

从群众中来，到群众中去 [“From the Masses, to the Masses”]: Contradiction, Mass Line, and Democratic Centralism as a Constitutional Governing Loop — and People's Democratic Dictatorship as Its Gatekeeper

An essay in Chinese Marxist-Leninist political theory and its constitutionalism

Larry Catá Backer (王 哲)¹

(discussion Draft 23 August 2026)

Abstract

This essay reconstructs the governing loop of Chinese Marxist-Leninist constitutionalism — contradiction theory, the mass line, and democratic centralism — not as discrete institutional tools but as a single recursive system whose intelligibility depends on the modernizing Lebenswelt within which it operates. Building on the author’s prior work theorizing modernization (现代化) as the metasignifier and historically sedimented horizon of Chinese constitutionalism, the essay traces each governing principle across four simultaneously operative strands: normative, state-constitutional, Party-line, and Party-internal-organizational. It extends the triad through the dual revolutions (self-revolution and social revolution) and identifies people’s democratic dictatorship (人民民主专政) as the meta-mechanism — a Peircean semiotic thirdness — that constitutes the categories of “the people” and “the enemy” before the loop can operate on either. The essay deploys Li Zehou’s concept of jidian (积淀, sedimentation) to show how modernizing categories acquire depth, spatiality, and directional motion along the Socialist Path, and draws on Guiguzi (鬼谷子) — particularly the chapters on probing (揣篇), exploiting fissures (抵巇), response and reflection (反应), cultivating aspirations (养志), and opening and closing (捭阖) — as a pre-semiotic Chinese vocabulary for the governance problems the Marxist-Leninist loop recodes rather than invents. The argument is reconstructive before it is normative: accurate identification of the system in its own vocabulary must precede evaluation. The essay closes by arguing that theory provides the conceptual space within which empirical testing becomes intelligible, and that the governing loop, like Guiguzi’s sage guarding the gates, is the mechanism by which change without limit is given direction.

Executive Summary for Experts

This essay advances a phenomenological-semiotic reconstruction of the constitutional governing loop in Chinese Marxist-Leninist theory. Its principal contribution is threefold. First, it shows that contradiction theory, the mass line, and democratic centralism each operate across four structurally independent strands — normative (N), state-constitutional (S), Party-line (L), and Party-internal-organizational (O) — producing a sixteen-cell matrix per principle that is unevenly developed, unevenly textualized, and periodically re-wired. Second, it identifies people’s democratic dictatorship as a Peircean semiotic thirdness: the general, law-like rule that constitutes the categories of “the people” and “the enemy” through an act of intelligent naming (Guiguzi’s 明名), rather than classifying a pre-existing population. This draws on the author’s published semiotic framework in “The Soulful Machine” (2024), where Peircean firstness, secondness, and thirdness are deployed to analyze human-machine co-constitution. Third, the essay deploys Li Zehou’s jidian (积淀) not as flat geological layering but as three-dimensional conceptual sedimentation — objects with depth, lateral extension, and directional motion along the Socialist Path — set in dialectical motion through the mass line and channeled by democratic centralism.

¹ W. Richard and Mary Eshelman Faculty Scholar; Professor of Law and International Affairs
Penn State Dickinson Law, a unit of The Pennsylvania State University system | 239 Lewis Katz Building,
University Park, PA 16802. Claude, Grok, and Harvey AI were used in the drafting and development of this article,
the ideas are strictly my own as are all errors and omissions

The essay integrates Guiguzi passages (Warring States period) as a pre-semiotic Chinese vocabulary for the governance problems the Marxist-Leninist loop recodes: 揣 (probing) for the mass line's diagnostic function, 因 (exploiting fissures) for contradiction theory's calibrated diagnosis, 反应 (response and reflection) for the feedback cycle, 养志 (cultivating aspirations) for democratic centralism's concentration function, and 捭阖 (opening and closing) for the loop's overall mechanism of directing change. The interdisciplinary framework cuts across Chinese constitutional law (Jiang Shigong, Chen Duanhong), Western Marxist theory (Pashukanis, Gramsci), systems theory (Luhmann), and phenomenological constitutionalism (Schmitt, Häberle). The essay's method is reconstructive: the system must be made visible in its own vocabulary before normative judgment can proceed.

Executive Summary for General Readers and Policymakers

China's governing system is built on a set of interlocking principles: contradiction theory (diagnosing what is wrong at each stage of development), the mass line (gathering information and grievances from the population), democratic centralism (concentrating scattered input into unified policy), and people's democratic dictatorship (determining who counts as "the people" entitled to participate and who does not). This essay argues that these are not separate administrative tools but parts of a single recursive loop — a system that repeatedly diagnoses, gathers, concentrates, decides, and then returns to check whether its decisions still fit the conditions on the ground. The essay shows that this loop only makes sense within the framework of "modernization" as China's Communist Party defines it: a historically evolving project that sets the direction, the priorities, and the criteria by which social problems are identified and policy responses are judged. The concept of modernization functions as the system's organizing principle — not just a policy goal but the lens through which everything else acquires meaning. The essay also draws on an ancient Chinese text, Guiguzi, to show that the governance problems China's Marxist-Leninist system addresses — how to probe a society's conditions, how to concentrate political will without fragmentation, how to respond to changing circumstances — have deep Chinese antecedents, even though the modern system recodes them through Marxist-Leninist vocabulary and Party organization. For policymakers, the key implication is that analyzing China's constitutional system through the assumptions of liberal democracy (separation of powers, competitive elections, individual rights as limits on state power) produces a category error: it measures one system by the standards of another. Effective engagement requires understanding the system on its own terms first, including its internal logic of diagnosis, feedback, and correction, before normative judgments can be usefully applied.



Introduction

Official Chinese Marxist-Leninist discourse — as presented in the People's Daily (Renmin Ribao), the Central Committee's theoretical journal Qiushi (求是), and its historical predecessor Red Flag (Hongqi, 红旗) — describes Party-state governance less as a line of command than as a loop that must repeatedly return to the conditions of its own intelligibility. The theory of contradiction (矛盾论) supplies the ontological diagnosis of social conditions; the mass line (群众路线) supplies the epistemological method for gathering that diagnosis from below; democratic centralism (民主集中制) supplies the organizational mechanism that concentrates those inputs into binding state action; and, in the doctrine's more recent extension, the Party's self-revolution (自我革命) and the social revolution

(社会革命) it leads keep the apparatus fit to keep running. Yet the loop is not closed because it has no outside. It is closed provisionally, by returning each decision to the field that made the decision intelligible in the first place.

