

[Spivey on Eisenman, 'Red China's Green Revolution: Technological Innovation, Institutional Change, and Economic Development under the Commune'](#)

Review published on Wednesday, January 13, 2021

Joshua Eisenman. *Red China's Green Revolution: Technological Innovation, Institutional Change, and Economic Development under the Commune.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. xxxii +

436 pp. \$35.00 (paper), [ISBN 978-0-231-18667-4](#).



Reviewed by Brian Spivey (University of California, Irvine) **Published on** H-Environment (January, 2021) **Commissioned by** Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

Printable Version: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=55409>

Red China's Green Revolution is an important reassessment of the Maoist rural commune system in China from its establishment in the 1950s to its demise in the late 1970s to early 1980s. The conventional assessment of the Maoist commune as found in official, scholarly, and popular accounts created in the post-Mao period goes something like this: overburdened by endless political campaigns and a strict Maoist ideology, China's rural farmers were unproductive, inefficient, and ideologically blinded to economic reality. Communes were economic and agricultural failures, symbolized most potently by the famines of the Great Leap Forward (1958 to 1962). However, the centrality of collective farming to Maoism meant that communes could not be abandoned, and so agricultural production limped along until after Mao's death in 1976. Finally, in 1978, a local production team in rural Anhui Province agreed to a secret contract that divided the commune's farmland into individual family plots called "household contracts." The success of their household-based farming system ultimately spurred the nationwide decollectivization of agriculture in the early 1980s; and, so the story goes, it was this decollectivization that played the crucial role in China's enormous post-Mao economic growth.

Red China's Green Revolution is arrayed against this conventional post-Mao narrative sponsored by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) outlined above at several points. First, the book argues that the "Chinese commune was not an economic failure remedied by decollectivization" (p. 2). Instead, despite early challenges and disasters wrought by the commune system, communes were institutionally reformed and agriculturally modernized and productive by the 1970s. Joshua Eisenman builds his case by looking at extant but not previously closely examined national, provincial, and county data, such as grain production, machine power, labor, fertilizer, and pig inventory. That data, according to Eisenman, shows that from 1970 to 1979 the communes produced enough food for enough people such that China's population grew by more than 150 million people. Moreover, other markers of well-being also improved, like life expectancy, literacy, and vocational education.

Second, Eisenman identifies in China's "green revolution" of the 1970s the "material, technological, and educational foundations for China's emergence as an economic superpower" (p. xxi). By locating the roots of China's economic growth in the late Mao period, *Red China's Green Revolution* adds

significant weight to the work of scholars who have approached 1978 as less an unbridgeable chasm and more a porous divide between the Mao years and the period of Deng Xiaoping's reforms. As the post-1978 period of the PRC increasingly falls under the purview of "history," this process will likely continue, building on the foundations laid by books like this. Third, Eisenman shows that the romanticized story of the ending of the commune system by a daring band of local farmers is false: decollectivization was the consequence of elite political maneuvering.

The bulk of the book is divided into a prologue and two main parts that are spread across eight chapters. After the introduction (chapter 1), Eisenman provides an institutional history of the commune through 1970 and identifies four distinct periods: the disastrous Great Leap Forward Commune (1958-61); the Rightist Commune (1962-64), which incorporated material incentives and relied more on central decision-making; the strictly Maoist Leftist Commune (1965-69), which coincided with the Cultural Revolution and commune-led agricultural mechanization; and the more productive and effective Green Revolution Commune (1970-79), which drew on the lessons from previous commune periods that culminated in the Northern Districts Agricultural Conference reforms of 1970. Eisenman distinguishes these periods mostly by commune size, their system of remuneration, and strategies for agricultural modernization. This chapter shows convincingly that the success of the 1970s cannot be understood without fleshing out the broader institutional history of the commune.

Chapter 3 is a deeper study of the fourth and final commune period, the "Green Revolution Commune." In it, Eisenman uses national and provincial official data to elaborate how investments in agricultural capital and technological advances drove increased agricultural productivity. This strategy helped overcome what Eisenman identifies as the three principal challenges facing communes in the 1970s: decreasing arable land, high-capital depreciation rates, and rising population growth. A crucial component of this green revolution was the elevation of agricultural and mechanical experts. Sidelined during the Great Leap Forward period, these figures worked in tandem with commune work teams to create a network (a "research and extension system") through which agricultural knowledge, best-practices, and applied science research could be shared at national, provincial, county, and commune levels.

