



How the Ethical Implications of Ideology are Altered During Modernization and Globalization

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Abstract: This essay examines the ethical transformation of ideology in China during the transition from the Cultural Revolution to the 1978 Truth Criterion Debate. It argues that ideology in Maoist China functioned not only as a political doctrine but also as an absolute moral authority that equated ideological correctness with moral virtue. During the Cultural Revolution, loyalty to authoritative texts and revolutionary orthodoxy displaced empirical judgment and weakened individual moral responsibility, as political legitimacy depended primarily on adherence to the “correct line.” The essay contends that the Truth Criterion Debate marked a decisive ethical rupture by redefining legitimacy through the principle that “practice is the sole criterion of truth.” Rather than abandoning socialism or Marxism, post-Mao reformers reinterpreted ideology as a flexible framework subject to empirical verification and practical outcomes. The essay further argues that modernization and globalization jointly reinforced this ethical reorientation. Modernization required governability, institutional learning, and accountability, while globalization exposed China to comparative developmental models that undermined ideological self-sufficiency. Together, these processes transformed ideology from a source of unquestionable moral certainty into a system increasingly judged by performance, responsibility, and responsiveness to social realities.

Keywords: *Ideology, Truth criterion debate, modernization, globalization*

Introduction

In the recent discussions on "China's modernization", especially after the 2023 "Global Civilization Initiative" defined modernization as a pluralistic rather than a singular historical path, ideology no longer merely serves as a term for expressing political identity, but has increasingly become a proposition regarding which form of development should be regarded as reasonable, responsible, and morally defensible.¹ Ideology is often understood as a set of political ideas, but in practice it also acts as a moral judge. It tells people what is right, what is wrong, and which actions should be criticized. In revolutionary systems, ideology often becomes especially powerful; it not only guides political decisions, but also claims the authority to decide what is morally correct. Karl Mannheim, a sociologist of knowledge whose analysis of ideology made a lasting contribution to modern political theory, argued that when ideology becomes absolute, belief is treated as moral virtue, while disagreement is recast as moral failure.² This situation was especially clear in Maoist China. During this period, ideological correctness was both a political requirement and a moral standard. It influenced how people judged actions, intentions, and even personal character.³ As a result, ideology was no longer used to understand reality or respond to real conditions; instead, it presented itself as the final authority on moral questions, protected from criticism based on evidence or real-world outcomes.⁴

This essay examines how the ethical meaning of ideology underwent a significant transformation in China during the transition from the Cultural Revolution to the 1978 Truth Criterion Debate. Rather than viewing this period as only an intellectual debate about truth or an internal party issue, this essay treats it as a moment of ethical change. Under the pressure of modernization, ideological legitimacy did not disappear, but it increasingly shifted from revolutionary tradition and authoritative texts toward the question of whether ideas and policies could produce positive social outcomes and practical results.⁵ At the same time, globalization was not simply a process of economic integration; it also widened China's exposure to international experience, thereby weakening the ethical self-containment of ideological thinking by making alternative development paths visible and comparable.⁶ Together, modernization and globalization reshaped how legitimacy was understood: ideology was increasingly required to justify itself through governable results, social responsibility, and responsiveness to lived conditions, rather than through inherited certainty

¹ Xi Jinping, "Keynote Address at the CPC in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-Level Meeting," March 15, 2023, State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China.

² Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1936), 49–52.

³ Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 3–10.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1951), 460–468.

⁵ Joseph Fewsmith, *Dilemmas of Reform in China: Political Conflict and Economic Debate* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), 20–27.

⁶ Stuart R. Schram, *Ideology and Policy in China Since the Third Plenum, 1978–1984* (London: Contemporary China Institute, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1984), 1–6.

alone.