Nonetheless, that simple and straightforward analysis conceals a much richer theoretical foundation worth exploring. Each of these core concepts of Chinese Marxist-Leninist theory has a genealogy that affects and guides its evolution; each exists simultaneously as a bundle of normative concepts and as operational principles; each exists recursively within the logic of its own conceptual cage and its operational forms and as a critical element of the dialectical inter-subjectivity of Chinese Leninism, compelled to proceed forward, catching error and bringing along the masses toward the ideal; and each occupies a space that mimics its respective internal framing within the hierarchically superior system of people’s democratic dictatorship, within which their respective internal and inter-systemic dialectics can be managed, organized, and directed under the meta-signification of “modernization” as that term is understood within Chinese Marxist-Leninism. All of this is then bundled together and juridified within the constitutional ordering of the Chinese State Constitution and as the conceptual structuring of the organization of the collective political vanguard, the leading force of which is the Communist Party. The concepts, methods, signals, values, approaches, and relationships, the dialectics and the objectives of the political order — its constitution — can be understood more usefully as the phenomenological expression of the operation of these systems in and as the active expression of Chinese constitutionalism. To understand Chinese constitutionalism, then, requires at least some understanding of the conceptual-operational power of the sub-systems through which it is expressed, maintained, protected, and advanced. To those ends this essay uses my previous work, “Modernization as the Lebenswelt of Chinese Constitutionalism,” as its theoretical foundation and starting point. From that baseline, the essay then seeks to better understand the dynamic quality of what are, at their core, the fundamental constitutive elements of Chinese constitutionalism.

The argument therefore proceeds in spirals rather than in a straight line. It first asks how the modernizing horizon makes the governing principles intelligible, then follows contradiction, the mass line, and democratic centralism through their normative, state-constitutional, Party-line, and Party-internal-organizational strands. It returns to their sedimentation, rupture, and repair; adds the dual revolutions and the people’s democratic dictatorship that gates the field; and closes by asking what it means for the loop to be inhabited. Each return is meant to add a dimension — conceptual, institutional, embodied, historical, and semiotic — rather than to restate a conclusion already reached. The method is reconstructive before it is normative: the order must be made visible in its own vocabulary before its claims can be judged.

The argument that follows cuts across fields that do not ordinarily speak to one another, and the reader should know where the seams are. Chinese constitutional scholarship, including Jiang Shigong’s account of the unwritten constitution and Chen Duanhong’s work on constituent power, helps clarify the relation between political founding, constitutional text, and institutional authority. But these accounts are not imported as a master key. The claim here is that legal text is one moment in a larger process of constitutional reproduction, a process in which the Party’s political direction, state form, and lived categories continually translate into one another.

The other seams run outward: Pashukanis’s law-form and Gramsci’s account of hegemony offer analogues and contrasts for the mass line’s naturalization function; Luhmann’s autopoiesis supplies a structural parallel to a system that reproduces itself through its own operations, even as the governing loop refuses a purely self-referential closure; and Schmitt’s nomos and Häberle’s open society of constitutional interpreters mark competing phenomenological accounts of order, space, and interpretation. This is not a literature review. These frameworks are pressure points at

which the argument can be tested: Chinese constitutional law, jurisprudence, political philosophy, semiotics, cognitive and systems theory do not converge into one vocabulary, and the seams are part of what the loop has to explain.

An older Chinese vocabulary supplies a productive, pre-semiotic framing for that problem. Guiguzi’s 《揣篇》 (Chapter on Probing) opens: “古之善用天下者，必量天下之權，而揣諸侯之情。量權不審，不知強弱輕重之稱；揣情不審，不知隱匿變化之動靜。” — “Those who were good at governing the world in ancient times necessarily measured the power of the world and probed the sentiments of the feudal lords. If power is not carefully measured, one cannot know the balance of strength and weakness, lightness and weight; if sentiments are not carefully probed, one cannot discern the movement and stillness of what is hidden and changing.” In this essay, 揣 is not yet a theory of signs; it is a method for discovering what can become a meaningful signal. The continuity with my own semiotic work is deliberate rather than decorative: in “The Soulful Machine,” I had already placed Guiguzi’s 明名 (míng míng)—intelligent naming—at the root of a classical Chinese rhetoric of naming that gives a thing form and essence. Guiguzi therefore supplies an older vocabulary for the question of how a field becomes legible before it is governed, while later Marxist-Leninist doctrine recodes that question through historical materialism, class analysis, and Party organization rather than claiming a line of historical descent.

《揣篇》 then specifies 量權 (measuring power): “何謂量權？曰：度於大小，謀於眾寡；稱貨財有無之數，料人民多少、饒乏、有餘不足幾何？辨地形之險易，孰利孰害？謀慮孰長孰短？揆君臣之親疏，孰賢孰不肖？與賓客之智慧，孰少孰多？觀天時之禍福，孰吉孰凶？諸侯之交，孰用孰不用？百姓之心，去就變化，孰安孰危？孰好孰憎？反側孰辯？能知如此者，是謂量權。” — “What is meant by measuring power? Gauge according to size and plan according to numbers; assess the quantity of wealth and goods available or lacking; estimate the number of people, whether they are abundant or scarce, and by what margin resources may be in surplus or deficit; distinguish the ease and difficulty of terrain and what is advantageous or harmful; consider which strategies are long-term or short-term; judge the closeness or distance of ruler and ministers, who is worthy and who is not; consider the wisdom of guests and advisers, whose knowledge is less and whose is more; observe the auspiciousness or misfortune of Heaven’s timing, what is favorable and what is ominous; consider relations among the feudal lords, who should be used and who should not; and attend to the hearts of the common people, their inclinations and changes, whose situation is secure or dangerous, whose sentiments are favorable or hostile, and who can discern wavering loyalties. He who knows these things is said to measure power.” What is striking about this list, when read alongside the mass line’s institutional apparatus, is that it is already a grammar of relational attention rather than a catalogue of inert data. Size, numbers, wealth, population, terrain, strategy, political proximity, time, inter-state relations, and 百姓之心 (the hearts of the common people) are not objects to be passively received but conditions from which governance must infer what can be named and acted upon. The mass line’s operational channels — petition offices, hotlines, field research (調查研究), digital consultation platforms, and the institutionalized collective representation I described in my work on Whole Process People’s Democracy — perform something structurally analogous: they do not merely collect grievances but probe sentiments in order to determine which signals can be translated into contributions to the modernizing project and which remain noise. The difference, of course, is that the mass line recodes this probing through historical materialism and the Party’s basic line rather than through the cosmological vocabulary of Heaven’s timing and dynastic relations. But the governance problem — how to gauge a field before one classifies what it contains — is recognizably the same.

《養志法靈龜》 (Method of Cultivating Aspirations: The Divining Tortoise) gives the complementary problem of concentration: “養志者，心氣之思不達也。有所欲，志存而思之。志者，欲之使也。欲多則心散，心散則志衰，志衰則思不達。故心氣一則欲不徨，欲不徨則志意不衰，志意不衰則思理達矣。理達則和通，和通則亂氣不煩於胸中，故內以養氣，外以知人。” — “Those who cultivate their aspirations are those whose thoughts and emotions do not reach their goals. If one has a desire, the will is set upon it and thoughts dwell on it. The will is the servant of desire. Excessive desires scatter the mind; a scattered mind weakens the will; a weakened will prevents thought from reaching its goal. Therefore, when heart-mind and vital energy are unified, desire does not wander; when desire does not wander, will and intent do not weaken; when will and intent do not weaken, thought and reasoning reach their goal. When reasoning reaches its goal, harmony is achieved; when harmony is achieved, disruptive emotions do not trouble the chest. Thus internally one cultivates vital energy, and externally one understands people.” The passage maps with unexpected precision onto the problem democratic centralism is meant to solve. The chain of subordination — individual to organization, minority to majority, lower level to higher level, entire membership to the Central Committee — is the institutional form of Guiguzi’s principle that 心氣一則欲不徨: when the political will is unified, desire does not wander, and the project can proceed without fragmenting into competing regional or factional interpretations of what modernization currently requires. In my Modernization essay, I described democratic centralism as the mechanism of continuous edge-reweighting — the organizational guarantee that a recalibrated priority actually propagates through the system as binding practice rather than remaining contested theory. Guiguzi’s 養志 supplies the older intuition: a governing body that scatters its will across too many desires loses the capacity to reach its object; concentration is not a restriction on thought but a condition of its effectiveness. The frisson between this Daoist vocabulary and the computational leanings of the essay’s systems-theoretical approach is deliberate: an ancient method of unifying vital energy sits beside a modern account of feedback, coding, and recursive control, and neither vocabulary fully contains what the other illuminates.

