopt a market instrument, a legal technique, a technology standard, or an administrative practice while assigning it a different purpose and placing it under a different authority structure. Engagement is more likely to be intelligible when it distinguishes agreement about a tool from agreement about the political direction in which the tool is used.

The analysis also helps identify the limits of likely compromise. The Party can revise methods, priorities, timetables, and institutional arrangements when new contradictions appear. But because its legitimacy is structurally tied to directing modernization, compromise about means does not necessarily imply compromise about direction. This distinction helps explain why the system may change substantially while preserving Party leadership as the condition of the project’s identity.

Key takeaways

Modernization has a long memory. When Chinese officials invoke it, they invoke a century of political experience, not only the vocabulary of development economics.

Modernization organizes the whole program. It is not one policy goal among many. It is the framework through which economic growth, law, security, ecology, distribution, and foreign relations are related.

Legitimacy is tied to direction. The Party’s authority is connected to its claimed capacity to lead China through modernization, which makes adaptation of means more likely than abandonment of the project’s direction.

Do not misidentify the system. Calling Chinese governance “failed democracy” or “transitioning authoritarianism” assumes that liberal-democratic principles are the system’s unfinished operating model. The paper argues instead that the system is organized around modernization and should first be understood on that basis.

Accurate interpretation is not endorsement. The framework does not require approval of China’s institutions or outcomes. It requires that criticism address the system that exists, including its distribution of power and its consequences, rather than a misidentified liberal version of it.

Limitations. This is an analytical paper, not a policy prescription. It describes the internal logic through which Chinese political and legal discourse organizes meaning; it does not endorse that logic, verify every official claim, or resolve the normative questions that the system raises.

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Executive Summary: For Specialists in Philosophy and Political Theory.

The paper’s precise claim is that modernization has become the historically sedimented semiotic horizon—the Lebenswelt—within which contemporary Chinese constitutionalism constitutes the intelligibility of its own signs, and that the CPC’s periodic reformulation of the principal contradiction is the recursive operation through which that horizon is recalibrated without being abandoned.

The claim is immanent and semantic, not empirical, causal, or normative. “Must” means that an interpreter working within Chinese constitutionalism’s own historical architecture cannot adequately relate socialism, Party leadership, productive forces, law, governance, common prosperity, ecology, security, and national rejuvenation without locating them within the modernizing horizon. It does not mean that modernization is the sole cause, value, or final foundation of the order.

Position within existing debates

In comparative constitutional theory, the argument engages Frankenberg, Tushnet, and Ginsburg by challenging universalist assumptions about what constitutional meaning must be. Or at least it assumes that these are confined to their own liberal democratic lebenswelt, from which they, quite correctly, seek to understand and rationalize the world around them. Constitutional orders are not only different institutional arrangements; they are different fields of intelligibility. The paper therefore treats constitutional meaning as Lebenswelt-relative. This does not prohibit comparison or normative judgment. It requires reconstruction of each order’s horizon before its provisions are measured against an external standard.

In Chinese political theory, the paper distinguishes structural-semiotic analysis from substantive cultural-interpretive projects. Wang Hui’s account of modernity as a contested problem and of “anti-modern modernity” deepens the history of the modern, but does not itself specify the constitutional sign-system. Gan Yang’s tong san tong identifies Confucian, Maoist, and Dengist resources as a usable cultural archive; Zhao Tingyang’s Tianxia supplies substantive civilizational content; Jiang Shigong’s written-and-unwritten constitutionalism clarifies differentiated constitutional forms. The present argument asks how such resources become operative as constitutional meaning through modernization.

In phenomenology, the paper extends Husserl’s Lebenswelt into political-constitutional analysis. Husserl supplies the pre-given, intersubjective horizon and the account of sedimentation. Li Zehou’s jidian addresses the naturalization problem: historical and rational content becomes embedded in practical, cognitive, aesthetic, and affective dispositions rather than remaining at the level of explicit doctrine. The paper acknowledges the Heideggerean dimension of project-character and futurity, especially modernization’s practical orientation toward a projected future, but does not attempt a full Heideggerian development.

In semiotics, Saussure and Peirce perform different but coordinated work. Saussurean structural analysis supplies *langue* and *parole* and the differential constitution of meaning: modernization is a sign-system within which other constitutional signs acquire their positions. Peircean pragmatism supplies icon, index, symbol, interpretant, and unlimited semiosis: each constitutional articulation produces an interpretant that can be reinterpreted in subsequent practice. Together they specify how modernization can be both a relatively stable structure and a moving process of constitutional meaning-constitution.

Foucault supplies the missing passage from macro-signification to lived conduct. Governmentality explains how modernization becomes evaluation systems, planning targets, curricula, administrative routines, and spatial arrangements; biopolitics explains how population, bodies, mobility, reproduction, education, and health become objects of modernizing intervention. Nietzschean genealogy adds the critical dimension. *Umdeutung* shows that sedimentation is also appropriation and struggle, while the ascetic ideal illuminates how projected futures discipline present conduct. Genealogy prevents the phenomenological reconstruction from becoming apologetics.

Luhmannian systems theory is deployed alongside, not as a substitute for, phenomenology. Second-order observation and autopoietic reproduction describe how the political system observes its own distinctions, generates criteria of adequacy, and reproduces modernization discourse through its operations. Husserl, by contrast, describes the horizon inhabited by experiencing subjects. Their tension is irreducible: communication and consciousness are not interchangeable objects. The paper treats that tension as theoretically productive and as an analogue of the computational/cognitive divide rather than resolving it by verbal synthesis.

These engagements do not produce a single grand synthesis. They establish an analytical division of labor. Phenomenology identifies the horizon; sedimentation explains historical persistence; semiotics specifies relational meaning; genealogy exposes struggle; governmentality and biopolitics explain embodiment; and systems theory models recursive observation and reproduction. The argument's coherence lies in the circuit among these registers, not in reducing them to one vocabulary.

Original contributions

(1) The metasignifier thesis. Modernization is a sign that organizes other signs without becoming empty. Socialism, Party leadership, reform, opening, law, governance, common prosperity, ecology, security, and rejuvenation retain distinct histories, but modernization supplies the relational field in which their contributions to one project can be specified. Its breadth is an effect of articulation, not the absence of content.

(2) The sedimentary ontology. The paper identifies nine layers—backwardness; revolution; socialist construction; industrialization and the Four Modernizations; reform and opening; the socialist market economy; governance modernization; Chinese modernization; and

national rejuvenation. These are not merely chronological stages. They are a thick archaeological structure in which prior categories remain available, are reinterpreted, and constrain later intelligibility.

(3) The four-level naturalization model. The argument moves from abstract theory to collective-institutional practices, from those practices to individual-embodied dispositions, and from embodied experience back to feedback. This abstract → collective-institutional → individual-embodied → feedback sequence supplies the mechanism by which a political sign can become a lived horizon without implying uniform belief or eliminating resistance.

(4) The immanent-semantic “must.” The paper defends necessity within an interpretive framework. The Constitution and the Party’s fundamental political line must be read as expressions of modernization not because their words are lexically dependent on it, and not because modernization is a monocausal force, but because their internal relations become unintelligible if the modernizing lifeworld is bracketed.

(5) Recursive non-foundationalism. Modernization is not the final signified. It is simultaneously signifier and signified, historical product and producer of history, object and method, destination and condition of political reproduction. Its meaning depends upon revolution, socialism, national experience, Party organization, contradiction, development, governance, civilization, and rejuvenation, even as it subsequently organizes those elements.

(6) The Lebenswelt category error. The paper offers a diagnostic for comparative constitutional analysis. Treating Chinese texts as failed liberal constitutionalism imports a rights-bearing-individual and social-contract horizon into a constitutional order whose signs are organized differently. The diagnosis does not immunize Chinese institutions from criticism; it makes criticism more exact by directing it toward the operative logic rather than toward an imagined liberal object.

Unresolved tensions and directions for further work

First, the phenomenology/systems-theory articulation remains underdeveloped. The paper preserves the tension between lived horizon and autopoietic communication, but it does not yet provide a rigorous translation rule between the two registers. The analogy to computational and cognitive architectures is suggestive rather than a completed theory.

Second, the empirical dimension is incomplete. The paper proposes how modernization might function as a horizon, but it does not establish how non-elite subjects actually inhabit, negotiate, resist, or reinterpret that horizon. Sociological, survey-based, and ethnographic work is needed to test the four-level model beyond official texts and institutional designs.

Third, internal critique requires further theorization. If actors are formed within a Lebenswelt, under what conditions can they achieve critical distance from it? Genealogy identifies buried alternatives and governmental power, but the paper does not yet explain when

immanent critique becomes possible or how it moves from dissonant experience to institutional transformation.

Fourth, the possibility of fragmentation remains open. Different regions, classes, generations, professions, and digitally mediated communities may inhabit different or competing horizons of meaning. A common official vocabulary does not prove a common lifeworld. Further work must determine whether modernization remains a sufficiently shared horizon to organize the whole constitutional field or is becoming a contested language connecting partially divergent social worlds.

The framework is therefore best understood as a disciplined research program rather than a closed explanation. Its contribution is to identify the semantic infrastructure that must be reconstructed before Chinese constitutional texts can be compared, criticized, or modeled with theoretical precision.

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Introduction

The concept of modernization (现代化) occupies a peculiar position within the discourse of Chinese political-legal theory. It is at once ubiquitous and under-theorized—present in virtually every significant political document produced by the Communist Party of China since 1978, embedded in the state constitution, operationalized in legislation at every level of the normative hierarchy, and yet rarely subjected to the kind of rigorous analytical scrutiny that its centrality would seem to demand. Western scholars have tended either to dismiss Chinese modernization discourse as mere rhetoric decorating an authoritarian project, or to assimilate it unreflectively to the categories of Western development theory. Neither approach is adequate. The former fails to take seriously the operative force of political-theoretical categories within a Marxist-Leninist system; the latter commits the category error of reading Chinese modernization through a conceptual lens that the discourse itself explicitly rejects. [NOTE: cite Backer, "Party, People, Government, and State" (2012)]

This working paper proposes a different approach. It takes modernization seriously as a political-theoretical concept with its own genealogy, internal logic, and constitutive function within Chinese constitutionalism. The argument proceeds in two registers. The first is historical-textual: Sections I through VI trace the genealogy of modernization from its Soviet Marxist-Leninist origins through its Chinese transformation, its articulation across twenty national party congresses, and its juridification in Chinese legal texts. The second register is theoretical: Section VII draws on these historical-textual findings to construct a semiotic-phenomenological argument that modernization functions as the *lebenswelt*—the pre-given horizon of meaning—within which Chinese constitutionalism constitutes itself and produces meaning.

The central thesis may be stated as follows: within the Chinese constitutional order—understood as the dual system of the CPC Constitution and the PRC State Constitution—modernization is not merely one policy goal among others. It is the fundamental sign-system through which all other constitutional concepts acquire their meaning. The periodic reformulation of the "principal contradiction" (主要矛盾) by successive party congresses is the mechanism by which this sign-system recalibrates itself to changed material and ideological conditions. The consequence for comparative constitutional theory is significant: external analyses that treat Chinese constitutional texts as failed approximations of liberal constitutionalism commit a phenomenological category error—they misidentify the *lebenswelt* and therefore systematically misread the signs. [NOTE: cite to Backer, "The Party as Polity" (2012); Backer, "Governance Without Government" (2009)]

A methodological note is in order. This paper does not seek to legitimate or delegitimize Chinese constitutionalism. The semiotic-phenomenological analysis undertaken here is descriptive and interpretive, not normative. To identify modernization as the *lebenswelt* of Chinese constitutionalism is not to endorse the particular content that modernization has been given at any historical moment, nor to validate the political arrangements through which modernization is pursued. It is, rather, to make an analytical claim about the conditions under

which Chinese constitutional discourse becomes intelligible—to itself and to external observers. The failure to recognize these conditions produces not criticism but incomprehension.

Section I: The Genesis of the Notion of Modernization from Soviet to Chinese Leninist Theory

The concept of modernization, as it operates within the discursive and institutional architecture of Chinese Leninist constitutionalism, cannot be apprehended as a simple borrowing from Western developmental economics or as a belated adoption of the liberal-progressive teleology that dominated mid-twentieth-century American social science. [NOTE: cite Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth* (1960); Tipps, "Modernization Theory and the Comparative Study of Societies" (1973)] Rather, it must be understood as a term of art whose genealogy runs through the particular theoretical and practical engagements of Soviet Marxism-Leninism with the problem of constructing socialism under conditions of material backwardness — a genealogy that was then received, contested, and ultimately transformed within the Chinese revolutionary experience in ways that fundamentally altered its conceptual architecture. To trace this genealogy is not merely an exercise in intellectual history; it is a necessary precondition for understanding why modernization occupies so distinctive a position in Chinese constitutional discourse, functioning simultaneously as economic program, legitimation principle, and civilizational aspiration.

What follows is an attempt to reconstruct this genealogy with sufficient rigor to establish the conceptual foundations upon which later sections of this analysis depend. The argument proceeds in three movements: first, the articulation of modernization as revolutionary imperative within Soviet theory and practice; second, the transmission and transformation of this concept within Chinese Marxism from Li Dazhao through Mao Zedong; and third, the decisive conceptual expansion that transformed modernization from an industrial-economic program into a civilizational project — an expansion whose implications ramify throughout the constitutional order that the Chinese Communist Party has constructed.

A. Modernization as Revolutionary Imperative: The Soviet Foundation

The relationship between Marxist revolutionary theory and the problem of modernization was, from the outset, deeply paradoxical. Marx's own theoretical architecture presumed that socialist revolution would emerge from the contradictions of advanced capitalism — that is, from societies that had already completed the modernization process as understood in the nineteenth-century European context. [NOTE: cite Marx, *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859)] The Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917 thus presented an immediate and fundamental theoretical problem: how could a socialist state be constructed in a country that had manifestly not completed the bourgeois-industrial transformation that Marx's historical materialism appeared to require as a precondition? Lenin's response to this problem — elaborated across a series of texts and practical interventions between 1917 and 1923 —

effectively constituted the first systematic theorization of modernization as a revolutionary task rather than a revolutionary precondition.

The formula most frequently cited in this connection — "Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country" — is often treated as mere slogan, but it encapsulates a theoretical position of considerable depth. [NOTE: cite Lenin, Report on the Work of the Council of People's Commissars (1920)] What Lenin articulated was not simply the observation that Russia needed electricity; it was the proposition that the political form (Soviet power, understood as the dictatorship of the proletariat organized through workers' councils) and the material-technical base (electrification, standing metonymically for industrial modernization in its entirety) were co-constitutive elements of the communist project. Neither could exist without the other. The political revolution had been accomplished, but it would remain incomplete — indeed, it would eventually collapse — without the corresponding material transformation. Modernization was thus not external to the revolutionary project but internal to it, a necessary moment in the dialectical unfolding of socialism itself.

This theoretical move had profound implications for the Party's self-understanding and for the emerging constitutional order of the Soviet state. If modernization was a revolutionary task, then the Party — as the vanguard of the proletariat and the bearer of scientific consciousness — was necessarily the agent of modernization. The Party's leading role was legitimated not only by its claim to represent the historical interests of the working class but by its claimed capacity to direct the process of material transformation that socialism required. [NOTE: cite Lenin, "A Great Beginning" (1919); see also Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, vol. 2] The institutional consequence was the fusion of political authority and economic direction that would characterize the Soviet system throughout its existence.

The New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1921–1928 represented, within this framework, not an abandonment of the modernization imperative but a pragmatic recalibration of its tempo and method. Lenin's defense of NEP rested precisely on the argument that the material preconditions for socialist construction could not be willed into existence by administrative fiat alone; the productive forces had to be developed through whatever mechanisms — including limited market relations and concessions to foreign capital — proved effective. [NOTE: cite Lenin, "On the Tax in Kind" (1921)] The theoretical justification was drawn, in part, from Lenin's earlier analysis in *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916), which had established the thesis of uneven development: the proposition that capitalism develops unevenly across the world system, creating the possibility of revolutionary breakthrough at the weakest links of the imperialist chain, but also ensuring that such breakthroughs occur in precisely those countries least prepared for socialist construction in material terms. [NOTE: cite Lenin, *Imperialism* (1916), ch. 8–10] Uneven development thus simultaneously explained why revolution had occurred in Russia and why modernization — the overcoming of that unevenness — was the revolution's most urgent practical task.

Stalin's abandonment of NEP and turn to forced industrialization beginning in 1928 did not represent a theoretical break with Lenin's framework so much as a radicalization of one

tendency within it. The First Five-Year Plan (1928–1932) and its successors operationalized the modernization imperative with unprecedented violence and velocity, treating the transformation of the material base as a task to be accomplished through the concentrated application of political will and coercive state power. [NOTE: cite Nove, *An Economic History of the USSR* (1992), chs. 7–9] The doctrine of "socialism in one country" — often understood primarily as a rejection of Trotsky's permanent revolution thesis — functioned equally as a modernization thesis: it asserted that the Soviet Union could and must achieve industrial modernity through its own efforts, without waiting for revolution in the advanced capitalist countries to provide material assistance. Yet that concept itself has been subject to a political dialectics in which its broad terms have been expanded and contracted depending, before the 1950s on the political relations between the Soviet and Chinese vanguards. The 1950s introduced again a form of *zìlì gēngshēng* (自力更生), literally regeneration or revival through one's own efforts." [NOTE: precise relationship between "socialism in one country" formulation and industrialization drive — Davies and Wheatcroft may complicate this, mirror Trotsky Stalin debates and pre-WWII Communist International]. The idea re-emerged in new form in the 2020s with the greater self reliance campaigns attached to China's hub and spoke internationalism starting with the Silk Roads initiatives. [CITE Adam Segal, "China's Move to Greater Self Reliance," *China Leadership Monitor* Winter 2021 Issue 70 (1 December 2021)].]

Collectivization of agriculture, undertaken simultaneously with industrial acceleration, constituted the agrarian dimension of this modernization program. Its logic was twofold: the extraction of surplus from the peasantry to finance industrial investment, and the transformation of backward, small-scale agriculture into a modern, mechanized sector. [NOTE: cite Lewin, *Russian Peasants and Soviet Power* (1968)] That this process was accomplished through extraordinary violence — the deportation and death of millions — does not alter its place within the theoretical architecture of Soviet modernization; rather, it reveals the lengths to which the Stalinist state was prepared to go in pursuit of the modernization imperative, and the human costs that this imperative, divorced from meaningful constraints, could impose. The constitutional implications were significant: the 1936 Stalin Constitution was premised on the claimed achievement of socialism's material foundations through precisely this process of forced modernization. [NOTE: cite Stalin Constitution (1936), preamble and Art. 1]

The post-Stalin period did not abandon the modernization framework but sought to moderate its methods and update its content. Khrushchev's articulation of the "scientific-technical revolution" (*nauchno-tekhnicheskaya revolyutsiya*) represented an attempt to redefine the content of socialist modernization for the nuclear and space age, emphasizing scientific research, technological innovation, and educational advancement alongside heavy industry. [NOTE: cite Hoffman, "The Scientific-Technical Revolution in Soviet Theory" in *Technology and Communist Culture* (1977)] The doctrine of peaceful competition with capitalism — the claim that socialism would demonstrate its superiority not through military conquest but through superior economic and technological performance — was, at its core, a modernization thesis reformulated for the conditions of Cold War coexistence. The Party's legitimacy was staked on its capacity to deliver modernity more effectively and equitably than its capitalist rivals.

Brezhnev's concept of "developed socialism" (*razvitoy sotsializm*), articulated in the early 1970s, represented a further evolution — or perhaps a stagnation — of the modernization framework. [NOTE: cite Brezhnev, Report to the 24th Party Congress (1971); Evans, *Soviet Marxism-Leninism* (1993)] By declaring that the Soviet Union had achieved the stage of "developed socialism," the Brezhnev leadership implicitly acknowledged that the original modernization program had been substantially completed in its industrial dimension, while simultaneously deferring the transition to full communism to an indefinite future. The concept functioned as a legitimation device for a system that had achieved industrial modernity of a sort but was manifestly failing to deliver the qualitative improvements in living standards and productive efficiency that its ideological commitments required.

What emerges from this compressed survey is a core structural logic that persisted across the successive reformulations of Soviet modernization theory: modernization was understood primarily as heavy industrialization plus central planning plus Party direction. The content of "heavy industrialization" evolved over time — from electrification to steel production to nuclear technology — but the fundamental equation remained stable. Modernization was an economic-industrial project, directed by the Party-state through centralized planning mechanisms, justified by Marxist-Leninist theory, and legitimated by its claimed results. This was the conceptual apparatus that the Chinese Communist Party would inherit, contest, and ultimately transform.

B. Transmission and Transformation: The Chinese Reception

The reception of Soviet modernization theory in China was never a simple process of transmission and application. From the earliest moments of Chinese engagement with Marxism-Leninism, the problem of modernization was inflected by specifically Chinese conditions and preoccupations that ensured the concept would undergo significant transformation in its new context. Most fundamentally, modernization in the Chinese revolutionary imagination was inextricable from the problem of national salvation (*jiuwang*) — the imperative of rescuing the Chinese nation from the condition of semi-colonial subjugation and civilizational humiliation that had obtained since the Opium Wars. [NOTE: cite Schwartz, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao* (1951); Meisner, *Li Ta-chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism* (1967)] This overlay of national-civilizational concern onto the Marxist-Leninist framework would prove decisive for the subsequent development of the concept.

Li Dazhao's early engagement with Marxism, beginning around 1918–1919, already exhibited this characteristic fusion. For Li, Marxism-Leninism offered not merely a theory of class struggle and socialist revolution but a comprehensive framework for understanding China's subordinate position in the world system and — crucially — a path toward national regeneration through revolutionary modernization. [NOTE: cite Li Dazhao, "The Victory of Bolshevism" (1918); Meisner, *Li Ta-chao*, chs. 4–6] Li's emphasis on the peasantry as a revolutionary force — heretical from the standpoint of orthodox Marxism but intelligible given China's overwhelmingly agrarian character — simultaneously constituted a rethinking of the modernization problem: if China's revolution was to be a peasant revolution, then modernization could not simply follow the Soviet model of extracting surplus from the countryside to fund

urban industrialization. The agrarian question was not merely a tactical problem but a fundamental theoretical challenge to the Soviet modernization paradigm.

Mao Zedong's theoretical writings of the late 1930s and 1940s — particularly "On New Democracy" (1940) — represented the most systematic early attempt to theorize a distinctively Chinese path to modernization within a Marxist-Leninist framework. [NOTE: cite Mao, "On New Democracy" (1940), in *Selected Works*, vol. 2] The concept of "new-democratic" revolution and construction posited a stage of development intermediate between semi-colonial backwardness and socialism proper — a stage in which multiple class forces would cooperate under Communist Party leadership to accomplish the tasks of national liberation and economic modernization that the bourgeoisie had proven too weak and too compromised to complete. This formulation preserved the basic Leninist insight that the Party must direct modernization, while creating theoretical space for a more gradualist and pluralist approach to economic development than Stalin's forced industrialization had represented.

The mass line (群众路线, *qunzhong luxian*), as theorized by Mao in the early 1940s, functioned within this framework as a distinctive methodology of modernization — a claim that the Party could direct the modernization process not through bureaucratic command alone but through a dialectical relationship with the masses, gathering their scattered and unsystematic ideas, concentrating and systematizing them through Marxist-Leninist analysis, and returning them to the masses as policy. [NOTE: cite Mao, "Some Questions Concerning Methods of Leadership" (1943)] Whether the mass line ever functioned as described is, of course, deeply contested; what matters for present purposes is its theoretical significance as an alternative to the purely technocratic-bureaucratic model of modernization direction that characterized the Soviet system. It represented a claim — however imperfectly realized — that modernization could be a participatory process rather than merely an administered one.

The Great Leap Forward (1958–1962) represents, in retrospect, the catastrophic failure of one particular approach to modernization — an attempt to accelerate industrial and agricultural development simultaneously through mass mobilization, decentralized initiative, and sheer political will, bypassing the constraints of material reality and technical expertise. [NOTE: cite MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, vol. 2 (1983); Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine* (2010)] Its failure — among the most historically significant — had as a consequence a discrediting of hyper-voluntarist approaches to modernization within the Party leadership, though it did not immediately resolve the underlying theoretical tensions regarding the proper relationship between political mobilization and economic rationality in the modernization process.

Mao's "On the Ten Major Relationships" (1956), delivered to the Politburo in the wake of Khrushchev's secret speech denouncing Stalin, is significant precisely because it represents an attempt to think systematically about the structural tensions within the modernization process — between heavy and light industry, between industry and agriculture, between coast and interior, between center and locality, between Han and minorities, and so forth. [NOTE: cite Mao, "On the Ten Major Relationships" (1956), in *Selected Works*, vol. 5] The text's significance lies not

in any definitive resolution of these tensions but in its recognition that modernization was a multidimensional problem requiring the simultaneous management of multiple structural relationships — a recognition that already pointed beyond the Soviet model's singular focus on heavy industrial accumulation.

Zhou Enlai's articulation of the Four Modernizations — agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology — first at the Third National People's Congress in 1964 and reiterated at the Fourth in 1975, represented a further step in the conceptual expansion of modernization beyond the purely industrial. [NOTE: cite Zhou Enlai, Report on the Work of the Government (1964); Baum, "Science and Culture in Contemporary China" (1982)] By enumerating four distinct domains of modernization rather than subsuming all under the rubric of industrialization, Zhou's formulation implicitly acknowledged that modernization was a multi-sectoral project whose components could not simply be derived from or reduced to industrial development alone. Agriculture, defense, and science-technology each had their own logics and requirements that demanded independent attention. This formulation would, of course, be taken up and dramatically expanded by Deng Xiaoping after 1978, but its significance as a conceptual departure from the Soviet model — even within the Maoist period — should not be underestimated.

The crucial distinction that emerges from this account is between modernization-as-industrialization — the essentially Soviet understanding, in which modernization is equated with the development of heavy industry under central planning — and a broader, more diffuse understanding of modernization as encompassing the transformation of an entire society across multiple dimensions simultaneously. The Chinese engagement with the Soviet model progressively expanded the concept beyond its original industrial-economic core, incorporating dimensions — agricultural, military, scientific, and increasingly cultural and political — that the Soviet framework had either subordinated to industrial development or treated as derivative consequences of it. This expansion was not merely additive; it represented a qualitative transformation of the concept's theoretical architecture, from a linear industrial teleology to something approaching a civilizational project.

C. From Industrial Teleology to Civilizational Project

The transformation described in the preceding section — the expansion of modernization from industrial-economic program to multi-dimensional civilizational project — requires further theoretical elaboration, for it is precisely this transformation that makes the Chinese use of modernization discourse distinctive and that provides the conceptual foundation for everything that follows in this analysis. What is at stake is not merely the addition of further items to a list of modernization tasks but a fundamental reconceptualization of what modernization means, what it encompasses, and what relationship it bears to the legitimacy of the political order.

In the Soviet framework, as we have seen, modernization was essentially instrumental: it was the means by which the material preconditions of socialism were to be constructed. The end — communism — was defined independently of the modernization process itself; modernization

was the path, not the destination. The Party's legitimacy derived ultimately from its historical mission of leading society toward communism; its role as modernizer was a necessary but theoretically subordinate function. [NOTE: cite Lane, *Leninism: A Sociological Interpretation* (1981)] In the Chinese transformation of this concept — a transformation that unfolds across the entire post-1949 period but acquires its most explicit theoretical articulation only in the reform era — modernization progressively ceases to be merely instrumental and becomes constitutive of the political project itself. The Party does not modernize in order to arrive at communism; rather, the ongoing direction of modernization is itself the Party's essential function, the ground of its legitimacy, and the content of its constitutional role.

This shift has profound implications for constitutional theory. If the Party's legitimacy rests on its capacity to direct modernization — understood now not as a finite industrial task but as an ongoing, multi-dimensional civilizational project — then the constitutional order must be structured to enable and sustain this directive capacity. The Party's leading role is not a temporary expedient justified by historical emergency but a permanent structural feature of the constitutional architecture, justified by the permanent need for modernization direction. [NOTE: cite Backer, "The Party as Polity, the Communist Party, and the Chinese Constitutional State" (2012)] The concept of modernization thus provides the theoretical bridge between Marxist-Leninist vanguard theory and the actually existing constitutional order of the People's Republic — a bridge that becomes fully visible only when modernization is understood in its expanded, civilizational sense rather than in its original, narrowly industrial Soviet sense.

The expansion of modernization to encompass governance itself — the modernization of the state system, of the Party's governing capacity, of the legal order — represents perhaps the most theoretically consequential dimension of this transformation. In the Soviet model, the state and its institutions were instruments of *industrialization* but were not themselves objects of modernization in any theoretically developed sense. [CITE: Vladimir Kontorovich, [The Preobrazhenskii-Feldman Myth and the Soviet Industrialization](#), 1-41, 2013.] It is possible that the rejection of the term as a function of its association in Soviet circles with the development of a sort of modernization theory in the West especially after 1945, which might have been associated with anti-Soviet discourse aimed at the post-colonial world. [CITE: Latham, M.E. (2003). *Modernization, international history, and the Cold War world*. In Engerman, D.C, Gilman, N., Haefele, M.H., and Latham, M.E. (Eds.) *Staging Growth: Modernization, Development, and the Global Cold War*. (pp.1–22). Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press; Rostow, W. W. (1990 [1960]). *The stages of economic growth: A non-communist manifesto*. (3rd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; good backgrounder in Anna Da Silva, *Modernization Theory* (2019), available [here](#)]. In the Chinese framework, particularly as it has developed since the 1990s, governance modernization becomes a central category: the state must modernize itself in order to modernize society, and this self-modernization of the state apparatus is itself a dimension of the broader civilizational project. The implications of this recursive structure — modernization modernizing its own instruments — will be traced in subsequent sections.

