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### Review: Red China's green revolution: Technological innovation, institutional change, and economic development under the commune

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## Book Review

Joshua Eisenman, ed., *Red China's Green Revolution: Technological Innovation, Institutional Change, and Economic Development Under the Commune*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018) ISBN 9780231186667

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Professor Joshua Eisenman's book, "Red China's Green Revolution: Technological Innovation, Institutional Change, and Economic Development Under the Commune," is as paradoxical as the enigmatic era that it seeks to illuminate. On the one hand, the volume contains compelling evidence – much of it newly and painstakingly collected provincial and county-level data – that the later Maoist period, particularly the 1970–1979 period, was not the disaster that it is sometimes portrayed to be. It fundamentally undermines the discredited (yet often rehearsed) fable that decollectivization was initiated and promulgated solely by desperate protesting farmers. The author supports his argument via an impressive mix of methods – including historical analysis, economic modeling and case studies.

On the other hand, this book does decidedly not contain what is repeatedly asserted to be a "radically different and wide-ranging reinterpretation of China's contemporary history" (xxiii). By my count, 10 of the 11 themes the author lists as "principal revisions to the traditional characterization of the Chinese commune" are firmly supported by mainstream China scholars. Two examples may suffice to illustrate. First, one of the author's central arguments is that agriculture production increased during the later collectivist period. This pattern is already observed not by a maverick group of scholars, but by a veritable who's-who of China experts, including (but not limited to) Spence ([6], pp. 595–6), Harding ([2], pp. 241–2), and MacFarquhar ([3], p. 283, note 126). Second, the argument that agricultural reform was not sparked bottom-up by famished and fed-up farmers is also far from fringe. To be sure, the 'people power' argument remains widely disseminated – not only Zhou's [7] tome (rightfully criticized for being an exercise in cherry picking), but also in influential documentaries, in official Chinese community lore, and even in Wikipedia. But this argument is also widely discredited among most mainstream China scholars. Such luminaries as Zweig ([8], p. 259), Shirk [5] and Chung ([1], p. 58–59) carefully document the dance between center and provincial government that generated experiments in rural reform. Here too, the argument that farmers' protests and initiatives were not the sole causes of the early Deng rural reforms is closer to conventional wisdom – established by innovative but mainstream scholarship – than it is to a revisioning of history, as the book claims.

In this manner, most of the remaining supposed revisionings also reflect consensus. Indeed, the scholars the book cites as holding a 'minority view' include Princeton University's Professor Lynn White, former editor of *China Quarterly* Chris Bramall, and economists Barry Naughton and Louis Putterman – hardly marginal China scholars.

Also worrying are omissions to key context to exaggerate the book's conclusions. For instance, the book underscores a mainstream view that farmers were not systemically starving under the communal period, yet it omits the contrasting fact that World Bank and other statistics suggest that nearly three-quarters of China's population was living under one US dollar per day in 1981 (e.g., [4]). In another such omission, although the book implies in several places that the communal period was better than the subsequent early household responsibility system (HRS) period, it fails to mention that grain production per annum under HRS increased

86 million tons per annum in the 4 years between 1980 and 1984 - almost as great an increase in a shorter period of time than the 92 million tons increase in production under the communal system in the nine years between 1970 and 1979. (In places, I couldn't follow the book's math, such as Table A.1's report of a 4.77% average annual increase in grain production during that period. Based on the same data from the book, I calculated the increase to be 3.3%.) The book's claim that "the start of decollectivization coincided with historically high levels of agricultural productivity per unit land and per unit labor, life expectancy, basic literacy" [etc.] (p. xxiii) is true only if 'historic' means historic to that point. Most, if not all, of these indicators subsequently improved under the HRS.

To be sure, in addition to being exceptionally well-written, the book does have two additional strengths. First, it contains some new data, which in some ways are underplayed: Could the provincial-level data help adjudicate, for instance, claims that some provinces implemented communal farming more effectively than others? Second, the volume analyzes county level data to make its 11th point about scale of team size and productivity – a pattern that is not as well known, but that is convincing and to my knowledge, unique. The claim that the book's conclusions represent a radical view overshadow this project's more humanscale, yet still substantial, contributions to China scholarship.

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John Donaldson Associate Professor of Political Science at Singapore Management University, is the author of *Small Works: Poverty and Economic Development in Southwestern China* (Cornell University Press, 2011). Professor Donaldson has authored and co-authored numerous journal and conference papers as well as other academic publications on issues such as poverty reduction and economic growth in China, the transformation of China's agrarian system and central-provincial relations in China. His research has also been published in such journals as *World Development*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *Politics and Society*, *China Journal*, *China Quarterly* and *Journal of Contemporary China*.