I. The Lebenswelt as Active Grammar, Not Passive Backdrop

In my essay on modernization as the Lebenswelt of Chinese constitutionalism, I argued that modernization does not function in Party discourse as a policy goal that happens to be pursued through contradiction analysis, the mass line, and democratic centralism. It functions, rather, as what I called a metasignifier: a historically sedimented sign that organizes the relational field within which socialism, Party leadership, reform, opening, law, governance, common prosperity, ecological civilization, and national rejuvenation acquire their particular force within one project. The sedimentary ontology I developed there—nine layers of accumulated meaning, from the revolutionary imperative through Chinese-style modernization and national rejuvenation—is not a stack of inert deposits; each layer retains pressure, and later layers reach backward and alter what the earlier ones are taken to have meant. The four-level naturalization model (abstract theory, institutional practice, embodied disposition, feedback) describes how those meanings move from proposition to habit to lived expectation and back again. What modernization supplies, in that framework, is not an empty unity but something more like a question each term is made to answer: what does this contribute to, or obstruct, at the present historical stage? Guiguzi’s 揣 — probing before naming — provides a distant methodological echo. The horizon measures the field before it classifies the signal, and in measuring it already gives the signal a possible political meaning.

A bit of data that is classified or understood to be a “social fact”—understanding the difference between a fact as a discrete object without meaning and a bit of data signified as something that is a fact, that is social, and that is meaningful within the system in which it is used—does not become a “principal contradiction” (主要矛盾) simply by being large or felt. It becomes legible as principal, rather than as secondary or as no contradiction at all, only because the modernizing horizon has already ranked developmental imbalance above other possible diagnoses of what might be wrong with a given social arrangement. The 1981 Resolution’s identification of backward social production as the principal contradiction, and the 19th Party Congress’s 2017 reformulation as “unbalanced and inadequate development” against “the people’s ever-growing needs for a better life,” are successive calibrations of that horizon—each one, in effect, a re-reading of what modernization currently requires and what counts as a fissure worth probing. Read through 《抵巇》 (Exploiting Fissures), each calibration approaches a crack in an inherited arrangement. The text states: “巇者，罅也。罅者，隙也。隙者，成大隙也。巇始有朕，可抵而塞，可抵而卻，可抵而息，可抵而匿，可抵而得，此謂抵巇之理也。” — “Xī refers to a crack or fissure. A fissure is a small opening or crevice; a small opening becomes a great gap. When the first sign of a fissure appears, it can be resisted and blocked, repelled, calmed, concealed, or turned to advantage; this is the principle of dealing with fissures.” The chapter adds: “自天地之合離終始，必有巇隙，不可不察也。察之以裨闔，能用此道，聖人也。聖人者，天地之使也。” — “From the union and separation of Heaven and Earth, from beginning to end, there must be fissures; they cannot go unexamined. To examine them through opening and closing is to use this Way; one who can use it is a sage. The sage is an agent of Heaven and Earth.” Contradiction theory, as the operational sub-system through which the Party diagnoses each historical stage, does not discover a defect lying outside the system; it uses the fissure to make the system’s own historical limit visible. What Guiguizi calls 抵巇 — probing, blocking, or turning the crack to advantage — is structurally what the normative strand (N) of contradiction theory does when the Party reformulates the principal contradiction: it identifies the point at which the inherited arrangement can no longer carry the developmental pressures it has accumulated. The crack is where modernization reads itself. In the sedimentary ontology I developed in the Modernization essay, each reformulation of the principal contradiction is not a fresh diagnosis but a re-reading of what has already been sedimented — the earlier layers do not disappear but are reinterpreted through the pressure of the later ones. Guiguizi’s insight that fissures are inevitable (必有巇隙) and must be examined (不可不察) maps onto what I described there as the recursive self-calibration of modernization: the horizon does not hold still, and neither does the diagnosis.

Correspondingly, the mass line does not gather “raw” social experience in some neutral sense. It selects, from the undifferentiated field of what a population might say or feel, those signals that are already legible as contributions to, or obstacles against, the modernizing project—stalled development, pollution, corruption, or the erosion of the Party’s capacity to lead modernization. And democratic centralism concentrates those signals precisely so that the project can proceed without the parliamentary or regional paralysis that Party theorists contrast with disciplined, unified execution. The opening of 《反應》 (Response and Reflection) states: “古之大化者，乃與無形俱生。反以觀往，覆以驗來；反以知古，覆以知今；反以知彼，覆以知此。動靜虛實之理不合於今，反古而求之。事有反而得覆者，聖人之意也，不可不察。” — “The great transformations of ancient times coexisted with formlessness. Reflecting backward to observe the past and reviewing forward to test what is to come; looking back to know antiquity and looking ahead to know the present; looking back to know the other and reviewing forward to know oneself. When the principles of movement and stillness, emptiness and reality do not align with the present, return to

antiquity and seek them there. Matters can be understood by turning backward and examining forward; this is the intention of the sage and cannot be overlooked.” The Guiguzi notion of 反應 sharpens the mass line’s operational logic: response is not an after-the-fact reaction but a return in which the governing order hears its own categories reflected through the people. Mao’s formula — “from the masses, to the masses” — describes precisely this structure: scattered ideas are gathered (the probing moment), concentrated through theory (the moment of classification), and returned to the masses for implementation and testing (the moment of response). In my work on Whole Process People’s Democracy, I described how the institutionalization of this cycle through political parties, the CPPCC, and the multi-layered system of consultation transforms the mass line from a revolutionary method into a permanent constitutional mechanism — one in which each consultation cycle manifests, legitimates, and reaffirms the constitutional order. Guiguzi’s 反應 adds a dimension that pure institutional description tends to flatten: the return is not merely administrative feedback but a form of self-knowledge, in which the governing order discovers whether its own categories still track the field they claim to govern. None of the three elements of the loop, in other words, is intelligible purely on its own institutional terms. Each already presupposes the modernizing Lebenswelt as the condition under which it can function as diagnosis, input, or decision at all.

II. Genealogy and Structure: The Four Strands Within Each Governing Principle

The preceding section described contradiction, the mass line, and democratic centralism largely as if each were a single idea that simply gets applied — diagnosed, gathered, concentrated. That simplification established the loop’s first shape, but it understates what each principle becomes when followed across texts and practices. The four strands that emerge below are not a pre-built architecture imposed on the doctrine; they are an inference from the doctrine’s repeated crossings between proposition, institution, Party line, and organizational life. The relationship among those senses is therefore not incidental architecture. It is where much of the doctrine’s interpretive and institutional weight is carried.