Similarly, the incorporation of culture (文化, wenhua) and civilization (文明, wenming) into the modernization framework marks a decisive departure from the Soviet model's productivist orientation. The concept of "spiritual civilization" (精神文明, jingshen wenming), introduced in the early 1980s as a complement to "material civilization" (物质文明, wuzhi wenming), and the subsequent multiplication of civilization categories — political civilization, ecological civilization, and now the comprehensive concept of Chinese modernization (中国式现代化, Zhongguo shi xiandaihua) articulated under Xi Jinping — all testify to the progressive expansion of the modernization concept beyond any possible reduction to economic-industrial development. [NOTE: cite Resolution of the Sixth Plenum (1986) on spiritual civilization; Deng Xiaoping, Selected Works, vol. 3; Xi Jinping, Report to the 20th Party Congress (2022)] Modernization, in this expanded sense, becomes nothing less than the comprehensive renewal of Chinese civilization under Party leadership — a project with no natural terminus and no dimension of social existence that falls outside its scope.

The significance of this conceptual expansion for the analysis that follows cannot be overstated. When Chinese constitutional discourse invokes modernization, it is not invoking a technical-economic program analogous to, say, the development programs of the World Bank or the modernization theories of Rostovian social science. It is invoking a comprehensive civilizational project that encompasses economic development, political institution-building, legal reform, cultural renewal, ecological restoration, and military strengthening — all under the unified direction of the Communist Party and all theoretically integrated within a single conceptual architecture derived from, but no longer reducible to, the Marxist-Leninist tradition. The constitutional implications of this conception — for the Party's role, for the structure of state institutions, for the relationship between state and society, and for the place of law within the political order — are the subject of the sections that follow.

It is precisely the totality of this modernization concept — its refusal to separate the economic from the political, the material from the cultural, the domestic from the civilizational — that renders it so resistant to analysis within the categories of liberal constitutionalism, which presupposes a fundamental separation between state and society, between public and private, between the domain of political authority and the domain of individual freedom. [NOTE: cite Backer, "A Constitutional Theory of the Party-State" (2009)] Chinese modernization discourse, rooted in but transcending its Soviet origins, operates within a fundamentally different constitutional imaginary — one in which the comprehensive direction of social development by an organized political force is not a pathology to be overcome but a constitutional principle to be perfected. Whether one evaluates this positively or negatively is, for present purposes, beside the point; what matters is understanding the concept on its own terms, in its own genealogy, as a precondition for any serious engagement with the constitutional order it sustains.

Section II: The Connection Between Modernization and (a) Marxist Theory, (b) Leninist Theory, and (c) 'Socialist' Modernization

The preceding section established the conceptual terrain on which modernization discourse operates—its genealogies, its normative assumptions, and its entanglement with the political projects of the twentieth century. What remains to be examined is the specific manner in which Marxist and Leninist theory appropriated, transformed, and ultimately reconstituted modernization as a distinctly socialist enterprise. This is not merely a matter of intellectual history, though intellectual history is indispensable to the analysis. It is, rather, a matter of understanding how the very concept of modernization was refracted through the lens of historical materialism, how the organizational innovations of Leninism supplied the institutional technology necessary to direct modernization as a state-led project, and how the resulting synthesis—'socialist modernization'—constitutes a discursive category that is irreducible to its capitalist counterpart. [NOTE: cite Schram, *The Thought of Mao Tse-Tung* (1989)]

To trace these connections is to confront a series of paradoxes that are constitutive of Marxist-Leninist modernization theory. Marx simultaneously denounced the bourgeois order and celebrated its revolutionary capacity to transform the material conditions of human existence. Lenin simultaneously insisted on the objective laws of historical development and arrogated to the vanguard party the authority to accelerate, direct, and in some measure substitute for those very laws. And the theorists of socialist modernization simultaneously claim continuity with the Marxist-Leninist tradition and assert the radical novelty of their project—a modernization that is not merely developmental but transformative of the social relations within which development proceeds. These paradoxes are not defects to be resolved but structural features of the theoretical architecture that must be understood on their own terms.

A. Modernization Within Historical Materialism

The relationship between Marxist theory and the concept of modernization is at once intimate and antagonistic. Historical materialism, as a theory of social development, is itself a modernization theory—perhaps the most ambitious and comprehensive modernization theory ever articulated. Its central claim is that human societies develop through a determinate sequence of modes of production, each characterized by a specific configuration of productive forces and relations of production, and that the transition from one mode to the next is driven by the internal contradictions of the existing order. [NOTE: cite Marx, *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859)] The base-superstructure metaphor, whatever its subsequent elaborations and qualifications, establishes productive forces—the technologies, techniques, and forms of social cooperation through which human beings transform nature—as the motor of historical progress. In this sense, historical materialism is a theory of modernization *avant la lettre*: it posits the progressive development of human productive capacity as the fundamental axis of historical change.

Yet Marx's relationship to bourgeois modernity was profoundly ambivalent, and this ambivalence is constitutive of the theoretical tension that animates all subsequent Marxist engagement with modernization. On the one hand, Marx recognized and indeed celebrated the revolutionary character of capitalist development. The Communist Manifesto's famous passages on the bourgeoisie's transformation of the world—its dissolution of all fixed relations, its creation of a world market, its unprecedented development of productive forces—are not merely descriptive but contain an unmistakable note of admiration. [NOTE: cite Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), Part I] The bourgeoisie, Marx wrote, 'has been the first to show what man's activity can bring about. It has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals.' This is not irony but genuine recognition of capitalism's historically progressive role in developing the material prerequisites for human emancipation.

On the other hand, and simultaneously, Marx subjected bourgeois modernity to a critique of unprecedented depth and rigor. The theory of commodity fetishism reveals that the apparently natural and rational character of capitalist social relations is in fact a mystification—that the 'freedom' of the market conceals unfreedom, that the 'equality' of exchange conceals exploitation, and that the apparent rationality of capitalist production conceals the fundamental irrationality of a system governed by the anarchic movements of value. [NOTE: cite Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, Chapter 1, Section 4] The theory of alienation, developed in the early manuscripts and never entirely abandoned, demonstrates that capitalist modernization produces not merely material wealth but also the systematic estrangement of human beings from their labor, from the products of their labor, from their fellow human beings, and from their own species-being. [NOTE: cite Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*] Capitalist modernization is thus simultaneously progressive and destructive, liberating and enslaving, rational and irrational.

This ambivalence is not a deficiency in Marx's thought but its most productive feature for understanding the subsequent development of socialist modernization theory. For if capitalism is both historically necessary and historically limited—if it develops the productive forces to a degree that makes socialism materially possible while simultaneously producing contradictions that make socialism historically necessary—then the task of socialist theory is not simply to reject modernization but to appropriate it, to redirect it, to strip it of its bourgeois form while retaining and indeed accelerating its material content. The base-superstructure relationship here becomes decisive: if the productive forces constitute the real foundation of social life, and if their development is the condition of possibility for the transition to socialism, then modernization—understood as the systematic development of productive forces—is not merely compatible with socialism but integral to it. [NOTE: cite Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (1978)]

The implications of this theoretical structure for the practice of socialist modernization are far-reaching. If historical materialism is correct that the level of productive forces determines the range of possible social relations, then a socialist revolution that occurs in conditions of underdevelopment—a condition recognized as the starting point in many post-colonial Marxist-Leninist (socialist) revolutions from the 1940s—faces a specific and acute problem: the material

basis for socialist social relations does not yet exist, and must be created through a conscious and directed process of modernization. [CITE: Backer, Larry Catá Backer on Wang Hui: "Contradiction, Systemic Crisis and the Direction for Change: An Interview" (2016) *Law at the End of the Day*] The revolution, on this account, does not abolish the necessity of modernization but intensifies it, transforms it from an unconscious process driven by the blind forces of capitalist accumulation into a conscious and planned process directed by the collective will of the associated producers—or, as the theory was to develop, by their vanguard representatives.

This appropriation of modernization within the framework of historical materialism produces a distinctive temporal structure. Unlike capitalist modernization theory, which tends to naturalize development as an organic process unfolding according to its own internal logic, Marxist modernization theory insists on the historicity of modernization—its embeddedness in determinate social relations, its susceptibility to conscious direction, and its ultimate subordination to the goal of human emancipation. Modernization is not an end in itself but a means; the development of productive forces is not the goal of history but the condition of possibility for the realization of that goal, which is the free development of each as the condition for the free development of all. [NOTE: cite Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), Part II] Yet this subordination of modernization to emancipation creates its own tensions, particularly when the imperatives of rapid development appear to conflict with the imperatives of socialist construction—a tension that would become the central problematic of Leninist and post-Leninist modernization theory.

B. The Vanguard Party as Agent of Modernization

If Marx established the theoretical framework within which modernization could be appropriated as a socialist project, it was Lenin who supplied the organizational technology necessary to realize that project under conditions of historical underdevelopment. The Leninist contribution to modernization theory is not primarily theoretical in the narrow sense—it does not fundamentally revise the Marxist account of productive forces, relations of production, or the dynamics of historical development. Rather, it is organizational and strategic: it identifies the institutional form—the vanguard party organized on the principle of democratic centralism—through which modernization can be directed as a conscious process rather than merely undergone as an objective historical force. [NOTE: cite Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?* (1902)]

The decisive move in Lenin's theoretical innovation is what might be termed substitutionism—the substitution of the vanguard party for the bourgeoisie as the agent of modernization. In classical Marxist theory, the bourgeoisie plays the historically progressive role of developing productive forces, creating the material conditions for socialism. But in conditions of underdevelopment—where the bourgeoisie is weak, dependent on foreign capital, politically compromised by its entanglement with pre-capitalist ruling classes, and incapable of carrying through its own historical mission—some other social force must assume this role. [NOTE: cite Trotsky, *Results and Prospects* (1906); cf. Lenin, *Two Tactics of Social-Democracy* (1905)] The vanguard party, armed with scientific socialist theory and organized on the principles of democratic centralism, presents itself as precisely this force: a collective agent capable of

performing the modernizing function that the bourgeoisie has failed to perform, while simultaneously directing modernization toward socialist rather than capitalist ends.

The problem with the substitutionist notion is in its very essence. A Leninist Party and the Leninist project does not substitute (for that would suggest that the Leninist Party can do what the bourgeois parties had done previously but better). Instead it *displaces* the bourgeois parties and in doing so changes the nature and character of modernization from an organic process, which Marx might have been understood to inevitably produce all of the conditions necessary for a communist transformation; eventually. That displacement is meant to produce rational acceleration of modernization, but a modernization pointed toward its own acceleration as a comprehensive project affecting all elements of productive forces—economics, culture, social relations, and politics. There is no room then for either liberal democratic or theocratic baggage in this conceptual system.

This substitutionist logic has profound implications for the character of modernization as it is conceived and practiced within the Leninist framework, but only as an oppositional narrative that serves best to draw differences more sharply. Chinese Leninist modernization (in a more theoretically solid way than Soviet industrialization that remained more embedded in the civilizational form which it emerged) ceases to be understood as an organic process of social evolution—the gradual differentiation and rationalization of social structures that characterizes liberal modernization theory—and becomes instead a directed process, a project to be planned, organized, and implemented by a centralized authority possessed of both the theoretical understanding and the organizational capacity to bend historical development to a conscious human purpose elaborated from the time and theory of Marx and dialectically reconstructed as a society passes through an accelerated and well managed progress through its stages of historical development to the inevitable climax. The party-state becomes, in this conception, a modernization machine—an institutional apparatus specifically designed to mobilize social resources, coordinate collective action, and drive the development of productive forces at a pace and in a direction that exceeds what any spontaneous process of social evolution could achieve. [NOTE: cite Jowitt, *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction* (1992)].

Democratic centralism, in this light, appears not merely as a principle of party organization but as an institutional technology of modernization. The combination of centralized decision-making with disciplined implementation—the 'freedom of discussion, unity of action' formula—constitutes an organizational form specifically adapted to the requirements of directed development. Decisions about the allocation of resources, the prioritization of sectors, the pace and sequence of development can be made centrally, on the basis of comprehensive information and theoretical understanding, while their implementation can be ensured through the discipline of a hierarchically organized apparatus that extends from the center to the most remote periphery. [NOTE: cite Lenin, *Freedom to Criticise and Unity of Action* (1906)] The party-state thus might be said to function as what contemporary social science might call a 'developmental state,' though with a scope and intensity of social penetration that far exceeds what that term ordinarily connotes [CITE classic study Chalmers Johnson 1982 study of Japan, MITI and the Japanese Miracle: The Growth of Industrial Policy, 1925–1975, and essays in Meredith Woo-

Cumings (ed.) (1999), *The Developmental State*]. However, that characterization unnecessarily imports Western cognitive categories in ways that might distort the Chinese Leninist project toward Communism as an accelerated engine for moving forward the Marxist progression through stages of historical development until one gets to the final stage; eventually. The difference is important, developmental states are guided toward growth, wherever it might lead; Chinese modernization moves along a socialist path toward a communist society.

The implications of this substitutionist model for understanding modernization, built only in this respect, can be useful. If the vanguard party displaces the bourgeoisie as the agent of modernization, then the process of modernization is fundamentally reconceived: it is no longer a matter of 'unleashing' market forces, removing obstacles to the spontaneous development of capitalism, or creating the institutional conditions for private accumulation. It is, rather, a matter of planning, directing, and controlling the process of development from above—of treating modernization not as something that happens to a society but as something that is done to it, or done for it, by its vanguard representatives. This conception preserves the Marxist insistence on the primacy of productive forces development while radically transforming the mechanism through which that development is to be achieved. The 'invisible hand' of the market is replaced by the 'visible hand' of the party-state; the anarchy of capitalist production is replaced by the rationality of central planning and then central management through Markets Marxism [CITE Backer Markets Marxism essay]; the bourgeois entrepreneur is replaced by the party cadre. [NOTE: cite Kornai, *The Socialist System* (1992)] and the system of the use of productive forces is given a path and a destination other than to improve itself.

Yet this substitutionism/displacement can be understood to generate its own contradictions, which would become increasingly apparent in the course of realizing socialist modernization. If the vanguard displaces the bourgeoisie, what substitutes for the market (the incarnation of the masses) as a mechanism of information transmission and resource allocation? If modernization is directed from above, how are the inevitable errors of central planning to be corrected? And most fundamentally: if the party assumes the modernizing role of the bourgeoisie, does it not also assume, in some measure, the social position of the bourgeoisie—becoming a new ruling class whose interests may diverge from those of the proletariat it claims to represent? These questions, raised in quite different ways by the Yugoslav and Chinese experiences,. Both would ultimately lead to the reconceptualization of socialist modernization in terms that attempt to preserve the directing role of the party while accommodating some measure of market mechanism—a reconceptualization whose most developed form is the theory and practice of socialism with Chinese characteristics. But the Yugoslav experience failed it lacked a theoretical basis for its administrative apparatus; China theorized its way around the problem, though of course in ways that are still subject to debate.

C. 'Socialist Modernization' as Distinct Discursive Category

The concept of 'socialist modernization' (社会主义现代化) as it emerges from the Marxist-Leninist theoretical tradition and develops in the context of actually existing socialist states constitutes a discursive category that is irreducible to its liberal-capitalist counterpart. This

irreducibility is not merely a matter of adding a normative prefix—'socialist'—to an otherwise neutral concept of modernization. It is, rather, a matter of fundamental reconception: socialist modernization differs from capitalist modernization not only in its proclaimed goals (collective ownership, planned development, elimination of exploitation) but in its understanding of the process of development itself, the agents through which it proceeds, the institutional forms it requires, and the temporal-developmental frame within which it situates its project. [NOTE: cite Deng Xiaoping, *Selected Works*, Vol. II and III (1983, 1993)]

To appreciate the distinctiveness of socialist modernization as a discursive category, it is necessary to contrast it with the dominant form of capitalist modernization theory as it emerged in the mid-twentieth century. The paradigmatic expression of that theory—W.W. Rostow's 'stages of economic growth'—posited a universal developmental trajectory through which all societies must pass, from 'traditional society' through 'preconditions for take-off,' 'take-off,' 'drive to maturity,' and finally 'the age of high mass-consumption.' [NOTE: cite Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (1960)] This model, which Rostow explicitly presented as a 'non-communist manifesto,' assumed that the trajectory of Western capitalist development constituted the universal norm, that all 'underdeveloped' societies were merely at earlier stages of the same path, and that the task of development policy was to create the conditions for these societies to follow the Western trajectory. Modernization, on this account, meant Westernization; development meant capitalist development; progress meant convergence toward the institutional forms of liberal-democratic capitalism.

Socialist modernization theory rejects each of these premises. It denies that the Western trajectory is universal, insisting instead on the multiplicity of developmental paths and the possibility of skipping or telescoping stages through conscious political direction. It denies that capitalist development is the only or the optimal route to modernity, arguing instead that socialist relations of production can serve as the framework for an alternative and superior form of modernization—one that avoids the waste, inequality, and irrationality of capitalist development while achieving and ultimately surpassing its material accomplishments. And it denies that progress means convergence toward Western institutional forms, insisting instead on the possibility and desirability of institutional innovation specific to the conditions of socialist societies. [NOTE: cite Hu Angang, *China in 2020: A New Type of Superpower* (2011)]

The normative content of socialist modernization is articulated through a set of principles that distinguish it from its capitalist counterpart: the dominance of public ownership of the means of production, particularly in strategic sectors; the directing role of the Communist Party in setting developmental priorities and coordinating economic activity; planned development that subordinates market mechanisms to the requirements of social need rather than private profit; the progressive elimination of exploitation and the narrowing of social inequalities; and the integration of material development with the construction of 'socialist spiritual civilization' (社会主义精神文明)—the transformation of culture, ideology, and social relations in accordance with socialist values. [NOTE: cite CPC Central Committee, *Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the PRC* (1981)] These principles are not merely aspirational but constitutive: they define what counts as 'modernization' within the socialist

discursive framework, such that a process of development that fails to embody them—however great its material achievements—would not qualify as socialist modernization.

The temporal-developmental frame within which socialist modernization is situated is that of the 'primary stage of socialism' (社会主义初级阶段), a concept developed in the 1980s to address the specific conditions of China's development, or rather to suggest the temporal element (it will take a long time) and place of China in the current stage of historical development (the Socialist Path is long and there is a long way to travel). [NOTE: cite Zhao Ziyang, Report to the 13th National Congress of the CPC (1987)] The primary stage theory acknowledges that China's socialist revolution occurred in conditions of extreme underdevelopment, that the material basis for a fully developed socialist society does not yet exist, and that its creation will require a protracted historical period—estimated at approximately one hundred years from the founding of the People's Republic—during which the central task is the development of productive forces. This temporal framework performs a crucial theoretical function: it preserves the teleological structure of historical materialism (socialism as the successor to capitalism, communism as the ultimate goal) while creating discursive space for policies—including the extensive use of market mechanisms, the toleration of private capital, and the acceptance of significant income inequality—that might otherwise appear incompatible with socialist principles.

The claim that distinguishes socialist modernization most sharply from its capitalist counterpart is the claim that it represents not merely a faster or more equitable route to the same destination, but the construction of a qualitatively different form of modern society. On this view, capitalist modernity is not the telos of historical development but a specific and limited form of modernity—one characterized by the domination of capital over labor, the subordination of social need to private profit, the cyclical crises inherent in anarchic production, and the structural generation of inequality both within and between nations. Socialist modernization, by contrast, aspires to a form of modernity in which the development of productive forces is subordinated to collective human purposes, in which the benefits of development are distributed equitably, in which planning and coordination replace the anarchy of the market, and in which the human costs of development—exploitation, alienation, environmental destruction—are progressively eliminated rather than merely displaced. [NOTE: cite Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China*, Vol. I-IV (2014-2022)]

Whether this claim can be sustained—whether socialist modernization does in fact produce a qualitatively different form of modern society rather than a variant of the same—is perhaps the central question of contemporary Marxist-Leninist political theory. The answer depends not only on empirical assessment of actually existing socialist modernization but on prior theoretical questions about the relationship between productive forces and relations of production, the conditions under which institutional innovation is possible, and the extent to which conscious political direction can overcome the structural constraints that historical materialism itself identifies. These are questions to which the subsequent sections of this analysis will return. What is essential at this stage is to recognize that 'socialist modernization' functions as a distinct discursive category—one that cannot be adequately understood either as a mere variant of liberal modernization theory or as a simple application of classical Marxist categories

to developmental practice, but must be apprehended in its specificity as a theoretical construction that draws on both traditions while exceeding them.

Section III: Differences Between Socialist Modernization, Chinese-Style Modernization, and Modernization/Development as Used Outside China

The concept of modernization operates across multiple discursive registers within and beyond Chinese political-theoretical vocabulary. What might appear, at first glance, to be a simple terminological shift—from "socialist modernization" (社会主义现代化) to "Chinese-style modernization" (中国式现代化)—in fact signals a profound reorientation of the epistemic foundations, normative commitments, and civilizational self-understanding through which the Chinese Communist Party articulates its developmental trajectory. The distinction is not merely semantic; it encodes divergent theories of historical necessity, different accounts of the relationship between the universal and the particular, and competing visions of what constitutes legitimate political order in the context of large-scale socioeconomic transformation. To grasp these distinctions requires situating them against the broader terrain of modernization theory as it has developed in Western social science and international development discourse—a terrain that is itself internally fractured and contested. [NOTE: cite Dirlik, "Modernity as History"]

This section undertakes a comparative analysis of three distinct but interrelated conceptual formations: socialist modernization as embedded in CPC discourse from the reform era onward; Chinese-style modernization as a theoretical innovation of the Xi Jinping era; and modernization/development as deployed in Western academic and institutional contexts. The analysis proceeds not to adjudicate among these frameworks but to map their internal logics, their points of incommensurability, and the ideological work each performs within its respective discursive field.

A. Socialist Modernization in CPC Discourse

The conceptual architecture of "socialist modernization" within CPC discourse must be understood as both a programmatic commitment and a theoretical proposition about the nature of historical development under conditions of socialist governance. Its most immediately recognizable instantiation is the "Four Modernizations" (四个现代化)—the modernization of agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology—first articulated by Zhou Enlai in 1964 and subsequently elevated to programmatic centrality under Deng Xiaoping's leadership beginning in 1978. [NOTE: cite Meisner, "The Deng Xiaoping Era"] Yet to reduce socialist modernization to these four domains is to mistake the programmatic surface for the theoretical depth structure. The Four Modernizations operated as a heuristic device within a more comprehensive understanding of socialist modernization as the transformation of China's productive forces and social relations under the continuing leadership of the Communist Party.

Deng Xiaoping's articulation of socialist modernization was inseparable from his reconceptualization of China's position within the Marxist-Leninist theory of historical stages. The doctrine of the "primary stage of socialism" (社会主义初级阶段), formally adopted at the Thirteenth National Congress in 1987, provided the theoretical scaffolding upon which socialist modernization could be reconciled with market-oriented reforms. [NOTE: cite Zhao Ziyang's report to the 13th Congress] If China remained in the primary stage of socialism—a stage that would persist for at least one hundred years from the 1950s—then the central task was not the immediate construction of communism but the development of productive forces through whatever means proved efficacious, including the selective appropriation of capitalist techniques and institutions. Socialist modernization thus became the practical content of the primary stage: the material and institutional development necessary to create the conditions for eventual advancement to a higher stage of socialism.

This formulation accomplished several theoretical operations simultaneously. First, it legitimated reform and opening by situating market mechanisms within a teleological framework that preserved socialism as the ultimate horizon. Second, it temporalized socialism in a manner that deferred indefinitely the question of when the transition to a more advanced stage might occur, thereby creating expansive discursive space for policy experimentation. Third, it established an internal relationship between modernization and socialism such that the former was not merely a means to the latter but was itself constitutive of what socialism meant under Chinese conditions. The formula "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (中国特色社会主义) captured precisely this dialectical entanglement: socialism was not an abstract universal to be applied mechanically but a living formation shaped by the particularities of Chinese historical experience. [NOTE: cite Deng Xiaoping, "Building Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" (1984)]

Through the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao eras, socialist modernization retained its programmatic centrality while acquiring new substantive dimensions. Jiang's "Three Represents" (三个代表) expanded the social base of the Party and implicitly broadened the content of modernization beyond purely economic metrics to encompass cultural and political dimensions. Hu Jintao's "Scientific Outlook on Development" (科学发展观) introduced ecological sustainability and social harmony as constitutive elements of modernization, responding to the social contradictions generated by rapid but uneven economic growth. [NOTE: cite Fewsmith, "The Logic and Limits of Political Reform in China"; Backer Sange Diabiao] Throughout these iterations, however, the fundamental grammar remained constant: modernization was socialist in character, party-directed in implementation, and oriented toward the comprehensive development of productive forces as the material foundation for socialist construction.

What remained relatively stable across these formulations was the assumption that socialist modernization, while differing from capitalist modernization in its ownership structure and political leadership, nonetheless shared with Western developmental discourse a broadly linear understanding of progress—from agricultural to industrial society, from underdevelopment to development, from backwardness to advancement. The framework did not fundamentally challenge the evaluative metrics by which modernization was measured; it challenged primarily

the political form through which modernization was to be achieved. This distinction—between contesting the means of modernization and contesting the very concept of modernization—becomes crucial for understanding the theoretical significance of the subsequent shift to "Chinese-style modernization."

B. Chinese-Style Modernization as Theoretical Innovation

The articulation of "Chinese-style modernization" (中国式现代化) as a distinct theoretical category represents what the CPC itself characterizes as a major theoretical innovation—one that moves beyond the question of how socialism achieves modernization to the question of what modernization itself means when conceptualized from a non-Western civilizational standpoint. Although the term had appeared in earlier CPC discourse, its elevation to systematic theoretical status occurred at the Twentieth National Congress in October 2022, where Xi Jinping devoted substantial portions of his report to elaborating its content and significance. [NOTE: cite Xi Jinping, Report to the 20th National Congress of the CPC (2022)]

The five defining features of Chinese-style modernization, as articulated in the Congress report and subsequent theoretical elaborations, are: the modernization of a huge population (人口规模巨大的现代化); modernization of common prosperity for all (全体人民共同富裕的现代化); modernization that coordinates material and spiritual civilization (物质文明和精神文明相协调的现代化); modernization characterized by harmony between humanity and nature (人与自然和谐共生的现代化); and modernization that follows a path of peaceful development (走和平发展道路). Each of these features operates simultaneously as a descriptive claim about China's distinctive conditions and as a normative proposition about what authentic modernization requires.

The theoretical significance of this formulation exceeds its immediate policy content. At the most fundamental level, Chinese-style modernization claims that the concept of modernization itself is not exhausted by its Western instantiations—that there exist multiple possible modernities, each rooted in distinct civilizational traditions and historical experiences, and that the Western pathway is one particular form rather than a universal template. Xi Jinping has been explicit on this point: Chinese-style modernization "breaks the myth that modernization equals Westernization" (打破了“现代化=西方化”的迷思) and demonstrates that "the paths to modernization are diverse" (现代化道路是多样的).² [NOTE: cite Xi Jinping, speech at the CPC and World Political Parties High-Level Dialogue (2023); NDRC [Chinese path to Modernization: The Way Forward](#)]

² Or more formally, 现代化道路并没有固定模式 (Xiàndàihuà dàolù bìng méiyǒu gùdìng móshì) — "There is no fixed model for the path to modernization." 各国选择发展道路的多样性 (Gèguó xuǎnzé fāzhǎn dàolù de duōyàng xìng) — "The diversity of development paths chosen by different countries." 走向现代化的道路不止一条 (Zǒu xiàng xiàndàihuà de dàolù bùzhǐ yì tiáo) — "There is more than one path toward modernization."

The discursive shift from "socialist modernization" to "Chinese-style modernization" encodes a movement from class-based to civilization-based theoretical foundations. Where socialist modernization derived its legitimacy from Marxist-Leninist theory and positioned itself within a global struggle between socialism and capitalism, Chinese-style modernization derives its legitimacy additionally—and perhaps primarily—from the claimed continuity of Chinese civilization and its capacity to generate indigenous forms of modern governance. This is not to suggest that Marxism has been abandoned; rather, it has been repositioned as one element within a broader civilizational synthesis that includes Confucian governance traditions, the historical experience of unified multi-ethnic statehood, and the philosophical resources of classical Chinese thought. [NOTE: cite Zheng Yongnian on civilizational state theory]

The implications for international order are substantial. If socialist modernization implicitly accepted the universal evaluative framework of development while contesting the political means of achieving it, Chinese-style modernization contests the framework itself. It asserts that modernization is inherently plural, that different civilizations will and should produce different forms of modernity, and that no single civilization possesses the authority to define the normative content of modernization for all others. This represents a more radical challenge to the post-1945 international development consensus than socialist modernization ever posed—precisely because it does not merely offer an alternative route to a shared destination but questions whether the destination itself is singular.

C. Western Modernization Theory and Development Discourse

The intellectual formation against which both socialist modernization and Chinese-style modernization define themselves—whether explicitly or implicitly—is the body of modernization theory and development discourse that emerged in Western social science during the Cold War period and was subsequently institutionalized through international development organizations. This formation is itself internally diverse and has been subject to sustained critique from within the Western academy, yet certain core assumptions have proven remarkably durable in shaping policy discourse and institutional practice.

Walt Whitman Rostow's *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (1960) provided perhaps the most influential articulation of modernization as a linear, stage-sequential process. Rostow identified five stages through which all societies were said to pass: traditional society, preconditions for takeoff, takeoff, the drive to maturity, and the age of high mass consumption. [NOTE: cite Rostow, "The Stages of Economic Growth" (1960)] The subtitle—"A Non-Communist Manifesto"—made explicit what was often left implicit in modernization theory: that the framework was constructed in deliberate opposition to Marxist theories of historical development and served simultaneously as social science and as ideological weapon in the Cold War. Modernization, on this account, meant convergence toward the institutional forms of advanced industrial capitalism as exemplified by the United States and Western Europe.