Whereas chapter 3 quantitatively shows that the post-1970 commune was productive, chapters 4, 5, and 6—which comprise the majority of the second part of the book—aim to show *why* it was productive. They do so from economic, political, and organizational perspectives, respectively. Chapter 4 ("Economics") argues that increased coercive household extraction was efficiently reinvested into agricultural capital—fertilizer, seeds, mechanization, pesticides—which in turn led to increased agricultural output. Chapter 5 ("Politics") explains how this high level of extraction was maintained principally through high social pressure from local leaders, the People's Militia, and fellow workers; a collective remuneration system based not on cash but on workpoints that effectively disguised the high level of state extraction; and a practically religious Maoist ideology that promoted hard work and dedication to the commune. Some readers might take issue with Eisenman's reliance on religious terminology, like the "church of Mao," "worship," and "state religion," to describe the ideological underpinnings behind Chinese workers' devotion to the commune. Indeed, Eisenman does not much address the degree to which belief in the commune was cynically "indoctrinated" from above, the result of authentic and sincere belief in the project from below, or a combination of the two. Chapter 6 ("Organization") uses econometric and social scientific theories to determine how the

commune's organizational structure and size increased its productivity. The examined data (county-level statistics from Henan Province) do not allow Eisenman to make simple, decisive conclusions. However, they do suggest a relationship between relative commune size and team size: small teams were more productive in small communes and large teams in large communes benefited from economies of scale.

Part 2 ends with chapters 7 and 8, the latter being a general conclusion and useful summarization of the book's main points. Chapter 7 ("Burying the Commune") is Eisenman's takedown of the CCP-sponsored "from-below" narrative of decollectivization. He looks at newspapers, speeches, official reports, and elite memoirs to convincingly show that decollectivization of the commune was decided from the top. Deng Xiaoping and other reformers could only diminish Maoism and harden their grip on power by dismantling the commune.

Red China's Green Revolution is an important, rigorous, and valuable contribution to a growing scholarship that seeks to highlight the successes of the Mao period and look past Cold War ideological arrangements that emphasized the Mao period's failures. However, the occasional historiographical framing of the book's "revisionist" conclusions as "radically different" or "disturbing" to read is at times overstated (p. xxiii). As Eisenman himself writes, his book builds on the work of other "agricultural economists, political scientists, and historians" who have long challenged the traditional narrative but have not yet produced revisionist narratives of sufficient "explanatory power" (p. xxii). So framed, the book's principal contribution is thus to collate and examine previously neglected national, provincial, and county data as a sort of quantitative coup de grâce of the post-Mao CCP-sponsored interpretation of Maoist communes, their agricultural productivity, and their relationship to post-Mao economic growth. Few studies of the PRC, either from social scientists or historians, move so seamlessly between administrative levels to understand how center and locale interacted across time. This framing more accurately highlights the book's many important contributions.

Eisenman should likewise be applauded for providing the national and provincial agricultural data that he used as appendices in the back of the book. Scholars of the Green Revolution and of agricultural development outside the scope of USAID from the 1950s to the 1970s will find the curation of this data, and the book as a whole, useful for comparative studies.

Finally, it should be underlined that the book (despite its title) is not principally focused on the "Green Revolution" so much as it is focused on the evolution of the Maoist commune as an institution and agricultural producer. For Eisenman's story, Red China's "Green Revolution" is crucial because its statistical existence shows that the commune system was able to modernize China's agriculture, increase food production, and improve general well-being from 1970 onward. Eisenman argues powerfully that this "Green Revolution" laid important foundations for China's continued rapid growth in the 1980s. Ironically, this subsequent enormous economic expansion has today led to calls for a "Green Revolution" of a different character in China—this time focused more on environmental pollution, ecological degradation, and renewable sources of energy.

Citation: Brian Spivey. Review of Eisenman, Joshua, *Red China's Green Revolution: Technological Innovation, Institutional Change, and Economic Development under the Commune*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. January, 2021. URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55409>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

Citation: H-Net Reviews. *Spivey on Eisenman, 'Red China's Green Revolution: Technological Innovation, Institutional Change, and Economic Development under the Commune'*. H-Environment. 01-13-2021.

<https://networks.h-net.org/node/19397/reviews/7115233/spivey-eisenman-red-chinas-green-revolution-technological-innovation>

Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.