The first sense is normative: each principle begins life as a guiding proposition of general import — a claim about how contradiction structures reality, how leadership ought to relate to the led, how democracy and centralism ought to be combined. This is the sense elaborated in the sections that follow, and it is the sense most visible to an outside reader, because it is the sense argued for in essays, speeches, and philosophy.

The second sense is constitutional in the narrow, textual meaning of that word: each principle is also a constituting provision of the administrative framework of the state, embedded in the 1982 Constitution and its three predecessors (1954, 1975, and 1978). Article 3 of the current Constitution does not argue for democratic centralism as a philosophical proposition; it states, simply, that “the state institutions of the People’s Republic of China shall practice the principle of democratic centralism” — a rule governing how the National People’s Congress, the State Council, and the courts are arranged relative to one another. Article 2’s declaration that “all power... belongs to the people” performs an equivalent, if less explicitly labeled, function for the mass line: it does not use the phrase 群众路线, but it is the textual hook on which the state’s own institutional channels of consultation — the petition system, legislative solicitation of comment, the National People’s Congress’s claim to embody the people’s exercise of power — are hung.

The third and fourth senses both concern the vanguard Party itself, and it is here that the structure becomes genuinely bifurcated rather than merely doubled, because the Party's own constituting document, the CPC Constitution, does two distinct kinds of work with each principle. Read as substance, the CPC Constitution's General Program states each principle as operational content of the Party's own “basic line” — the mass line as what the Party does when it governs (“everything is for the people and everything relies on the people”), the resolved principal contradiction as what the Party is for (development as the central task). This is the third sense: the principle as programmatic content of the Party's line, binding on what the Party does. But the same Constitution also uses each principle, particularly democratic centralism, as a rule of the Party's own internal architecture — how a provincial committee relates to the Central Committee, how a member's disagreement in discussion differs from a member's obligation to comply once a decision issues, how criticism and self-criticism are meant to function inside a branch meeting. This is the fourth sense: the principle not as what the Party does to or for society, but as the rule by which the Party constitutes and governs itself as an organization.

Four senses, then, for each of three principles: normative (N), state-constitutional (S), Party-line (L), and Party-internal-organizational (O). The four are not simply four places the same content happens to appear; they are wired to one another, and the wiring does real work. A shift in the normative diagnosis of the principal contradiction (N) does not automatically rewrite Article 3 of the state Constitution (S); it typically first becomes operational content of the Party's basic line (L) — a Congress report or amendment to the CPC Constitution — well before, if ever, it is textualized into the administrative constitution of the state. Conversely, the Party's own internal-organizational use of a principle (O) — how self-criticism actually happens inside a democratic life meeting — is only loosely constrained by how that principle is stated at the normative level (N); it evolves through internal Party regulation largely insulated from public constitutional amendment. The matrix is therefore not a pre-existing grid but a moving record of these uneven translations: sixteen cells per principle, weighted unevenly, revised unevenly, and cross-wired in ways that are themselves subject to periodic re-weighting at Politburo study sessions, Party Congresses, and the rarer occasions of formal constitutional amendment. What follows treats each principle's four strands in turn, but the matrix, not the list, is the more accurate picture of how the whole apparatus actually holds together — or, in the one historical case this essay examines at length below, comes apart.

III. The Ontological Engine: Contradiction as Calibrated Diagnosis

The foundational text remains Mao Zedong's 1937 essay *On Contradiction* (矛盾论), which holds that contradiction — the unity and struggle of opposites — is universal and absolute, present in every stage of every process. Mao's 1957 essay *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People* (关于正确处理人民内部矛盾的问题) then distinguishes antagonistic contradictions, between the people and their enemies, from non-antagonistic contradictions, among the people themselves — a distinction that allows internal social tension to register as a normal, even generative, feature of socialist society rather than as evidence of systemic failure.

This ontology does theoretical work that a purely institutional reading undersells. By defining every historical stage through a single “principal contradiction,” Party doctrine gives modernization a mechanism for continuous self-revision without abandoning the underlying project: means, priorities, and timetables can change as the principal contradiction is reformulated, while the deeper commitment — that the Party's task is to diagnose and resolve the contradiction defining each stage of a continuing modernization — remains. The principal contradiction is not a

summary written after the fact; it is the instrument that makes a stage visible to itself. In the language of 《抵巇》, diagnosis approaches the fissure where an inherited arrangement can no longer carry the pressures it has accumulated. But the Marxist-Leninist form does more than exploit a crack tactically: it locates the crack within a historical totality and asks what must be reconfigured so that the project can continue. This is the immanent-semantic sense in which contradiction theory must be read against the modernizing horizon: once the horizon is bracketed out, “principal versus secondary” loses the very direction that makes diagnosis more than classification.

Read through the four-strand structure just introduced, contradiction theory shows a revealing asymmetry. Its normative strand (N) is the most fully elaborated of the four, running continuously from Mao's 1937 and 1957 essays through every subsequent reformulation of the principal contradiction. Its Party-line strand (L) is textually explicit and load-bearing: the CPC Constitution's General Program states the Party's “basic line” as centered on economic development, which is nothing other than the resolved 1981 diagnosis of the principal contradiction converted into programmatic content binding on the Party's own conduct. Its Party-internal-organizational strand (O) has a precise origin: Mao's 1957 essay explicitly classifies internal Party disagreement as a species of non-antagonistic contradiction “among the people,” a classification that becomes, across the following decades, the doctrinal warrant for treating criticism and self-criticism as an ordinary organizational procedure rather than as factional threat — the institutional seed of what a later section discusses as self-revolution. Its state-constitutional strand (S), by contrast, is comparatively thin: the term 主要矛盾 does not appear in the operative articles of the 1982 Constitution at all; what the state constitution offers instead is the developmental staging language of its Preamble — the declaration that China “is currently in the primary stage of socialism and will remain so for a long time to come” — which encodes a contradiction diagnosis without naming it as such. That asymmetry is itself worth registering: contradiction theory governs the Party's own self-understanding and internal life explicitly and by name, while its presence in the administrative constitution of the state is present only by inference, folded into the vaguer vocabulary of historical stage.

IV. The Epistemological Method: The Mass Line as Naturalization Circuit

Mao's 1943 text, *Some Questions Concerning Methods of Leadership* (关于领导方法的若干问题), formalized the mass line's method: “from the masses, to the masses” (从群众中来，到群众中去). The formula already contains a problem of transformation: scattered and unsystematic ideas are gathered, concentrated through Marxist theory into systematic policy, and returned to the masses for implementation and testing. Xi Jinping's 2013 address to the 18th Politburo's 11th collective study session on historical materialism explicitly grounded this method in what Party texts call the “historical materialist view of the masses” (群众史观) — the position that the masses, not individual leaders, are the decisive force in history. The mass line therefore does not simply consult a population; it changes the status of what is gathered as it passes through theory, organization, and practice. The return is where the doctrine claims to learn whether its concentration has remained faithful to the conditions from which it began.

