

REVIEWS

RETHINKING THE COMMUNE: A REVISIONIST TAKE ON MAOIST COLLECTIVISATION

Fabio Lanza
University of Arizona
flanza@email.arizona.edu

Joshua Eisenman, *Red China's Green Revolution. Technological Innovation, Institutional Change, and Economic Development Under the Commune*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2018, pp. xxxii/436

In this new, incredibly well-researched book, Joshua Eisenman gives us a bold reappraisal of history of the organisation that more than any other embodied the promises and failures of collective economy under Maoism: the commune. The dominant opinion on rural collectivisation (in China as in the western world) has long been that the communes, born out of the «madness» of the Great Leap Forward, survived that debacle as administrative units, hampering rural productivity and constraining the initiative of Chinese peasants, up until the moment when Deng Xiaoping responded approvingly to the request for capitalist liberalisation coming from the peasants themselves. The dismantling of the commune system has in turn been heralded as the reason for the economic boom of the 1980s, with GDP growth rates hovering around 10%. This commonly held opinion about the Maoist economy – which, we should note, is also functional to the legitimacy of the post-Mao CCP regime – has been since challenged in a series of scholarly interventions,¹ and Eisenman's is the most recent salvo in this attack. It is a very useful and very much needed one, precisely because it addresses the form that framed the lives of the majority of Chinese people between 1958 and the early 1980s, and is most closely identified with Maoist economic 'irrationality.'

Red China's Green Revolution shows that, contrary to the accepted interpretation, the rural communes worked, or at least after a series of exper-

1. One exemplary work is Lin Chun, *The Transformation of Chinese Socialism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.

iments – some disastrous, some not – CCP planners and leaders got them to work, so that in the last decade of their existence (the 1970s) collectivised production and life under the commune system was an effective way of organising Chinese rural life. Eisenman painstakingly enumerates and describes the contributions that the commune system made (he lists eleven of them); and they were not minor. Rural production and productivity increased, guaranteeing a steady influx of capital for industrialisation. Rural residents registered increases in life expectancy and basic education. The communes made possible the expansion and distribution of the technical reforms developed under the Maoist agricultural research and extension system. This led to increased outputs per unit of land, freeing labour for rural industries – and eventually for relocation into urban centres.² The development of the 1980s was based on the economic, structural, and financial conditions shaped by the communes. After 1962, and especially after 1970, collectivised peasants were allowed to enjoy the «three small freedoms» (private household plots, small-scale animal husbandry and cottage industries, and rural markets) under the auspices of the commune and its sub-units, which actively encouraged household investments. At the same time, commune members did not evade collective labour. In Eisenman's summation, «the commune was not an 'irrational' system created and perpetuated by brainwashed Maoists who failed to consider, or were indifferent to, economic outcomes» (xxiii).

Eisenman illustrates how the commune system guaranteed the continuing extraction of surplus from the countryside to finance industrial development, one of the crucial and perhaps paradoxical features of the Maoist state, which, born out of a peasant revolution, proceeded systematically and unrelentingly to shift resources away from rural residents. Yet, Eisenman is also very careful to point out the actual improvements in farmers' lives under the commune. After the disaster of the Great Leap famine in 1959-61, the CCP leadership tinkered with the system so that, by the 1970s, the commune fed its residents while at the same time minimised their consumption levels so as to maximise productive investment. This was achieved by adopting a complex system of work points, for which Eisenman provides one the most detailed analysis to date. He shows how work points disincentivised labour mobility thus retaining workers in their production team; unlike currency, work points were untradeable, recorded, and of flexible value, and could therefore be adjusted to reduce consumption or increase collective savings. In turn, this unpredictable flexibility incentivised commune members to work more, in order to secure sufficient income vis-à-vis the always uncertain evaluation of their labour. Through work points and

2. This aspect (the so-called Green Revolution) is, however, not central in Eisenman's analysis and one wishes he had chosen a different title, one less close to Sigrid Schmalzer's *Red Revolution, Green Revolution. Scientific Farming in Socialist China*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016, which tackles that issue directly.

other means, the communes came to constitute a massive mechanism of state extraction of surplus from overworked farmers but, and this is another aspect Eisenman clearly outlines, they were also the main conduit by which a minimum of welfare, technical innovation, and education were provided to rural residents.

Perhaps the most important (and I suspect most controversial) argument about the commune system in *Red China's Green Revolution* is the one Eisenman makes about its dismantling. In 1978, when Deng Xiaoping ascended to power, the communes were *not* economically in crisis and pressure from the bottom (from spontaneously emerging capitalist-minded farmers) would not have been enough to bring about their collapse. The decision to decollectivise was, in Eisenman's analysis, eminently political, because Deng's anti-commune faction had staked its position against a rival pro-commune faction. This political decision by the leadership was then recast as deriving from a bottom-up popular movement. This is indeed a very convincing argument and I have no quibble with it. I wish, however, that Eisenman had also engaged with other factors that were probably involved in the fight over decollectivisation. For example, Frederick Teiwes and Warren Sun have highlighted Deng's (and Zhao Ziyang's) preoccupation over state deficit as a crucial factor in the decision to dismantle the communes.³ In addition, reversing collectivisation had specific effects that might not have been clear at the time but that became crucial for the success of Deng's reforms. By eliminating the structure of the commune while maintaining the *hukou* (household registration) system, decollectivisation created, in one fell swoop, a disposable, submissive, and completely unprotected labour force, ready to be used in urban centres.

Red China's Green Revolution is a fascinating book; laden at times with the language and writing conventions of social sciences, it's not always an easy read, especially for a historian like myself. Yet it is well worth the effort. Eisenman, while he is very skillful in tackling statistics and economic theory, falters a little when dealing with ideology. Chapter 5, which focuses on Maoism and its role in incentivising rural productivity, displays a very stiff and quite functionalistic understanding of ideology, modeled largely on religious belief. His description of the commune as 'the church of Mao' is uncomfortably set in the mode of some outdated cold war scholarship and does not provide any useful insight into how Maoism penetrated and informed the everyday. The chapter might have been omitted without affecting the overall argument. It is however a minor flaw in an excellent book.

Finally, the book indirectly hints at a more general conundrum, which I believe is central in how we evaluate the Maoist economy, and perhaps the entire Maoist enterprise. Chinese leaders and economists at the time

3. Frederick C. Teiwes & Warren Sun, *Paradoxes Of Post-Mao Rural Reform: Initial Steps Toward A New Chinese Countryside, 1976–1981*, London, New York: Routledge, 2016. I owe this insight to Alexander Day.

deployed terms like «productivity», «profit», «market», etc. and we tend to re-deploy them in our analysis, probably without much thinking. And we tend to assume that those terms – and the practices they referred to – carried the same meaning no matter if they existed in a capitalist or a non-capitalist system, in a system that was based on accumulation of capital per se and one that saw accumulation as functional to state reinvestment of a specific kind. Yet this is an assumption we cannot make, or at least one that we cannot make unproblematically. I would argue that the accumulation of specific means of production for developmental reasons under Maoism probably operated under a different logic than simply the accumulation of capital in capitalism.⁴ While this exceeds the limits of Eisenman's analysis, *Red China's Green Revolution* then also opens the way for a new discussion of the very terms and meanings of the Maoist economic strategy.

4. I owe this point to an ongoing discussion with Alexander Day, Malcolm Thompson, and Covell Meyskens.