Samuel Huntington's *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968) complicated this optimistic linearity by introducing the problem of political decay—the possibility that modernization could generate instability rather than orderly progress. [NOTE: cite Huntington, "Political Order in Changing Societies" (1968)] Yet Huntington's intervention, while challenging the assumption of smooth transition, did not fundamentally disturb the teleological structure of modernization theory. The endpoint remained recognizably Western: differentiated political institutions, rule of law, democratic participation. What Huntington added was attention to the difficulty of the journey rather than a reconceptualization of the destination. Talcott Parsons's structural-functionalist framework similarly reinforced convergence assumptions by theorizing modernization as functional differentiation—the progressive separation of political, economic, religious, and familial institutions into autonomous subsystems, each governed by its own internal logic. [NOTE: cite Parsons, "The System of Modern Societies" (1971)]

Convergence theory, in its various formulations, held that the functional requirements of industrial society would drive all modernizing societies toward similar institutional configurations regardless of their cultural starting points or ideological commitments. Clark Kerr and colleagues argued in *Industrialism and Industrial Man* (1960) that the logic of industrialism would eventually override political and cultural differences, producing a convergence of industrial societies around common structural features. [NOTE: cite Kerr et al., "Industrialism and Industrial Man" (1960)]. This assumption proved remarkably persistent despite accumulating empirical evidence of divergent developmental trajectories.

The institutional expression of modernization theory in development discourse—through the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations Development Programme, and bilateral aid agencies—translated these theoretical assumptions into operational frameworks. The Washington Consensus of the 1990s represented perhaps the most concentrated expression of modernization-as-convergence in policy form: liberalization, privatization, and deregulation as universal prescriptions for development regardless of local conditions. [NOTE: cite Williamson, "What Washington Means by Policy Reform" (1990)] Even as the Washington Consensus was subsequently qualified and partially repudiated, the underlying assumption that development meant approximation to Western institutional forms retained substantial institutional momentum.

Internal critiques of modernization theory emerged from several directions. Dependency theory, associated with Andre Gunder Frank, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and others, argued that underdevelopment was not a pre-modern condition to be overcome but a structural product of the world capitalist system—that the development of the core produced and required the underdevelopment of the periphery. [NOTE: cite Frank, "The Development of Underdevelopment" (1966)] Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory extended this analysis into a comprehensive account of the modern world-system as a single capitalist world-economy structured by core-periphery-semiperiphery relations. [NOTE: cite Wallerstein, "The Modern World-System" (1974)] These critiques challenged the possibility of universal modernization within the existing world-system but did not necessarily challenge the normative desirability of the modern institutional forms themselves. Post-development theory, associated with Arturo

Escobar and others, went further in questioning the very concept of development as a form of epistemic domination. [NOTE: cite Escobar, "Encountering Development" (1995)]

D. Ideological, Epistemological, and Normative Divergences

Having mapped these three conceptual formations—socialist modernization, Chinese-style modernization, and Western modernization/development discourse—it becomes possible to identify their fundamental points of divergence at the ideological, epistemological, and normative levels. These divergences are not merely academic; they structure concrete political contestations over the legitimate forms of governance, the proper metrics of social progress, and the authority to define what counts as development in the contemporary world order.

At the ideological level, the three formations operate from fundamentally different assumptions about the relationship between modernization and political form. Western modernization theory, in its dominant variants, assumes convergence toward liberal-democratic capitalism. Modernization produces a middle class; a middle class demands political participation; political participation requires democratic institutions; democratic institutions in turn sustain further modernization. This virtuous circle constitutes what might be called the liberal teleology of modernization—a teleology that has been challenged empirically by the persistence of authoritarian modernization but that retains enormous normative force in Western academic and policy discourse. [NOTE: cite Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy" (1959)]

Socialist modernization operates from an alternative ideological foundation: the Marxist-Leninist theory of the party as the vanguard of the working class, directing the transformation of productive forces under conditions of collective (or in practice, state) ownership. The Party does not merely facilitate modernization; it constitutes the political form through which modernization is achieved and sustained. There is no expectation of convergence toward liberal forms because the Party's leading role is theorized not as a transitional expedient but as a structural necessity arising from the nature of socialist construction itself. The "primary stage" framework temporalizes this necessity—the Party leads because China has not yet achieved the material conditions that would permit more diffuse forms of governance—but the framework's indefinite temporal horizon effectively transforms what is theorized as temporary into what functions as permanent.

Chinese-style modernization adds a further dimension by grounding political form not only in class theory but in civilizational history. The CPC's leading role is legitimated not solely by Marxist-Leninist theory but by the claimed continuity of unified governance as a civilizational achievement of the Chinese people. This civilizational grounding simultaneously universalizes—by claiming that all civilizations have the right to determine their own political forms—and particularizes—by anchoring China's specific form in its unique civilizational heritage. The result is a framework that is more robust against external critique than classical socialist modernization precisely because it operates on multiple registers of legitimation simultaneously. [NOTE: cite Zhang Weiwei, "The China Wave"]

At the epistemological level, the divergences are no less fundamental. Western modernization theory, particularly in its mid-twentieth-century formulations, rested on an empiricist-positivist epistemology: modernization was a process that could be observed, measured, and compared across cases using universally applicable indicators. GDP per capita, literacy rates, urbanization ratios, institutional differentiation—these served as objective metrics against which any society's modernization could be evaluated. The assumption of commensurability—that all societies could be located on a single developmental continuum—was itself an epistemological commitment that naturalized particular (Western) forms of social organization as universal norms.

Socialist modernization, grounded in dialectical materialism, operated from a different epistemological base. Historical development was understood not as linear progression along a single continuum but as dialectical movement through contradictions—a process driven by the internal tensions between productive forces and relations of production, between base and superstructure. This framework permitted a more complex understanding of development as uneven, contradictory, and potentially reversible, while maintaining a broadly progressive teleology oriented toward communist society as the ultimate resolution of social contradictions. The epistemological difference from Western positivism was significant: where positivist modernization theory sought to identify universal laws of development, dialectical materialism insisted on the historically specific character of developmental processes while maintaining that these specificities were intelligible through the application of dialectical method.

Chinese-style modernization introduces what might be characterized as a hermeneutic-civilizational epistemology—one that grounds knowledge claims not primarily in universal scientific method (whether positivist or dialectical) but in the interpretive recovery of civilizational traditions and their contemporary relevance. This epistemological orientation draws on what some Chinese scholars have theorized as the tradition of "practical rationality" (实践理性) in Chinese thought—a form of reasoning oriented not toward abstract universals but toward the contextually appropriate response to concrete situations. [NOTE: cite Li Zehou on practical rationality]. One speaks here of the sedimentation of social practice (积淀), emotional and moral integration (情理互渗); immanent transcendence (内在超越); and a substitution of aesthetics for religion (以美育代宗教). The theoretical significance of this epistemological shift should not be underestimated: it challenges not merely the content of Western modernization theory but the epistemological framework within which such theories are constructed and evaluated.

At the normative level, the three formations diverge on the question of universality itself. Western modernization theory and development discourse presuppose—and actively construct—a universal normative framework within which all societies can be evaluated. This universalism has been qualified and complicated over time, but the institutional apparatus of international development continues to operate on the assumption that certain outcomes (democratic governance, market economies, individual rights) represent universal goods toward which all societies should aspire. Socialist modernization accepts a different universalism—that of class struggle and historical materialism as applicable to all societies—but contests the specific normative content that Western theory fills into the universal frame. Chinese-style modernization

makes the most radical move: it contests universalism itself, or rather, it asserts a meta-universal principle (that all civilizations have the right to their own modernization pathway) that functions to delegitimize any substantive universalism that would privilege one civilizational form over others.

The practical consequences of these divergences are substantial. They structure disagreements over governance standards in international institutions, over the conditionality attached to development assistance, over the legitimacy of human rights discourse as a framework for evaluating non-Western polities, and over the authority of any single state or group of states to define the terms of international order. Understanding these divergences as theoretical rather than merely political—as rooted in genuinely different epistemological and normative frameworks rather than simply in competing interests—is essential for any serious engagement with the contemporary contestation over the meaning and direction of global development. [NOTE: cite Callahan, "China's Asian Dream"]

Section IV: The Evolution of the Concept of Modernization as Textually Evidenced in CPC Documents (Constitution and Congress Reports, 1st–20th)

The textual record of the Communist Party of China across its twenty national congresses and successive amendments to its Constitution constitutes a living archive of ideological development. Within that archive, the concept of modernization occupies a peculiar position: it is at once omnipresent as an aspirational horizon and yet remarkably protean in its specific articulations. To trace the evolution of modernization as a discursive and programmatic concept within CPC documents is to trace the party's self-understanding of its historical mission, the relationship between revolutionary legitimacy and developmental achievement, and the mechanisms through which ideological innovation is disciplined by textual continuity. This section undertakes that tracing through close attention to the congress reports and constitutional texts from the founding congress in 1921 through the 20th Congress in 2022, identifying four distinct periods in which the concept of modernization assumes different valences, functions, and degrees of programmatic specificity.

What emerges from this analysis is not a simple narrative of progressive clarification — though there is an undeniable trajectory from implicit aspiration to explicit programmatic centrality — but rather a more complex story of conceptual suppression and re-emergence, of subordination to other organizing categories and eventual triumph over them, and of the ways in which textual practices of constitutional amendment and congress report drafting serve simultaneously as vehicles for ideological innovation and mechanisms for the disciplining of that innovation within acceptable bounds of doctrinal continuity. [NOTE: cite Shambaugh, China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation]

A. The Revolutionary Period: Absence and Implication (1st–7th Congresses, 1921–1945)

The founding congress of the Communist Party of China in July 1921 produced documents that are notable, for present purposes, primarily for what they do not contain. The programmatic focus of the 1st Congress was overwhelmingly oriented toward class struggle, the organization of the proletariat, and the overthrow of capitalist relations of production. The concept of modernization — understood as a systematic project of national transformation encompassing industrial development, institutional rationalization, and the achievement of material and technological parity with advanced industrial states — is simply absent from this textual moment. [NOTE: cite Tony Saich, *The Origins of the First United Front in China*] This absence is not a deficiency; it reflects the historical conditions and ideological coordinates within which the early party operated. The immediate problematic was not development but revolution, not construction but destruction of existing class relations.

The 2nd Congress in 1922 introduced what might be understood as a proto-modernization discourse, though it appeared under entirely different conceptual categories. The congress report is understood to have addressed the questions of anti-imperialism and national independence with considerable urgency, situating the Chinese revolution within the broader framework of colonial and semi-colonial liberation struggles. [NOTE: cite Van de Ven, *From Friend to Comrade*] Insofar as national liberation implies the recovery of sovereign capacity for self-directed development, the anti-imperialist framework contained within itself an implicit modernization aspiration. But it remained implicit — subordinated to and subsumed within the categories of national liberation and anti-imperialism rather than articulated as an independent programmatic objective.

Through the subsequent congresses of the revolutionary period — the 3rd through 7th Congresses spanning from 1923 to 1945 — the pattern persists with modifications. The 6th Congress (1928), held in Moscow, addressed questions of revolutionary strategy in conditions of temporary defeat, while the extraordinary gap between the 6th and 7th Congresses (1928–1945) reflects the exigencies of war and the party's precarious institutional existence during the Long March and the resistance war against Japan. The 7th Congress in 1945, convened in Yan'an as the anti-Japanese war drew to its conclusion, articulated the concepts of New Democracy and Mao Zedong Thought as the party's guiding theoretical framework. The Yan'an moment represents a significant inflection point: Mao's programmatic vision for New Democracy contained within it substantial developmental and modernizing content — the aspiration toward industrialization, the transformation of agrarian social relations, the building of a new state apparatus capable of directing national reconstruction. [NOTE: cite Mao, *On New Democracy* (1940)]

Yet even at this advanced moment within the revolutionary period, modernization as such remained embedded within and subordinated to the revolutionary project rather than constituting an independent axis of programmatic elaboration. The 7th Congress report is understood to have framed the party's mission primarily in terms of completing the national-democratic revolution

and establishing the conditions for subsequent socialist transformation. Modernization was the implicit horizon of these transformations but not yet their explicit organizing concept. The textual evidence thus reveals a period in which the material and institutional transformations that would later be gathered under the rubric of modernization were present as aspirations but dispersed across other conceptual categories — national liberation, class struggle, new democracy, the united front — without achieving independent programmatic identity.

B. The Construction Period: Emergence and Subordination (8th–11th Congresses, 1956–1977)

The 8th Congress of 1956 marks a decisive textual turning point. With the completion of socialist transformation of ownership in agriculture, industry, and commerce, the party's self-described principal task shifted from revolution to construction. The congress report is understood to have articulated, for the first time with programmatic clarity, the objective of building socialism through systematic industrialization and the development of productive forces. [NOTE: cite Liu Shaoqi, Political Report to the 8th National Congress] The language of modernization — or more precisely, of industrialization as the pathway to a modern socialist state — achieved for the first time a degree of conceptual independence from the categories of class struggle and revolutionary transformation. The 8th Congress is further notable for its formulation of the principal contradiction in Chinese society as that between the people's demand for economic and cultural development and the country's inability to meet those demands — a formulation that implicitly centered developmental modernization as the party's central task.

This emergence, however, proved fragile. The subsequent political trajectory — the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Great Leap Forward, and ultimately the Cultural Revolution — subjected the nascent modernization discourse to severe suppression. The 9th Congress (1969), convened at the height of the Cultural Revolution, represents a textual nadir for modernization as an organizing concept. The congress report, delivered by Lin Biao, is understood to have been overwhelmingly oriented toward the categories of continuing revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat, class struggle as the key link, and the repudiation of the so-called capitalist-roaders within the party. [NOTE: cite MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*] The developmental and modernizing content that had achieved preliminary articulation at the 8th Congress was not merely de-emphasized but actively stigmatized as evidence of revisionist deviation.

The 10th Congress (1973) and 11th Congress (1977) represent transitional moments in which the suppression of modernization discourse began to erode without yet being fully reversed. The 10th Congress, still dominated by Cultural Revolution politics, maintained the emphasis on class struggle and continuing revolution. The 11th Congress (1977), held after Mao's death and the arrest of the Gang of Four, is understood to have initiated a partial rehabilitation of modernization discourse, including reference to Zhou Enlai's earlier formulation of the "Four Modernizations" — of agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology. [NOTE: cite Hua Guofeng, Political Report to the 11th National Congress] Yet the 11th Congress remained textually committed to the theoretical framework of continuing

revolution, producing a document characterized by internal tension between residual Cultural Revolution categories and the re-emerging modernization discourse that would achieve full articulation only at the subsequent congress and the intervening Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee in December 1978.

The construction period thus reveals a pattern of emergence, suppression, and re-emergence that illuminates the contingent and contested character of modernization as a party-state concept. Far from representing a natural or inevitable evolution, the centrality of modernization to CPC programmatic discourse was achieved only through political struggle — a struggle that was simultaneously a struggle over personnel, over policy, and over the textual practices through which the party constituted its ideological identity.

C. The Reform Period: Centrality and Systematization (12th–17th Congresses, 1982–2007)

The 12th Congress in 1982 represents the moment at which modernization achieved definitive centrality within CPC programmatic discourse. Deng Xiaoping's opening address introduced the formula "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (中国特色社会主义) — a formulation whose significance lies precisely in its subordination of ideological purity to developmental pragmatism. The congress report, delivered by Hu Yaobang, is understood to have articulated modernization not merely as one task among many but as the overarching framework within which all other party activities were to be organized and evaluated. [NOTE: cite Hu Yaobang, Create a New Situation in All Fields of Socialist Modernization] The textual shift is dramatic: where the 9th and 10th Congress reports had centered class struggle as the "key link" around which all other work was organized, the 12th Congress report effectively substituted modernization — specifically, socialist modernization — as the new organizing principle of party work.

The 13th Congress (1987) advanced this systematization significantly through the formal articulation of the theory of the "primary stage of socialism" (社会主义初级阶段). This theoretical innovation performed crucial discursive work: by establishing that China remained in the primary stage of socialism — a stage characterized by underdeveloped productive forces and requiring prolonged developmental effort — it provided doctrinal justification for the prioritization of economic modernization over ideological transformation. The congress report, delivered by Zhao Ziyang, is understood to have situated the modernization project within a temporal framework extending to the mid-twenty-first century, establishing what would subsequently crystallize as the "two centenary goals" framework. [NOTE: cite Zhao Ziyang, Advance Along the Road of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics] The primary stage theory thus functioned as a theoretical device for insulating the modernization project from ideological challenge — for establishing modernization as a long-term structural commitment of the party rather than a tactical accommodation subject to reversal.

The 14th Congress (1992), convened in the aftermath of the political crisis of 1989 and Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour, is notable for its textual consecration of the "socialist market

economy" (社会主义市场经济) as the institutional framework for modernization. The significance of this formulation cannot be overstated: it resolved — or rather dissolved — the previously intractable tension between socialist identity and market-oriented development by incorporating the market mechanism into the definition of the socialist modernization project itself. The congress report, delivered by Jiang Zemin, is understood to have articulated an accelerated modernization agenda premised on deeper integration with the global economy and more thoroughgoing marketization of domestic economic relations. [NOTE: cite Jiang Zemin, Accelerating Reform and Opening-Up]

The 15th Congress (1997) performed the important textual work of enshrining Deng Xiaoping Theory as a component of the party's guiding ideology, thereby consolidating the theoretical legitimacy of the reform-era modernization framework at the level of constitutional doctrine. The 16th Congress (2002) introduced two significant conceptual innovations: the Theory of Three Represents (三个代表), which expanded the party's claimed representational basis beyond the proletariat to encompass advanced productive forces, advanced culture, and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority; and the objective of "building a moderately prosperous society in all respects is important to China and the world" (全面建成小康社会对中国和世界的), which operationalized the modernization aspiration as a concrete, time-bound developmental target. [NOTE: cite Jiang Zemin, Build a Well-off Society in an All-Round Way] The concept of xiaokang (小康) — moderate prosperity — represented a distinctively Chinese articulation of modernization's intermediate objectives, drawing on classical textual resources while simultaneously serving as a measurable benchmark for developmental achievement.

The 17th Congress (2007) contributed the Scientific Outlook on Development (科学发展观), which represented an attempt to qualitatively redefine the content of modernization beyond purely economic growth metrics. The congress report, delivered by Hu Jintao, is understood to have emphasized people-centered development, comprehensive and coordinated sustainable development, and the correction of imbalances generated by the preceding period of rapid but uneven growth. [NOTE: cite Hu Jintao, Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics] The Scientific Outlook on Development thus represented not a retreat from the centrality of modernization but rather a deepening and complexification of its content — an acknowledgment that modernization as a programmatic concept required internal differentiation and qualitative specification beyond the relatively undifferentiated growth orientation of the early reform period.

Across the reform period, then, the textual evidence reveals a process of progressive systematization: modernization moved from achieved centrality (12th Congress) through theoretical grounding (13th Congress), institutional specification (14th Congress), doctrinal consolidation (15th Congress), operational concretization (16th Congress), and qualitative deepening (17th Congress). Each congress added layers of specificity and theoretical elaboration to the modernization concept while maintaining its position as the overarching framework for party work.

D. The New Era: Modernization as Central Task (18th–20th Congresses, 2012–2022)

The 18th Congress (2012) marked the transition to the Xi Jinping era and introduced formulations that would achieve full elaboration only in subsequent congresses. The congress report, delivered by Hu Jintao in his final act as General Secretary, is understood to have formalized the "two centenary goals" (两个百年目标): the completion of a moderately prosperous society by the centennial of the CPC (2021) and the building of a great modern socialist country by the centennial of the People's Republic (2049). [NOTE: cite Hu Jintao, *Firmly March on the Path of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics*] This temporal framework established modernization not merely as an ongoing process but as a periodized project with identifiable milestones and completion horizons — a significant textual innovation that rendered the modernization commitment susceptible to concrete assessment and accountability.

The 19th Congress (2017) represents perhaps the most consequential single congress for the evolution of modernization discourse since the 12th. The congress report, delivered by Xi Jinping, performed several textual operations of fundamental significance. First, it declared the advent of a "New Era" (新时代) for socialism with Chinese characteristics, establishing a periodization that implicitly distinguished the current moment from the preceding reform period. Second, it enshrined Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想) as a guiding ideology of the party, placing it alongside Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, the Theory of Three Represents, and the Scientific Outlook on Development. Third, and most significantly for present purposes, it reformulated the principal contradiction in Chinese society — from the contradiction between growing material and cultural needs and backward social production (the 1981 formulation) to the contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life. [NOTE: cite Xi Jinping, *Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects*]

This reformulation of the principal contradiction carried profound implications for the concept of modernization. By shifting from "backward social production" to "unbalanced and inadequate development," the 19th Congress acknowledged that modernization in the quantitative sense — aggregate economic growth — had been substantially achieved, and that the challenge now lay in the qualitative dimensions of modernization: balance, adequacy, comprehensiveness, and responsiveness to differentiated needs. The congress report further introduced the concept of modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity (国家治理体系和治理能力现代化), extending the modernization concept beyond its traditional economic and technological domains into the institutional and political sphere. This represented a significant conceptual expansion: modernization was no longer confined to the material base but encompassed the superstructure as well — the systems, institutions, and capacities through which the party-state exercised governance.

The 20th Congress (2022) brought this trajectory to its current culmination through the formal articulation of "Chinese-style modernization" (中国式现代化) as the party's "central task" (中心任务). The congress report, delivered by Xi Jinping, is understood to have identified five defining features of Chinese-style modernization: it is the modernization of a huge population; it is modernization characterized by common prosperity for all; it is modernization that coordinates material and spiritual civilization; it is modernization that achieves harmony between humanity and nature; and it is modernization that pursues peaceful development. [NOTE: cite Xi Jinping, Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive in Unity to Build a Modern Socialist Country in All Respects] Each of these features simultaneously distinguishes the Chinese modernization project from Western developmental models and establishes normative criteria against which the party's performance may be evaluated.

The textual significance of the 20th Congress formulation lies in its synthesis of several previously distinct discursive threads — the quantitative developmental imperative, the qualitative requirements of balanced and people-centered development, the institutional modernization of governance, and the civilizational distinctiveness claim — into a single, internally differentiated concept presented as the party's overarching mission. Chinese-style modernization at the 20th Congress is not merely one policy objective among others; it is the framework within which all other objectives are situated and from which they derive their legitimacy and coherence. The evolution from absence (1st Congress) to implicit aspiration (7th Congress) to programmatic centrality (12th Congress) to comprehensive organizing concept (20th Congress) thus achieves its fullest expression. [NOTE: cite Backer, The Party as Polity]

E. The CPC Constitution as Living Text

The CPC Constitution occupies a distinctive position within the party's textual universe. Unlike the congress reports, which are temporally bounded documents reflecting the political priorities and theoretical innovations of a specific moment, the Constitution is a cumulative text — one that is amended rather than replaced, that carries forward the deposits of successive ideological innovations while incorporating new formulations through a disciplined process of textual accretion. The Constitution's preamble and general program function as a compressed archive of the party's evolving self-understanding, encoding in highly condensed form the theoretical contributions of successive leadership generations and the programmatic commitments they have articulated.

The current formulation of the party's basic line, as established through successive amendments, provides a particularly illuminating window into the evolution of modernization discourse. The basic line is understood to commit the party to "leading the people in a concerted, self-reliant, pioneering, and enterprising effort to turn China into a great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful" (把我国建设成为富强民主文明和谐美丽的社会主义现代化强国). [NOTE: cite CPC Constitution, General Program] The accumulation of adjectives in this formulation — prosperous, strong,

democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, beautiful — itself encodes the historical evolution of modernization's content: from primarily economic (prosperous, strong) through political and cultural (democratic, culturally advanced) to social and ecological (harmonious, beautiful). Each adjective represents a layer of conceptual sedimentation deposited by a specific moment in the party's theoretical development.

The constitutional amendments adopted at successive congresses track the evolution of modernization theory with particular precision. The incorporation of Deng Xiaoping Theory (15th Congress, 1997), the Theory of Three Represents (16th Congress, 2002), the Scientific Outlook on Development (17th Congress, 2007, as a guiding theory, elevated to a core guiding ideology in the 18th Congress, 2012), and Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era (19th Congress, 2017) into the Constitution's preamble represents not merely the canonization of individual leaders' theoretical contributions but the progressive elaboration of the modernization concept itself. Each theoretical contribution, once enshrined in the Constitution, becomes a permanent textual constraint on subsequent ideological innovation — simultaneously enabling and limiting the conceptual space within which future reformulations of modernization may operate.

The CPC Constitution thus functions as what might be termed a textual technology of ideological governance — a mechanism through which the party manages the tension between innovation and continuity, between the imperative to adapt its programmatic commitments to changing historical conditions and the imperative to maintain the appearance (and to some degree the reality) of doctrinal coherence across time. The modernization concept, as it appears in the Constitution, is not simply a policy objective but a constitutional commitment — one that constrains future party leadership even as it provides them with the discursive resources for programmatic innovation. The living character of the Constitution lies precisely in this dialectic: each amendment simultaneously closes certain interpretive possibilities (by fixing particular formulations in constitutional text) and opens others (by providing new conceptual vocabulary from which future innovations may be elaborated). [NOTE: cite Backer, Party, People, Government and State]

The trajectory from the near-absence of modernization language in the earliest party constitutions through its gradual incorporation as a programmatic objective and its eventual elevation to the status of the party's "central task" mirrors the trajectory observable in the congress reports, but with a distinctive character. The Constitution, as a cumulative and authoritative text, performs the work of integration — of gathering together the disparate and sometimes contradictory formulations of successive congresses into a single, ostensibly coherent textual whole. The cost of this integration is a certain compression and loss of nuance; the benefit is the production of a stable doctrinal framework within which the party's modernization commitment can be presented as both historically continuous and theoretically developing — as simultaneously faithful to founding aspirations and responsive to contemporary conditions.

What the textual analysis of CPC documents across twenty congresses ultimately reveals is that modernization in the Chinese party-state context is not a fixed concept with a stable

referent but rather a discursive formation that has been progressively constructed, contested, suppressed, rehabilitated, systematized, and transformed through the party's textual practices. The concept of Chinese-style modernization as articulated at the 20th Congress represents not the discovery of a pre-existing essence but the culmination (or perhaps merely the current stage) of a long process of conceptual labor — labor performed through and upon texts, within institutions, and under conditions of political contestation that are themselves partially legible in the textual record. [NOTE: cite Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization in Communist China*] To read the CPC's documents as a textual history of modernization is thus to recognize that the concept itself is a product of the very processes it purports to describe — that the party's modernization of China and its modernization of the concept of modernization are not merely parallel but mutually constitutive projects.

Section V: The Current Idea of Socialist or Chinese Modernization in Chinese New Era Theory

The emergence of what Chinese Communist Party discourse designates as the "New Era" (新时代) represents not merely a temporal marker but a comprehensive reconceptualization of the theoretical architecture within which modernization is understood, pursued, and legitimated. Under the intellectual and political leadership of Xi Jinping, the Party-state has undertaken what amounts to a systematic reformulation of modernization theory—one that claims simultaneously to fulfill the historical trajectory of socialism with Chinese characteristics and to transcend the limitations of earlier developmental paradigms, both domestic and foreign. This section examines the theoretical structure of Chinese-style modernization (中国式现代化) as it has been elaborated in New Era discourse, attending both to its internal logic and to its implications for broader debates concerning alternative modernities. [NOTE: cite Report to the 19th National Congress of the CPC (2017)]

What is distinctive about the New Era formulation is not simply the assertion that China has entered a new developmental phase—such periodization claims are endemic to Leninist party-states—but rather the degree to which this periodization is accompanied by a self-conscious theoretical apparatus that positions Chinese modernization as a contribution to human civilizational development writ large. The ambition is not merely national but universal in scope, even as it insists upon the particularity of the Chinese path. This productive tension between universalism and particularism constitutes one of the most analytically significant features of the current discourse.

A. Xi Jinping Thought and the Theorization of the New Era

The periodization claim embedded in the concept of the "New Era" performs multiple theoretical and political functions simultaneously. At the most immediate level, it establishes the authority of the current leadership generation by marking a qualitative break with preceding periods—the era of Mao Zedong's revolutionary construction, the era of Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening, and the subsequent period of continued reform under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao.

The New Era is presented not as a rupture with these predecessors but as a dialectical synthesis that preserves their contributions while elevating them to a higher theoretical plane. [NOTE: cite Xi Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" (2017)]

Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想) functions as the comprehensive theoretical framework within which modernization discourse is situated. Its inscription into the Party Constitution at the 19th Congress in 2017 and subsequently into the state Constitution in 2018 established it as the guiding ideology—a status that carries both normative and institutional implications for how modernization is conceptualized and implemented. The thought system encompasses what are officially termed the "Fourteen Upholds" (十四个坚持), which together constitute the basic strategy for developing socialism with Chinese characteristics in the New Era. [NOTE: cite CPC Constitution, amended 2017, General Program]

For purposes of modernization theory, perhaps the most consequential doctrinal innovation of the 19th Congress was the reformulation of the "principal contradiction" (主要矛盾) facing Chinese society. In Mao-era formulations, the principal contradiction was understood in class terms. Following the 8th Congress in 1956 and as definitively reformulated at the 11th Central Committee's 6th Plenum in 1981, it was recast as the contradiction between the growing material and cultural needs of the people and backward social production (人民日益增长的物质文化需要同落后的社会生产之间的矛盾). This formulation served as the theoretical foundation for the reform-era emphasis on developing the productive forces as the Party's primary task. [NOTE: cite Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the PRC (1981)]

The 19th Congress reformulation redefines the principal contradiction as that between unbalanced and inadequate development (不平衡不充分的发展) and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life (人民日益增长的美好生活需要). The significance of this reformulation for modernization theory cannot be overstated. It accomplishes several things at once: it acknowledges that the problem is no longer one of aggregate productive capacity ("backward social production" has been superseded); it reframes the challenge in qualitative rather than purely quantitative terms (the issue is balance, adequacy, and the quality of life rather than sheer growth); and it introduces a normative dimension—"a better life"—that exceeds the narrowly economic. [NOTE: cite Xi Jinping Report to the 19th Congress, Section I]

This theoretical move has direct implications for the meaning of modernization itself. If the principal contradiction is no longer about overcoming backwardness through the development of productive forces, then modernization can no longer be understood primarily as industrialization and economic growth. It must instead be reconceptualized as a comprehensive project encompassing material prosperity, cultural enrichment, social equity, ecological sustainability, and—importantly—spiritual-civilizational development. The reformulation thus

provides the theoretical license for a more expansive and multidimensional understanding of what it means to be modern, one that the Party claims distinguishes its approach from the narrowly economistic modernization paradigms it attributes to the West.

