

Book Review

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Calvin Hui, *The Art of Useless: Fashion, Media, and Consumer Culture in Contemporary China*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021, 280 pp., \$35 (Paperback)

What exactly is Calvin Hui's *The Art of Useless: Fashion, Media, and Consumer Culture in Contemporary China* about? Examining at turns fashion, documentary and feature films, consumption, the Chinese middle class, migrant workers, and rubbish, this book seeks to track the emergence of the Chinese middle class in connection with changing patterns of cultural attitudes towards consumption—an expansiveness of scope that may be its greatest strength as well as its weakest point. On the one hand, Chinese consumer culture deserves the multifaceted attention that Hui's book accords it: it is a particularly paradoxical phenomenon, situated as it is in the unique intersection of a Marxist economic and social tradition and the breakback transition from mass poverty to global economic influence. Hui's project to illuminate these developments is therefore a highly valuable addition to the scholarship on global capitalism, especially when viewed from a postcolonial lens that is increasingly necessary as the geopolitical poles of power shift towards East Asia. On the other hand, however, in its eagerness to articulate multiple connections and develop several topics in tandem, the book sometimes gives the impression that these ambitions leave the topics themselves underexplored, and that the conclusions lack the depth they might have deserved.

In the introduction, Hui describes his project as aiming to show that “cultural productions—in particular, media and popular cultures—can potentially call into being and construct [the] new social subjectivity” of the middle class; simultaneously, he also asks how “middle-class consumer culture [has] replaced proletarian culture and become the dominant imaginary of China today” (2). To do this, Hui examines an artistic fashion show as well as a range of documentary and feature films, and marshals a host of theories drawn predominantly from the canon of Western Marxism and psychoanalysis, including the likes of Louis Althusser, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, Fredric Jameson, and Michael Hardt—the use of which, he argues, “demonstrates the relevance of cultural studies, Western Marxism, and poststructuralist theory in investigating the complexities of contemporary Chinese media and popular cultures” (3).

The book is structured into three thematic blocs: the first, consisting of chapter one, examines contemporary Chinese attitudes towards fashion by analyzing Ma Ke's fashion exhibit *Useless* (2007) as well as Jia Zhangke's film documentary about it, of the same title (2007). The next section,



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consisting of chapters two to four, rewinds the clock and traces the emergence of contemporary consumption attitudes through the period of the 1960s-2000s by analyzing the depictions of fashion and the desire for it in four feature films, Xie Tieli's *Never forget* (*Qianwan buyao wangji*) from 1964, Huang Zumo's *Romance on Lu Mountain* (*Lushanlian*) from 1980, and Xu Jinglei's *Go! Lala Go!* (*Du Lala shengzhi ji*) from 2010. The last bloc turns to production, examining first the plight of Chinese migrant factory workers as seen through the lens of two films, He Zhaoti's *My Fancy High Heels* (*Wo'ai gaogenxie*) from 2010 and Wu Feiyue's *Iron Moon* (*Wode shipian*) from 2017 (chapter five) and finally rubbish as the underside of consumption as portrayed in Wang Jiuliang's *Beijing Besieged by Waste* (*Laji weicheng*) from 2010 (chapter six). All this follows upon an introduction that rehearses a bewildering, because highly intricate, scholarly conversation about the history and definition of the Chinese middle class. This introduction may at times feel fruitless, but in fact it offers clear support for Hui's claim that the Chinese middle class is as much, perhaps even more, a project of consciousness and subjectivity that it is of economic status. It therefore makes sense to evaluate products of the media for their production of affects that subtend the project of calling middle-class consciousness into being.