The Chinese case is particularly instructive because the ethical transformation of ideology did not occur through ideological abandonment, but through internal reinterpretation. The Truth Criterion Debate did not reject Marxism or Mao Zedong Thought outright; instead, it questioned the moral authority of dogmatic interpretation by subordinating theory to practice. As Schoenhals demonstrates, the debate temporarily suspended scriptural authority-based legitimacy and replaced it with a standard grounded in empirical verification, thereby altering how correctness itself was ethically understood.⁷ This shift also reflected deeper concerns among the post-Mao leadership about governance, responsibility, and the moral consequences of political action.⁸ By tracing this transition from ideological absolutism to outcome-based legitimacy, this essay treats the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath not simply as historical episodes, but as moments in which ideology was forced to renegotiate its ethical role under the combined pressures of domestic modernization and a world increasingly organized around comparison, performance, and developmental alternatives.⁹

From Ideological Absolutism to Ethical Reorientation: The Cultural Revolution and the Truth Criterion Debate

During the Cultural Revolution, ideology was not only used to guide political action, but also acted as an absolute moral authority. Moral legitimacy mainly depended on whether a person followed the correct ideology, so political correctness and moral virtue became very closely connected. This fusion was visible in everyday political practice: the language of class struggle, loyalty rituals, and the public denunciation of “incorrect” thinking turned political disagreement into a question of moral character. As MacFarquhar and Schoenhals point out, Maoist politics turned loyalty to the correct line into a moral duty, and disagreement was often seen as moral failure instead of different opinion.¹⁰ This strong connection between ideology and morality centralized moral judgment so thoroughly that concrete circumstances, individual intentions, and actual social consequences became secondary to the performance of ideological correctness.

This kind of ethical absolutism was supported by the high status of texts and the way interpretation was moralized. Mao’s writings and instructions were treated as morally correct truths, rather than ideas connected to specific historical conditions. For example, the ritualized use of Mao’s “latest instructions” and

⁷ Michael Schoenhals, “The 1978 Truth Criterion Controversy,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 126 (1991): 243–250.

⁸ Frederick C. Teiwes and Warren Sun, *The End of the Maoist Era: Chinese Politics during the Twilight of the Cultural Revolution, 1972–1976* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), 215–225.

⁹ Deng Xiaoping, “Emancipate the Mind, Seek Truth from Facts and Unite as One in Looking to the Future,” in *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, Volume II (1975–1982)* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1994), 151–156.

¹⁰ Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao’s Last Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 8–15.

the demand to speak in authorized formulas meant that political actors could demonstrate virtue by citing the correct textual authority, even when policy outcomes were destructive or empirically indefensible. Schoenhals shows that political legitimacy often came from using correct ideological language, not from whether policies really worked or caused social problems.¹¹ Appeals to authoritative texts thus functioned as moral shortcuts: political actors could bypass deliberation and responsibility by invoking higher authority.¹² In this system, moral responsibility moved upward, and obedience itself became a moral virtue: when campaigns generated violence, fear, or administrative disorder, such outcomes could be narrated as the necessary cost of defending the correct line rather than as failures requiring accountability. The result of this system was a serious ethical problem. By putting ideological correctness above real experience, the Cultural Revolution weakened individual moral responsibility. Walder notes that mass political campaigns encouraged people to act with strong moral confidence, but at the same time reduced their accountability, because negative outcomes could always be explained as necessary for ideology.¹³ As Arendt argues in her analysis of total systems, when ideology claims to be morally complete, real experience loses its power to correct mistakes, and ethical failure becomes hard to recognize. Over time, social damage and problems in governance accumulated, making it more difficult to believe that ideological purity alone could provide moral legitimacy.¹⁴