Whether this reformulation represents a genuine theoretical advance or merely a rationalization for shifting political priorities—or, as is perhaps most likely, some combination of both—is a question that admits of no simple answer. What is analytically significant is that the reformulation provides a coherent internal logic for the subsequent elaboration of Chinese-style modernization as a multidimensional project irreducible to GDP growth.

B. The Five Features of Chinese-Style Modernization

The most systematic articulation of Chinese-style modernization was provided at the 20th National Congress of the CPC in October 2022, where it was elaborated as possessing five distinctive features (中国式现代化的五个特征) that collectively differentiate it from Western modernization paths. Each of these features operates simultaneously as a descriptive claim about the Chinese experience and as a normative proposition about what modernization ought to entail. The analytical challenge is to take these claims seriously as theoretical propositions while remaining attentive to the gap between discursive construction and empirical reality. [NOTE: cite Xi Jinping, Report to the 20th National Congress of the CPC (2022), Section III]

The first feature—modernization of a huge population (超大规模人口的现代化)—is presented as simultaneously a challenge and a contribution. The claim is that achieving modernization for more than 1.4 billion people represents an undertaking without historical precedent, one that cannot simply replicate the paths followed by countries with populations of tens or hundreds of millions. The sheer scale, on this account, necessitates institutional innovations and developmental strategies that are qualitatively different from those that served smaller polities. This is not merely a quantitative observation but a theoretical argument: that scale itself generates novel problems requiring novel solutions, and that the successful modernization of such a population would constitute a contribution to human development knowledge that no prior modernization experience can match.

The second feature—common prosperity for all (全体人民共同富裕的现代化)—positions Chinese modernization against what is characterized as the polarization inherent in capitalist modernization. Here the discourse draws explicitly upon the Marxist critique of capitalist development as generating inequality as a structural feature rather than a contingent defect. Chinese-style modernization, by contrast, is claimed to pursue a developmental path in which prosperity is shared rather than concentrated—a claim that situates the common prosperity campaign launched in 2021 as an integral component of modernization strategy rather than a discrete policy initiative. The theoretical significance lies in the assertion that genuine modernization is incompatible with extreme inequality—that a society characterized by acute polarization, regardless of its aggregate wealth or technological sophistication, has failed to modernize in any meaningful sense. [NOTE: cite Xi Jinping, "Solidly Promoting Common Prosperity" (2021)]

The third feature—coordination of material and spiritual civilization (物质文明和精神文明相协调的现代化)—draws upon a distinctively Chinese Marxist conceptual vocabulary that distinguishes between material civilization (物质文明) and spiritual civilization (精神文明). This distinction, which entered Chinese political discourse formally in the 1980s under Deng Xiaoping's formulation of "two civilizations" construction, is here elevated to a constitutive feature of modernization itself. The argument is that Western modernization, by privileging material development and individual liberty, has produced societies that are materially affluent but spiritually impoverished—characterized by anomie, moral relativism, and the erosion of social cohesion. Chinese modernization claims to avoid this deficiency by treating the development of "spiritual civilization"—encompassing not merely cultural production but ideological commitment, moral cultivation, and civilizational confidence—as equally essential to genuine modernization. [NOTE: cite Deng Xiaoping, "On the Reform of the System of Party and State Leadership" (1980) for origins of the two-civilizations framework]

The fourth feature—harmony between humanity and nature (人与自然和谐共生的现代化)—represents the ecological dimension of Chinese modernization theory. It is presented as a critique of the Western modernization path understood as predicated upon the domination and exploitation of nature, producing the ecological crisis that now confronts all of humanity. Chinese-style modernization claims to integrate ecological civilization (生态文明) into its very definition, such that development that degrades the natural environment is definitionally not modern. The concept of "lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets" (绿水青山就是金山银山) is invoked as capturing a worldview in which economic value and ecological integrity are not opposed but mutually constitutive. [NOTE: cite Xi Jinping, speech at the National Conference on Ecological and Environmental Protection (2018)]

The fifth feature—the peaceful development path (走和平发展道路的现代化)—addresses the international dimension and constitutes perhaps the most explicitly polemical of the five features. It positions Chinese modernization against the historical record of Western modernization, which is characterized as having been achieved through colonialism, imperialism, and war. Chinese modernization, by contrast, claims to achieve development without external aggression, exploitation, or hegemony—pursuing instead what is termed "win-win cooperation" and the construction of a "community of shared future for mankind" (人类命运共同体). The historical claim—that Western modernization required colonial extraction—is deployed not merely as moral critique but as a structural argument: that the Western path is not universally replicable precisely because it depended upon the subordination of the periphery, and that China's peaceful path therefore represents the only viable model for the developing world. [NOTE: cite Xi Jinping, speech at the United Nations General Assembly (2015)]

Taken together, these five features constitute a systematic counter-narrative to what Chinese discourse constructs as the Western modernization paradigm. Each feature identifies an alleged deficiency in the Western path and claims that Chinese modernization transcends it. The analytical question is whether these features represent genuinely distinctive structural characteristics of the Chinese developmental model or whether they function primarily as

ideological constructions that retroactively rationalize Chinese practice while delegitimizing alternatives. The answer, predictably, is that they partake of both dimensions—they are neither pure description nor pure ideology but something more complex: performative theorizations that simultaneously describe, prescribe, and constitute the reality they claim to analyze.

C. High-Quality Development and the Two Centenary Goals

If the five features provide the theoretical architecture of Chinese-style modernization, the concept of "high-quality development" (高质量发展) provides its operational expression in the New Era. First articulated prominently at the 19th Congress and subsequently elaborated as the defining characteristic of China's current developmental stage, high-quality development functions as the bridge between abstract modernization theory and concrete governance practice. It signals the Party's declared commitment to a developmental paradigm that prioritizes quality over quantity, innovation over imitation, sustainability over short-term growth, and equity over aggregate expansion. [NOTE: cite Central Economic Work Conference communiqué (December 2017)]

The concept operates at multiple levels simultaneously. At the macroeconomic level, it signals the shift from high-speed growth to high-quality growth—an acknowledgment that the extensive growth model predicated upon cheap labor, massive capital investment, and export orientation has reached its limits. At the structural level, it implies the reorientation of the economy toward innovation-driven development, the prioritization of the "new quality productive forces" (新质生产力), and the construction of a modern industrial system. At the governance level, it requires the transformation of performance metrics away from GDP growth as the primary indicator of local officials' success toward more comprehensive measures that incorporate environmental protection, social welfare, and innovation capacity. [NOTE: cite Xi Jinping, speech at the Central Economic Work Conference (2023) on new quality productive forces] [CITE: Understanding the new quality productive forces in the energy sector (Lin Zhang; 2024 Energy Nexus 16:100352)]

High-quality development is integrated into the temporal framework of the "two centenary goals" (两个一百年奋斗目标), which provide Chinese modernization with its programmatic timeline. The first centenary goal—building a moderately prosperous society in all respects (全面建成小康社会)—was declared achieved on schedule in July 2021, coinciding with the centenary of the founding of the CPC. This achievement was itself presented as a milestone in modernization: the elimination of absolute poverty according to Chinese standards, the establishment of the world's largest social security system, and the attainment of middle-income status for the population as a whole. [NOTE: cite Xi Jinping, speech at the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CPC (July 1, 2021)]

The second centenary goal—building a great modern socialist country (全面建成社会主义现代化强国) by 2049, coinciding with the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic—provides the programmatic horizon for Chinese-style modernization in its fullest

expression. This goal has been further disaggregated into two stages: basically achieving socialist modernization by 2035, and building a great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful by mid-century. The two-stage structure itself carries theoretical significance: it suggests a conception of modernization as a phased process with qualitatively distinct stages, rather than a single threshold to be crossed.

What is particularly noteworthy in the discursive evolution from the reform era to the New Era is the shift from a language of "catching up" (赶上) to one of "surpassing" (超越) and offering an alternative. In the early reform period, modernization was understood primarily in comparative and competitive terms: China needed to catch up with the developed world, to narrow the gap, to achieve parity. The New Era discourse, by contrast, positions China not merely as catching up but as pioneering an alternative path—one that other developing nations might follow and that challenges the presumptive universality of the Western model. This is a qualitative shift in the self-understanding of Chinese modernization: from emulation to innovation, from following to leading, from learning from the West to offering lessons to the world. [NOTE: cite Huang Ping and Cui Zhiyuan, eds., *China and Globalization* (2005) for earlier articulations of alternative modernity discourse]

The institutional expression of this shift is visible in initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative—each of which positions China as offering developmental wisdom and institutional models to the Global South. Whether this constitutes genuine intellectual leadership or merely the assertion of geopolitical influence through developmental discourse is, again, a question that resists simple resolution. What matters analytically is that the discourse of modernization has been transformed from an inward-facing developmental program into an outward-facing civilizational claim.

D. Chinese-Style Modernization and the Chinese Dream

The concept of the "Chinese Dream" (中国梦) of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (中华民族伟大复兴), first articulated by Xi Jinping in November 2012 shortly after assuming the position of General Secretary, provides the affective and narrative framework within which Chinese-style modernization acquires its deepest legitimating force. [Note discussion in Backer, *China Dream*, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2223279]. The Chinese Dream is not merely a slogan but a comprehensive framing device that situates contemporary modernization efforts within a narrative of civilizational decline and recovery—the "century of humiliation" (百年屈辱) that began with the Opium Wars and from which China is now understood to be emerging through its modernization achievements. [NOTE: cite Xi Jinping, speech at "The Road to Rejuvenation" exhibition, National Museum of China (November 29, 2012)]

The connection between modernization and national rejuvenation is not incidental but constitutive. Modernization, in this framework, is understood not merely as a developmental strategy but as the means through which a great civilization recovers its rightful place in the

world—a place from which it was displaced by the combination of internal decay and external aggression. This framing accomplishes several things: it provides emotional resonance to what might otherwise be abstract developmental goals; it connects the present leadership's program to the longest historical trajectory of the Chinese political tradition; and it establishes modernization as a patriotic imperative rather than a merely technocratic one.

The civilizational continuity claim is crucial here. Chinese discourse increasingly positions China not merely as a modern nation-state pursuing development but as an ancient civilization undergoing renewal—a civilization-state (文明国家) whose modernization represents the contemporary expression of an unbroken five-thousand-year civilizational tradition. [CITE: Jiang Shigong, "World Empire and the Return of Civilization: Taking Seriously the Post-Cold War Discourse of Civilizational Revival" 强世功, [“世界帝国与文明复兴：认真对待后冷战以来的文明复兴论述”](#),] This framing has significant implications for modernization theory. If China is understood as a civilization-state rather than a mere nation-state, then its modernization cannot be adequately understood through the conceptual frameworks developed to analyze the modernization of nation-states. It requires, on its own terms, a civilizational theory of modernization—one in which modernization is not the replacement of tradition with modernity but the creative transformation of civilizational resources for contemporary purposes. [NOTE: cite Zhang Weiwei, *The China Wave: Rise of a Civilizational State* (2012)]

This civilizational framing produces a productive but unresolved tension at the heart of Chinese modernization discourse. On the one hand, the discourse employs universalist language: Chinese-style modernization is presented as expanding the paths available to developing countries, as offering "a new choice" for humanity, as contributing to human civilizational progress. On the other hand, it insists upon the radical particularity of the Chinese path—rooted in Chinese history, culture, and civilizational tradition, and therefore not directly transplantable to other contexts. The tension between these claims—between Chinese modernization as a universal model and as a unique civilizational expression—is never fully resolved in the discourse, and arguably cannot be, for it is this very tension that gives the discourse its flexibility and breadth of appeal.

The universalist claim allows China to position itself as a leader of the Global South, offering developmental wisdom that transcends its particular circumstances. The particularist claim protects against the accusation that China is seeking to impose its model upon others—an accusation that would undermine the very critique of Western universalism upon which the discourse depends. By maintaining both claims simultaneously, the discourse achieves a kind of productive ambiguity that serves both domestic and international legitimation functions. Domestically, the civilizational narrative provides a source of collective pride and purpose that sustains popular commitment to the modernization project. Internationally, the offer of an alternative path—one that respects each country's "national conditions" (国情) while providing general principles—positions China as a champion of developmental pluralism against Western hegemony.

The analytical significance of this discursive architecture extends beyond Chinese domestic politics. It represents one of the most comprehensive and theoretically elaborated alternatives to the liberal modernization paradigm produced in the post-Cold War era. Whether one judges it ultimately persuasive or not—and there are substantial grounds for skepticism regarding the gap between discursive construction and empirical practice—it must be taken seriously as a theoretical proposition. To dismiss it as mere propaganda is to miss its significance; to accept it uncritically is to abandon the analytical posture that scholarship requires. The task of critical engagement—understanding the discourse on its own terms while subjecting it to rigorous analytical scrutiny—remains the appropriate scholarly orientation. [NOTE: cite Backer, "The Party as Polity: Theories of Socialist Modernization and the Role of the Chinese Communist Party" for extended analysis]

What emerges from this examination is a picture of Chinese-style modernization as a thoroughly self-conscious theoretical construction—one that draws upon Marxist-Leninist concepts, Chinese political traditions, developmental experience, and civilizational narrative to produce a comprehensive alternative to liberal modernization theory. Its coherence is greatest at the level of discourse; its tensions become most apparent when the relationship between discursive claims and institutional practice is interrogated. Yet even its tensions are analytically productive, for they reveal the fundamental challenges facing any attempt to construct a non-liberal modernity in a world system still substantially structured by liberal assumptions and institutions.

Section VI: The Concept of Modernization as Found in Legal Texts (From Constitution to National, Provincial, and Local Regulations and Legislation)

The preceding sections have traced the concept of modernization as it has evolved within the discourse of the Chinese Communist Party and its principal theoreticians. Yet modernization in the Chinese constitutional order is not merely a political aspiration or a programmatic slogan deployed within the Party's internal deliberative processes. It has become, through a sustained and deliberate process of juridification, a legal norm — one that operates across multiple registers of the Chinese legal system, from the highest constitutional provisions to the most granular local regulations. This section examines that process of juridification: the transformation of modernization from a concept internal to Party discourse into a binding constitutional mandate and statutory obligation that structures the activities of the state at every level of governance. [NOTE: cite Backer, 'Party, People, Government and State: On Constitutional Values and the Legitimacy of the Chinese State-Party Rule of Law System' (2012)]

The significance of this juridification cannot be overstated. When modernization appears in the Preamble of the PRC Constitution, it is not merely decorative language or aspirational rhetoric. Within the Chinese constitutional order — which must be understood as a dual system comprising both the CPC Constitution and the State Constitution — preamble provisions carry

normative weight. They establish the fundamental orientation of the state and create obligations that flow downward through the legislative hierarchy. The Legislation Law of the People's Republic of China provides the structural mechanism through which these constitutional mandates are operationalized, creating a cascading system of obligation from constitutional norm to national statute to provincial regulation to local implementation measure. [NOTE: cite Hand, 'Resolving Constitutional Disputes in Contemporary China' (2013)]

A. The PRC Constitution: Modernization as Constitutional Mandate

The PRC Constitution, as amended through 2018, establishes modernization as a foundational commitment of the Chinese state. The Preamble declares that 'China will be in the primary stage of socialism for a long period of time. The basic task of the nation is to concentrate its efforts on socialist modernization along the path of Chinese-style socialism.' This provision is not merely descriptive of a current condition; it is constitutive of a state obligation. The 'basic task' (genben renwu) formulation establishes modernization as the orienting purpose of state activity — the telos toward which the entire apparatus of governance must direct itself. [NOTE: cite PRC Constitution, Preamble, para. 7 (2018 amendment)]

The constitutional embedding of modernization operates at multiple levels. Article 1 establishes the People's Republic of China as a 'socialist state under the people's democratic dictatorship led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants,' while Article 5 affirms that 'the state upholds the uniformity and dignity of the socialist legal system.' These provisions create the framework within which modernization must be understood — not as modernization in the abstract, nor as modernization along lines determined by liberal-democratic theory, but as socialist modernization, bounded by the ideological commitments of the constitutional order. [NOTE: cite PRC Constitution, Arts. 1, 5]

Specific provisions elaborate the modernization mandate across distinct domains of state activity. Article 29 addresses the modernization of national defense, obligating the state to 'strengthen the building of the armed forces to increase their capacity for national defense, including the modernization of the armed forces.' The constitutional status of defense modernization — one of the 'Four Modernizations' identified by Zhou Enlai and institutionalized under Deng Xiaoping — demonstrates the manner in which a political-programmatic commitment has been given constitutional form. Similarly, provisions on education (Articles 19-24) and science and technology link these domains explicitly to the modernization project, establishing a constitutional framework in which intellectual and scientific development are understood instrumentally, as means toward the broader end of socialist modernization. [NOTE: cite PRC Constitution, Arts. 19-24, 29]

The 2018 constitutional amendments represent a significant deepening of the modernization commitment at the constitutional level. The incorporation of 'Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era' (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想) into the Preamble, alongside the 'new development concept' (新发展理念; xin fazhan linian), fundamentally restructured the constitutional framework of modernization. These

amendments did not merely add new language to an existing framework; they reconstituted the meaning of modernization itself at the constitutional level. Modernization is no longer merely the 'Four Modernizations' of the reform era, nor even the more capacious 'socialist modernization' of the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao periods. It is now 'Chinese-style modernization' (中国式现代化; Zhongguo shi xiandaihua) — a concept whose content is determined by Xi Jinping Thought and whose trajectory is governed by 新发展理念 (the 'new development concept'). [NOTE: cite 2018 Constitutional Amendment, 13th NPC]

The constitutional status of modernization thus creates a binding obligation on the state — an obligation that is not static but dynamic, evolving as the Party's understanding of modernization evolves. This is the critical structural feature of the Chinese dual constitutional order: the Party Constitution defines the content of the modernization obligation, while the State Constitution gives that obligation juridical form and distributes it across the institutions of state governance. The state is not free to pursue modernization as it independently understands it; the state must pursue modernization as the Party defines it. [NOTE: cite Backer, 'The Rule of Law, the Chinese Communist Party, and Ideological Campaigns' (2006)]

B. The Legislation Law and the Legislative Framework

The Legislation Law of the People's Republic of China (Lifa Fa), most recently revised in 2023, provides the structural architecture through which constitutional modernization mandates are translated into operative legal norms. Article 1 declares that the law is enacted 'in accordance with the Constitution, for the purposes of regulating legislative activities, improving the socialist legal system with Chinese characteristics, and advancing the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity.' The Legislation Law thus explicitly identifies itself as an instrument of modernization — its purpose is not merely procedural (regulating how laws are made) but substantive (to safeguard and advance national modernization through law). [NOTE: cite Legislation Law (2023 revision), Art. 1].³

The normative hierarchy established by the Legislation Law — Constitution, basic laws (jiben falü) enacted by the NPC, other laws enacted by the NPC Standing Committee, administrative regulations (xingzheng fagui) of the State Council, local regulations (difang xing fagui), and departmental rules — creates the mechanism through which abstract modernization commitments acquire operative specificity. Each level of the hierarchy must conform to the level above it (Article 87-92), creating what might be understood as a cascading obligation structure: the constitutional modernization mandate constrains and directs national legislation, which in

³ Article 3 (Paragraph 2): "... [Legislation shall] advance the building of a socialist rule of law system with Chinese characteristics, and safeguard the comprehensive building of a socialist modern country on the track of the rule of law." [第三条 推进中国特色社会主义法治体系建设, 保障在法治轨道上全面建设社会主义现代化国家。]. Article 4: "Legislation shall adhere to taking economic development as the central task, adhere to reform and opening-up, implement the new development philosophy, and guarantee the advancement of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation on all fronts through a Chinese path to modernization" [第四条 立法应当坚持以经济建设为中心, 坚持改革开放, 贯彻新发展理念, 保障以中国式现代化全面推进中华民族伟大复兴。].

turn constrains and directs provincial and local regulation. [NOTE: cite Legislation Law, Arts. 87-92]

This cascading structure has a critical implication for understanding modernization as a legal concept. Because each level of the normative hierarchy must conform to the level above, and because the constitutional level establishes modernization as the 'basic task' of the nation, no legislation at any level may contradict or obstruct the modernization mandate. Local regulations that impede modernization are, in principle, constitutionally infirm. The Legislation Law thus creates not merely a hierarchical ordering of norms but a directional structure — a system in which all normative activity must be oriented toward the constitutional telos of socialist modernization. [NOTE: cite Hand, 'An Assessment of Socialist Rule of Law with Chinese Characteristics' (2018)]

C. National-Level Legislation: Modernization as Statutory Obligation

At the level of national legislation, modernization appears not merely as background aspiration but as specific statutory obligation. The operative provisions of major national laws explicitly embed modernization as a legal requirement, creating concrete obligations for state organs, social organizations, and in some instances, individual citizens. The density of modernization references across the statute book demonstrates the degree to which the concept has been juridified — transformed from political discourse into operative legal norm.

The National Security Law (Guojia Anquan Fa) of 2015 provides a paradigmatic example. Article 1 states that the law is enacted 'in order to safeguard national security, defend the people's democratic dictatorship and the socialist system with Chinese characteristics, protect the fundamental interests of the people, adapt to the requirements of reform, opening up, and socialist modernization construction, and realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.' Here modernization operates not as an abstract aspiration but as a justificatory framework for the national security apparatus — the expansive powers granted to the state under the National Security Law are legitimated, in part, by their connection to the modernization project. [NOTE: cite National Security Law (2015), Art. 1]

The Education Law (Jiaoyu Fa) similarly embeds modernization as a statutory obligation. Article 5 provides that 'education must serve socialist modernization construction and serve the people.' This provision transforms the constitutional aspiration regarding education into a concrete obligation: educational institutions, at every level, must orient their activities toward modernization. The instrumentalization of education — its subordination to the modernization project — is thus not merely a policy choice but a legal requirement. [NOTE: cite Education Law (2021 revision), Art. 5; Backer essays on education as an instrument of modernization]

The Science and Technology Progress Law (Kexue Jishu Jinbu Fa), revised in 2021, establishes science and technology development as a vehicle for modernization with particular explicitness. Article 1 identifies the purpose of the law as 'promoting the progress of science and technology, giving play to the role of science and technology as the primary productive force,

promoting scientific and technological achievement in serving socialist modernization construction.' The law creates specific obligations for research institutions, enterprises, and government agencies to orient scientific activity toward the modernization program. [NOTE: cite Science and Technology Progress Law (2021 revision), Art. 1]

Additional statutes reinforce this pattern. The Agriculture Law links agricultural development to 'socialist modernization construction.' The National Defense Law establishes modernization of the armed forces as a legal obligation. The Civil Servants Law requires that civil servants serve 'socialist modernization construction.' The cumulative effect is a legal system in which modernization is not merely one obligation among many but the organizing principle — the master norm that gives direction and coherence to the statutory order as a whole. [NOTE: cite Agriculture Law, Art. 1; National Defense Law, Art. 1; Civil Servants Law, Art. 1]

D. Provincial and Local Regulations: Operationalizing Modernization

The cascading obligation structure established by the Legislation Law ensures that modernization mandates do not remain at the level of constitutional abstraction or statutory generality. Provincial and local regulations operationalize these mandates — translating them into specific programmatic requirements adapted to local conditions. This process of operationalization is itself mandated by the constitutional and legislative framework: the system of regional autonomy within a unitary state requires that national mandates be implemented through locally-adapted regulation. [NOTE: cite PRC Constitution, Arts. 100, 115-120]

Provincial regulations (sheng ji difang xing fagui) routinely invoke modernization as both justification and obligation. The pattern is remarkably consistent across jurisdictions: provincial regulations on economic development, education, science and technology, environmental protection, and urban planning typically begin with purpose clauses that link the specific regulatory domain to 'socialist modernization construction' or, increasingly, to 'Chinese-style modernization.' This is not merely formulaic language; from a discursive standpoint, it establishes the interpretive framework within which the regulation must be understood and applied. [CITE: МОДЕРНИЗАЦИЯ КИТАЙСКОГО ТИПА: ЭВОЛЮЦИЯ КОНЦЕПЦИИ © 2024 г. О. Н. Борох, А. В. Ломанов [Borokh and Lomanov, Chinese-Style Modernization: Evolution of the Concept]]

At the local level — municipalities, autonomous prefectures, and designated cities with legislative authority — the modernization mandate achieves its most concrete expression. Local regulations on urban planning, for instance, typically require that planning decisions serve the goal of modernization, operationalizing this requirement through specific standards for infrastructure development, technological integration, and economic restructuring. The Five-Year Plans at local levels translate the abstract modernization commitment into quantifiable targets and implementation timelines. [NOTE: cite representative municipal regulations implementing modernization mandates]

The significance of this cascading structure lies in its comprehensiveness. From the constitutional Preamble to the most specific local implementation measure, modernization operates as a legal obligation at every level of the normative hierarchy. There is no space within the Chinese legal system that is exempt from the modernization mandate. Every exercise of state power — legislative, administrative, and in principle judicial — must be oriented toward modernization as constitutionally defined. This represents a degree of juridification that goes well beyond what is found in most constitutional systems, where programmatic goals typically remain at the level of aspirational principle rather than operative obligation. [NOTE: cite comparative analysis of directive principles in other constitutional systems]

E. The Juridification of a Political Concept

The concept of *Verrechtlichung* — juridification — provides a theoretical framework for understanding what has occurred with modernization in the Chinese legal system. In its classical formulation, associated with the work of Jürgen Habermas and the critical legal tradition, juridification refers to the process by which social relations that were previously governed by informal norms or political processes become subject to legal regulation. The juridification of modernization in China represents a distinctive application of this concept: not the juridification of a social relation, but the juridification of a political-theoretical commitment — the transformation of a Party line position into a binding legal norm. [NOTE: cite Habermas, 'Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2' (1987); Teubner, 'Juridification of Social Spheres' (1987)]

This process raises fundamental questions about the relationship between political authority and legal normativity in the Chinese constitutional order. When modernization moves from the Party Constitution into the State Constitution and thence into legislation and regulation, does this movement constrain or merely legitimate? The constraining interpretation holds that juridification subjects modernization to the discipline of law — that once modernization becomes a legal obligation, it must be pursued through lawful means, according to established procedures, and subject to legal scrutiny. The legitimating interpretation holds that juridification merely provides a legal veneer for what remains, in substance, a political decision — that law serves as an instrument of Party authority rather than as a constraint upon it. [NOTE: cite Backer, 'Chinese Constitutional Theory and the Rule of Law' (2014)]

The dual constitutional system complicates this analysis. In the Chinese constitutional order, the CPC Constitution and the PRC State Constitution operate not in hierarchy (one above the other) but in functional complementarity. The Party Constitution establishes the substantive content of the governing ideology — including the meaning of modernization — while the State Constitution provides the juridical framework through which that ideology is operationalized in governance. Modernization thus operates across both constitutional domains simultaneously: as a Party commitment (political-normative) and as a state obligation (juridical-normative). The question of constraint versus legitimation cannot be answered in the abstract; it depends on the specific institutional context in which the modernization mandate is invoked. [NOTE: cite Backer, 'Dual Constitutional Systems' (2019)]

What the juridification of modernization does achieve, with certainty, is the elimination of any space for legal opposition to the modernization project as such. Because modernization is a constitutional mandate, no legal argument can be constructed against modernization itself — only against particular implementations that arguably contradict the true meaning of modernization. Legal contestation thus becomes a contest over the meaning of modernization, not over its desirability or necessity. This is the disciplinary function of juridification: it does not prevent disagreement, but it structures the terms on which disagreement can be articulated within the legal system. [NOTE: cite Teubner, 'Constitutionalizing Polycontextuality' (2011)]

The implications extend to the question of legality and legitimacy more broadly. In Western constitutional theory, the legitimacy of law is typically understood to derive from democratic authorization or from conformity with higher-order norms (natural law, human rights, procedural justice). In the Chinese dual constitutional system, legitimacy derives from the correctness of the Party's ideological line as validated through practice and as embodied in law. Modernization functions as a critical node in this legitimation structure: the state's pursuit of modernization legitimates the Party's leadership, while the Party's leadership ensures that modernization proceeds along correct lines. The juridification of modernization thus serves a structural function in the Chinese constitutional order — it connects the legitimacy of the state to the programmatic success of the Party's modernization project. [NOTE: cite Backer, 'Governance Without Government: A Preliminary Inquiry' (2015)]

This structural role explains the persistence and intensification of modernization language across the legal system. As the Party's understanding of modernization has evolved — from the Four Modernizations to socialist modernization to Chinese-style modernization — the legal system has been correspondingly updated, ensuring that the juridical expression of the modernization mandate remains aligned with its political-theoretical content. The 2018 constitutional amendments, incorporating Xi Jinping Thought, represent the most recent iteration of this alignment process. The revision of numerous national laws in subsequent years — the Education Law in 2021, the Science and Technology Progress Law in 2021, the Legislation Law in 2023 — reflects the cascading effect of constitutional amendment through the normative hierarchy. [NOTE: cite comprehensive account of post-2018 legislative revisions]

The juridification of modernization in the Chinese legal system is thus not a single event but an ongoing process — a continuous alignment of legal norms with evolving political-theoretical commitments. This process operates through the dual constitutional system, with the Party Constitution providing substantive direction and the State Constitution providing juridical form. The result is a legal order in which modernization is simultaneously a political aspiration, a constitutional mandate, a statutory obligation, and a regulatory requirement — operating at every level of the normative hierarchy and structuring the activities of the state in their entirety. Whether this comprehensive juridification constrains or merely legitimates remains the central question for any critical analysis of law and modernization in China.

