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reasonable to argue that these leaders rely on a shared cultural repertoire, to which the Goujian story and other moral stories belong, to make similar political decisions.

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The Art of Useless: Fashion, Media, and Consumer Culture in Contemporary China

By Calvin Hui. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021. 280 pp.
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“In the morning, Deng Xiaoping rules; in the evening, Teresa Teng (Deng Lijun) rules,” went a popular saying in China during the 1980s. The late Chinese leader and Taiwanese singer are ideologically opposed and have nothing in common except for their investment in social change through (pop) culture. Analyzing the stark contrast between the two Dengs, Calvin Hui shows that the subjectivity of China’s middle class and new petty bourgeoisie is constructed by their cultural production and consumption (pp. 8–9). Cultural consciousness constructs the subject. Before the arrival in China of Teresa Teng’s sentimental songs about love and nostalgia, revolutionary songs such as “We Are the Successors of Communism” and “Glory to the Red Sun” dominated the Chinese pop music scene. Teng’s “decadent music,” as it is sometimes characterized in China, showed Chinese audiences how to express personal feelings as an individual rather than as a collective. In *The Art of Useless*, Hui argues that such popular music formed a “cultural foundation for the Chinese middle-class . . . subjects to emerge” (p. 9) in the “postsocialist and neoliberal” 1990s and 2000s.

Taking a cultural and media studies approach, *The Art of Useless* tells the story of how the Chinese middle class has come into being since the 1980s and how consumerism has come to define that group, somewhat counterintuitively, in a socialist country. The eye-catching title of Hui’s book takes inspiration from Ma Ke’s 2007 fashion exhibit *Useless* and Jia Zhangke’s documentary of the same title and year. Driven by the need to understand the “political-economic . . . and materialist dimensions” of the Chinese middle class, or “the new petty bourgeoisie” (p. 12), the book analyzes the life cycle of commodity and fashion, namely, its production, distribution, consumption, and eventual disposal, while attending sensitively to the plight of sweatshop workers who fantasize about the luxury products they manufacture. Particularly appealing to readers is the book’s breadth and its range of eclectic case studies. One highlight, for example, is Hui’s tracing of evolving fashion decisions in Chinese cinema of the 1960s, 1990s, and 2000s. Drawing on a range of signifiers (and expressions) of urban and visual cultures, such as film, documentary, and fashion history, the book argues that the middle-class culture anticipates, perhaps presages, the middle-class subject. Censors and social regulators would find the fluid, always evolving self-consciousness of the middle class difficult to rein in.

The strength of *The Art of Useless* lies in the new research questions it raises, such as how middle-class consumer culture is replacing proletarian culture as the new, dominant ideology in China today. Given the diversity of materials, it could be a challenge to organize the chapters for sufficient coverage within an easy-to-follow structure. However, Hui succeeds in telling a compelling story without being restricted by a chronological structure.

This book uses a compelling tripartite structure to organize its case studies in film, literary, and fashion studies in its six chapters—namely, middle-class culture, petty bourgeois sensibility, and the concept of *zhuang*. Most intriguing among the three is *zhuang* as category to organize the anxieties and social ambitions of the middle class, in that the word denotes multiple, sometimes conflicting social pursuits in fashion, fantasy, and upward mobility. In pop culture, *zhuang* also refers to acting or posturing in a negative sense, simulating a presence, counterfeiting, or faking, as in parodying an idea through imitation. The variegated artistic engagements with *zhuang* as analyzed in *The Art of Useless* constitute a major insight. These range from *Never Forget* (chapter 2), a cautionary tale of consumer culture in the context of Chinese socialism, to Wang Jiuliang's film *Beijing Besieged by Waste* (chapter 6), a documentary designed to raise awareness of rubbish dumps and landfills that are overwhelming China's capital. The duality of consumption and production of waste is captured by the word play in Wang's film title, which calls to mind both Qian Zhongshu's novel *Fortress Besieged* and Mao Zedong's slogan "the countryside overwhelms the city." Hui perceptively characterizes the overflowing rubbish as "warfare" on middle-class civility (p. 198). Labor, disposable consumer products, and waste are intimately connected as cyclical stages of consumerism. Wang's film renders visible the previously invisible underside of consumerism.

First, we learn about Jia Zhangke's documentary *Useless* and the commodified chain of fashion in the twenty-first century. We begin with a contemporary case study and work backward in time in subsequent chapters. It is understandable why Hui might have opted for this arrangement, because chapter 1 is intended as an "on-ramp" to ease readers into the specific branch of critical inquiry about waste.

Next, in chapters 2–4, we are presented with a genre-specific examples of the consumption of commodity and the production of waste, namely Chinese cinema of the 1960s, the 1980s, and the 2000s, chronologically organized. The main argument here is that the films both filter out and project the fantasies of the middle class.

The last cluster, chapters 5 and 6, turns to the key question of labor, gender, and desire. Each of the sections is distinct and offers internal coherence. Chapter 6 is particularly fascinating as it invites us to consider the politics of disposal, generation of and management of waste, and how fashion is recycled.

The writing is occasionally verbose ("middle-class and new petty bourgeois culture . . . construct middle-class and new petty bourgeois subjectivity," p. 9), and the book's central concern (defining the middle class) and unique take on the concept of the "useless" are obscured in the introduction, which does not provide concrete examples to anchor its main arguments about social and urban waste. While readers may pick up the book thanks to its intriguing title, they would remain confused about the direction in which the book is taking them. The title seems to be pointing to a study focused on the cyclical nature of art and urban waste, rather than a study seeking to name a social class, as declared by Hui in the Introduction and throughout the book. This seems like a lost opportunity.

The Art of Useless is notable for its innovative methodologies of cultural studies. Arguing against the critical commonplace created by social and political sciences, this monograph suggests that the formation of middle-class culture "calls into being" and shapes a new social subjectivity, namely the middle-class subject. The study of social class is an important field, but in China studies, this subject is dominated by sociological methodologies. This book makes a welcome contribution by bringing in humanistic concerns and a cultural studies perspective.