Read through the four-level naturalization model, the mass line is the institutional mechanism that moves modernizing categories from abstract theory (Level 1) into lived, embodied disposition (Level 3) and back again through Level 4 feedback. Level 2 — collective-institutional practice — is where the movement becomes visible: petition offices, the

12345 government hotline, digital consultation platforms, and field research (调查研究) are procedures through which theory becomes routine. In Li Zehou's vocabulary, jidian (积淀) names the sedimentation by which rational and theoretical content enters practical, perceptual disposition. The mass line is a chief site of that sedimentation. Its first added dimension is depth: a category such as “balanced development” becomes not only a proposition but a way cadres, petitioners, and planners feel an institutional dissonance.

But sediment is not a flat geological archive. Through meta-signification, sedimented objects are blown up into three-dimensional conceptual spaces. They have vertical depth (historical inheritances), lateral extension (relations among state, Party, and social practices), and an inward face (embodied expectations and dispositions). A grievance therefore arrives carrying more than information; it carries the sedimented horizon that lets it appear as grievance, development need, or obstacle. Jidian here adds spatiality to depth: the object is enlarged so that its hidden relations can be seen rather than merely accumulated.

Once the object has depth and space, the mass line sets it in motion. Each return from masses to center and back is a dialectical displacement along the guardrails of democratic centralism and along a defined Socialist Path (社会主义道路). The guardrails do not make the movement neutral: they keep dispersed experience from becoming mere drift, while the Socialist Path gives the drift a direction. In the doctrine's contrast with liberal democracy, the road is not itself the end; procedural circulation is not sufficient as a destination. Other paths appear as detours or dead ends because they interrupt the direction of socialist modernization. Jidian thus acquires a third dimension — motion with direction — and the mass line becomes the mechanism that turns sedimented meaning into a project capable of changing itself without losing its path.

The mass line's four strands are more evenly developed than contradiction's, and the state-constitutional and Party-line strands can be distinguished with unusual precision because the surrounding institutional literature itself insists on distinguishing them. Article 2 and Article 27 of the state Constitution — providing respectively that all power belongs to the people and that state functionaries must accept the people's supervision — constitute the state-constitutional strand (S): they are addressed to the administrative apparatus, the government offices, courts, and functionaries whose obligations they define. The CPC Constitution's General Program, in near-identical language (“everything is for the people and everything relies on the people... from the people, to the people”), constitutes the Party-line strand (L): the same commitment, restated as programmatic content of the Party's own conduct rather than as a rule binding on state organs. The distinction tracks, almost exactly, the institutional pairing used to separate exogenous from endogenous democratic mechanics in the literature on Whole Process People's Democracy (全过程人民民主): the National People's Congress system, elected and constitutionally seated within the administrative apparatus (S), against the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and its constellation of United Front parties, embedded not in the administrative constitution but in the Party's own consultative architecture (L). The Party-internal-organizational strand (O) is narrower still — grassroots party-branch reporting, cadre evaluation, and democratic life meetings, through which the Party gathers information about its own members' conduct and morale rather than about society at large — and the normative strand (N) remains Mao's 1943 formulation, the wellspring from which the other three draw their vocabulary but which none of them simply repeats verbatim.

V. The Organizational Architecture: Democratic Centralism as Edge-Reweighting

Mao’s 1945 text *On Coalition Government* (论联合政府) frames the underlying logic: democracy solicits the diverse input the mass line depends on, while centralism enforces unified execution of whatever is concentrated from that input. Deng Xiaoping’s 1980 speech *On the Reform of the System of Party and State Leadership* (党和国家领导制度的改革) restored this discipline after the Cultural Revolution as a safeguard against both the cult of personality and anarchic mass mobilization — the two failure modes that a mass line detached from centralist discipline had just demonstrated.

Within the metasignifier framework, democratic centralism is best described as continuous edge-reweighting within the modernizing relational field. Each Politburo collective study session, each reformulation of the principal contradiction, and each intensification of self-revolution reweights which elements of the project currently take priority. Democratic centralism is the organizational guarantee that a reweighting decided at the center actually propagates through the system as binding practice rather than remaining contested theory. But its deeper role is directional. The center is not simply a processor of inputs; it establishes the route on which selected inputs can travel and become binding practice. The strict chain of subordination — individual to organization, minority to majority, lower level to higher level, entire membership to the Central Committee — functions as guardrails: it prevents feedback from dispersing into parallel sovereignties, while the democratic moment keeps central judgment answerable to the mass line that supplied its materials. Along the Socialist Path, centralism is therefore not the negation of movement but its disciplined vector; it is what distinguishes a loop with trajectory from a circuit that merely circulates.

The doctrine makes this connection between democratic centralism and self-revolution explicit rather than leaving it implicit. At the 20th Politburo’s 21st collective study session, held June 30, 2025, on strengthening the long-term mechanisms for implementing the Eight-Point Regulation and rectifying the “four malfeasances” (四风), Xi Jinping stated directly that combating corruption requires regularizing the exercise of power, and that this means “fully implementing democratic centralism and supervising the exercise of power throughout the entire process” (全面贯彻民主集中制，全过程监督权力运行). The pairing is not incidental: democratic centralism is invoked here specifically as the mechanism that keeps the concentration of authority accountable, which is exactly what allows it to function as trustworthy edge-reweighting rather than as unaccountable command.

Democratic centralism offers the cleanest instance of all four strands operating with independent textual anchors, and for that reason it is worth treating as the paradigm case for the matrix structure described above. The normative strand (N) is Leninist in origin and Maoist in Chinese elaboration — the dialectical unity of democracy and centralism already discussed. The state-constitutional strand (S) is Article 3 of the 1982 Constitution, quoted above, a rule addressed to state institutions as such: the National People’s Congress, the State Council, the courts, and their subordinate organs. The Party-internal-organizational strand (O) is textually distinct and considerably more elaborated: the CPC Constitution devotes its own chapter to the Party’s organizational system, spelling out the chain of subordination — individual to organization, minority to majority, lower level to higher level, entire membership to the Central Committee — as binding internal law for the Party’s own conduct, independent of anything said about state institutions. The Party-line strand (L) is what connects the other three to actual governance: it is democratic centralism

functioning not as a rule about organizational structure but as the operative mechanism by which a decided Party line becomes binding practice — the edge-reweighting function already described in this essay. That all four strands can be located in four different texts, addressed to four different audiences, is not evidence that democratic centralism is four different things. It is evidence that a single principle can be woven into an institutional order at multiple structurally independent points, each capable of being revised somewhat independently of the others — which is precisely what makes the 20th Politburo's explicit 2025 linkage of democratic centralism to self-revolution, discussed above, an act of active re-wiring rather than a mere restatement. It deliberately ties the O-strand discipline of accountable power to the L-strand mechanism of policy concentration, at a moment when the Party's own leadership judged that connection needed reinforcing.

VI. Sedimentation and Rupture: Reading the Historical Arc Archaeologically

The contemporary synthesis of contradiction, mass line, and democratic centralism is not a timeless formulation; its history is better understood archaeologically than chronologically, but archaeology here cannot mean a stack of flat layers. Modernization's semantic content has accumulated — national backwardness and the imperative of revolution; socialist construction and the Four Modernizations; reform and opening, the socialist market economy, governance modernization, Chinese-style modernization, and national rejuvenation. In Li Zehou's terms, these are *jidian* (积淀), but sedimented objects retain pressure. They behave more like tectonic plates than strata: colliding, subducting, and lifting inherited meanings into new conceptual elevations. Through meta-signification, a later layer does not merely cover an earlier one; it changes the earlier layer's dimensions and the direction in which it can be mobilized. The mass line senses the pressure, democratic centralism supplies guardrails, and the Socialist Path gives the moving plates a declared trajectory.

