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The Time of Self-Revolution: Political Narrative and Legitimacy in Contemporary China

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Abstract

This article examines how the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) discourse of "self-revolution" (自我革命) constructs political meaning through the strategic organization of time. Drawing on temporal narrative theory, the study treats time as an active resource that political actors use to connect past, present, and future into a coherent account. Based on textual analysis of official Party documents since the 18th Party Congress—including congress reports, leadership speeches, and Central Committee resolutions—the article identifies a recurring three-part temporal structure: historical continuity, which situates self-revolution within the Party's century-long tradition; present relevance, which frames it as a response to current governance challenges; and future orientation, which links it to the goals of Chinese-style modernization and national rejuvenation. The article argues this temporal structure performs distinct political functions: it grounds legitimacy in historical continuity, cultivates political identification by offering a coherent account of collective identity and direction, and reframes self-revolution as an ongoing element of governance capacity building rather than a one-time campaign. The study situates this narrative within a comparative perspective on party self-renewal, contributing to scholarship on political narrative and legitimation by showing how temporal framing sustains the coherence and adaptability of political discourse over time.

Keywords: Chinese Communist Party; governance capacity; self-revolution; temporal narrative