Section VII: A Semiotic-Phenomenological Argument —

Modernization as the Lebenswelt of Chinese Constitutionalism

A. The Central Semiotic Proposition: Modernization as Metasignifier

The argument can now be stated in its most forceful form. Within contemporary Chinese constitutionalism, modernization is not simply one sign among other Chinese political signs, nor merely one policy objective placed beside socialism, Party leadership, reform, opening, science and technology, rule of law, governance, common prosperity, ecological civilization, national rejuvenation, people's democracy, national security, and high-quality development. It is increasingly a metasignifier: a sign through which otherwise distinct signs acquire relational meaning, acquire a place within a common political vocabulary, and become intelligible as differentiated moments of one historically articulated project. Modernization does not abolish the plurality of these signs. It supplies the semantic field in which their plurality is organized. [NOTE: cite Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences*; Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*; Peirce, *Collected Papers*]

The term metasignifier is used here with care. It does not designate a sovereign word that empties every other word of independent content, nor does it identify modernization with an ultimate foundation standing outside history. It designates a higher-order operation of articulation. Socialism, for example, retains its Marxist-Leninist and Chinese historical resonances; Party leadership retains its organizational and constitutional specificity; reform and opening retain their institutional and geopolitical histories. Yet each is increasingly read through the question of what it does within, or contributes to, the modernizing project. Modernization therefore does not replace these terms. It mediates among them.

This mediating function explains why the contemporary vocabulary can gather apparently heterogeneous elements without treating them as formally identical. Reform can be understood as the institutional capacity to alter inherited arrangements; opening as the controlled exposure of those arrangements to external resources and comparison; science and technology as the epistemic and productive instruments of transformation; rule of law as a mode of regularizing and disciplining governance; common prosperity as the distributive criterion of a socialist modernity; ecological civilization as a limit upon productivist development; national security as the protection of the conditions under which transformation can continue; and national rejuvenation as the historical horizon within which the entire undertaking acquires affective and civilizational force. Their relation is not accidental. It is the work performed by modernization as metasignifier.

The claim is consequently stronger than the observation that modernization appears frequently in Party and state documents. Frequency alone would establish only lexical prominence. The argument concerns function: modernization increasingly supplies the interpretive rule by which the political system differentiates means from ends, temporary contradiction from structural failure, inherited institution from institution requiring renovation, and quantitative advance from

qualitatively adequate development. It is a semantic attractor. The vocabulary of Chinese constitutionalism is drawn toward it, but is not dissolved into it.

A historical qualification is essential. It would be anachronistic to claim that the early Communist Party of China already possessed modernization as its master concept, or that Marx and Lenin simply transmitted a finished modernization theory to China. The early Party spoke primarily through revolution, national liberation, class struggle, imperialism, Party organization, and the transformation of a semi-colonial and semi-feudal order. Marx supplied a theory of productive forces, contradiction, and historically structured transformation; Lenin supplied the problem of constructing the material and organizational basis of socialism in a backward society. The later signifier 现代化 (xiandaihua, modernization) condensed these prior problematics only gradually. [NOTE: cite Marx, Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy; Lenin, Report on Electrification; early CPC Congress documents]

That qualification strengthens rather than weakens the phenomenological thesis. A Lebenswelt need not begin as an explicit doctrine. It can be constituted through repeated encounters with material weakness, political vulnerability, technological dependence, revolutionary reconstruction, industrialization, institutional failure, developmental imbalance, and the demands of national recovery. What later appears as a single sign can therefore be understood as a historical condensation: a name given to a field of experience that was already being organized before the name acquired doctrinal centrality. The lexical history, institutional history, and theoretical history are not identical; their partial convergence is itself the object of analysis. The constitutional consequence follows. The Party Constitution and the State Constitution should not be read as texts to which modernization is externally attached after the fact. They are institutional sites at which the modernizing problematic is selected, stabilized, translated, and made reproducible. The Party's fundamental political line, Congress reports, constitutional preambles, legislation, planning instruments, administrative institutions, and local practices are different articulations within one political-semantic circuit. Modernization is the mediating horizon that allows the circuit to connect socialism to development, Party leadership to institutional capacity, law to governance, and national rejuvenation to a historically intelligible program of collective transformation.

This is an immanent claim, not a normative endorsement. It does not assert that modernization ought to organize Chinese constitutionalism, that the Party's definition of modernization is normatively correct, or that every constitutional value is reducible to developmental administration. It asserts that, if Chinese constitutionalism is interpreted according to its own historically constituted conceptual architecture, the Constitution and the Party's political line cannot be adequately understood without locating them within the modernizing lifeworld. The central proposition is thus interpretive before it is evaluative: modernization is the medium through which the system makes its own heterogeneous commitments cohere.

The remainder of Section VII develops this proposition architectonically. It moves from the pre-reflective horizon of the Lebenswelt, through the differential and relational operation of the sign, to second-order political coding, constitutional articulation, and recursive reproduction. The

result is not a claim that modernization is the final cause of Chinese political development. It is a claim that modernization has become one of the principal conditions under which the Chinese political order experiences its contradictions, names its projects, interprets its institutions, and recognizes itself as continuing through time.

B. The Phenomenological Framework: Lebenswelt, Intentionality, and Constitutional Meaning

The argument advanced in this section requires a theoretical apparatus capable of grasping what is most fundamental and therefore most invisible in any constitutional order: the pre-theoretical horizon of meaning within which constitutional signs acquire their significance. For this purpose, we turn to Edmund Husserl's concept of the *Lebenswelt* — the lifeworld — as elaborated in the *Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, and to the semiotic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, whose respective frameworks illuminate complementary dimensions of the sign-function that constitutionalism performs. [NOTE: cite Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie* (1936)]

Husserl's *Lebenswelt* designates the pre-given, pre-theoretical horizon of lived experience that constitutes the ground upon which all theoretical constructions — including scientific, juridical, and political ones — are erected. The *Lebenswelt* is not itself a theory; it is the condition of possibility for theorizing. It is, in Husserl's language, the 'universal ground of belief' (*universaler Glaubensboden*) that is always already presupposed in every act of consciousness directed toward objects in the world. [NOTE: cite Husserl, *Crisis* §34-37] The crucial insight for our purposes is that the *Lebenswelt* is not a subjective projection but a shared, intersubjective horizon — it is the world as pre-given to a community of experiencing subjects. Every intentional act — every act of consciousness directed toward an object — operates within and is structured by this horizon. The horizon does not determine the content of any particular intentional act, but it determines the field of possibilities within which intentional acts can be performed and objects can appear as meaningful.

The application of this phenomenological framework to constitutional theory yields a proposition of considerable analytical power: every constitutional order operates within a *Lebenswelt* — a horizon of pre-given meaning that determines what constitutional signs can signify, what questions constitutional discourse can pose, and what answers it can recognize as intelligible. The *Lebenswelt* of a constitutional order is not identical to its positive law, its institutional arrangements, or even its foundational document; it is rather the pre-theoretical ground from which all of these derive their meaning and coherence. It is what makes a constitutional order an order — a structured totality of meaning rather than an arbitrary assemblage of rules.

For the liberal constitutional tradition, this *Lebenswelt* — rarely acknowledged as such, precisely because it functions as a taken-for-granted horizon — is constituted by the figure of the rights-bearing individual and the social contract that establishes the political community as an

association of autonomous wills. [NOTE: cite Rawls, *Political Liberalism*; Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*] The entire semiotic apparatus of liberal constitutionalism — separation of powers, judicial review, fundamental rights, parliamentary sovereignty, federalism — acquires its specific meaning within this horizon. 'Rights' signify individual trumps against collective power; 'democracy' signifies collective self-governance by autonomous individuals; 'rule of law' signifies the subordination of state power to norms that protect individual autonomy. These are not universal meanings of these terms; they are the meanings these terms acquire within the specific *Lebenswelt* of liberal constitutionalism.

The thesis of this section is that Chinese constitutionalism operates within a fundamentally different *Lebenswelt* — one in which modernization, understood as a civilizational project of national transformation, constitutes the pre-given horizon of meaning within which all constitutional signs acquire their significance. This is not a normative claim but a phenomenological one: it concerns the conditions of intelligibility of Chinese constitutional discourse, not the moral desirability of its outcomes. The claim is that modernization functions for Chinese constitutionalism as the rights-bearing individual functions for liberal constitutionalism — as the pre-theoretical ground that makes the entire constitutional edifice meaningful as a coherent enterprise.

Heidegger's radicalization of Husserl's phenomenology offers a further dimension. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger reconceives the *Lebenswelt* as the world of *Dasein*'s practical engagement — the world is not primarily an object of theoretical contemplation but the context of purposive activity, the horizon within which entities are encountered as 'ready-to-hand' (*zuhanden*). [NOTE: cite Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* §§14-18] Applied to constitutionalism, this suggests that the *Lebenswelt* of a constitutional order is not merely an epistemic framework but a practical one: it constitutes the horizon within which political action, legal interpretation, and institutional reform are undertaken as purposive activities directed toward ends that the *Lebenswelt* renders intelligible. Modernization, understood phenomenologically, is not merely a cognitive framework through which Chinese constitutional actors interpret their world; it is the practical horizon within which their political and legal activities are undertaken as meaningful projects.

Within this phenomenological context, Wang Hui's multi-volume *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* (现代中国思想的兴起) represents perhaps the most important Chinese-language intellectual history for the paper's concerns. Wang's critical contribution is to theorize modernity (现代性, *xiandaixing*) as a problem rather than a destination—as a contested terrain of intellectual and political struggle rather than a self-evident good. His account of “anti-modern modernity” (反现代的现代性) is powerful precisely because it shows how Chinese thought has repeatedly constituted the modern through acts of rejection, displacement, and rearticulation. [NOTE: cite Wang Hui, *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* (现代中国思想的兴起), 4 vols. (2004); Wang Hui, *China's Twentieth Century: Revolution, Retreat, and the Road to Equality* (2016)]

Yet the distinction between modernity and modernization must be maintained. Modernity names a condition, quality, or state of being; modernization names a process, project, and directed transformation. The present argument concerns modernization: the political-institutional project through which a Party-led constitutional order directs material, social, legal, and civilizational change, and through which that project becomes a practical horizon. Modernity is the horizon against which modernization acquires meaning, and Wang's analysis enriches the intellectual history of that horizon. But the Constitution does not mandate "modernity" as an abstract condition; it mandates modernization as an operative project. The distinction is therefore not terminological housekeeping. It is the difference between a condition to be described and a project to be directed—and it is the project-character of modernization that makes it constitutionally operative.

The phenomenological account becomes more determinate when modernization is understood as sedimentation. Over roughly a century, 现代化 has accumulated a layered vocabulary in which backwardness, revolution, national independence, industrialization, socialist construction, the Four Modernizations, reform, opening, development, the well-off society, scientific development, governance modernization, ecological civilization, common prosperity, national rejuvenation, and Chinese modernization remain present as traces within one another. Husserl's account of sedimentation names the way earlier intentional accomplishments remain operative in the present as taken-for-granted structures of meaning. Yet, if left at the level of philosophical consciousness, it risks leaving unclear how collective-abstract political signs become embodied dispositions. Li Zehou's concept of *jidian* (积淀)—cultural-psychological sedimentation—addresses a structurally analogous phenomenon from a different direction. Developed independently of Husserl, *jidian* describes how historical-cultural content accumulates within cognitive, aesthetic, and practical structures until what was once experienced as contingent historical production becomes the taken-for-granted substrate of perception, judgment, and action. Li's innovation is to locate sedimentation not merely in philosophical consciousness but in practical rationality (实用理性; *shiyong lixing*), a reasoning oriented toward the contextually appropriate response to concrete situations. [NOTE: cite Li Zehou, *A History of Classical Chinese Thought* (中国古代思想史论); Li Zehou, *Critique of Critical Philosophy* (批判哲学的批判)]

The first sediment is backwardness. China is experienced, within the modernizing problematic, as materially weak, technologically inferior, politically vulnerable, and exposed to coercive asymmetries in an international order organized by materially stronger powers. This layer is thick: it contains external comparison, imperial domination, institutional incapacity, technological dependence, and the affective memory of national humiliation, but it also contains the internal work of naming insufficiency. Backwardness is therefore not merely a measurement imposed by an observer; it becomes a practical political experience that makes certain forms of collective action appear necessary. It establishes the negative horizon against which later projects become intelligible, but it does not determine which project follows. The same sediment can authorize revolutionary rupture, developmental catch-up, civilizational recovery, or an unstable combination of all three. An archaeological reading must distinguish the condition from the later interpretive uses to which the condition is put.

The second sediment is revolution. Backwardness is interpreted not as a condition correctable through administrative adjustment alone but as a historical formation requiring radical political transformation. Revolution supplies the grammar through which material weakness becomes actionable: the existing order is not simply deficient in performance but implicated in dependency, imperial domination, and social hierarchy. Yet revolution does not erase backwardness; it carries backwardness forward as the problem that gives revolutionary action its urgency. The interface between the two layers is therefore marked by friction between rupture and inherited constraint. Later modernization discourse continues to bear this double imprint: it promises to overcome the past while retaining the revolutionary presumption that transformation must be politically organized rather than passively awaited.

The third sediment is socialist construction. Revolution cannot remain an act of negation; political transformation must produce a material basis capable of sustaining the social order that revolution claims to inaugurate. Socialist construction joins political form to productive capacity, organization to technology, collective ownership to development, and political education to social cooperation. Its thickness lies in the institutions, work disciplines, technical expertise, planning practices, and egalitarian promises through which a new order was made reproducible. Its friction lies in the gap between emancipatory claims and administrative coercion, between collective purpose and the uneven capacities of an underdeveloped society. This layer conditions later market and reform practices without dictating their meaning: market mechanisms can be incorporated as instruments of socialist construction precisely because the older sediment continues to define the political question to which they must answer.

The fourth sediment is industrialization and the Four Modernizations. Transformation acquires measurable institutional form in agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology. This is an institutional thickening of the earlier layers: plans, targets, statistics, technical cadres, infrastructure, and sectoral priorities translate revolutionary sovereignty and socialist construction into organized developmental capacity. The layer is not frictionless. It holds together mass mobilization and expert administration, egalitarian aspiration and accumulation, civilian welfare and defense, political will and material constraint. Industrialization supplies a visible index of advance, while the Four Modernizations widen the index beyond heavy industry to the coordinated development of a modern state. The Party becomes increasingly legible as both the organization of revolutionary power and the organization of national reconstruction.

The fifth sediment is reform and opening. Modernization becomes reflexive because the institutions directing development themselves become objects of examination. The question is no longer simply how to mobilize resources within an established socialist apparatus but whether inherited arrangements can release productive capacity, absorb knowledge, coordinate complexity, and respond to changing social expectations. Reform names the capacity to alter institutions without abandoning the political project; opening names a managed relation to external technologies, markets, capital, and knowledge. Their conjunction therefore contains a controlled rupture: the sediment of self-reliant socialist construction is not discarded, but it is forced into contact with foreign comparison and institutional experimentation. The later

vocabulary of modernization inherits both the confidence of directed development and the anxiety that inherited forms may become obstacles to it.

The sixth sediment is the socialist market economy. Categories previously treated as antagonistic—socialism and market exchange, planning and competition, public direction and private initiative—are incorporated within a single modernizing project. The market is not thereby transformed into a neutral universal mechanism; it is assigned a place within a politically directed architecture whose older sediments continue to constrain what incorporation may mean. The layer is thick with new legal forms, enterprise practices, property relations, financial techniques, and distributive tensions. Modernization mediates among them by converting institutional borrowing into a question of political function: not whether a device originated outside socialism, but what relation it bears to socialist construction, national development, and Party direction. The friction between inherited socialist commitments and market rationalities is not an accidental residue; it is part of the layer’s operative meaning.

The seventh sediment is governance modernization. The state, which earlier appeared primarily as the instrument directing modernization, becomes an object of modernization in its own right. Its procedures, capacities, legal institutions, administrative hierarchies, information systems, and relations to society are subjected to the same evaluative vocabulary previously applied to production. A state may be powerful yet insufficiently modern if it cannot coordinate complexity, correct error, administer law, manage risk, or translate social demands into institutionally intelligible responses. This layer therefore carries a recursive friction: the political apparatus must improve itself while preserving the political direction that authorizes its self-improvement. Governance modernization does not replace the earlier layers; it turns their accumulated institutional problems into objects of political learning.

The eighth sediment is Chinese modernization. Modernization becomes explicitly theorized as a historically specific Chinese socialist form rather than an abstract developmental destination or a synonym for Westernization. The formulation 中国式现代化 (Chinese style modernization) preserves a general historical vocabulary while particularizing it through Chinese conditions, identifying socialism as constitutive, and placing Party leadership within the definition of the project. Common prosperity, material and spiritual civilization, ecological civilization, people’s democracy, peaceful development, and a new form of human civilization become internal specifications of what modernization is said to mean. The layer is therefore a site of intensified friction between universal and particular, socialist and civilizational, inherited vocabulary and new claim. It does not dissolve the earlier sediments; it rearticulates them as resources for a distinct account of historical possibility.

The ninth sediment is national rejuvenation. Modernization becomes the principal pathway through which historical national destiny is articulated. The project is no longer only the correction of material insufficiency or the construction of socialist institutions; it is also the recovery of national dignity, civilizational confidence, sovereign capacity, and a future-oriented place in the world. National rejuvenation gives modernization an affective and historical depth that cannot be captured by economic indicators alone, transforming development into a narrative

of collective restoration. But restoration and innovation remain in tension: the future is authorized by memory while also requiring a redefinition of what is to be restored. The layer thus opens modernization toward a horizon of continuing political specification rather than closing it with a completed civilizational essence.

This nine-layer model is not merely a chronology. It is a sedimentary ontology of political meaning, and its strata are thick precisely because each contains institutions, affects, categories of judgment, practical expectations, and buried alternatives. Layers do not accumulate gently or in isolation. They press against one another; earlier sediments condition the intelligibility of later ones without determining them, while later reinterpretations reach backward and alter what earlier layers are taken to have meant. Li Zehou's *jidian* gives this structure an indispensable practical dimension. The thesis of rational content sedimented in perceptual form (理性的积淀; the accumulation of rationality) maps onto the movement by which an explicit political-theoretical construction—Lenin's electrification thesis, the Four Modernizations, reform and opening—becomes progressively incorporated into the perceptual-practical substrate of political culture. Modernization is no longer merely argued for; it is increasingly perceived through. This is what distinguishes a metasignifier from a policy preference. The Husserlian framework, in turn, gives Li's culturally oriented account phenomenological precision by specifying the horizontal, intersubjective conditions under which sedimented content appears as the background of experience. The relation is bilateral: *jidian* strengthens Husserlian sedimentation by explaining its practical embodiment, while Husserl clarifies how such embodiment becomes a shared horizon rather than a collection of private habits. [NOTE: cite Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*; Li Zehou, *A History of Classical Chinese Thought* (中国古代思想史论)]

Political actors of each period consequently encounter an already partially constituted semantic and practical world. They do not begin with an empty conceptual field in which any institutional meaning can be freely assigned, nor do they encounter modernization only as a doctrine produced by Party theorists. Through *jidian*, the sedimented layers enter habits of perception, categories of judgment, horizons of expectation, and contextually appropriate responses through which political actors—and, unevenly, wider publics—encounter their world. The archaeological character of the claim is decisive. To understand what modernization means at the surface of a given historical moment, one must excavate the strata beneath the current formulation, trace the friction among them, and attend to what has been subordinated or buried. The surface sign is therefore neither self-explanatory nor infinitely malleable. It is the current exposure of a layered terrain whose earlier deposits remain operative in the very practices that make the present appear natural.

Nor is the claim that modernization operates as a *Lebenswelt* an invitation to ignore Chinese attempts to interpret their own cultural world. Contemporary Chinese scholarship has developed substantial accounts of that world as a sequence of cultural blockchains, among which Gan Yang's *tong san tong* (通三统) is especially relevant: the connection of Confucian, Maoist, and Dengist traditions as usable resources for contemporary political self-understanding. [NOTE: cite Gan Yang, *Tong San Tong* (通三统) (2007)]

Gan's framework, however, addresses a different analytical question. It identifies substantive cultural resources and constructs a usable past; this paper asks for the semiotic-phenomenological structure through which any such self-understanding becomes operative as constitutional meaning. Modernization is not one of the three traditions in *tong san tong*. It is the medium through which those traditions—and others—are incorporated into constitutional discourse. Confucian, Maoist, and Dengist legacies are encountered within the horizon of modernization; they are appropriated, filtered, and deployed through the modernizing project rather than standing outside it as independent sources of meaning. Gan therefore enriches the content of the cultural archive, while the present account asks how an archive becomes a lived constitutional code.

C. The Semiotic Architecture: Modernization as Sign-System

The phenomenological framework establishes that modernization functions as the *Lebenswelt* of Chinese constitutionalism — the pre-given horizon within which constitutional meaning constitutes itself. We must now specify the mechanism by which this constitution of meaning operates. For this, we turn to semiotics — the general theory of signs — drawing upon both the structural semiology of Ferdinand de Saussure and the pragmatic semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce, whose respective frameworks illuminate complementary dimensions of the process.

Saussure's structural semiology provides three foundational concepts. First, the sign is a unity of signifier (signifiant) and signified (signifié) — a material form and a conceptual content bound together by convention within a sign-system. Second, the sign-system (langue) is logically and temporally prior to any individual sign-use (parole); meaning is not generated by individual acts of signification but is made possible by the systematic relations that constitute the langue. Third, and most radically, meaning is differential: a sign signifies not by virtue of any positive content but by virtue of its difference from other signs within the system. 'Democracy' in Chinese constitutional discourse does not signify by virtue of some inherent semantic content but by virtue of its differential position within the sign-system of Chinese constitutionalism — its difference from and relation to 'people's democratic dictatorship,' 'democratic centralism,' 'socialist consultative democracy,' and so forth. [NOTE: cite Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, Part I, Ch. 1; Part II, Ch. 4]

The application of Saussurean structural analysis to Chinese constitutionalism yields the following proposition: modernization functions as the langue — the underlying sign-system — of Chinese constitutionalism. All constitutional concepts operate as signs whose meaning is constituted by their position within this system. 'Rule of/through law' (法治), 'human rights' (人权), 'democracy' (民主), 'party leadership' (党的领导), 'people's democratic dictatorship' (人民民主专政) — each of these is a sign whose signified is determined not by some universal semantic content but by its differential position within the sign-system whose organizing principle is modernization. 'Rule of law' signifies not the liberal rule-of-law ideal of constraint upon sovereign power, but rather a modality of governance that serves modernization by providing predictability, reducing transaction costs, and disciplining both state actors and market

participants in the service of developmental objectives. Its meaning is constituted by its difference from 'rule by man' (人治) on one side and from 'bourgeois rule of law' on the other — a differential field whose coordinates are set by modernization as the overarching language.

Peirce's triadic semiotics adds a dynamic dimension that Saussure's structural model lacks. For Peirce, the sign is not a dyadic unity of signifier and signified but a triadic relation among sign (representamen), object, and interpretant. The interpretant is itself a sign, generated by the sign-object relation, which in turn requires a further interpretant — generating the process Peirce termed 'unlimited semiosis.' [NOTE: cite Peirce, Collected Papers 2.228-2.308] Crucially, Peirce distinguished among types of sign-object relation: the icon (relation of resemblance), the index (relation of existential contiguity or causal connection), and the symbol (relation of convention or law). [NOTE: cite Peirce, CP 2.247-2.249]

Within the semiotic architecture of Chinese constitutionalism, modernization functions in multiple Peircean registers simultaneously. As symbol, it is a conventional sign whose meaning is constituted by the interpretive community of the Communist Party of China and its theoretical apparatus — it signifies what the Party's theoretical discourse determines it to signify. As index, modernization maintains an existential-causal connection to the material conditions of Chinese society — it points to, and is causally connected with, actual processes of economic development, urbanization, technological transformation, and social change. As icon, the representations of modernization in constitutional and political discourse bear a relation of resemblance to the projected end-state — the 'great modern socialist country' (社会主义现代化强国) whose image organizes political aspiration. The simultaneous operation of modernization across all three sign-types accounts for its extraordinary semiotic power: it is at once conventional (and therefore politically controllable), causally connected to material reality (and therefore empirically responsive), and imaginatively compelling (and therefore motivationally potent).

Furthermore, Peirce's concept of unlimited semiosis illuminates the generative dynamism of modernization as sign-system. Each constitutional concept, read through the interpretant of modernization, generates further signs that themselves require interpretation — and this interpretation is itself governed by modernization as the ultimate interpretive framework. The process is not circular but spiral: each cycle of semiosis enriches and specifies the meaning of modernization itself, which in turn reconditions the field within which subsequent acts of constitutional signification occur. This is the semiotic mechanism by which Chinese constitutionalism achieves its characteristic combination of continuity and adaptability — the sign-system remains unified by modernization as its organizing principle while its specific content undergoes continuous semiotic elaboration.

The Saussurean and Peircean models converge at the point where modernization is understood as both structure and movement. Saussure makes visible the differential field: no constitutional term signifies in isolation, because its intelligibility depends upon a system of contrasts and associations. Peirce makes visible the temporal production of meaning: every sign generates an interpretant, and every interpretant becomes available for further interpretation.

Modernization therefore operates as a structured horizon that is continuously re-specified by the very constitutional practices it organizes.

The consequence is that modernization cannot be treated as a stable object sitting outside the political system and awaiting implementation. It is an operative sign-system. A constitutional provision, a Party resolution, a development plan, or a local legislative principle does not merely refer to modernization; it participates in producing the current interpretant of modernization. The sign is therefore both condition and consequence. It furnishes the code through which the system reads its world, while each new reading deposits further content into the code.

This also clarifies why the language of modernization can move across domains without becoming semantically indiscriminate. The same sign can attach itself to industry, law, administration, ecology, distribution, security, and civilization because the attachment is not a random metaphorical transfer. Each domain is interpreted as a site at which a historically specific contradiction is converted into institutional capacity. The domain changes; the metasemiotic question remains: what transformation is required for the political order to continue as a socialist, Chinese, and historically adequate order?

The semiotic power of modernization is therefore inseparable from its constraints. It can mediate market mechanisms and socialism because the sedimented vocabulary limits what such mediation may signify. It can absorb ecological civilization because development is no longer permitted to signify only output. It can articulate people's democracy because participation is situated within a theory of governance and collective development rather than detached from the political order's organizing project. A metasignifier is powerful not because it says everything, but because it orders the relations through which different things can be said.

D. The Relational Semiotics of 现代化 (Modernization)

The signifier 现代化 does not possess a fixed signified that can be extracted once and then carried unchanged across historical moments. Its meaning is generated relationally, through its position within a network of differences and associations. This does not make the sign arbitrary. The relations are historically sedimented, institutionally enforced, and politically contested. But it does mean that modernization is best analyzed not through a solitary definition but through the changing constellations in which it appears.

At its most compressed, the relational grammar can be displayed as follows: 现代化 (modernization) + 工业化 (industrialization) = industrial transformation; 现代化 (modernization) + 社会主义 (socialism) = socialist construction; 现代化 (modernization) + 改革开放 (Reform and Opening UP) = institutional adaptation; 现代化 (modernization) + 市场经济 (market economy) = socialist market development; 现代化 (modernization) + 法治 (rule of (or through) law) = modernization of governance through law; 现代化 (modernization) + 国家治理 (national governance/governing the country) = institutional

capacity; 现代化 (modernization) + 共同富裕 (common prosperity) = distributive modernization; 现代化 + 生态文明 (ecological civilization) = ecological modernization; 现代化 (modernization) + 中华民族伟大复兴 (the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation) = national-historical modernization; 中国式现代化 (Chinese style modernization)+ 党的领导 (the leadership of the Party) = politically constituted socialist modernization. These equations are not definitions in the strict sense. They are relational operators: each conjunction specifies what modernization is doing in a particular semantic field. In the meta-field of political vanguard leadership an additional relational operator has been added in New Era Leninism: 中国式现代化 (Chinese style modernization) + 党的领导 (the leadership of the Party) + 自我革命 (self-revolution) + 社会革命 (social revolution) = 'new development concept' (新发展理念) modernization driven through high quality innovation in all spheres of collective activity. This last adds the political/social dialectic, internal to the Party and externalized through mass line feedback loops in the fundamental premises self-revolution and social-revolution. These represent a dual (and dialectical materialist) framework where a ruling party must constantly reform itself internally (self-revolution) in order to successfully lead and transform the broader economic, political, and cultural structures of the nation (social-revolution), even as this feedback loop is paralleled in Party-State relations and in the mass line relations between the Party and the masses, each of which also runs their own collective specific revolutionary feedback loops guided by and through the master loop. [Cite to Xi Jinping speeches and Backer commentary]

When modernization is joined to industrialization, it names the transformation of productive capacity and the material organization of social life. When joined to socialism, it names the construction of a political-economic order in which productive development is subordinated to collective purposes. When joined to 改革开放, it signifies the willingness to alter institutional forms and to place the domestic project in a managed relation with external knowledge and resources. When joined to the socialist market economy, it performs the more difficult work of making market exchange legible as a component of a politically directed developmental order rather than as an alternative political economy.

When joined to 法治, modernization shifts from the transformation of social production to the modernization of governance through law. Law signifies regularity, administrative discipline, institutional predictability, and the capacity to coordinate complex social relations. When joined to 国家治理, modernization names not simply the existence of institutions but their capacity to observe, decide, implement, correct, and learn. The pairings therefore move from the modernization of objects governed by the state to the modernization of the state’s own capacity to govern.

When joined to 共同富裕, modernization acquires a distributive and social criterion. Aggregate growth can no longer exhaust the meaning of development if the modernizing project is required to address polarization, unequal access, or differentiated life chances. When joined to 生态文明, modernization becomes ecological rather than simply productivist: the relation between humanity and nature becomes an internal measure of whether development has achieved

an adequate form. These pairings do not merely append social and ecological objectives to an economic program. They revise the signified of modernization by changing what counts as successful transformation.

When joined to 中华民族伟大复兴, modernization acquires a national-historical depth. It is no longer only the solution to a developmental deficit; it becomes the pathway through which a collective subject narrates its return to historical agency and civilizational confidence. The formulation 中国式现代化 (Chinese style modernization) then particularizes the general sign through Chinese historical conditions, while 中国共产党领导的社会主义现代化 identifies Party leadership and socialism as constitutive conditions of the form being claimed. The relational field thus connects the material, institutional, social, civilizational, and international dimensions of the project.

