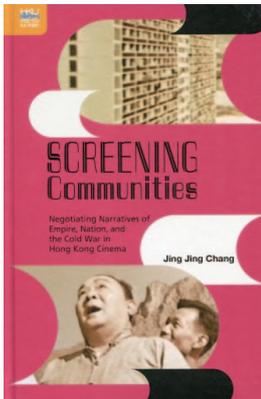


# Book reviews



**CHANG, Jing Jing. 2019.**  
***Screening Communities:  
 Negotiating Narratives of Empire,  
 Nation, and the Cold War in Hong  
 Kong Cinema.***  
 Hong Kong: Hong Kong University  
 Press.

TOM CUNLIFFE

Jing Jing Chang's book focuses on how post-war Hong Kong cinema's fate and fortunes, circa 1950s-late 1960s, were inextricably bound up with the context of the Cold War. For Chang, Hong Kong cinema of this period simultaneously imagined communities while constructing apolitical images that obscured the volatile political situation in post-war Hong Kong. Rather than a top-down enterprise from colonial authorities to subjects, Chang argues this situation was born out of a complex triangular relationship between colonial state, local filmmakers, and audiences. She posits that what was screened and what was screened out were equally important in the role films played in building Hong Kong's post-war community. Hence, Chang's methodological approach of "screening communities" sheds light on how certain strands of Hong Kong cinema operated in the colony, which both elucidates and revises assumptions about the historical development of Hong Kong cinema.

Chapter One assesses how the colonial government kept the rules and regulations of its censorship system in the 1950s and 1960s shrouded in mystery, so that it could "maintain its façade of apolitical unity during the Cold War" (p. 36) to help stabilise its shaky grasp on power. This chapter contextualises the conditions that restrained filmmakers' political expression, setting the stage for the proceeding chapters. Particularly useful is Chang's utilisation of various primary sources, including newspaper articles and archival government documents, to outline the different forces at battle with each other in Hong Kong, including the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the role played by CCP propaganda organs such as the Southern Film Corporation (*Nanfang yingye youxian gongsi* 南方影業有限公司). Since the colonial government genuinely feared that films with overtly political stances could mobilise audiences and lead to public disturbances (p. 39), their censorship policies aimed to depoliticise culture and create the image of an apolitical community on screen. Chapter Two assesses how the colonial government promoted their own ideological agenda and image both within and outside of Hong Kong through focusing on the government-produced Hong Kong Film Unit series of documentaries (1950s-early 1960s), as well as their attempts to

ingratiate themselves with the local populace by exhibiting the films in mobile cinemas in areas with no local cinemas and few televisions. Chang highlights how the Hong Kong government "moved from indifference to recognising the role of film in co-opting audiences as partners in the screening of their own collective post-war identities" (p. 47).

Chapter Three assesses how Cantonese left-leaning filmmakers at studios such as Union Film Enterprise Ltd. (*Zhonglian dianying qiye youxian gongsi* 中聯電影企業有限公司) reinterpreted the May Fourth tenets of anti-feudalism and gender equality in the depoliticised arena of Hong Kong. This process inscribed "Hong Kong audiences in the discursive 'screened' construction of Chinese nationalism and nation building beyond strictly party-based rhetoric" (p. 101). Several times in Chapter Two Chang mentions that the colonial government sought to use film to educate audiences about civic responsibility (see pp. 51, 52, and 57). This idea of cinema as a pedagogic tool was also key to many left-leaning filmmakers; for instance the Union filmmakers attempted to balance entertainment with a "moral cinematic education" (p. 80). From their "cultural elite status" they sought to educate audiences (p. 82) and they "unanimously regarded cinema as a medium to teach audiences how to be good, morally upright people who would serve society and love culture" (p. 83). This sounds surprisingly similar to the way the colonial government sought to educate audiences about "civic responsibility." What were the similarities and differences between them, and how did left-leaning filmmakers resist the political ideas in documentaries made by the government? More detailed analysis from both ideological and stylistic perspectives would have provided a better understanding of the overlaps and divergences in how such communities were constructed on-screen by each institution and how each type of film operated in its pedagogic aspects.

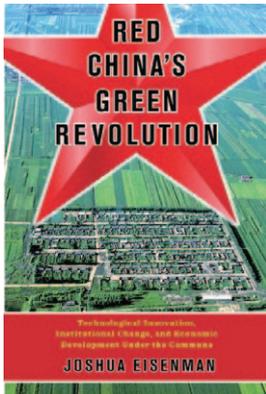
The highlight of the book for this reader is Chapter Four, in which Chang discusses the *lunlipian* (倫理片). The *lunlipian* was an important genre in the filmmaking practices of 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong cinema, utilised as a generic marker by contemporary film critics and also as a marketing strategy by studios. Chang discusses the cultural significance of this form within its social history and also clears up the confusing interchangeability between the terms *lunlipian* and *wenyipian* (文藝片), and the differing English translations for the former term. This is helpful for all scholarship on Hong Kong cinema from the 1950s to the 1970s, since the term *lunlipian* is rarely used in English language scholarship, whereas various different English translations such as "social ethics films," "(family) melodrama," or "social realist film" are. Chang specifically illustrates how she sees "*lunli*" as a concept of address, deduced from excellent in-depth analysis of the production companies' promotional materials and two 1960s genre-blending *lunlipian*, which function to construct local community based on communal solidarity, family values, and "a renegotiation of what constitutes traditional Chinese culture in post-war Hong Kong" (p. 112). The Cantonese *lunlipian*'s genre-blending development in the 1960s is often criticised as favouring entertainment over ethical concerns compared to 1950s iterations, but Chang's argument that this genre-blending is a natural progression for the Cantonese *lunlipian* in line with stiff competition from Mandarin and foreign films and evolving socio-political conditions is a fruitful one that

helps reconsider the generic and thematic connections between 1950s and 1960s Cantonese cinema.