Read this way, the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) is not merely an object lesson in what happens when the mass line is institutionally detached from democratic centralism, though it is certainly that. Mao's later doctrine of “continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat” (无产阶级专政下继续革命的理论) and the slogan “class struggle as the key link” (以阶级斗争为纲) collapsed the formal distinction between antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradictions in practice; directives such as the 1966 Sixteen Articles (十六条) and the call to “bombard the headquarters” (炮打司令部) mobilized the mass line directly against the Party's own organizational discipline. In the vocabulary of Guiguzi's “exploiting fissures” 《抵巇》, the fissure was real, but it was widened as if the crack itself could supply a governing direction. The diagnostic opening became an alternative source of authority. Institutionally, this is a story of breakdown. Archaeologically, it shows how *jidian* can be re-coded by a competing revolutionary grammar: permanent class struggle displaced staged developmental advance as the horizon within which contradiction, mass mobilization, and political authority were understood. The rupture was therefore not an interruption of governance mechanics alone; it interrupted the sedimentary process by which modernization had accumulated meaning since the revolutionary period. The intensive reconstructive work after 1978 — the 1981 Resolution's repudiation of “class struggle as the key link,” Deng's restoration of democratic centralism as the Party's “life,” and the re-embedding of the mass line in ordinary institutional channels — did more than repair procedure. It re-established depth, direction, and a rule for returning from fissure to path.

The rupture-and-repair pattern is not confined to the operational triad of contradiction, mass line, and democratic centralism. It also reaches the superordinate signifier that determines who the entire apparatus is even talking about when it invokes “the people.” The next section therefore moves one level upward: from the loop’s sedimented operation to the dual revolutions that keep its subjects, and the horizon they inhabit, from hardening into inert doctrine.

VII. The Dual Revolutions as the Lebenswelt's Mode of Self-Reproduction

Since the 18th and 19th Party Congresses, doctrine has extended the original triad with the pairing of self-revolution (自我革命) and social revolution (社会革命), together the “two great revolutions” (两个伟大革命). Xi Jinping formalized this relationship at the 19th Politburo's 15th collective study session, on June 24, 2019, in the address later published in Qiushi as “Never Forget the Original Aspiration and Founding Mission, Advance Self-Revolution” (牢记初心使命，推进自我革命, Qiushi 2019/15), and elaborated it further in “Consistently Advance the Great New Project of Party Building” (推进党的建设新的伟大工程要一以贯之, Qiushi 2019/19) and, most recently, in “Deepen the Advancement of the Party's Self-Revolution” (深入推进党的自我革命, Qiushi 2024/24). Self-revolution leads and safeguards social revolution; the outcomes of social revolution serve as the empirical test of self-revolution's effectiveness.

It is tempting to read this simply as an additional layer of institutional circuitry — a fourth and fifth node bolted onto the original three-part loop. But the dual-revolution doctrine makes explicit that the loop produces, and must continually remake, the subjects who inhabit it. Cadres evaluating their own conduct against “formalism, bureaucratism, hedonism, and extravagance” (四风), petitioners framing grievances as obstacles to development, and planners setting targets against the current principal contradiction are not applying an external administrative tool. They experience political time, institutional adequacy, and personal political identity through categories that the modernizing horizon has already supplied. In Li Zehou's vocabulary, *jidian* (积淀) here acquires a reflexive dimension: self-revolution does not preserve sediment as a museum; inspection tours (巡视), democratic life meetings (民主生活会), and criticism and self-criticism (批评与自我批评) reopen sedimented dispositions, test their fit, and recode them when they no longer carry the project. The object now has an interior that can turn back upon itself.

Social revolution is the corresponding outward movement. It is Level 4 feedback at civilizational scale: the empirical record against which self-revolution's effectiveness, and the Party's continued capacity to inhabit and lead the modernizing horizon, are tested. Guiguzi's 反應 (Response and Reflection) is useful here because response includes reflection: the governing order must encounter its own effects as an answer, not merely receive reports that confirm its prior categories. In the terms of my Modernization essay, this is where the naturalization model completes its circuit: abstract theory (Level 1) has been translated through institutional practice (Level 2) into embodied disposition (Level 3), and now the feedback loop (Level 4) returns a signal that may confirm or destabilize the entire sequence. The masses return not only information but a changed field, and that changed field requires the Party to answer by changing its own arrangements. This is also, operationally, the point at which democratic centralism and the mass line intersect most visibly with the dual revolutions: self-revolution adjusts the Party's capacity to hear the signal, while social revolution tests whether the signal has been heard correctly. As I argued in my work on Whole Process People's

Democracy, the system of structured consultation through political parties and the CPPCC is designed precisely to institutionalize this return — to ensure that each consultation cycle is not merely a gathering of opinion but an occasion for the system to discover whether its own categories still track the conditions they are meant to govern. The dual revolutions thus make the loop temporally thick: it watches whether action has changed the field and whether the field can return a different signal. That is how sedimentation remains motion rather than petrification.

This also reframes what Party texts call the historical-cycle problem — “jumping out of the historical cycle” (跳出历史周期率) of dynastic rise and decline. The problem is not merely administrative decay. It is the loss of an ability to hear the fissures generated by one’s own success: the institutions that diagnose, gather, and concentrate may continue to operate procedurally while ceasing to track the Lebenswelt they claim to reproduce. In the vocabulary of Guiguizi’s 《抵巇》, fissures accumulate regardless of how well the system runs — 自天地之合離終始，必有巇隙 — and the danger is not the crack itself but the failure to examine it. Self-revolution is doctrine’s name for maintaining that capacity: the continuous internal audit through inspection tours, democratic life meetings, and criticism and self-criticism is meant to keep the Party’s perceptual apparatus sensitive enough to detect the crack before it becomes a gap. Operationally, this is where the four strands of democratic centralism — normative, state-constitutional, Party-line, and Party-internal-organizational — are most tightly wound together: the O-strand (internal discipline) must remain responsive to the N-strand (normative diagnosis), or the concentration function ceases to track the field it claims to serve. In my Modernization essay, I described this as the risk that sedimented categories harden into reflex rather than remaining available for recalibration. Self-revolution is the mechanism that keeps sedimentation from becoming petrification, and the governing loop from becoming a closed circuit that merely reproduces its own assumptions.

VIII. The Meta-Mechanism: People's Democratic Dictatorship and Semiotic Thirdness

Everything described so far — contradiction diagnosing, the mass line gathering, democratic centralism concentrating, self-revolution maintaining, social revolution testing, each principle itself wired across four strands — operates on a population that has already been sorted. Before a social fact can be diagnosed as a contradiction “among the people,” before a grievance can be gathered as legitimately “from the masses,” before a policy can be concentrated as binding on “the people” rather than imposed by force on an enemy, something has already decided who counts as people and who does not. That prior sorting operation has a name in Chinese Marxist-Leninist doctrine: people's democratic dictatorship (人民民主专政).