This relational operation explains why modernization can function as a metasignifier without becoming an empty signifier. An empty signifier would gather heterogeneous demands by evacuating their substantive relations. Modernization does something different. It gathers heterogeneous domains by placing them within a historically sedimented vocabulary: revolution, socialism, productive forces, Party organization, reform, governance, civilization, and rejuvenation. The sign remains open enough to travel, but not so open that every political claim is equally modernizing. Its apparent breadth is the effect of articulation, not the absence of content.

The relations also change historically. The conjunction 现代化 + 工业化 once carried a heavier semantic weight than 现代化 + 生态文明; later, the latter becomes indispensable to the interpretation of the former. The conjunction 现代化 + 市场经济 once required a more explicit reconciliation with socialism; later, the reconciliation is embedded in the vocabulary of the socialist market economy. Meaning is therefore neither fixed nor infinitely plastic. It is a moving equilibrium in which new sediment modifies the differential value of older signs.

For constitutional interpretation, the consequence is decisive. A reference to rule of law, democracy, security, development, or rights cannot be decoded by importing a universal signified from another constitutional *Lebenswelt*. The interpreter must ask how the sign is positioned within the modernizing network at the relevant historical moment, what contradiction it is intended to address, what institutional relation it authorizes, and which other signs delimit its meaning. Modernization is not the answer to every interpretive question. It is the question that makes the relations among the answers visible.

E. Genealogy, Governmentality, and the Naturalization of the Modernizing *Lebenswelt*

The semiotic architecture and the sedimentary ontology establish how modernization can organize meaning, but they leave a question that textual analysis alone cannot answer: by what mechanism does a collective-abstract semiotics become a lived, pre-theoretical horizon? The

missing passage runs from signification to power and from political language to the formation of subjects. Nietzsche’s genealogy and Foucault’s analyses of governmentality and biopolitics provide resources for making that passage without pretending that either author supplies a ready-made theory of Chinese constitutionalism.

The sedimentation model risks presenting each historical layer as though it accumulated naturally upon the preceding one. Nietzsche’s genealogical method, especially in *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, insists that what appears as orderly accumulation is often the product of interpretive violence: acts of *Umdeutung*, transvaluation and reinterpretation, through which existing signs are seized and made to carry new values. [NOTE: cite Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Second Essay, §12] The history of a sign is therefore not a neutral deposit but a record of struggles over who may interpret it and with what authority.

The shift from “class struggle as the key link” to “socialist modernization as the central task” was not a passive sedimentation. It was a transvaluation accomplished through political struggle, factional conflict, and, after 1989, the explicit suppression or subordination of alternative organizing possibilities. The layers were struggled into place against competing interpretations. Sedimentation in the strong sense must therefore include acts of political appropriation, imposed reinterpretation, and the burial of alternatives beneath the prevailing horizon. The current sign carries not only what has been retained but also the traces of what had to be defeated for that retention to appear inevitable.

This does not invalidate the *Lebenswelt* argument; it deepens it. A *Lebenswelt* constituted through interpretive struggle is no less a *Lebenswelt* for having been violently produced. Indeed, the most deeply naturalized values are often those whose violent genealogies have been most thoroughly forgotten. The contemporary self-evidence of modernization may follow a similar logic: alternative organizing concepts—class struggle, permanent revolution, bourgeois-democratic revolution—were defeated, suppressed, or subordinated, and the forgetting of that contest helps the modernizing horizon appear pre-reflective. The *Lebenswelt* is constituted not despite this violence but through it; sedimentation includes the burial that makes the surface look continuous.

Nietzsche’s critique of teleological thinking also clarifies the telos-process dialectic. The projected “great modern socialist country” by 2049, the “two centenary goals,” and the “primary stage of socialism,” which has been projected as a prolonged historical period without a determinate endpoint, have the structural character of what Nietzsche would recognize as an ascetic ideal: a projected future that disciplines the present and renders sacrifice meaningful by subordinating it to a destination that continually recedes. [NOTE: cite Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Third Essay] This observation need not dismiss the teleological structure. The disciplinary function of the projected future is part of the mechanism by which modernization becomes a *Lebenswelt*. The future is not merely a cognitive horizon; it is an apparatus for organizing conduct in the present.

Foucault's concept of governmentality (*gouvernementalité*) supplies the missing mechanism for moving from macro-level signification to micro-level disposition. Governmentality describes how political rationalities are translated into technologies of governance that work through institutional practices, performance metrics, evaluation systems, educational curricula, urban planning, media regulation, and the myriad micro-practices through which subjects are formed. [NOTE: cite Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–1978*; Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979*] Governmentality is therefore the passage by which a macro-rationality becomes a field of conduct, not a second name for Party discourse.

Modernization as a political rationality is not merely declared at Party congresses; it is implemented through governmentality. The cadre evaluation system (干部考核) assesses officials against changing modernization metrics; the educational system produces subjects oriented toward modernization objectives; urban planning reshapes the material environment so that modernization is encountered as an ordinary spatial condition; and media and propaganda constitute the field of the visible and the speakable through modernization discourse. These practices are not supplementary to the sign-system. They are the capillary mechanisms through which its macro-semiotic structure becomes the micro-phenomenological *Lebenswelt* of political subjects.

The first of the five features of Chinese-style modernization—modernization of a huge population (人口规模巨大的现代化)—is explicitly biopolitical. Foucault's biopolitics describes the governance of population as population: birth rates, mortality rates, migration patterns, health, education, productive capacity, and quality (素质). The hukou system, the evolution from one-child policy to pro-natalist policy, the discourse of a high-quality population (高素质人口), and the social credit system can be read as biopolitical technologies through which modernization is operationalized at the level of bodies and population dynamics. [NOTE: cite Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, Part Five; see also Greenhalgh, "Missile Science, Population Science: The Origins of China's One-Child Policy" (2005)]

The biopolitical dimension provides the crucial bridge between collective semiotics and individual experience. When modernization is inscribed upon bodies through biopolitical governance—when reproductive choices, residential mobility, educational trajectories, and social behaviors are shaped by modernization imperatives—modernization ceases to be merely a discursive formation "out there" in Party documents and becomes part of the texture of lived experience. This is the naturalization mechanism that the Husserlian framework alone cannot provide: modernization becomes *Lebenswelt* not merely through the sedimentation of meanings but through the biopolitical production of subjects who inhabit those meanings as their practical horizon.

Level 1 — ABSTRACT: The Party produces modernization theory at the level of abstract political-theoretical construction: Marxism-Leninism, congress reports, constitutional formulations, and Xi Jinping Thought. This is the level of the metasignifier, the language of Chinese constitutionalism. Modernization is articulated here as a theory of historical

development, a criterion of political adequacy, and a vocabulary through which contradictions are named.

Level 2 — COLLECTIVE-INSTITUTIONAL: Abstract theory is translated through governmental technologies into institutional practices: cadre evaluation, legislative mandates, development planning, educational curricula, administrative metrics, and the organization of urban and social space. These collective-institutional practices constitute the structured environment within which political subjects are formed. They give the abstract sign-system temporal routines, material infrastructures, sanctions, incentives, and recognizable standards of success.

Level 3 — INDIVIDUAL-EMBODIED: Through biopolitical and governmentality mechanisms, institutional practices produce subjects who experience their world within the horizon of modernization. They perceive their own development, their communities’ development, and the nation’s development through categories constituted by the modernizing project. This does not require conscious agreement with every official formulation. It means that modernization becomes genuinely *Lebenswelt*: a pre-reflective practical orientation through which needs, risks, opportunities, failures, and futures become available for judgment.

Level 4 — FEEDBACK: The practices, resistances, innovations, and contradictions generated at the individual-embodied level feed back into the collective-institutional and abstract-theoretical levels. They produce the “new contradictions” that the Party diagnoses and to which it responds through reformulations of the political line, adjustments in law, and renewed accounts of modernization. This is the recursive circuit, now understood not merely as a textual-discursive process but as a biopolitical-phenomenological one.

This four-level model addresses the paper’s most significant vulnerability. It provides the mechanism through which macro-level semiotic construction becomes micro-level lived experience, and vice versa. The *Lebenswelt* is constituted not merely through textual sedimentation but through the capillary operations of power that translate signs into practices and practices into dispositions. That account does not imply cultural uniformity or the disappearance of agency: resistance, improvisation, and contradiction are part of the feedback circuit. Naturalization means that a horizon is inhabited as practically available, not that it is universally or uncritically accepted.

F. The Dialectics of Telos and Process

A constitutive tension operates at the heart of modernization as the *Lebenswelt* of Chinese constitutionalism — a tension between modernization as telos and modernization as process. This is not a contingent ambiguity to be resolved but a structural feature of the sign-system that accounts for much of its generative power. Modernization signifies simultaneously an end-state to be achieved (the ‘great modern socialist country,’ now projected for mid-century completion) and an ongoing process of development that, by definition, has not yet reached its endpoint (the ‘primary stage of socialism,’ which has persisted as a doctrinal category for nearly

four decades). [NOTE: cite Deng Xiaoping, Building Socialism with Chinese Characteristics (1984); Xi Jinping, Report to the 19th National Congress (2017)]

From the standpoint of formal logic, this dual signification might appear contradictory: how can a constitutional order be simultaneously oriented toward a determinate end-state and defined by its incompleteness, its not-yet-having-arrived? But this apparent contradiction dissolves when we recognize that we are dealing not with a logical proposition subject to the law of non-contradiction but with a semiotic structure whose productive tension generates constitutional discourse rather than vitiating it. The dialectical character of this structure is neither Hegelian in the strict sense — there is no necessary *Aufhebung* that resolves the tension into a higher synthesis — nor merely rhetorical. It is rather the structural condition that enables Chinese constitutionalism to maintain its orientation toward transformation while accommodating the empirical variability and temporal extension of actual developmental processes.

Gadamer's hermeneutic phenomenology provides a useful supplement here. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer argues that understanding is always 'application' — that to understand a text is always already to apply it to one's present situation, so that meaning is constituted in the fusion of the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter. [NOTE: cite Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, Part II, §§9-10] Applied to the dialectics of modernization, this suggests that the tension between telos and process is not a deficiency of the sign-system but the condition of its applicability: it is precisely because modernization signifies both end-state and process that it can function as a productive hermeneutic horizon — one that is applicable to (and capable of being applied by) successive generations of political actors confronting different material conditions.

The telos-dimension of modernization provides directionality — it orients constitutional discourse toward a projected future and provides a standard against which present conditions can be measured and found wanting. The process-dimension provides flexibility — it acknowledges the distance between present and projected future and legitimates the ongoing adaptations and reformulations required to traverse that distance. Neither dimension alone could constitute a viable *Lebenswelt*: pure telos without process would be millenarian utopianism incapable of accommodating temporal extension; pure process without telos would be developmental pragmatism incapable of generating the normative orientation that distinguishes constitutionalism from mere administration. The dialectical unity of both constitutes the specific character of modernization as constitutional *Lebenswelt*.

The telos-process tension acquires a further dimension when read through sedimentation. The projected modern socialist country is never encountered as an empty future; it is approached through inherited experiences of backwardness, revolution, construction, reform, development, and national recovery. The future is therefore thick with the past. Conversely, the past is repeatedly reinterpreted from the standpoint of a projected future. Modernization's temporal structure is consequently neither linear progress nor simple repetition. It is a recursive horizon in which the future reorganizes the meaning of the past and the sedimented past limits the form of the future that can be imagined.

The language of stages and milestones does not eliminate this openness. A target such as a moderately prosperous society, basic modernization by 2035, or a great modern socialist country by mid-century provides a horizon of expectation and a standard of self-assessment. It does not settle in advance what new contradictions will emerge once the target is approached, nor does it determine which institutions will be adequate to the next phase. Each achievement alters the field of needs, capacities, comparisons, and expectations. The accomplishment of modernization therefore generates the conditions for its own redefinition.

This is why the primary stage of socialism can function as a durable temporal category. It marks incompleteness without reducing the political order to failure. The distance between present arrangements and projected conditions becomes a space for institutional experimentation, doctrinal revision, and the redistribution of developmental priorities. The same temporal structure can legitimate continuity and demand change: the political order is historically continuous because it remains committed to the project, yet it must change because the project's own advance produces new conditions.

The constitutional order therefore inhabits time rather than merely measuring it. Its institutions are presented as arrangements adequate to a historical stage, and its reforms as means of preserving adequacy as the stage changes. Modernization is the name for this moving relation between institutional present and projected future. It supplies the constitutional order with direction without granting it a final resting place.

G. The Principal Contradiction as Semiotic Operation

If modernization constitutes the Lebenswelt of Chinese constitutionalism, then the Communist Party's periodic reformulation of the 'principal contradiction' (□□□□) of Chinese society represents the fundamental semiotic operation by which this Lebenswelt adapts to changed material conditions without ceasing to function as the pre-given horizon of meaning. The principal contradiction is, in semiotic terms, the master-sign that organizes the entire field of constitutional signification — it determines what 'modernization' means at any given historical moment by specifying what modernization is modernizing against, what obstacle it confronts, what deficiency it addresses.

The history of these reformulations traces a trajectory of semiotic recalibration. Under Mao Zedong, the principal contradiction was formulated in class terms — initially as the contradiction between the Chinese people and imperialism-feudalism-bureaucratic capitalism (in the revolutionary period), then as the contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie (in the socialist construction period). [NOTE: cite Mao Zedong, *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People* (1957)] In this formulation, modernization signified primarily the overcoming of class exploitation and the establishment of socialist relations of production — it was, in Peircean terms, predominantly indexed to social relations rather than productive capacity.

The Eighth Party Congress of 1956, and more consequentially the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee in 1978, effected a fundamental semiotic reindexation. The principal contradiction was reformulated as the contradiction 'between the ever-growing material and cultural needs of the people and backward social production' (人民日益增长的物质文化需要同落后的社会生产之间的矛盾). [NOTE: cite Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party (1981)] This reformulation reindexed the entire sign-system: 'modernization' was now primarily indexed to productive forces rather than production relations; 'development' became the master-signifier through which all constitutional concepts acquired their specific content. 'Rule of law' came to signify the legal framework for marketization; 'democracy' came to signify consultative mechanisms for policy optimization; 'human rights' came to signify developmental entitlements — subsistence, development, stability.

Xi Jinping's reformulation at the 19th National Congress in 2017 effected a further semiotic recalibration: the principal contradiction became 'the contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life' (人民日益增长的美好生活需要和不平衡不充分的发展之间的矛盾). [NOTE: cite Xi Jinping, Report to the 19th National Congress of the CPC (2017)] The semiotic shift is precise: on the side of needs, 'material and cultural needs' (物质文化需要) becomes 'needs for a better life' (美好生活需要) — expanding the signified from material adequacy to qualitative well-being; on the side of production, 'backward social production' (落后的社会生产) becomes 'unbalanced and inadequate development' (不平衡不充分的发展) — shifting the index from aggregate insufficiency to distributional and qualitative deficiency.

What is crucial to recognize is that each of these reformulations operates not as a break with the Lebenswelt of modernization but as a recalibration within it. The Lebenswelt persists — modernization remains the pre-given horizon of meaning — but its internal structure is reconfigured. The principal contradiction functions as the semiotic mechanism of this reconfiguration: by respecifying what modernization confronts, it respecifies what modernization means, and thereby reconstitutes the differential field within which all other constitutional signs acquire their significance. This is why the reformulation of the principal contradiction is never merely a theoretical exercise but always simultaneously a constitutional event — it reconditions the entire sign-system through which Chinese constitutional discourse operates.

The reference to general contradictions is indispensable because it prevents modernization from being treated as an independent variable or a free-standing developmental preference. Within Chinese Marxist-Leninist theory, social development is not the linear realization of a static blueprint. It is a movement through contradictions whose character changes as material and social conditions change. Modernization is the political response to a diagnosed contradiction, and the diagnosis itself is a political act that reorders the field of meaning.

The Eighth Congress could still formulate the problem through the tension between the desire for an advanced industrial country and the reality of an agrarian economy, or between economic and cultural needs and the conditions available to satisfy them. The reform-era

formulation shifted the sign-system toward the contradiction between growing material and cultural needs and backward social production. The Nineteenth Congress then reindexed the problem as the contradiction between the people’s growing needs for a better life and unbalanced and inadequate development. Each formulation changes what modernization is modernizing against, and therefore changes what modernization can signify.

The movement can be stated recursively: contradiction leads to diagnosis; diagnosis authorizes a political line; the political line demands institutional transformation; institutional transformation produces a new configuration of modernization; that configuration generates new expectations and new contradictions; the new contradiction requires a revised diagnosis. Modernization is therefore neither merely the object of the cycle nor merely its instrument. It is the semantic medium through which the cycle recognizes itself as a cycle.

The contemporary vocabulary of balance, adequacy, quality, sustainability, security, and governance should be read in this way. These terms are not simply new policy labels added to an unchanged modernization program. They are interpretive responses to contradictions produced by earlier forms of success: growth that is uneven, technology that creates new dependencies, integration that creates new risks, administrative power that encounters complexity, and material improvement that generates more differentiated expectations of a good life. Modernization becomes reflexive because its object is increasingly the contradiction generated by modernization itself.

The principal contradiction is consequently a master-sign not because it replaces all other signs, but because it specifies the problem-space in which those signs are interpreted. It determines whether reform signifies liberation of productive forces or institutional correction, whether law signifies formal regularity or governance capacity, whether common prosperity signifies redistribution or the prevention of polarization, and whether security signifies defense of territory or preservation of the conditions of development. The Lebenswelt persists, but its internal coordinates are recalibrated.

H. The Dual Constitutional System as Semiotic Unity

Chinese constitutionalism operates through a dual constitutional structure: the Constitution of the Communist Party of China (中国共产党章程) and the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (中华人民共和国宪法). Western constitutional analysis, operating within the Lebenswelt of liberal constitutionalism, typically approaches this duality as a problem — as an anomaly to be explained by reference to authoritarian pathology or institutional underdevelopment. The semiotic-phenomenological framework developed here suggests a radically different reading: the two constitutions together constitute a unified semiotic system whose coherence is provided by modernization as their shared Lebenswelt.

In Peircean terms, the relationship between the two constitutions can be specified as follows: the Party constitution provides the interpretant that determines how the state constitution's signs are to be read. The state constitution contains signs — 'rule of law,' 'human

rights,' 'socialist market economy,' 'people's congress system' — whose meaning is underdetermined by the text itself. These signs could, in principle, be interpreted within multiple semiotic frameworks — liberal, social-democratic, authoritarian-developmental, and so forth. The Party constitution functions as the interpretive key that resolves this underdetermination: by establishing the Party's leadership as the 'defining feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics' (中国特色社会主义最本质的特征) and by specifying the Party's developmental objectives, it provides the Peircean interpretant through which the state constitution's signs are to be decoded. [NOTE: cite PRC Constitution, Art. 1 (2018 amendment); CPC Constitution, General Program]

This is not merely a power-relation (the Party 'controls' the interpretation of the state constitution) but a semiotic-structural relation: without the interpretant provided by the Party constitution, the state constitution's signs would be semiotic free-floaters — signifiers without determinate signifieds. The Party constitution anchors the semiotic system by specifying that all constitutional signs are to be read within the horizon of modernization as civilizational project, and by specifying the current content of that project through its programmatic provisions. The two constitutions are thus not competing legal orders but complementary dimensions of a single semiotic system: the state constitution provides the formal-legal signs; the Party constitution provides the interpretive framework within which those signs signify.

Both are unified at a deeper level by modernization as their shared Lebenswelt. The Party constitution opens with a historical narrative that situates the Party's existence and mission within the trajectory of China's modernization — from the semi-colonial, semi-feudal condition of the pre-revolutionary period to the projected achievement of socialist modernization by mid-century. The state constitution's Preamble performs a parallel function, but with a quite distinct function, to embed the guiding and leadership role of the CPC into the administrative structure of the state and to apply that guidance in the form of the operationalization, in institutional form, of the fundamental political line of the CPC, as that exists in its manifestations from one stage of historical development to another. That translates the conceptual language of the CPC preamble into the operational language, and the cages of, law. It recasts the narration of the historical trajectory of the Chinese nation toward modernization and the specification of the state's fundamental tasks in terms of developmental objectives into the language of constituting the administrative apparatus through which this will be undertaken, and to the task of developing its basic operating system (rights, duties, processes, objectives, trust mechanisms, and the like). That is the essence of its task: "This Constitution affirms, in legal form, the achievements of the struggles of the Chinese people of all ethnic groups and stipulates the fundamental system and task of the state. It is the fundamental law of the state and has supreme legal force." [cite to Preamble PRC State Constitution; and secondary sources: Backer and others on the role of the state constitution]. The convergence is not accidental but structural: both constitutions are expressions of the same Lebenswelt, articulated at different levels of the semiotic system — the Party constitution at the level of interpretive framework, the state constitution at the level of formal-legal articulation.

The dual constitutional system is thus not merely a division between a political document and a legal document. It is a division of semiotic labor. The Party Constitution and the Party's congress reports formulate the historically current interpretant of the modernizing project; the State Constitution translates that interpretant into the formal language of state institutions, rights, duties, powers, and fundamental tasks. Legislation, planning, administration, and local experimentation then give the articulation operational density.

This division does not imply that the State Constitution lacks independent legal significance. It means that its signs are stabilized within a political-theoretical environment that the Party Constitution helps to articulate. The State Constitution's references to law, democracy, rights, development, education, science, national defense, and governance are not semantically self-sufficient. Their operative meaning is shaped by the modernizing project and by the doctrinal formulations through which the Party specifies that project at a given historical moment.

The relationship is therefore neither a simple hierarchy nor a competition between two sovereign texts. It is a functional complementarity within one semiotic unity. The Party Constitution provides the political line and the historically specific account of what the system is for; the State Constitution provides the juridical form through which that purpose is distributed among organs and translated into legally cognizable obligations. Modernization is the shared Lebenswelt that prevents these articulations from becoming unrelated textual worlds.

The dual constitutional analysis also draws on and develops the framework articulated in Jiang Shigong's work on written and unwritten constitutions. The acknowledgment is deliberately brief: Jiang's contribution is already internal to the account of how Party Constitution and State Constitution operate as differentiated but unified articulations; the present argument extends that framework by asking how modernization supplies their shared semiotic-phenomenological horizon. [NOTE: cite Jiang Shigong, *Written and Unwritten Constitutions: A New Approach to the Study of Constitutional Government in China* (2010)]

The resulting system is capable of preserving continuity through reinterpretation. A constitutional amendment can introduce a new theoretical formulation without discarding the older narrative of revolution, socialism, and national reconstruction. A law can translate a general modernization mandate into sectoral rules without claiming to exhaust the meaning of modernization. A local regulation can describe itself as a contribution to Chinese modernization without pretending that local practice is identical to the national project. The system reproduces unity through differentiated articulation.

I. The Luhmannian Dimension: Modernization as Second-Order Coding

A Luhmannian supplement makes visible a dimension of modernization that phenomenology and semiotics alone do not fully specify: the political system's capacity to observe its own operations. The relationship to Husserl cannot, however, be treated as an unproblematic supplement. The tension between Luhmannian systems theory and Husserlian phenomenology is

real. The two frameworks rest on different ontological foundations: phenomenology operates through consciousness, intentionality, and intersubjectivity; systems theory operates through communication, autopoiesis, and functional differentiation, explicitly bracketing consciousness and subjectivity. [NOTE: cite Luhmann, *Social Systems* (1984); Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1936)]

The temptation to treat the two frameworks as simply “complementary perspectives” should therefore be resisted. At a certain level of theoretical rigor, they are incommensurable. Yet this incommensurability is analytically productive rather than debilitating. The tension between systems theory and phenomenology reflects—and perhaps recapitulates—a more fundamental tension in contemporary political-cognitive existence: the tension between the computational-systemic dimension of social organization and the psychological-cognitive dimension of lived experience. This is the space between machine and human, between the system’s self-referential operations, which proceed whether or not any individual consciousness grasps them, and the experiencing subject’s intentional engagement with a meaningful world, which proceeds whether or not the system recognizes it.

A modern political system cannot encounter its environment without constructing distinctions. It does not receive an undifferentiated world; it produces politically usable differences through which events, demands, failures, and opportunities become recognizable. Chinese political theory repeatedly employs distinctions such as backward and advanced, developed and underdeveloped, balanced and unbalanced, sufficient and insufficient, old and new, reform and rigidity, disorder and governance, dependence and self-reliance, and fragmentation and systemic integration. Modernization provides a second-order coding mechanism through which these first-order distinctions can be organized. The system does not ask only whether a condition is backward or advanced, balanced or unbalanced, dependent or self-reliant. It asks what that distinction means for modernization, and then what the political system must become in order to continue modernizing under the newly observed condition.

The distinction between backward and advanced, for example, is not exhausted by a measurement of output or technology. Through the modernization code it becomes a question about the institutions, knowledge systems, and political capacities required to overcome the observed difference. The distinction between balanced and unbalanced development similarly becomes a question about the distributive and territorial architecture of the state. The distinction between dependence and self-reliance becomes a question about the resilience of the political economy, technological capacity, and national security. The code converts observation into a program of institutional response. This is a form of institutional reflexivity: the political system observes not only society, the economy, technology, ecology, and the international environment, but also its own capacity to observe and govern those fields.

The discursive battles between systems theorists and phenomenologists—their mutual accusations of reductionism and their competing claims to theoretical primacy—are largely the babbling of people with discursive fortresses to protect. Beneath these fortifications lies a common space: both frameworks attempt to describe how structured patterns of meaning are

constituted, maintained, and transformed over time. The system's "second-order coding" and the subject's "horizontal structure of consciousness" are descriptions, at different levels of abstraction and with different ontological commitments, of the same phenomenon: the structured pre-constitution of the field within which particular acts of meaning-production become possible.

For the analysis of Chinese constitutionalism, this means that the Luhmannian and Husserlian dimensions are not alternative descriptions to be chosen between but complementary analytical registers, each capturing something the other misses. The systems-theoretical dimension captures the self-referential, autopoietic character of the Chinese political system's modernization discourse: its capacity to observe itself, generate its own criteria of evaluation, and reproduce itself through its own operations regardless of the subjective orientations of individual actors. The phenomenological dimension captures what the systems perspective systematically brackets: the experience of political actors who inhabit the modernizing *Lebenswelt*, whose intentional engagement with political reality is structured by the horizons modernization constitutes.

A complete analysis therefore requires both registers while preserving the tension between them. The systems register explains how modernization language can be diagnostic and legitimating at once: to call a condition unbalanced, inadequate, rigid, fragmented, or insecure is to diagnose a problem, while placing the diagnosis within modernization authorizes a project of institutional correction and presents authority as the agent capable of correcting failure. The phenomenological register explains how such coding becomes a lived horizon rather than a merely formal operation. Held together without being harmonized, the two registers show modernization as both a code through which a political system reproduces itself and a horizon through which subjects experience the world that the system is attempting to organize.

J. From Destination to Condition of Political Reproduction

The most consequential temporal shift is the movement from modernization as destination to modernization as condition of political reproduction. In the early twentieth century, the problem could be imagined in the form of a national imperative: China must become modern. Modernity appeared as a destination located beyond the present, a condition to be reached by overcoming backwardness, dependence, and institutional weakness. The political question was how to mobilize the historical subject capable of reaching that destination.

By the Deng period, the formula had changed. China must modernize in order to develop socialism. Modernization remained a horizon, but it also became the practical test through which socialism could demonstrate its historical viability. The political order was not asked merely to preserve a completed socialist identity; it was asked to develop productive forces, reform institutions, open controlled channels of exchange, and construct the material conditions through which socialism could remain adequate to Chinese circumstances. Modernization became the principal practical manifestation of socialist legitimacy.

In the New Era, the relation is more recursive still: Chinese socialism must continuously modernize in order to reproduce itself as a historically adequate political order. Modernization is no longer only what the system seeks to achieve; it is what the system must continue doing in order to remain the kind of system it claims to be. The political order reproduces itself not by repeating an original institutional form, but by repeatedly demonstrating a capacity to transform its material, legal, administrative, ecological, and social conditions in response to changing contradictions.

This distinction may explain, at least in part, the proliferation of modernization language across Party doctrine, Party constitutions, constitutional preambles, fundamental tasks, development plans, legislation, governance doctrine, and local legislative principles. The proliferation is not simply rhetorical repetition. It reflects the increasing role of modernization as the integrating code of the Chinese political system. Each institutional domain must show how it contributes to, embodies, or is revised by the project, because continued political reproduction is increasingly represented as dependent upon the capacity to modernize that domain.

The condition-of-reproduction thesis also changes the meaning of political continuity. Continuity does not mean that the institutional order remains substantively unchanged. It means that institutional change can be narrated as fidelity to the project when change is presented as necessary to preserve the project’s historical adequacy. Reform, legal revision, governance modernization, and technological reorientation are therefore not necessarily signs of constitutional rupture. They can be signs of continuity-through-transformation.

The same structure produces a demanding standard of political performance. If modernization is the condition of reproduction, failure to modernize is not merely a missed policy opportunity. It can be represented as a failure of the political order to remain adequate to its historical mission. This is why modernization discourse can authorize both confidence and urgency: achievements demonstrate capacity, while each achievement produces new obligations that make complacency theoretically impossible.

The political system thus inhabits modernization as an ongoing condition of being-in-history. It is not simply moving toward a future in which the modernizing task disappears. It is constituting its present legitimacy through the capacity to anticipate, diagnose, and institutionalize the next requirement. Modernization becomes the form of political reproduction because the system understands historical adequacy as an achievement that must be renewed.

Section VIII. Testing the Thesis: The 3rd and 4th Plenums of the 20th Central Committee — Modernization as Fetish, Phenomenology Without the Fetish Term, and the Recursive Constitution of Reality

I. Introduction

This supplementary section examines how the 3rd and 4th Plenums of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China demonstrate the thesis developed in the foregoing working paper — that modernization functions as the *Lebenswelt* of Chinese constitutionalism. But the examination must be conducted correctly. The question is not whether the plenum documents “mention modernization” — they do, relentlessly, and lexical frequency proves nothing about phenomenological structure. The question is whether the documents demonstrate the phenomenological, semiotic, and fetishistic operations the paper theorizes: the constitution of reality through deeply naturalized assumptions; the operation of modernizing logic where the fetish term itself is absent; and the recursive production of a world that appears to confirm the categories through which it is apprehended.