Chapters Five and Six expand outward, to Southeast Asia (*Nanyang* 南洋), and forward, to the late 1960s, to assess different strategies and developments in how filmmakers screened, and constructed, communities on-screen in Hong Kong cinema. The latter chapter helps with understanding how the “factory girl” series of films offer narratives articulating female emancipation and a fantasy of factory life, but perhaps more analysis on how these films posit that sacrificing oneself for capitalism is a noble pursuit would help illuminate their ideology in relation to local identity.

It would also have been interesting to see consideration of Mandarin left-leaning/left-wing films to enrich our understanding of the industrial and creative milieu of the time. Overall, Chang’s book contributes greatly to reassessments of Hong Kong film history and demonstrates the importance of archival research. Her screening communities lens focuses clearly on how different parties with different political affiliations, commercial considerations, and agendas all utilised cinema to take part in the construction of Hong Kong’s post-war communities.

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

## FELIX WEMHEUER

In this book, Joshua Eisenman presents a revisionist approach to the Chinese People’s Communes era (1958-1983). One of his main goals is to question common narratives in Chinese and Western research that the communes would have been an economic failure and that only decollectivisation under Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s set agriculture on the right track. Eisenman is not motivated by nostalgia for so-called Maoist “egalitarianism.” Rather, he argues strictly in economic terms, claiming that the communes were a successful model to modernise agriculture, increase productivity in grain production, and promote the green revolution, at least in the 1970s. This institution would have allowed the state to enforce household austerity in the villages, reallocating these savings for investment in machinery, irrigation systems, fertilizers, small factories, or agricultural schools.

Eisenman introduces the reader to several changes in the commune system: For example, the period of the Great Leap Forward (GLF) (1958-61)

was characterised by over-saving and unproductive investments such as the steel campaign. The Rightist Commune (1962-64) in the aftermath of the famine resulted in under-saving. According to Eisenman, the best model was the Green Revolution Commune (1970-79) characterised by high saving rates allocated to useful and productive investments. In Chapter Four, he uses neoclassic economic growth models from Solow-Swan and Arthur Lewis to prove this argument. Most of the data sets in the book are taken from official Chinese statistics published in the 1980s.

In Chapter Five on politics, Eisenman argues that the communes would have been the “churches” of Maoism (p. 254). With rituals like songs, dance, or readings of the *Little Red Book*, the Party indoctrinated commune members to work hard, to be self-reliant, to consume little and to save resources. By doing so, politics contributed to the communes’ accumulation of capital. In the last part of the book, Eisenman argues that the communes did not face an economic crisis when Deng came to power after 1978. It would have been much more a political decision of the Party leadership to gradually dissolve the communes in order to bury the collectivist ideology of the Mao era.

*Red China's Green Revolution* is a thoughtful provocation and should be discussed. To combine approaches from neoclassical economy, organisational theory, history, and politics is innovative, but not always easy to follow. The author presents himself as a “young Turk” challenging the field. However, he does not engage with major academic works related to his topic and even ignores them. For example, Kenneth Walker published several books and articles on grain production in the commune era, using official statistics from the 1980s, and re-evaluating them in a critical way (Walker 1984). Robert Ash also came to a much less rosy conclusion than Eisenman (Ash 1998, 2006: 993). This is also true for prominent Chinese scholar Wen Tiejun 温铁军, who has argued that low agricultural prices helped the industries and cities to develop at the expense of the countryside (Wen 2000: 175-7). A key institution in this context was the state monopoly for the purchase and sale of grain, which is hardly mentioned by Eisenman.

Some scholars have argued that late Maoism in the 1970s was quite successful in economic and social development. However, if Eisenman wants to prove that the 1970s were more successful than the decollectivisation era, he should have compared both periods. Instead, his data sets end mostly in 1979 or 1983.

Eisenman argues that after the end of the GLF there is no evidence that commune members were “starving or too hungry to work” (xxiv). It seems to be true that no massive-scale deadly famine took place in China after 1962. I have proposed that the government had learnt lessons from the Great Leap to lower the peasants’ burden, to limit the growth of the urban population, and to import grain to feed the cities. These policies were more important to prevent famine than the slight increase in grain production per head (Wemheuer 2014: 142-7). A repetition of the Great Famine was avoided; however, several reports show that in some regions, peasants faced malnutrition and hunger even in the late commune era (Chen 1998; Fu, Hu, and Feng 2008). By the end of the Mao era, peasants ate fewer fine grains (rice and wheat) and more unpopular coarse grains (sweet potato etc.) than they had 20 years before (Ash 2006: 990). By international standards, the Chinese population could not eat their fill in the Mao era. Only in 1978 could China for the first time meet the minimum level of basic nutrition of over 2,400 calories a day per person, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Nussbaumer and Ruthemann 2003, Vol. 1: 116).

In Eisenman’s book, we learn little about peasants’ reactions to changes in the commune system. However, several studies show that they developed a set of strategies to hide resources from the state such as stealing, “eating green”