The 1978 Truth Criterion Debate marked a decisive ethical rupture with this moral absolutism. Although framed as an epistemological discussion, the assertion that “practice is the sole criterion of truth” carried deeper ethical implications: it challenged the assumption that ideological correctness could serve as a self-sufficient source of moral legitimacy. By subordinating theory to practice, the debate temporarily suspended legitimacy based on scriptural authority and replaced it with a standard grounded in empirical verification, fundamentally altering how correctness itself was ethically understood.¹⁵ This shift redefined moral responsibility: ideological claims could no longer justify themselves through lineage or citation alone; they were compelled to account for their social consequences. As Schram observes, the debate opened ideological space for reassessing past policies not merely as tactical errors but as ethically problematic decisions detached from lived reality.¹⁶ In contrast to the Cultural Revolution’s ethics of belief—where loyalty itself constituted virtue—the Truth Criterion Debate advanced an ethics of responsibility, in which correctness depended on demonstrable outcomes rather than asserted purity.

Importantly, this ethical change did not mean ideology was abandoned. Instead, ideology changed its

¹¹ Michael Schoenhals, “The 1978 Truth Criterion Controversy,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 126 (1991): 243–246.

¹² Frederick C. Teiwes and Warren Sun, *The End of the Maoist Era* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), 180–190.

¹³ Andrew G. Walder, *China under Mao: A Revolution Derailed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 165–175.

¹⁴ Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao’s Last Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 320–330.

¹⁵ Michael Schoenhals, “The 1978 Truth Criterion Controversy,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 126 (1991): 243–255.

¹⁶ Stuart R. Schram, *Ideology and Policy in China Since the Third Plenum, 1978–1984* (London: Contemporary China Institute, SOAS, University of London, 1984), 4–9.

role. Fewsmith argues that the new focus on practice made ideology more flexible, allowing adjustment and correction when policies failed.¹⁷ Ideology was therefore no longer treated as the unchallengeable source of truth; it became a framework whose claims had to be tested, revised, and justified through results. Deng Xiaoping's idea of "seeking truth from facts" clearly expressed this view. Ideology was expected to solve real social problems, not to protect itself from criticism.¹⁸ In this sense, the Truth Criterion Debate was not merely an intellectual correction, but a recalibration of ideology's ethical role: it transformed correctness from a matter of doctrinal fidelity into a matter of responsible political judgment under the pressures of modernization.

Modernization as the Ethical Driver

Modernization provided the primary internal force behind the ethical reorientation of ideology in post-Mao China. As governance shifted from revolutionary mobilization toward economic development and administrative regularity, the moral demands placed on ideology changed accordingly. The restoration of educational selection, the rehabilitation of expertise, and the turn toward the Four Modernizations all indicated that the state could no longer rely on mobilizational virtue alone; it needed institutions capable of producing stable and measurable improvements. An ethical framework that prioritized doctrinal purity over practical effectiveness proved increasingly incompatible with the requirements of a modernizing state, which depends on predictability, correction, and institutional learning. In this context, ideology was compelled to justify itself not by revolutionary lineage but by its capacity to support governability and social improvement.¹⁹

This shift reflected a broader transformation in ethical responsibility. Modernization introduced new standards of moral evaluation centered on performance, outcomes, and accountability. Policies and political lines could no longer be defended solely as expressions of correct belief; they had to demonstrate their ability to deliver growth, stability, and material improvement: for instance, the post-1978 emphasis on agricultural incentives and economic experimentation made local effects and social welfare central to judging policy success. As Weber's distinction between an ethics of conviction and an ethics of responsibility suggests, modern political systems tend to privilege responsibility for consequences over fidelity to principle.²⁰ The post-1978 emphasis on practice embodied precisely this ethical transition, recasting ideological legitimacy as conditional and revisable rather than absolute. Importantly, modernization did not render ideology irrelevant;

¹⁷ Joseph Fewsmith, *Dilemmas of Reform in China: Political Conflict and Economic Debate* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), 31–38.

¹⁸ Deng Xiaoping, "Emancipate the Mind, Seek Truth from Facts," in *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, Volume II (1975–1982)* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1994), 151–156.

¹⁹ Andrew G. Walder, *China under Mao: A Revolution Derailed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 210–220.