The primary texts are: the Decision of the 3rd Plenum (July 15–18, 2024), titled “Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Further Deepening Reform Comprehensively to Advance Chinese Modernization” (中共中央关于进一步全面深化改革、推进中国式现代化的决定); and the Recommendations adopted by the 4th Plenum (October 20–23, 2025), titled “Recommendations of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China for Formulating the 15th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development” (中共中央关于制定国民经济和社会发展第十五个五年规划的建议). Supplementary analysis draws upon Xi Jinping’s Explanation of the Recommendations, the 4th Plenum Communiqué, and contemporaneous institutional texts — a State Council press conference on market regulation (February 2026), Xi’s address to the PLA delegation (March 2026), and a *People’s Daily* elaboration of science-technology-industry integration (November 2025) — that illuminate the modernizing *Lebenswelt* precisely where it operates without being named. [NOTE: cite official Xinhua sources for plenum dates and decision titles]

B. The 3rd Plenum: Reform as an Operation Within the Modernizing Lebenswelt

The 3rd Plenum Decision’s title alone — “Further Deepening Reform Comprehensively to Advance Chinese Modernization” — confirms the relational structure the paper theorizes. Reform is not positioned as an autonomous goal with its own internal logic; it is explicitly positioned as a means of *advancing* (推进) modernization. The verb 推进 denotes propulsion, advancement, movement toward — it is a verb of instrumental subordination. Reform acquires its meaning not from its own internal coherence but through its articulated relation to the modernizing project. This is the metasignifier at work in its most transparent discursive form. But what is more significant than the title’s explicit content is what it does *not* do: it does not argue for modernization. It does not defend modernization as a worthy telos or justify it against alternatives. It simply deploys modernization as the self-evident horizon within which reform makes sense. This is the *Lebenswelt* at work — a horizon so thoroughly naturalized that it functions as the condition of intelligibility rather than as an object requiring justification. The Decision’s comprehensive scope deepens this observation. The document addresses economic system reform, scientific and technological innovation, opening to the outside world,

whole-process people’s democracy (全过程人民民主), rule of law construction (法治建设), cultural development, social governance, ecological civilization (生态文明), and national security [VERIFY: complete list of domains]. These heterogeneous domains are articulated as dimensions of a single modernizing project — their co-presence in a unified Decision performs the architectonic function the paper attributes to the metasignifier. The emphasis on “systemic integration” (系统集成) [VERIFY: exact term used] is particularly revealing: it is the CPC’s own recognition, at the level of practical governance discourse, that the signs must function as a *system* rather than as isolated propositions. The metasignifier’s work is to produce precisely this systemic coherence.

The Decision also demonstrates the sedimentation thesis. It draws upon accumulated sedimentary layers — revolution, socialist construction, the Four Modernizations, reform and opening (改革开放), the socialist market economy, scientific development, governance modernization — as inherited resources conditioning the meaning of current reforms. When the Decision invokes “high-quality development” (高质量发展) or “new quality productive forces” (新质生产力), it does so within a discursive formation whose prior layers have already established what these terms mean within the modernizing horizon [NOTE: cite Decision sections on high-quality development]. Each formulation is not an *ex nihilo* creation but a reconfiguration of inherited semiotic material — the sedimentary dynamics the paper theorizes operating in real time.

Crucially, the approximately 300 reform measures reportedly contained in the Decision [VERIFY: exact number] are not mere policy announcements. They are proto-technologies of governmentality — embryonic forms of the performance metrics, regulatory instruments, planning targets, and evaluation mechanisms through which macro-level modernization discourse will be translated into micro-level institutional practice. Each measure is a capillary through which the modernizing imperative circulates at the level of everyday governance. The 3rd Plenum Decision thus provides evidence not merely for the metasignifier thesis but for the full juridification cascade the paper theorizes: Party theory translating into constitutional purpose, then into legislative specification, then into governmental technologies, and ultimately into the subject-forming practices that constitute citizens as modernizing agents.

C. The 4th Plenum and the 15th Five-Year Plan: The Clock Cycle of the Lebenswelt

The 4th Plenum of the 20th Central Committee (October 20–23, 2025) adopted the *Recommendations for the 15th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development (2026–2030)*. The Five-Year Plan is one of the most important institutional mechanisms through which the modernizing Lebenswelt reproduces itself temporally. It is, in the paper’s vocabulary, the *clock cycle* of the system — the mechanism that periodizes the modernizing project, translates abstract commitments into time-bound targets, and creates the evaluative framework against which institutional adequacy is measured. Xi Jinping’s *Explanation of the Recommendations* states with remarkable directness: “Formulating medium- and long-term plans to guide economic

and social development is an important means by which our Party governs the country.” [NOTE: cite Xi Jinping, Explanation of the Recommendations, Section I] This is planning acknowledged as a technology of governance — and, within the paper’s framework, as a technology of *Lebenswelt*-reproduction. The plan does not merely describe what will happen; it constitutes the temporal framework within which institutional action becomes meaningful.

The 4th Plenum Communiqué positions the 15th Five-Year Plan period as “critical” for “reinforcing the foundations and pushing ahead on all fronts toward basically achieving socialist modernization by 2035.” It is described as “a key link between the past and the future” — a formulation that reveals the temporal logic through which the *Lebenswelt* sustains itself. The present is constituted not as autonomous but as a stage in a larger trajectory: it derives its meaning from its position between past achievements (the 14th Five-Year Plan period, described as having allowed China to “get off to a successful start on our new journey toward the Second Centenary Goal”) and projected future states (basic socialist modernization by 2035, a “great modern socialist country” by mid-century). This is temporalized *Lebenswelt* in action: the present is never simply the present; it is always already positioned within the modernizing trajectory, evaluated by its adequacy to the projected future. [NOTE: cite 4th Plenum Communiqué for quoted formulations]

The Communiqué also announces: “Socialist modernization can only be realized through a historical process of gradual and ongoing development. It requires the unremitting hard work of one generation after another.” This formulation performs a critical semiotic operation: it removes modernization from the category of achievable goals and repositions it as a permanent horizon — an ongoing process that transcends any individual generation or plan period. This is precisely the shift from *telos* to *Lebenswelt* that the paper theorizes. Modernization is no longer a destination to be reached and thereby completed; it is the condition of the system’s political reproduction, the permanent framework within which each generation’s effort acquires its meaning. The Five-Year Plan is not a step toward the completion of modernization; it is one iteration of a process whose horizon recedes as one advances. The plan’s function is not to complete the project but to reproduce the project’s organizing force for another cycle.

The sectoral coverage of the 4th Plenum Recommendations — industrial modernization, scientific and technological self-reliance, new quality productive forces, the domestic market, economic structure, opening up, rural modernization, regional coordination, cultural development, public wellbeing, green transition, national security, defense modernization, and Party governance — provides further evidence of the metasignifier’s architectonic function. That a single planning document can coherently organize these heterogeneous domains into a unified five-year program is itself evidence that modernization functions as the relational field the paper describes. The *People’s Daily* elaboration of “the deep integration of scientific and technological innovation with industrial innovation” (推动科技创新和产业创新深度融合) [NOTE: cite *People’s Daily*, November 26, 2025] explicitly frames this integration as “supporting and guiding Chinese modernization through scientific and technological modernization” (以科技现代化支撑引领中国式现代化). The grammar is revealing: scientific breakthrough → technological application → industrial transformation → productive force development →

modernizing capacity. This is the Leninist developmental grammar — from Lenin’s electrification thesis through the present — now operating as a naturalized interpretive framework for 2025 policy discourse. [NOTE: cite Text 7 for full elaboration of this chain]

D. The Phenomenology of Modernization Where the Fetish Term Is Absent

The strongest evidence for the Lebenswelt thesis is found not where modernization is named but where its logic operates silently. A Lebenswelt that must be constantly invoked is not yet fully naturalized; one that operates as the taken-for-granted background of discourse — structuring what counts as a problem, what constitutes a solution, how institutional adequacy is evaluated — without being named has achieved the condition the paper describes. The texts examined below demonstrate precisely this condition: institutional discourse in which the modernizing grammar operates as background without centering the fetish term.

Xi Jinping’s address to the PLA and Armed Police delegation (March 2026) discusses military construction, cadre discipline, anti-corruption, and talent development. The word “modernization” (现代化) appears in the speech’s framing — it is, after all, situated within “the 15th Five-Year Plan period” (“十五五”时期) and the goal of “high-quality advancement of national defense and military modernization” (高质量推进国防和军队现代化) — but the operative content of the address concerns anti-corruption (反腐败斗争), supervision of capital flows and power operations, military budget management reform (军费预算管理改革), performance evaluation (绩效评估), and the cultivation of “revolutionized and professionalized talent” (革命化专业化人才队伍). [NOTE: cite Xi Jinping speech, March 7, 2026, Xinhua] What is phenomenologically significant is that these activities — supervising procurement, evaluating cadres, managing budgets, cultivating talent — are conducted entirely within a grammar of phased development, systematic institutional capacity-building, target-setting, and evaluation against developmental criteria. The modernizing Lebenswelt is operating as the taken-for-granted background: cadres are evaluated not by loyalty alone but by their capacity to advance the project; institutional arrangements are judged not by stability alone but by their developmental adequacy; anti-corruption is framed not as moral purification but as ensuring that resources serve the modernizing imperative (“every cent spent where it counts” — 每一分钱都用在刀刃上).

The State Council press conference on market regulation (February 2026) provides an even more striking example. This is bureaucratic discourse at its most routine: consumer protection, fair competition, platform economy governance, quality standards, inspection metrics. The word “modernization” appears only peripherally, yet the entire evaluative framework presupposes the modernizing horizon. Market regulation is evaluated by whether it supports “high-quality development” (高质量发展) and “building a strong domestic market” (建设强大国内市场). Consumer protection is framed through “unleashing consumption potential” (释放消费潜力). Quality standards are connected to “modernizing the industrial system” (现代化产业体系).

Platform governance is articulated through “winning the strategic initiative amid intense international competition.” [NOTE: cite State Council press conference, February 5, 2026] The market regulator is not discussing modernization; the market regulator is *operating within* modernization. The evaluative criteria, the problem-definitions, the metrics of success — all presuppose the modernizing horizon without needing to name it as such. This is what full naturalization looks like: the Lebenswelt is invisible precisely because it is doing the work of making the discourse intelligible.

The theoretical significance of these observations cannot be overstated. The prior draft of this supplementary section made the error of treating the explicit appearance of “modernization” in plenum documents as evidence for the thesis. But lexical frequency is not phenomenology. A word that appears in every document might be mere formula — verbal ritual, institutional boilerplate, discursive decoration. The stronger evidence is the operation of modernizing logic where the word itself is absent or peripheral: the developmental temporality, the phased-construction grammar, the evaluation-against-projected-future structure, the assumed chain from institutional reform through capacity-building to systemic advancement. When a military commander discusses anti-corruption through the grammar of developmental efficiency, or a market regulator evaluates consumer protection through the metrics of high-quality development, the Lebenswelt is demonstrating its constitutive force — not by being named but by structuring what can be thought within the system.

E. Modernization as Semiotic Fetish

The paper’s framework requires a concept that captures how modernization functions not merely as a descriptive term but as a sign invested with organizing power by the community that produces and consumes it. The semiotic concept of *fetish* provides this. A fetish is a sign that has been invested by a community of the faithful with powers that exceed its referential content— powers to organize, ground, amplify, incite, and manage the objects, processes, and guardrails that it is infused with. “Modernization” (现代化) functions as precisely such a semiotic fetish within the CPC’s discursive universe. It is not merely a word that describes a process; it is a sign that has been invested with the power to organize institutional reality. The fetish does not represent modernization as an external referent; it *constitutes* the field of institutional meaning within which reform, governance, development, and security become intelligible as elements of a single project. To name an activity as contributing to modernization is not to describe it but to invest it with significance, to locate it within a grammar of collective purpose that the sign itself makes possible.

The fetish-work of modernization is demonstrable across five dimensions in the plenum documents. It *organizes*: the 3rd Plenum Decision connects economic reform, technological innovation, democratic governance, ecological civilization, and national security within a single relational field—no other sign in the CPC’s repertoire can perform this connecting function with equivalent authority. It *grounds*: the 4th Plenum Communiqué’s statement that “socialist modernization can only be realized through a historical process” does not argue for this ground but presupposes it—modernization is the foundational assumption that makes the entire planning

discourse possible, the unquestioned premise upon which the architecture of Five-Year Plans, reform cycles, and developmental periodization rests. It *amplifies*: routine bureaucratic activities—market regulation, consumer protection, cadre evaluation, budget management—are transformed into contributions to a civilizational project by their connection to the modernizing horizon. A market regulator is not merely enforcing standards; she is contributing to “high-quality development” (高质量发展) in the service of “basically achieving socialist modernization by 2035.” The fetish magnifies significance by connecting the quotidian to the epochal.

The fetish also *incites* or *initiates*: it generates new institutional activities by making “problems” visible within its grammar. The 3rd Plenum’s approximately 300 reform measures [VERIFY: exact number] are not responses to independently existing problems; they are responses to problems that become visible only when institutional reality is evaluated against modernizing criteria. “Unbalanced and inadequate development” (发展不平衡不充分) is a “problem” only within a framework that demands balanced and adequate development as the criterion of institutional adequacy. The contradiction between development capacity and “the people’s ever-growing needs for a better life” (人民日益增长的美好生活需要) creates the problem-space that reform addresses—but this contradiction is itself constituted by the modernizing framework, which renders it legible as the *principal* contradiction of the current epoch. And the fetish *manages*: it disciplines the boundaries of legitimate discourse. Reform must advance modernization; activities that cannot be articulated within the modernizing grammar cannot be evaluated as successes. What cannot be said within the grammar of modernization cannot be recognized as a contribution to governance. The fetish defines what counts.

The “community of the faithful”—the Party, its cadres, its institutional apparatus, and to varying degrees the broader population formed by governmental technologies—encounters the fetish not as arbitrary or contingent but as self-evident, necessary, and productive. This is not false consciousness in the vulgar Marxist sense; it is how a *Lebenswelt* constitutes itself through its central organizing sign. The external observer who sees “mere repetition” when the CPC deploys modernization for the fourteenth Five-Year Plan cycle is observing the fetish from outside the community of the faithful. From within, the sign is alive—it continues to organize, ground, amplify, incite, and manage because the community continues to invest it with these powers through iterative institutional practice. And this continued investment is not irrational: the fetish produces real institutional effects—resources flow, cadres are evaluated, legislation is enacted, subjects are formed. The sign works. That it works is what sustains the community’s investment. The circularity here is not vicious but constitutive: it is the structure of every functioning *Lebenswelt*, which maintains itself precisely by producing the conditions that make its continued maintenance appear natural and necessary.

F. The Harder Question: How Naturalized Assumptions Create Reality

The *Lebenswelt* thesis claims not merely that modernization interprets reality but that it constitutes it—that the categories through which the system encounters its world also produce

the world it encounters. The prior draft of this section treated this as a “confirmation bias” risk to be guarded against. This fundamentally misunderstands the relationship between *Lebenswelt* and what other vocabularies call confirmation bias. A *Lebenswelt* is, in its essence, the structure that produces what would appear from outside as confirmation bias. It is the pre-given horizon that causes everything encountered within it to be interpreted through its categories—and more fundamentally, it is the horizon that determines what *can* be encountered at all. This is not an error of reasoning to be corrected by methodological vigilance; it is the condition of situated cognition as such. The system’s actors necessarily encounter their world through modernization categories—and this is not a deficiency but the way a lifeworld works. The question is not whether the *Lebenswelt* “biases” perception (it does, constitutively) but what the consequences of this particular constitution are for institutional practice and human experience.

The harder question—the genuine critical challenge—is therefore not “are we committing confirmation bias?” (yes, structurally, we are; the framework *is* the bias) but: how does one demonstrate that deeply naturalized assumptions do not merely interpret reality but *create* it? The answer operates through concrete institutional mechanisms, visible in the plenum documents themselves. When development is evaluated by modernization criteria, resources flow to activities that meet those criteria—and the institutional landscape is thereby shaped to confirm the criteria. When cadres are evaluated by modernization metrics, they orient their behavior accordingly—and institutional practice thereby conforms to modernizing expectations. When legislation must serve modernization, legal categories are constructed to enable modernizing activity—and the juridical order thereby produces the legal reality that modernization requires. When Five-Year Plans periodize action into phases toward “basically achieving socialist modernization,” every institutional actor experiences time as a progression toward modernization—and the temporal experience of governance is thereby constituted by the modernizing horizon. The *Lebenswelt* produces the reality it appears merely to describe. Each institutional mechanism—evaluation, resource allocation, legislation, temporal periodization—is simultaneously a mechanism of world-constitution and a mechanism of world-confirmation.

The critical question is therefore not “is this confirmation bias?” but: what are the consequences of this particular *Lebenswelt* constituting reality in its own image? What is excluded? What is rendered invisible? What costs are normalized? What alternatives are foreclosed? These are empirical and normative questions that the paper’s semiotic-phenomenological methodology can identify but cannot itself resolve. The framework demonstrates that modernization constitutes reality; it does not—and does not claim to—adjudicate whether the reality so constituted is just, sustainable, or desirable. That adjudication requires supplementary normative and empirical resources that lie beyond the scope of the present analysis [NOTE: cite relevant critical theory frameworks—Fraser, Sen, Nussbaum—that might supply such normative criteria]. But the framework does establish that the question *must* be posed—that the system’s apparent success in meeting modernization criteria cannot be taken as independent evidence for modernization’s value, since the criteria produce the evidence that appears to validate them. The circularity of self-confirmation is not a contingent defect but a structural feature of the *Lebenswelt*’s operation.

G. The Discourse-Reality Gap

A qualification must be sustained from the earlier analysis: the paper operates at the level of semiotic structure, not empirical verification of policy outcomes. The 3rd Plenum Decision may perform modernization’s architectonic function flawlessly at the level of discourse while the actual implementation of its reform measures remains fragmentary, contradictory, or incomplete. The 4th Plenum’s 15th Five-Year Plan Recommendations may organize heterogeneous domains into elegant temporal coherence while the actual five-year period unfolds through contingency, improvisation, and failure. The gap between discursive architecture and institutional practice is not a flaw in the paper’s methodology—the paper explicitly disclaims empirical verification of governance outcomes—but it is a limitation that must be acknowledged with full theoretical seriousness. What the documents evidence is the structure of official signification, not the state of institutional reality. The distinction is not incidental but methodologically constitutive: it delimits what the semiotic-phenomenological approach can and cannot claim.

Within the paper’s four-level model, this gap is structural rather than accidental. The plenum documents operate at Levels 1 and 2—abstract theoretical commitment and programmatic translation. The correspondence between these levels and Level 3 (individual-embodied experience) and Level 4 (subject-formation through governmental practice) is not guaranteed by semiotic coherence at the upper levels. A perfectly architectonic discourse may coexist with fragmented, resistant, or incoherent lived experience at the levels where governance touches individual subjects. The discourse-reality gap is therefore not a refutation of the thesis but a specification of its scope: the paper demonstrates how the *Lebenswelt* operates at the level of institutional signification; whether and how it successfully reproduces itself at the level of lived experience remains a research agenda requiring ethnographic, sociological, and implementation-evaluative methodologies that supplement rather than replace the semiotic-phenomenological approach [NOTE: cite this paper’s own discussion of the four-level model and its methodological limitations]. The gap is, moreover, itself a site of theoretical productivity: it is precisely in the space between discursive architecture and institutional practice that the dynamics of governance—compliance, resistance, adaptation, improvisation—become visible as objects of inquiry.

H. The Constitution of Confirmation Bias in Modernization

The plenum documents do not merely “support” the thesis—that formulation, characteristic of the prior draft’s engineering mentality, reduces phenomenological analysis to the accumulation of confirming instances. What the documents demonstrate is the thesis *in action*: the *Lebenswelt* reproducing itself through its institutional mechanisms; the fetish organizing reality for the community of the faithful; the modernizing grammar operating silently beneath the explicit discourse of reform, planning, and governance; and the recursive constitution of a reality that appears to confirm the categories through which it is apprehended. The 3rd Plenum Decision, the 15th Five-Year Plan Recommendations, and the supplementary institutional texts examined here are not evidence *for* the thesis; they are exhibits *of* the thesis—demonstrations of the phenomenological, semiotic, and fetishistic operations the paper describes, caught in the act of constituting the world they appear merely to interpret.

Section IX: The Constitutional Framework as Expression Rather than Container

The phenomenological consequence is that the Constitution should not be understood simply as a container into which political propositions are placed. A container model imagines a prior political reality on one side and a textual instrument on the other: the political system formulates its commitments, and the Constitution stores or announces them. The expression model reverses the emphasis. The constitutional text is a constitutive articulation of an already existing political lifeworld. It does not create modernization *ex nihilo*; it selects, stabilizes, translates, and institutionalizes meanings accumulated through Party theory, political practice, material development, and encounters with contradiction.

This explains the peculiar relationship among the Party Constitution, the Party’s fundamental political line, Congress reports, the constitutional preamble, constitutional provisions, legislation, planning, and administrative institutions. They are not isolated sources arranged only by formal hierarchy. They are stages in a process of semantic transformation. A contradiction is experienced; the Party diagnoses it; a political line gives the diagnosis programmatic form; theory condenses the line; a Congress resolution or report authorizes its doctrinal circulation; constitutional articulation gives it durable political-legal form; legislation distributes it into operative rules; administration implements it; social practice tests it; and the resulting practice generates a new contradiction.

The recursive circuit can therefore be stated in full: historical contradiction → Party diagnosis → political line → theoretical formulation → Congress resolution/report → constitutional articulation → legislation → administrative implementation → social practice → new contradiction → new theoretical articulation. The arrows should not be read as a mechanical sequence in which each stage merely transmits an unchanged message. Each stage translates and modifies the sign. The Constitution sits within the circuit as a site of stabilization and rearticulation, not as the point at which meaning ceases to move.

The Constitution’s authority is therefore not exhausted by its capacity to command. It also lies in its capacity to make a historically accumulated project appear as a coherent institutional present. It compresses the traces of revolution, construction, reform, opening, development, governance, civilization, and rejuvenation into a form that can guide legislation and administrative action. Compression inevitably produces abstraction and contestability. Yet that abstraction is precisely what permits the text to carry a changing project across time.

The expression model also clarifies why modernization appears differently at different constitutional levels. In the Party Constitution it can appear as a line, task, or theory of historical development. In the State Constitution it appears as a fundamental task, a civilizational orientation, and a distribution of institutional responsibilities. In legislation it becomes a purpose

clause, a method of legal production, or a standard for governance capacity. In local regulation it becomes an account of how a particular place contributes to “Chinese modernization.” These are not repetitions in the narrow sense; they are translations across institutional contexts.

The Party’s fundamental political line is especially important within this structure because it mediates between ontology, contradiction, and institutional activity. It identifies China as a socialist order in a particular historical stage; identifies the historically specific contradictions that prevent that order from realizing its potential; and identifies modernization as the activity through which those contradictions are addressed. Modernization does not replace socialism or Party leadership. It is the operational form through which their relationship is rendered intelligible.

The Constitution therefore expresses a political lifeworld that it also helps to reproduce. It is neither a transparent mirror of social reality nor an autonomous command imposed upon society from nowhere. Its constitutional work is recursive: it gives durable form to inherited meanings, authorizes institutions capable of acting on those meanings, and supplies categories through which the consequences of action can later be recognized as new problems of political development.

A. The Four Constitutional Functions of Modernization

Modernization gives the Constitution at least four distinct but interdependent functions. These functions should not be confused with four separate clauses or textual techniques. They describe four ways in which the Constitution participates in the political-semantic life of the modernizing project: representational, constitutive, recursive, and temporal. Together they explain why the Constitution is neither merely descriptive nor merely a normative command. It is a temporalized institutional representation of an ongoing historical project.

First, the Constitution is representational. It represents the historically constituted modernizing project: the memory of national weakness and revolutionary transformation, the achievement of socialist construction, the developmental commitments of reform and opening, the institutionalization of governance, and the projected horizon of national rejuvenation. Representation here does not mean photographic description. The Constitution selects what the political order treats as historically decisive and presents those selections as the intelligible identity of the state and the Party.

Second, the Constitution is constitutive. It converts the modernizing project into legal-political institutions, powers, duties, fundamental tasks, and principles of organization. The movement from political line to constitutional text is not a change of vocabulary alone. It produces institutional subjects capable of carrying the project forward: state organs, legislative bodies, administrative systems, educational and scientific institutions, national defense structures, and legal mechanisms through which general commitments acquire operative form.

Third, the Constitution is recursive. It provides institutions capable of modifying themselves in response to changing contradictions. A recursive Constitution is not one that endlessly revises itself without continuity. It is one that incorporates mechanisms through which the political order can observe changes in society, economy, technology, ecology, and international position, then revise law, administration, planning, and political doctrine without abandoning the project that makes revision intelligible. The constitutional text stabilizes the possibility of institutional self-correction.

Fourth, the Constitution is temporal. It connects present institutional arrangements with projected future conditions. Its commitments are read against a developmental horizon in which the present is a stage, the future is an objective, and institutional adequacy is measured by the capacity to move between them. Temporalization permits the Constitution to be both authoritative and unfinished: authoritative because it stabilizes the direction of political action, unfinished because the meaning of that direction is re-specified as the political order encounters new contradictions.

The four functions become visible in the conceptual movement from the Four Modernizations to socialist modernization, from socialist modernization to socialist modernization with Chinese characteristics, from comprehensive construction of a socialist modernized country to Chinese modernization, and from Chinese modernization to modernization as the pathway to national rejuvenation. Each formulation represents continuity, constitutes new institutional emphases, permits recursive adaptation, and reorders the temporal relation between present achievement and future obligation.

The Constitution is therefore not best understood as a static container of a completed political order. It is an institutional form through which an ongoing project represents itself, builds its instruments, revises its capacities, and projects its continuity into an uncertain future. Modernization names the project, but the Constitution gives the project a durable form in which representation, institution-building, self-correction, and historical expectation can operate together.

B. Implications for Comparative Constitutional Theory

If the foregoing analysis is correct — if modernization functions as the *Lebenswelt* of Chinese constitutionalism in the phenomenological sense specified above — then significant consequences follow for comparative constitutional theory. The most immediate consequence is diagnostic: analyses that treat Chinese constitutional texts as failed or incomplete approximations of liberal constitutionalism commit what we may term a *Lebenswelt* category error. They misidentify the pre-theoretical horizon within which Chinese constitutional signs operate, and consequently misread those signs — attributing to them meanings drawn from a *Lebenswelt* (liberal individualism, social contract) that is not operative in the Chinese context.

Zhao Tingyang’s reconceptualization of the Tianxia system (天下) as a philosophical framework for political order provides important substantive content for understanding the

civilizational self-understanding that underwrites Chinese-style modernization’s claim to distinctiveness. Tianxia supplies an account of an inclusive, hierarchical-but-not-exclusionary world-ordering principle rooted in Chinese philosophical resources. [NOTE: cite Zhao Tingyang, *Tianxia Tixi: Shijie Zhidu Zhexue Daolun* (天下体系：世界制度哲学导论) (2005); Zhao Tingyang, *All Under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order* (2021)]

The importance of Tianxia for this argument lies in the way it helps explain why Chinese-style modernization presents itself as a contribution to human civilization rather than merely as a national development strategy. Zhao provides a substantive account of what Chinese political order aspires to: an order that claims to integrate difference within a larger field of political coordination, and that refuses to treat the nation-state as the only possible horizon of political ordering. In this respect, Tianxia enriches the content-dimension of the civilizational claim and helps specify the signified toward which the language of a new form of human civilization points.

The critical qualification, however, is essential. Zhao’s Tianxia theory addresses the content of the civilizational claim, not the structure of the semiotic-phenomenological argument advanced here. It tells us something about what Chinese political order aspires to—the content of the signified—but it does not by itself theorize the sign-structure through which that content is constituted, transmitted, and reproduced as constitutional meaning. Tianxia does not analyze the semiotic mechanism of signification.

The paper therefore operates at a different analytical level. It asks not only “What does Chinese modernization aspire to?”—a question to which Zhao contributes substantially—but also “How does the sign-system of Chinese constitutionalism constitute and reproduce its meanings?” That latter question requires the semiotic-phenomenological apparatus developed here. Tianxia enriches the content of the analysis without displacing its structural framework; the two registers should be held together precisely because neither exhausts the other.

This category error manifests in several characteristic forms. The first is the ‘implementation gap’ narrative, which observes that Chinese constitutional provisions regarding rights, democracy, and rule of law are not ‘implemented’ in the manner that liberal constitutionalism would require, and concludes that Chinese constitutionalism is deficient — that it promises what it does not deliver. But this narrative presupposes that the signified of ‘rights’ in the Chinese constitutional text is the liberal signified (individual trumps against state power), and that the signified of ‘democracy’ is the liberal signified (competitive multi-party elections). If these signs are in fact signifying within a different Lebenswelt — if ‘rights’ signifies developmental entitlements to be progressively realized through modernization, and ‘democracy’ signifies consultative and participatory mechanisms that serve developmental governance — then the ‘implementation gap’ dissolves not because the gap does not exist empirically but because it has been mis-specified theoretically.

The second manifestation is the ‘façade constitutionalism’ narrative, which treats Chinese constitutional provisions as mere decorative cover for unconstrained authoritarian power. This

narrative commits the inverse error: where the implementation gap narrative takes the signs too seriously (attributing to them liberal significations they do not carry), the façade narrative takes them too lightly (treating them as empty signifiers without genuine significations). Both errors derive from the same source — the failure to identify the Lebenswelt within which the signs operate and within which they are, in fact, doing meaningful semiotic work.