Mao supplied the founding formulation in 1949, on the eve of the People's Republic's establishment: democracy is practiced among the people, who enjoy rights of speech, assembly, and association, and who alone hold the right to vote; dictatorship is exercised over the reactionaries, who hold none of these. “The combination of these two aspects, democracy for the people and dictatorship over the reactionaries, is the people's democratic dictatorship.” The formulation is, on its face, a synthesis—not democracy simply, not dictatorship simply, but the two combined into a single governing category that performs classification before the rest of the apparatus can operate. Read through Peirce and through my own semiotic vocabulary, this is not a decorative analogy. Firstness names the qualitative possibility of a thing before it is stabilized; secondness names the encounter, resistance, or force through which it becomes

distinguishable; thirdness names the generality, habit, law, and interpretive mediation that makes the relation intelligible. I describe semiotic temporality in terms of “a fleeting notion made more permanent (as a memory of the thing in time) by its essentializing signification, and then utilized abstractly through their assigned thirdness.” The phrase supplies the bridge from Peircean categories to this constitutional problem: “the people” begins as a qualitative political category, but it acquires durable institutional presence only through the mediating law of people’s democratic dictatorship.

That bridge is the work of 命名 (míng míng), intelligent naming. I write in “The Soulful Machine” that it is “at the root of the classical Chinese rhetoric of Guiguzi in the notion of intelligent naming—命名 (Míng míng),” a naming that gives a thing both form and essence, closely tied to shì (是), actuality, truth, or essence. People’s democratic dictatorship performs precisely this function. It names “the people” and “the enemy” into political reality—not by attaching labels to two populations already complete, but by assigning each a form, an essence, and a place within the modernizing Lebenswelt. The qualitative “people” is thereby remembered, stabilized, and made governable; the antagonistic “enemy” is made legible as the object of coercive power. The act is productive before it is descriptive: it constitutes the field in which rights, duties, participation, discipline, and exclusion can appear.

My account of human-machine co-constitution makes the structural parallel sharper. In “*The Soulful Machine*,” I write that the human-machine interface “provides a means for human to interface with themselves for which the digital is a conduit” and “also opens the door to an examination of the way that it provides a means for generative A.I. to interface with itself for which the human is a conduit.” The point is not two sealed domains joined by a neutral bridge. Broekman’s conversion—which I describe as a router, pathway, or bridging mechanism between analogue and digital expressivity—constitutes the intersubjective relation as it routes cognition. The same architecture operates here. People’s democratic dictatorship is not an external classifier applied to a pre-existing population; it is the semiotic third, the conversion mechanism, through which both “the people” and “the enemy” are constituted as politically legible categories within the modernizing relational field. It is the law that makes the two sides mutually intelligible and operationally distinct, just as conversion makes the human and machine domains mutually expressible without collapsing them into one.

The triadic structure can be stated without losing its political force. My treatment of the triadic self/self-E/subject supplies the form of the analogy: the subject appears as object, its Self-E as a separable signification connected to but detached from that object, and interpretation as the third that makes the relation meaningful among subjects. Applied to people’s democratic dictatorship, “the people” occupies the object or firstness-side: the qualitative field of those whose common life is to be organized. The classificatory boundary—who is recognized as the people and who is positioned as the enemy—is the sign or secondness-side: the mark of distinction, resistance, and coercive encounter. The mediating general rule—the law that governs how the first and second relate—is thirdness/interpretation: it gives the object-sign relation a repeatable form, authorizes institutions to treat one relation as enfranchisement and another as coercion, and returns the result to the loop as an intelligible political world. This is my “cascading tripleness of meaning”: object; the separable signification of the object, connected to but detached from the thing; and the interpretation that encases the signified object with meaning that can be shared among subjects. People’s democratic dictatorship is therefore not one more node in the governing loop and not an external classifier. It is the law-like interpretive third that constitutes the categories upon which the loop operates. Thirdness is a gate, but a gate with a history: its rule is sedimented, revisable, and capable of altering the field that will be read in the next turn.

Like every other element examined in this essay, people's democratic dictatorship has a dual nature — a signifying premise of the cognitive order of Chinese Marxist-Leninism, and a technical mechanism of constitutional governance — and, like the operational triad, its constitutional history is one of sedimentation, rupture, and reconstruction rather than stable continuity. The 1949 Common Program (共同纲领), adopted on the eve of the People's Republic's founding, described the new state as a “people's democratic dictatorship” uniting workers, peasants, the petty and national bourgeoisie, and other patriotic democratic elements under working-class leadership — a deliberately broad, coalitional formula suited to a united-front moment. The 1954 Constitution, China's first, narrowed the operative state-character clause to describe the PRC simply as a “people's democratic state” (人民民主国家) led by the working class on a worker-peasant alliance, without using “dictatorship” in the clause itself. The 1975 Constitution, drafted at the height of Cultural Revolution ideology, replaced this formula outright: Article 1 declared the PRC “a socialist state under the dictatorship of the proletariat” (无产阶级专政的社会主义国家), dropping the coalitional “people's democratic” language entirely and tying the state's very definition to the theory of “continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat” already discussed above. The 1978 Constitution, adopted after Mao's death but before Deng's full consolidation of power, retained this formula unchanged. Only with the 1982 Constitution — drafted, as its own legislative history records, only after considerable internal debate over precisely this point — was the state-character clause restored to “people's democratic dictatorship,” with the constitutional drafting committee's own explanatory report to the National People's Congress Standing Committee specifying that the restored phrase was to be understood as substantively continuous with, not a retreat from, dictatorship of the proletariat: the people's democratic dictatorship, the drafters stated, “is a concrete form of the dictatorship of the proletariat.” The 1982 formula is thus not simply a reversion to 1949; it is a deliberately layered text, reopening the coalitional breadth of the Common Program's formula while textually foreclosing any reading that would treat the change as an ideological retreat.

This genealogy matters because it shows that thirdness has a history. People's democratic dictatorship does not sit outside time as a fixed classifier; it is a sedimented habit of making political distinctions, and that habit can be revised when the modernizing field changes. The 1949 coalition, the 1975 narrowing, and the 1982 restoration make visible successive reconstructions of the rule through which the same population could be read as a broad people, a permanently embattled class order, or a reconstituted socialist coalition. The boundary of “the people” has therefore never been static: modernization periodically requires a new account of who can contribute to its project, most visibly in Jiang Zemin's Three Represents (三个代表), which extended Party membership, and with it standing within the coalition of “the people,” to private entrepreneurs whose economic role the reform-era principal contradiction had newly defined as indispensable. The metasignifier and the meta-mechanism are recursively entangled. The horizon recalibrates the boundary, while the boundary stabilizes which signals the horizon can receive as legitimate.

IX. Internal and External Governance as One Semiotic Field

It is worth being precise here about a distinction the preceding section's analysis makes available and that the internal/external language used elsewhere in Party literature can obscure: there are, properly speaking, three zones rather than two. Internal Party governance and external state and social governance, as described in this section, are both zones of democracy — both operate on populations already classified as “the people,” and both are governed by some combination of the operational triad's four strands. Outside both lies a third zone, the domain of dictatorship proper, to which the entire apparatus described in this essay — diagnosis, gathering, concentration, self-correction —

simply does not apply, because its objects have been classified as enemies rather than people. The internal/external distinction, in other words, is a distinction within the domain that people's democratic dictatorship has already constituted as governable through consultation; it is not a distinction between consultation and coercion, which is a separate and logically prior line.

