

BOOK REVIEW

THE ART OF USELESS: FASHION, MEDIA AND CONSUMER CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

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Calvin Hui. *The Art of Useless: Fashion, Media and Consumer Culture in Contemporary China*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2021. 280pp. ISBN: 9780231549837

Abstract: This review examines Calvin Hui's *The Art of Useless*, a cultural study of fashion, media, and consumer culture in contemporary China from the Cultural Revolution to the globalized present. Hui reads fashion objects and their cinematic representations as archives of social memory, class formation, labor, gender, and political economy. Moving across documentary, fiction film, popular literature, exhibitions, and ethnographic materials, the book argues that fashion is a privileged site for mapping the contradictions of socialist history, post-socialist reforms, and neoliberal globalization. By placing cultural texts in dialogue with Western Marxism, psychoanalysis, and cultural theory, Hui shows how consumption, production, and waste reveal the political unconscious of contemporary China. The review highlights the book's interdisciplinary method, theoretical richness, and contribution to Chinese cultural studies, while noting the limited comparative engagement beyond China.

Keywords: *Chinese Consumer Culture, Fashion and Media, Political Unconscious, Labor and Consumption, Documentary Film, Globalization, Cultural Theory.*

Calvin Hui's *The Art of Useless* offers a theoretically rich and interdisciplinary investigation of how fashion and consumer

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objects illuminate the historical and political transformations of contemporary China. Spanning the period from the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s to the globalized consumer culture of the 2020s, Hui asks what fashion commodities reveal about class formation, social memory, gender, labour and political economy. Across documentary film, fiction cinema, exhibitions, popular literature, and ethnographic materials, he demonstrates that fashion is not peripheral to history but central to the political unconscious of modern China.

The book opens with an analysis of the fashion exhibition *Useless* by Ma Ke (2007) and the documentary film *Useless* by Jia Zhangke (2007). Hui uses the exhibition and documentary film to provide an overview of the contradictory realities of connecting, relating and de-differentiating the fragmented, contradictory and incoherent realities of fashion. Hui argues that Jia's block-structured documentary form creates a "cognitive mapping" of global capitalism in China, presenting fragmented yet interconnected realities of fashion, labour and memory in the context of artisanal memory and industrial displacement. During the Cultural Revolution, fashion and consumption were condemned as bourgeois excess; Hui juxtaposes this historical suspicion with their later rehabilitation under socialist modernization and market reform. The memorable image of a tailor forced into coal mining captures how artisanal knowledge becomes "useless" in the face of factory production, exposing the erasure of embodied histories under industrial capitalism. At the same time, Hui shows that workers reattach meaning to mass-produced goods, complicating the claim that commodities lack memory.

Chapter *Two* revisits Mao-era cinema to examine clothing, leisure, and consumption within socialist ideology. Through films such as *Never Forget* by Xie Tieli (1964) and *Sentinels Under the Neon Lights* by Wang Ping, Hui argues that clothing and leisure in these films functioned as ambivalent signs rather than mere propaganda. Narrative tensions between political revolution, economic construction, and everyday desire reveal how libidinal energies were sublimated into socialist discipline. This chapter is particularly valuable for challenging the assumption that Maoist

culture entirely suppressed consumer sensibilities; instead, Hui uncovers subtle negotiations between ideology and daily life.

The transition to the post-socialist reform era appears in Chapter *Three* through films such as *Romance on Lushan Mountain* by Huang Zumo and *The Girl in Red* by Lu Xiaoya. The recurring motif of the red dress becomes a vehicle for dramatizing gender, desire, and political change. Hui connects cinema with magazines, television melodramas and fashion shows to highlight how femininity and consumer desire became central to economic modernization and cultural imagination. Importantly, he frames these developments within feminist concerns, arguing that gender, love and ethnicity were increasingly reframed through the logic of economic reform and aspirational consumption.

Chapter *Four* moves into the 2000s and early 2010s, examining the formation of the Chinese middle class through the novel *Chronicle of Du Lala's Promotion* by Li Ke and its film adaptation *Go Lala Go!* directed by Xu Jinglei. Hui's striking insight here is that commodities "look back" at viewers, teaching them how to perform middle-class identity. The state and commercial media, he argues, collaborate in shaping aspirational consumer subjectivities. Consumption thus becomes pedagogical; viewers learn to recognize symbols of success and distinguish themselves from other social groups.

If earlier chapters focus on consumption, Chapter *Five* shifts attention to production and labor. Through documentaries such as *Mardi Gras: Made in China* by David Redmon, *Iron Moon* by Wu Feiyue and *My Fancy High Heels* by Ho Chao-ti, Hui examines migrant factory workers as the underside of consumer culture. Drawing on Lauren Berlant's notion of 'cruel optimism,' he shows how workers both desire and are alienated by the commodities they produce. Their dreams of consumption reveal the paradox that consumer aspiration can be both empowering and obstructive to flourishing. Hui's interdisciplinary approach, combining cultural theory with ethnographic sensitivity, makes this chapter one of the book's most compelling contributions.

The *final* chapter addresses waste and disposal through *Beijing Besieged by Waste* by Wang Jiuliang. Engaging the thought of Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud, Fredric Jameson and Julia

Kristeva, Hui interprets garbage as the return of the repressed and as a critical symbol of development and modernization. Waste becomes a historical archive, revealing the hidden costs of development and the dialectic between utopian desire and ideological concealment.

Throughout the book, Hui situates his arguments within the frameworks of Karl Marx on alienation, Pierre Bourdieu on taste and Georg Simmel on fashion. A recurring theme is the tension between handmade objects that carry memory and mass-produced commodities that appear ahistorical. Yet Hui complicates this binary by showing how workers and consumers reattach stories and meanings to industrial goods. *The Art of Useless* stands out for its methodological range, theoretical depth and careful analysis of cultural texts. It convincingly demonstrates that cinematic and media representations of fashion, gender, labor and waste provide access to otherwise imperceptible contradictions of contemporary China. One limitation is the lack of sustained comparison with other developing contexts in Asia, Africa, or Latin America undergoing similar consumer transformations. Such comparison might have broadened the book's global relevance.

Nevertheless, Hui's work is innovative, methodologically sophisticated and intellectually rigorous. By taking 'useless' fashion seriously, he reveals how material culture, media and everyday objects become keys to understanding the political economy and historical memory of a rapidly transforming society. The book will be invaluable to scholars of cultural studies, media studies, sociology, fashion theory and contemporary Chinese studies, offering new ways to think about consumption, memory and political economy through the seemingly 'useless' world of fashion situated within a critical historical context.