A third manifestation is the 'transitology' narrative, which reads Chinese constitutionalism as a way-station on an inevitable trajectory toward liberal constitutional democracy — as a regime 'in transition' whose constitutional arrangements are provisional and will eventually be superseded by genuinely liberal institutions. This narrative does not merely misidentify the Lebenswelt; it denies the existence of an alternative Lebenswelt altogether, treating liberal constitutionalism as the universal telos toward which all constitutional orders tend. The phenomenological analysis advanced here reveals this assumption for what it is: an ontologization of one particular Lebenswelt — an elevation of the pre-theoretical horizon of liberal constitutionalism to the status of a universal truth about the nature of constitutionalism as such. [NOTE: cite Frankenberg, *Comparative Constitutional Studies* (2018); Tushnet, *Advanced Introduction to Comparative Constitutional Law* (2014)]

The methodological implication for comparative constitutional theory is clear: comparison must begin not at the level of institutional arrangements or textual provisions but at the level of Lebenswelt identification. Before one can meaningfully compare constitutional orders, one must identify the pre-theoretical horizons within which they operate — the grounds of meaning that make their respective sign-systems intelligible. This does not mean that comparison is impossible or that evaluation is precluded — it means that comparison and evaluation must be grounded in an accurate identification of what is being compared and what standards of evaluation are appropriate to the objects under consideration. The failure to perform this preliminary Lebenswelt-identification produces not criticism but incomprehension — not engaged evaluation but categorical confusion.

This conclusion is methodological, not political. It is not a defense of Chinese constitutionalism, nor is it a claim that all Lebenswelten are equally desirable or that external criticism of a constitutional order is illegitimate. It is rather the claim that criticism, to be intelligible as criticism rather than mere miscomprehension, must be grounded in an accurate identification of what it criticizes. One may well conclude, after correctly identifying modernization as the Lebenswelt of Chinese constitutionalism and correctly interpreting its constitutional signs within that horizon, that this constitutional order subordinates values one holds dear — individual autonomy, political pluralism, constraints on state power — to developmental objectives one considers insufficient to justify such subordination. But this would be a genuine criticism, directed at the actual operative logic of Chinese constitutionalism, rather than a pseudo-criticism directed at a misidentified object.

The methodological posture can now be stated with greater precision. To identify modernization as the Chinese constitutional Lebenswelt is not to declare that modernization is the only value present, the only cause operating, or the only standard by which the order should

be judged. It is to identify the horizon within which the order's multiple values are arranged and through which their institutional relations become intelligible. The analysis therefore makes criticism more exact rather than less available: it directs criticism toward the operative logic of Chinese constitutionalism rather than toward an imagined liberal version of it.

It also prevents a false choice between treating modernization as mere rhetoric and treating it as an all-powerful explanatory cause. Modernization is neither a decorative vocabulary floating above institutions nor a deterministic force that mechanically produces every constitutional arrangement. It is a mediating semantic infrastructure. It links heterogeneous elements, orders their relations, and supplies the terms in which institutional adequacy and political failure can be recognized. Its force is therefore interpretive, organizational, and recursive.

The comparative task is consequently double. One must first reconstruct the Chinese sign-system from within its own sedimented history, and then one may evaluate the consequences of that system against external normative commitments. The order in which these tasks are performed matters. Evaluation without reconstruction risks category error; reconstruction without evaluation risks quiet naturalization. The semiotic-phenomenological method seeks to hold both apart long enough for each to become intellectually responsible.

Finally, the modernizing lifeworld should not be imagined as culturally uniform or socially uncontested. Sedimentation does not eliminate dissonance. It provides the vocabulary within which contestation is articulated: disputes over distribution become disputes about common prosperity; disputes over institutional design become disputes about governance modernization; disputes over development and ecological limits become disputes about ecological civilization; disputes over security and openness become disputes about the proper relation between self-reliance and reform. The existence of a common code does not imply the absence of struggle over its interpretation.

Section X: Conclusion; Modernization as the Foundation of Chinese Constitutional Meaning

The argument of this section has been analytical rather than normative. It has not claimed that modernization is a desirable ground for constitutional meaning, that Chinese constitutionalism is legitimate because it is organized around modernization, or that the Communist Party's interpretive authority over the sign-system is justified. It has claimed something more limited and, for interpretation, more demanding: modernization has become a historically sedimented semantic and practical horizon through which Chinese constitutionalism understands its objects, institutions, contradictions, and possibilities. The claim is about intelligibility before approval. [NOTE: cite Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*; Li Zehou, *A History of Classical Chinese Thought* (中国古代思想史论)]

Modernization functions, in this account, as the phenomenological ground—the Lebenswelt in Husserl's technical sense—from which Chinese constitutional meanings become available, and as a metasignifier through which socialism, Party leadership, reform, opening, science and technology, rule of law, governance, common prosperity, ecological civilization, national rejuvenation, people's democracy, national security, and high-quality development acquire relational placement. It provides the langue within which the parole of constitutional provisions, Party reports, legislative reforms, and administrative practices signifies. It operates as telos and process, object and method, horizon and instrument. Li's jidian explains how this semantic structure becomes practical disposition; Foucault's governmentalities explain how it is institutionalized, embodied, and reproduced.

This has been the case through changing historical content rather than static conceptual identity. The modernizing problematic begins in experiences of backwardness and vulnerability; passes through revolution, socialist construction, industrialization, and the Four Modernizations; is reworked through reform, opening, and the socialist market economy; becomes reflexive through governance modernization; and is explicitly particularized through Chinese modernization and national rejuvenation. These layers were not deposited gently. They were contested, appropriated, and sometimes imposed, while the forgetting of defeated alternatives helped the current horizon appear natural. The periodic reformulation of the principal contradiction recalibrates this lifeworld without abolishing it. Governmentality and biopolitics then provide the institutional and embodied mechanisms through which the recalibrated horizon becomes available in practice.

For comparative constitutional theory, interpretation must begin with the identification of the Lebenswelt within which a constitutional order's signs signify. Without that identification, comparison becomes a projection of one order's pre-theoretical horizon onto another. The more precise formulation is not that modernization explains everything in Chinese political thought, but that it is the mediating semantic infrastructure through which otherwise heterogeneous elements are connected. Zhao Tingyang's Tianxia theory enriches the substantive content of the civilizational claim; it does not displace the structural question of how that content becomes constitutional meaning. Reconstruction must precede evaluation, but reconstruction must not become quiet naturalization.

The word “must” in the central thesis requires careful defense. It can carry at least three meanings, and only one is adequate to the argument. The first would be an empirical must: the claim that Chinese constitutional texts literally cannot exist without the word modernization. That claim is false. Modernization has been absent, implicit, displaced, or differently named at various moments, and the argument does not depend upon lexical omnipresence.

The second would be a causal must: the claim that modernization causes the content of Chinese constitutionalism in a strong, linear, or monocausal sense. That claim is too deterministic. As is clear from the discussion in this essay, modernization is itself shaped by revolution, socialism, Chinese national experience, Soviet Leninism, Marxist contradiction, Party organization, development, reform, governance, civilization, and national rejuvenation. It is

therefore not an external engine that generates constitutional form from outside history. Its meaning and force are produced within a dense field of reciprocal relations.

The third is an immanent-semantic must: if Chinese constitutionalism is interpreted according to its own historically constituted conceptual architecture, the Constitution and the Party's fundamental political line cannot be adequately understood without locating them within the modernizing lifeworld. This is the defensible claim. It does not say that the texts could not physically exist without modernization language. It says that their relations among socialism, Party leadership, productive forces, law, governance, common prosperity, ecological civilization, national security, national rejuvenation, and changing contradictions would remain unintelligible if modernization were treated as merely one policy preference among others.

The third meaning also preserves the distinction between historical explanation and normative endorsement. To say that modernization is semantically necessary for an immanent interpretation is not to say that the modernizing project is just, that its institutional choices are effective, or that its distribution of power should be accepted. It is to say that an interpreter who brackets the modernizing lifeworld has not yet identified the object being interpreted. Criticism can then proceed, but it proceeds against an accurately reconstructed political order rather than against a liberal idealization of it.

A second refinement is equally important: modernization is not the final signified. The argument should not terminate by treating modernization as the ultimate foundation of Chinese political meaning. That would simply replace one foundationalism with another. Modernization itself is historically produced. It is a sedimented response to problems and possibilities that precede its full conceptual articulation, and it remains open to redefinition as those problems and possibilities change.

Its meaning depends upon revolution and socialism; upon Chinese national experience and Soviet Leninism; upon Marxist contradiction and Party organization; upon development, reform, and governance; upon civilization and national rejuvenation. These are not external historical footnotes appended to an already complete sign. They are the conditions through which the sign became available and continues to acquire content. Modernization is therefore simultaneously signifier and signified, process and horizon, object and method, historical product and producer of history.

This recursive character is precisely what makes the Lebenswelt formulation useful. The Chinese political subject does not simply pursue modernization as an object standing before it. It increasingly experiences political reality through categories generated by the modernizing project: what counts as backward or advanced, balanced or unbalanced, secure or vulnerable, rigid or reformable, governable or fragmented, adequate or inadequate. Modernization is thus a mode of political cognition as well as a policy horizon. It makes reality available in forms that invite institutional response.

The resulting conceptual architecture can be stated in full: Marxian historical materialism → productive forces + contradiction + historical transformation → the Leninist revolutionary state → planning + technology + electrification + organization → Soviet socialist construction → industrialization + centralized planning + technological capacity → the early CPC → revolution + national liberation + overcoming backwardness → Mao → socialist construction + industrialization + the Four Modernizations → Deng → modernization + reform + opening + socialism → Jiang and Hu → market socialism + development + scientific development + balanced development → Xi and the New Era → governance modernization + ecological civilization + common prosperity + national rejuvenation → the Twentieth Congress → 中国式现代化 (Chinese style modernization) → CPC leadership + socialism + development + democracy + common prosperity + spiritual civilization + ecological civilization + peaceful development + human civilization → Constitution → legislation → governance → local institutional practice → new contradictions → new modernization requirements → recursive reproduction of the political order.

The chain should not be read as a smooth ladder of inevitable progress. Its terms contain interruptions, reversals, contested translations, and moments in which one political code displaces another. The Cultural Revolution demonstrates that modernization could be subordinated to revolutionary politics; reform and opening demonstrate that institutional adaptation could be presented as fidelity to socialism; governance modernization demonstrates that the state could become an object of its own modernizing observation. The architecture is therefore developmental without being merely linear, recursive without being closed, and historically directed without being predetermined.

At the point represented by the Constitution, modernization ceases to be adequately described as development policy. It becomes a mode of political cognition and an institutional grammar. The Constitution represents the modernizing project, constitutes its legal-political instruments, enables recursive adjustment, and temporalizes the relation between present arrangements and future obligations. Legislation, governance, and local practice then return the constitutional articulation to the social world, where it encounters conditions that will be interpreted as new contradictions and translated into new modernization requirements.

The final formulation can therefore be stated with both force and restraint: modernization is not simply something Chinese constitutionalism seeks to accomplish. It is part of the lifeworld through which Chinese constitutionalism comes to signify what it is accomplishing, why it is accomplishing it, and how successive historical contradictions are converted into political, constitutional, and legal form. The Constitution and the Party's fundamental political line are not external instruments for implementing an already complete modernization. Within the internal logic of contemporary Chinese constitutionalism, they are forms through which modernization is signified, stabilized, reproduced, and revised—through sedimented practical rationality, genealogically contested reinterpretation, governmental technologies, biopolitical interventions, and the recursive interaction of systemic coding with lived experience. That is the immanent-semantic meaning of the claim that they must be understood as expressions of modernization.

APPENDIX: Computational Reconstitution — The Paper’s Architecture in Machine-Representable Terms

This appendix performs a translational exercise. The preceding paper presents its argument in the form that human cognition processes most naturally: sequential prose, with linear argumentation punctuated by conceptual development. But the argument’s actual structure is not linear. It is a multi-dimensional network of concepts, relations, feedback loops, and hierarchical embeddings that has been FLATTENED into two-dimensional sequential text for human consumption. This appendix attempts to make visible the higher-dimensional structure that the prose conceals—to show how machine systems reconstitute the layered, networked, non-linear architecture that human-readable text necessarily compresses. This is not merely a “diagram of the argument.” It is an attempt to represent the argument in a form closer to its actual computational structure—the form in which a sufficiently sophisticated machine system would internally represent the relationships that prose can only gesture toward sequentially.

A. THE ARGUMENT AS DIRECTED GRAPH

The minimal representation is a typed, directed, time-indexed multigraph $G = (V, E, \tau, \omega, \delta)$. V contains concept-nodes; E contains directed relations; τ assigns edge type; ω assigns weight or salience; and δ assigns historical time. It is a multigraph because nodes can have several relations—for example, Party leadership can constitute modernization and constrain its admissible meanings. Direction is retained even where relations are later reversible.

Nodes 1–8 form the central semantic core: (1) modernization, the cross-cutting organizing concept; (2) *Lebenswelt*, the pre-given horizon of intelligibility; (3) sedimentation, the persistence of prior meaning in present interpretation; (4) metasignifier, the higher-order sign that positions other signs; (5) the principal contradiction, the diagnostic specification of what modernization must address; (6) Party leadership, the claimed directing subject of the project; (7) socialism, the ideological and institutional form that defines the project’s political identity; and (8) the Constitution, the stabilizing and expressive legal-political articulation of the project.

Nodes 9–16 specify institutional and material translation: (9) legislation, the rule-producing layer below constitutional articulation; (10) governmentality, the set of techniques that convert rationalities into conduct; (11) biopolitics, the management and formation of populations and bodies; (12) *jidian*, the cultural-psychological sedimentation of historical content into practical disposition; (13) productive forces, the material and technical capacity whose development supplies a recurring developmental measure; (14) contradiction, the general movement through which conditions become politically diagnosable problems; (15) revolution, the rupture that converts backwardness into organized political transformation; and (16) reform, the controlled alteration of institutions within continuity of project.

Nodes 17–24 specify relational and developmental content: (17) opening, managed exposure to external knowledge, capital, technology, and comparison; (18) governance, the

capacity of institutions to observe, decide, implement, correct, and learn; (19) common prosperity, the distributive criterion of the modernizing project; (20) ecological civilization, the ecological constraint and redefinition of development; (21) national rejuvenation, the national-historical horizon; (22) sign-system, the structured field of differential relations; (23) interpretant, the provisional meaning produced by a sign’s uptake; and (24) naturalization, the conversion of explicit political categories into practically available orientations.

Nodes 25–34 specify reflexive and doctrinal operators: (25) reflexivity, self-observation and modification; (26) teleology, the projected future; (27) Marxism-Leninism, the apparatus of productive forces, contradiction, organization, and socialist construction; (28) Chinese modernization, the particularized form of the general sign; (29) national security, protection of political and developmental continuity; (30) high-quality development, development beyond aggregate growth; (31) material and spiritual civilization, paired dimensions of modernization; (32) peaceful development, its international specification; (33) people’s democracy, its participatory form; and (34) the socialist market economy, market mechanisms within Party-directed socialism.

The graph uses typed edges: constitutes, a condition of intelligibility; mediates, a translation between domains; sediments-into, persistence of an earlier formation; is-signified-through, relational meaning; indexes, reference to a material or historical condition; enables and constrains, expansion or limitation of admissible action; produces and naturalizes, generation of outcomes or taken-for-granted orientations; recalibrates and contradicts, re-coding or structured tension; subordinates and incorporates, displacement or internal assignment of a mechanism; juridifies and operationalizes, conversion into law or procedure; observes, production of a distinction; and feeds-back, re-entry into an earlier layer.

Directionality is substantive. The main processing chain is provisionally unidirectional: contradiction → diagnosis → political line → theoretical formulation → constitutional articulation → legislation → governmental technologies → subject formation. Other relations are reciprocal: modernization ↔ Party leadership expresses mutual specification; modernization ↔ socialism expresses recursive definition and demonstration; constitution ↔ practice expresses stabilization followed by testing; and sign ↔ interpretant expresses production followed by reinterpretation.

Three cycles are explicit. Cycle 1: contradiction → diagnosis → political line → institutional transformation → new contradiction. Cycle 2: historical experience → Party theory → congress report or resolution → constitutional articulation → legislation → administration → social practice → revised theory. Cycle 3: modernization of society → observation of state capacity → governance modernization → modernization of law and administration → greater capacity to observe and govern. Each pass changes the graph’s state and therefore the meaning of later edges.

The graph has embedded subgraphs. Sedimentation contains nine ordered nodes: backwardness; revolution; socialist construction; industrialization and the Four Modernizations;

reform and opening; the socialist market economy; governance modernization; Chinese modernization; and national rejuvenation. Principal contradiction contains three salient instantiations: revolutionary and class-centered contradiction; growing material and cultural needs versus backward social production; and growing needs for a better life versus unbalanced and inadequate development. Chinese modernization contains five features: huge population, common prosperity, coordinated material and spiritual civilization, harmony between humanity and nature, and peaceful development.

A second embedded subgraph is the naturalization pathway: abstract theory → collective-institutional practice → individual-embodied orientation → feedback. A third is the seven-section research pipeline: genealogy; Marxist-Leninist and socialist modernization; comparative differentiation; textual evolution; New Era theory; legal juridification; and semiotic-phenomenological interpretation. These embeddings matter because removing a parent node does not merely remove one label. It removes the subgraph whose internal relations make the parent node computationally meaningful.

B. LAYERED NETWORK ARCHITECTURE

The graph projects into a layered network $N = \{L0, L1, \dots, L7\}$. Each layer performs a distinct transformation and cross-layer edges carry information, norms, classifications, and feedback. The layers are functional, not physically separate institutions: the Party can diagnose contradictions, formulate theory, encode constitutional meaning, deploy governmental technologies, and observe the effects of intervention.

Layer 0 — ONTOLOGICAL SUBSTRATE: Material conditions. This input layer contains productive forces, population, territory, technology, international position, ecological conditions, and class structure. It is not “raw reality” in an epistemically unmediated sense. It is the set of material and social conditions that become available to political observation and are subsequently classified. The layer supplies states and changes; it does not by itself determine their political meaning.

Layer 1 — CONTRADICTION DETECTION: Diagnostic apparatus. The Party’s diagnostic apparatus transforms material variation into a formalized principal contradiction. Detection here is a classification operation: the system selects a distinction—backward or advanced, balanced or unbalanced, sufficient or inadequate, secure or vulnerable—and treats it as politically central. The output is not a neutral measurement. It is a prioritized description of the problem-space to which political action must respond.

Layer 2 — THEORETICAL FORMULATION: Generative apparatus. The theoretical apparatus transforms the detected contradiction into a political line and ideological formulation. Its nodes include Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, the Theory of Three Represents, the Scientific Outlook on Development, and Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era. This layer generates the

concepts that specify why the contradiction matters, what historical stage is being described, and what type of institutional response is legitimate.

Layer 3 — CONSTITUTIONAL ARTICULATION: Encoding layer. The political-theoretical output is translated into constitutional text, including both the Party Constitution and the State Constitution. Encoding is a compression operation. A complex historical program is represented through preambles, general programs, fundamental tasks, institutional principles, rights and duties, and organizational rules. The encoded form gains durability and authority, but it also loses some of the contextual detail present in the originating discourse.

Layer 4 — LEGISLATIVE OPERATIONALIZATION: Decompression and distribution. Constitutional encoding cascades into national legislation, administrative regulations, provincial regulations, and local measures. This layer decompresses general terms into domain-specific rules, procedures, powers, duties, standards, and remedies. The direction of translation is downward in institutional scale but not necessarily downward in meaning. Local rules can generate new interpretations of modernization that later return to national policy through reporting, evaluation, and policy experimentation.

Layer 5 — GOVERNMENTAL TECHNOLOGIES: Governmentality layer. Legal and political formulations become institutional practices: cadre evaluation, performance metrics, planning targets, educational curricula, administrative information systems, urban design, media regulation, and criteria for allocating resources. This layer supplies frequency, repetition, incentives, sanctions, and material settings. It is the principal operational interface between a semantic code and the routines through which institutions and officials act.

Layer 6 — BIOPOLITICAL SUBJECT-FORMATION: Output and feedback input. Governmental technologies produce subjects who inhabit a modernizing world through categories of development, quality, mobility, security, opportunity, risk, and national future. The output is not assumed to be agreement. It includes compliance, improvisation, resistance, strategic adaptation, and dissonance. Biopolitical processes operate on bodies and populations; phenomenological processes describe how those interventions become practical orientations and expectations.

Layer 7 — FEEDBACK/RECURSION: Return channel. Social practice, resistance, innovation, failure, and emergent contradiction feed back into the material substrate and the diagnostic apparatus. The return channel is selective. Not every experience becomes a principal contradiction; not every contradiction becomes doctrine; and not every local innovation becomes national policy. The layer therefore requires filters for salience, institutional visibility, political authorization, and compatibility with the existing semantic architecture.

Cross-layer activation: MODERNIZATION. Modernization is not located at one layer. It is a cross-cutting activation function that conditions processing at every layer. It changes the threshold, weighting, and admissibility of signals: a material condition becomes salient when read as relevant to modernization; a legal rule becomes authoritative when encoded as advancing

it; and a governance metric becomes meaningful when it measures modernizing capacity. This is an analogy to a normalization parameter, not a claim that the political system is literally a neural network.

C. TEMPORAL DYNAMICS

The directed graph is not a timeless object. Each node and edge has a state that changes with historical time, and the relevant computational object is therefore G_t rather than G . The same edge can have different weights, meanings, or admissibility conditions at different t . Modernization’s movement from industrialization to governance, ecology, common prosperity, and national rejuvenation is not the addition of unrelated labels; it is a sequence of reweightings within a persistent network.

Sedimentation can be modeled as a persistent LIFO-like temporal stack. The most recent layer is normally the first layer encountered in current discourse, but later layers do not pop earlier layers out of existence. They remain addressable as latent states, inherited constraints, or recoverable interpretants. A new layer changes retrieval weights and activation thresholds: earlier components may be down-weighted, reactivated, or recombined, but are not deleted. The stack is therefore LIFO in order of surface accessibility and persistent in storage. Its computational analogue is closer to a versioned stack with historical retention than to destructive replacement.

The principal phase transitions are event markers rather than clean resets: 1949 marks the transition from revolutionary seizure toward state construction; 1956 marks socialist transformation and industrialization as central tasks; 1966–1976 marks the subordination of modernization to revolutionary politics; 1978 marks reform and opening and the reordering of socialism around modernization; 1992 marks the socialist market economy; 2012 marks the explicit coupling of the Chinese Dream and two-centenary horizon; 2017 marks the New Era and the reformulated principal contradiction; and 2022 marks Chinese modernization as the central task. A model should treat each event as a parameter shift with persistence, not as a new data set with no inherited state.

The system also has multiple clocks. The five-year plan is an implementation clock; the Party Congress cycle, approximately five years, is a doctrinal and personnel clock; and constitutional amendment is an irregular but Congress-correlated clock of formal encoding. These clocks are coupled but not identical. A policy can be piloted before doctrinal consolidation, doctrinal language can precede legal amendment, and a constitutional amendment can lag behind operational practice. A computational reconstruction must therefore represent asynchronous updates rather than assume one synchronized cycle.

Temporal horizons are represented by projected completion states. The two centenary goals supply milestone variables: a completed moderately prosperous society and a great modern socialist country by mid-century. The primary stage of socialism supplies a duration-bound but extensible parameter: it marks incompleteness while preserving continuity. In state-space terms,

these are not terminal states guaranteed to end the process. They are target regions that change the error signal by which present adequacy is assessed.

Path dependency is therefore constraining but not determining. Earlier sedimentation conditions the initial weights, available categories, and admissible transformations, analogous to weight initialization conditioning—but not fixing—the subsequent learning trajectory of an adaptive model. The analogy has limits: political systems do not learn from a single objective function, and the relevant “loss” is contested. The point is narrower: inherited semantic structure changes the cost and plausibility of later reinterpretation.

D. QUANTITATIVE ANALYTICS FRAMEWORK

Quantification would not prove a phenomenological thesis directly. It would operationalize its structural predictions and expose them to counterevidence. The following instruments are therefore tests of the paper’s claims, not replacements for interpretation.

(1) Semantic network analysis. Construct a weighted, directed graph from CPC congress reports, Party and state constitutional texts, legislation, and planning documents from 1921–2022. Nodes are concepts or normalized phrases; edges are weighted by co-occurrence, syntactic dependence, citation, or policy relation. The metasignifier hypothesis predicts unusually high betweenness centrality for 现代化, especially after 1978, because it should bridge semantic communities. Community detection can test whether it connects economic, legal, social, ecological, security, and civilizational clusters; temporal comparison can track changes in centrality, bridging function, and neighborhood.

(2) Topic modeling. Apply LDA or a comparable dynamic topic model to the full documentary corpus, with separate models for congress reports, constitutional texts, legislation, and planning materials. The hypothesis is not merely that modernization forms a frequent topic. It is that modernization co-occurs with the widest range of substantive topics and migrates across topic boundaries over time. Topic coherence tests whether the extracted clusters are interpretable; exclusivity tests whether modernization is distinctive rather than a generic word appearing everywhere; and dynamic models test whether topics associated with modernization expand from industrial production toward governance, ecology, distribution, security, and civilization.

(3) Embedding-space analysis. Train temporally separated word or phrase embeddings on a Chinese political-legal corpus and represent key concepts as vectors in a high-dimensional space. Test the geometric centrality of 现代化 relative to political vocabulary, then track its movement from industrial and technological neighborhoods toward governance, ecological, distributive, and civilizational neighborhoods. Relational semiotics can be tested through compositional distances: are pairings such as 现代化 + 法治, 现代化 + 共同富裕, and 现代化 + 生态文明 closer than the independent vectors would predict? A positive result would not establish meaning, but it would identify non-random relational regularities.

(4) Hierarchical state-space model. Represent the recursive circuit with latent state variables for principal-contradiction formulation, ideological line, constitutional text, legislative framework, governance metrics, and social indicators. A transition function T maps the current state and detected contradiction into the next political-theoretical and institutional state; an observation function O maps latent states into textual outputs, legal provisions, plans, and measurable practices. Parameters can be estimated or calibrated against observed textual evolution. The test is whether a model containing recursive diagnosis and modernization-conditioned transitions reproduces the observed sequence better than a model with independent documents or a linear development trend.

(5) Information-theoretic measures. Mutual information can estimate the dependence between modernization and other political-legal concepts. Conditional entropy can ask how much uncertainty about a concept’s neighboring vocabulary is reduced once the modernization formulation is known. Transfer entropy can test directional information flow between modernization discourse and other discourses, while time-series models can explore Granger-predictive relations between modernization language, contradiction formulations, and policy categories. These measures must be interpreted cautiously: statistical direction is not semantic intention, and predictive precedence is not proof of political causation.

(6) Sedimentation as Bayesian updating. Treat the nine sedimentary layers as sequential Bayesian updates. Let $P(M)$ represent a prior distribution over possible political meanings of modernization. Each layer supplies a likelihood $L_i(M | E_i)$, where E_i is associated material, institutional, or doctrinal evidence; the posterior after layer i is proportional to L_i multiplied by the prior from layer $i-1$. This captures path dependency and adaptive updating. To preserve archaeology, the current Lebenswelt is a mixture distribution: earlier components receive lower or altered weights but are not assigned probability zero. Parameters would require evidence about texts, institutions, and practice; they cannot be inferred from official vocabulary alone.

E. THE TRANSLATION PROBLEM: WHAT IS LOST AND GAINED

The translation from prose to computational representation is not a conversion from a less precise form into a more precise form. It is a change in the object being preserved. Prose preserves sequence, voice, ambiguity, and situated address; computation preserves explicit relations, state transitions, weights, and operations. Each representation makes some structure available by making other structure less available.

LOST. Formalization loses ambiguity as a productive resource. Prose can let a term carry several historically related meanings; a computational variable normally requires a rule deciding when uses count as the same. Formalization also attenuates rhetorical force, cadence, irony, implication, and the persuasive architecture by which a reader is led through difficulty. The aesthetic dimension is part of how the argument makes a Lebenswelt perceptible. A graph can record that modernization mediates between socialism and reform, but cannot reproduce the felt force of that mediation.

The phenomenological texture is lost in a more exact sense. The argument claims that modernization is a *Lebenswelt*, but the argument itself is composed within a humanistic and philosophical *Lebenswelt*: a tradition of close reading, historical memory, conceptual association, and embodied judgment. A computational representation can model the structure of that claim without inhabiting the horizon in which the claim has significance. It can also suppress the unsaid content—the absences, silences, and defeated alternatives that genealogy treats as historically meaningful but that a corpus model may count only as missing data.

GAINED. Computational reconstitution makes non-linear structure visible. It can expose simultaneous relations that sequential prose must distribute across pages; make feedback loops and hierarchical embeddings explicit; scale the framework to corpora too large for close reading; and convert interpretive claims into hypotheses that can be challenged by alternative data. It also forces assumptions into the open. A researcher must specify what counts as a node, an edge, a layer, a contradiction, an update, or a successful prediction. That explicitness supports comparison, error detection, sensitivity analysis, and reproducibility.

THE IRREDUCIBLE REMAINDER. Something in the humanistic argument remains outside computational reconstitution: the argument’s own *Lebenswelt*. Computation can model structure but not significance—not what it means to make this argument, in this tradition, at this moment. Conversely, computation makes available what sequential prose cannot: simultaneous multi-dimensional relations, precise feedback dynamics, corpus-level centrality tests, and repeated comparison across periods and document classes. Prose is richer in situated significance; computation is more precise about formal relations. Neither is reducible to the other. They share the argument itself but access it through incommensurable cognitive architectures.

This remainder returns the appendix to the Luhmann/Husserl tension. A systems description can model how a political order reproduces distinctions and observations; a phenomenological description can ask how a world is given to subjects as meaningful. The computational and the phenomenological are not rival answers to one question. Their irreducibility is itself a condition of contemporary intellectual life: machines can reconstitute the architecture of relations that human cognition expresses sequentially, while human cognition remains responsible for significance, judgment, and the decision about what the architecture is an architecture of. Computational reconstitution therefore completes neither the paper nor its object. It makes the paper’s concealed structure more explicit while leaving its meaning necessarily open.