Party literature distinguishes internal Party governance (党内治理) from external state and social governance (国家与社会治理), and the distinction has real institutional content. Internally, contradiction analysis targets the Party's own conduct through inspection and self-criticism; democratic centralism governs debate-then-compliance within the organization; the mass line operates through grassroots party-branch reporting. Externally, social contradictions such as income inequality or platform monopoly become targets for the social revolution, justifying interventions like common-prosperity initiatives; the mass line operates through petition offices, hotlines, and consultation platforms under “whole-process people's democracy” (全过程人民民主); and democratic centralism structures the relationship between Party leadership and formally separate organs such as the National People's Congress, the State Council, and the courts.

Once the field has been constituted, the internal/external distinction is best understood as a change of scale within one semiotic order. The Party does not first purify itself in isolation from society and only then turn outward to modernize it; its self-observation and society's transformation are co-constitutive moments of the same project. At the internal scale, a cadre's democratic-life-meeting self-criticism tests the Party's categories against conduct. At the external scale, a province's five-year development plan tests those categories against material and social change. The recurrence of the modernizing Lebenswelt here has a different weight: it is not merely the origin of the loop but the medium in which a single recursive logic can appear at different scales. In Guiguzi's sense of 反應, each scale answers the other. What the Party learns about itself changes how it reads society, and what society returns changes the institutional form through which the Party must read itself.

X. The Constitution as the Site Where the Loop Is Juridified

Article 1's declaration of people's democratic dictatorship is, in this sense, the constitutional keystone beneath everything else this section describes: before the translation chain from Party political direction to state constitutional text to legislation to administrative practice can even begin, Article 1 has already performed the prior classification that determines whose developmental needs, whose grievances, and whose compliance the rest of the chain is meant to process.

The Constitution, on this reading, is neither a neutral container for these operations nor a mere rhetorical expression of them. It is a principal site at which moving semiotic relations are temporarily crystallized into legal form — juridified — so that a recalibrated horizon can govern as text, institution, and administrative practice. The Party Constitution supplies the current political direction; the State Constitution gives that direction formal legal expression; national, provincial, and local legislation then translate general commitments into rules for education, science, national security, and development; and administrative practice translates those rules into planning targets and evaluation standards. This chain is not a one-way translation. Each legal form returns to practice, where its adequacy is tested, and a later contradiction can reopen the form. Constitutional text is therefore a pause in the loop, not its end.

This has a specific consequence for how the loop should be read by an outside observer. Analyses that treat Chinese constitutional texts as failed approximations of liberal constitutionalism — measuring the mass line against notions of consultation drawn from a different constitutional order, or measuring democratic centralism against separation-of-powers assumptions it was never designed to satisfy — commit what may be called a Lebenswelt category error: they project the assumptions of one constitutional order onto another and mistake the resulting mismatch for criticism. This diagnostic point does not defend the institutional choices described in this essay or immunize them from evaluation. It insists only that accurate reconstruction must precede normative judgment: a system cannot be meaningfully criticized on its own terms if it has not first been correctly identified on those terms.

Conclusion: A Loop That Is Inhabited, Not Merely Operated

The essay has established a structure rather than a slogan. Contradiction theory diagnoses the stage; the mass line gathers and returns experience; democratic centralism concentrates it along the guardrails of the Socialist Path; self-revolution keeps the Party capable of being answered; and social revolution tests the adequacy of that answer. Each principle exists across normative, state-constitutional, Party-line, and Party-internal-organizational strands. Li Zehou’s jidian turns their accumulation from flat strata into depth, space, motion, and reflexive re-coding. Guiguzi’s 揣, 抵巇, and 反應 provide older vocabularies for probing the field, locating its fissures, and receiving its return. People’s democratic dictatorship is the Peircean thirdness that makes “the people” and “the enemy” politically legible before the loop can operate on either. Modernization is the Lebenswelt and metasignifier through which these operations acquire direction.

What theory provides is not a substitute for empirical work but the space in which empirical work can become intelligible. It supplies the presuppositions, ordering frameworks, and distinctions — horizon and signal, sediment and rupture, people and enemy, Party and state, diagnosis and response — within which evidence can be gathered without being mistaken for self-explanatory fact. Empirical testing can therefore begin only once the foundational premises of the doctrine and the conceptual architecture used to reconstruct it are understood and respected. The point is not to exempt the theory from criticism; it is to prevent criticism from testing one order by silently substituting another.

This is also why empirics for humans and machines can do little more than illuminate the spaces and rationalizations theory makes possible. Surveys, ethnographies, administrative records, computational models, and machine-generated classifications do not arrive outside the webs of presumption that make their objects visible. They glean data through an ordering framework, and the data become evidence only when read back through it. The loop thus governs the conditions under which both human and computational observers can identify a contradiction, register a response, or call a decision legitimate. Theory does not close the inquiry; it draws the gates through which inquiry can pass.

Guiguzi’s 《捭闔》 (Opening and Closing) gives the final image: “粵若稽古聖人之在天地間也，為眾生之先，觀陰陽之開闔以名命物；知存亡之門戶，籌策萬類之終始，達人心之理，見變化之朕焉，而守司其門戶。故聖人之在天下也，自古至今，其道一也。” — “Looking back to antiquity, the sage who stands between Heaven and Earth is first among living beings; observing the opening and closing of yin and yang, the sage names and orders things, knows the gates of existence and destruction, calculates the beginnings and endings of the myriad things, reaches the principles of human hearts, sees the incipient signs of change, and guards those gates. Thus, wherever the sage has stood in the world, from antiquity to the present, the Way is one.”

《捭闔》 continues: “變化無窮，各有所歸，或陰或陽，或柔或剛，或開或閉，或弛或張。是故，聖人一守。司其門戶，審察其所先後，度權量能，校其伎巧短長。” — “Change is without limit, yet each thing has its return: sometimes yin, sometimes yang; sometimes yielding, sometimes firm; sometimes opening, sometimes closing; sometimes relaxing, sometimes tightening. Therefore the sage holds to one principle: to guard the gates, examine what comes first and what follows, measure power and capacity, and compare the strengths and weaknesses of skill.”

These are not ornamental citations. They name the mechanism this essay has reconstructed. Contradiction theory probes the fissure (抵牾); the mass line gathers the field’s signals through structured consultation and returns them to the center (揣，反應); democratic centralism concentrates the unified will so that desire does not wander and the project can reach its object (養志); self-revolution keeps the Party’s perceptual apparatus open to cracks in its own arrangements; and people’s democratic dictatorship performs the prior act of intelligent naming (明名) that constitutes the field on which the loop operates. The Party’s doctrine, whatever one makes of it normatively, is an attempt to guard those gates. The governing loop, like the sage’s guarding of the gates (司其門戶), is the mechanism by which change without limit (變化無窮) is given direction along the Socialist Path (社会主义道路): to observe the opening and closing of yin and yang (觀陰陽之開闔), to know the gates of survival and demise (知存亡之門戶), and to perceive the signs of transformation (見變化之朕焉).

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