It is for this reason that it is the second bloc of the book that provides the most helpful and most unified contribution to scholarship, specifically to Chinese studies of popular culture, consumer culture, and middle-class subjectivity. After a first chapter that establishes as a baseline that contemporary consumption in China tends to be excessive, the second bloc traces the shift from more cautious attitudes about consumption, through a dialectical embrace of consumption desires in the 1980s, to an active encouragement of consumerist lifestyles in the 2000s. Hui's treatment of the individual films of these periods is attentive to nuances and resists facile narratives, for example, those about communist repression during the Cultural Revolution as opposed to capitalist liberation during Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening up period. A good example for this sensitivity is Hui's response to what he calls the "revisionist narrative" (128), according to which Maoist fashion repressed women's inherent femininity by requiring everyone to dress in the same shapeless uniform, whereas the loosening of such strictures, exemplified by films such as *Romance on Lu Mountain*, finally allowed women the freedom to express themselves. Here, Hui critiques both the understanding that the uniform can only be understood as repressive, rather than expressive of nonstandard forms of (female/male/gendered) identities, and the narrative that "allowing" women to follow social expectations on feminine dress should be viewed as only liberatory. Such readings demonstrate the book's willingness and ability to push back against received narratives of China's consumer culture in relation to the history of the Communist Party, and that sensitivity extends both to the historical narrative that the book develops and to the individual episodes, with their own internal contradictions, within that narrative.

After this interesting and complex narrative in the book's second to fourth chapters, the last bloc feels somewhat less successful, both in itself and in its relation to what has come before. While (the filmic depictions of) the plights of migrant factory workers certainly merit scholarly attention, here it is less clear what Hui adds to the existing, mostly sociological, literature, of which he cites many relevant examples. I share Hui's sense that humanistic and critical theoretical approaches to the topics of sociological study are important and helpful, but it was not entirely clear to me how the depictions of and attitudes toward the factory workers relate to either middle-class subjectivity or consumer culture. And while the popular feature films analyzed in the book's more historical section are easily accepted as having an influence in shaping or reflecting widespread cultural dispositions, it is more difficult to see how the more niche documentary films examined here would have similar reach of influence; neither can they be straightforwardly argued to reflect Chinese consumption, since their primary subjects are the factory workers and their conditions of production.

The situation is similar with the book's first and last chapters, on the fashion exhibit and on rubbish, respectively. Especially the latter seems disconnected from what had hitherto appeared as the book's central questions—about the Chinese middle class, its consumption attitudes and its contradictions. Neither does the demonstration of rubbish's role as the abject in Kristeva's sense of the word appear particularly original; and I was left wondering whether rubbish really was as much a problem of consumption as Hui's book seems to suggest, or whether it might make more sense to see it as a problem of production, and especially a problem inherited from a history of colonialism and a West-dominated geopolitical order, in which developing countries are forced to "purchase" modernization at the cost of environmental hazards such as the accumulation of rubbish. The very first chapter, concerned with the fashion exhibit and the documentary about it, likewise seems to stand apart from the main directions of the majority of the book: after the introduction's lengthy attention to the question of defining the middle-class, Ma Ke's ambiguous artistic attempt to design anti-consumerist fashion is difficult to integrate in a unified critical intervention. I read this chapter as establishing consumerism as a problem of excess for contemporary China against which the historical development can be measured, but this is not made as explicit as may perhaps be beneficial.

So, while the historical trajectory of consumption in the PRC is fascinating and helpful, Hui's book leaves this reader with a number of questions. The first is what the overarching argument is supposed to be understood as: the many directions do not come together clearly in a larger claim or contribution. I also remain curious about the choice of corpus for this project: why were these films selected, or why even is the emphasis on filmic representations of fashion, rather than on fashion itself? Surely advertisements or visual social media such as Douyin or Xiaohongshu could also be fruitfully selected for a humanistic analysis of the subjectivities of middle-classness? Indeed, digital media of any sort seem to be curiously absent, either as forms of representation or as objects of consumption. Moreover, the book seems to regard (and does not justify regarding) consumption as primarily, or only, about fashion, understood as clothes: but surely consumption is as much about food, services, and non-fashion or non-clothing objects such as mobile devices, cars, and homes? Finally, where Hui claims that his book "demonstrates the relevance of cultural studies, Western Marxism, and poststructuralist theory [for] Chinese media and popular cultures" (3), I would have appreciated not so much a demonstration of that relevance—which, for me, does not seem to be so much in question—but more interrogation of how and when such Western theories apply, and when, and especially how, they need to be adapted to respond to the uniqueness of the Chinese context. In sum, Hui's book is an interesting and helpful read for scholars interested in the development of Chinese middle-class consumer subjectivities, but it leaves unanswered some questions of detail about contemporary Chinese consumer culture.

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