²⁰ Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 120–128.

instead, it altered ideology's ethical role. Fewsmith argues that reform-era governance required ideology to function as a flexible guide capable of adjustment and self-correction, rather than as a moral authority immune to failure. In ethical terms, modernization forced ideology to accept fallibility as a virtue rather than a vice. The willingness to revise theory in light of experience became not only pragmatically necessary but morally defensible, even commendable. Under the pressures of modernization, ideology ceased to be the guardian of moral certainty and became an instrument of ethically accountable governance.

Globalization, International Comparison, and Ethical Pressure

While modernization supplied the internal impetus for ethical change, globalization intensified and stabilized that transformation by exposing ideology to international comparison. Here, globalization mattered less as a single economic process than as a widening field of observation: diplomatic contact, intellectual exchange, and the visibility of other development trajectories made ideological self-sufficiency harder to sustain. As alternative development trajectories became visible—through diplomatic contact, intellectual exchange, and shifting geopolitical realities—claims of exclusive moral correctness grew increasingly difficult to sustain.²¹

Comparative experience played a crucial role in reshaping ethical judgment. Western Europe's postwar trajectory demonstrated that political legitimacy could be grounded in material welfare, institutional reliability, and social stability rather than ideological orthodoxy. More importantly for Chinese leaders, the Soviet and Eastern European experience offered a cautionary example: rigid ideological governance combined with economic stagnation exposed the ethical risks of treating doctrinal purity as a substitute for performance.²² In ethical terms, ideological correctness without results increasingly appeared not virtuous, but irresponsible. This comparative pressure altered how moral responsibility was conceived. Globalization rendered outcomes measurable and legitimacy relational: a political system's ethical standing was no longer judged solely against its own ideological claims, but against observable alternatives. Meyer et al. describe this process as the diffusion of global norms that privilege performance, rationalization, and accountability.²³ For China, this did not mean adopting foreign ideology wholesale. What received prime attention was more selective: technologies, administrative techniques, market mechanisms, and developmental experience that could be incorporated without surrendering the political language of socialism. The ethical consequence was nevertheless substantial, because moral justification increasingly required demonstrable success within a shared global frame of reference.

²¹ John Gerard Ruggie, "International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order," *International Organization* 36, no. 2 (1982): 379–415.

²² Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 20–35.

²³ John W. Meyer, John Boli, George M. Thomas, and Francisco O. Ramirez, "World Society and the Nation-State," *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 1 (1997): 144–181.

In this sense, globalization reinforced the ethical shift inaugurated by the Truth Criterion Debate. It did not create the practice-based ethic, but it constrained the possibility of reverting to ideological absolutism. Once exposed to international comparison, ideology could no longer plausibly claim moral immunity through isolation. Instead, it was compelled to operate under continuous ethical pressure—to justify itself through outcomes that were visible, comparable, and politically consequential beyond national boundaries.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that the ethical meaning of ideology is not fixed or separate from history, but is shaped by the processes of modernization and globalization. In the case of China, the change from the Cultural Revolution to the 1978 Truth Criterion Debate shows how ideology gradually lost its position as an absolute moral authority. Instead, it became something that needed to respond to social outcomes and practical results. Modernization played an important role in this change, because it emphasized governability, adjustment, and responsibility more than strict ideological certainty. At the same time, globalization strengthened this transformation by putting ideology into an international context, where moral isolation became more difficult to maintain.

Taken together, these processes did not remove ideology from political life, but changed how it worked ethically. Ideology no longer acted as a judge that is always correct. Instead, it became a tool that could be revised, and its legitimacy depended more on performance than ideological purity. The Chinese experience suggests a broader lesson: modernization and globalization do not only change political institutions, but also reshape the moral basis of ideological authority. When ideology can no longer rely on moral certainty alone, it must explain and justify itself through its ability to deal with real social problems and lived experience.

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