

## Princess Butterfly: A Chinese Fashion Influencer in London



Liu Min huddles on the sofa stuffed with clothes, waste paper shells, and plush toys, and lights a cigarette. We are in her shared flat in London. This flat located in Camden Town, close to the Central Saint Martins where she studies, is small and a little stuffy. It is dinner time. The smell of boiling broth came from the kitchen. She stands up and goes to the light-broken kitchen.

Back in the living room, she opens her iPad to see if she's gained more followers on Instagram(Ins). On Ins, her social account name is butterfly.minmin and she has 32,000 followers. On Weibo, the biggest Chinese social platform, her social account name is Princess Butterfly and she has 200,000 followers. The huge discrepancy in figures has made her a little frustrated. Since coming to the UK last September for her master course, she has put more effort into running her Ins account, but with little reward. "Traffic has been so bad recently. I don't feel like managing with any other accounts except Weibo." She says, "Sometimes I want to give up, sometimes I still want to be a big star."

"I desire to conquer people. The feeling is good." She sighs, "but here everything becomes different." She was constantly invited to brand shoots and events in China one year ago. After she lives in London, she feels "I am fettered. I dream of everything and I get nothing".

On Weibo, she could give a powerful explanation for her design work: "Chinese style, especially the kind of Chinese style that formed after the founding of the new China, is not an abstracted, idealized classicism in ancient Chinese paintings or poems. It exists in TikTok and Kwai, in the street signs, and in your second aunt's WeChat. "

In the UK, the birthplace of subculture, once when Liu Min walked down the street in her own designs, she was asked by a pedestrian, "Hey, do you play rock and roll?" The question surprised her. She never thought her Chinese style can be associated with something like the rock band. In China, people said her design is novel or ugly.

"How do people maintain a balance between serious national identity and jocular subculture on a global scale?" Xiong Yiran, the Chinese translator of the book *Fashion and Its Social Agendas*, raises this question. This is also the dilemma encountered by Princess Butterfly.

### **A Common Princess**

"A commoner princess. Not rich or beautiful. Yet gorgeous or pessimistic." This is what Princess Butterfly said about herself in 2020.

Liu Min was born in 1998 in Huilongguan, Beijing. As the capital's largest satellite town, it has no sign of a metropolis even after she grew up and went abroad. Dilapidated Soviet-style residential buildings are lined along its wide and empty roads. Between housing clusters, some weedy hundred-of-square-meter-wastelands are planted with corn and other vegetables. She loves her hometown, which is deserted and run-down, and she thinks herself has the same vibe as this area. Since her childhood, she has been interested in making up and drawing characters on paper to play dress-up games. "I am now making clothes, shoes, and dolls. My childhood dream is fulfilled step-by-step." Ten years ago she idolized Lady Gaga and longed to be someone like her who can create a stunning effect. She wrote down the words "Born This Way" on the notepad and put it in her pencil pouch. The words motivated her when she was down. Ten years later, she feels lucky enough that she is becoming the person she wants to be, although not entirely.



Liu Min has aroused largely attention online since she began to post pictures about dressing,



especially her own design, on her social media accounts by using the name "Princess Butterfly". She later registered a shop on Taobao, the well-known Chinese online shopping platform, and began to sell her designs which are less acceptable to the average customer. In the same year, her Tigers on the Mountain pantyhose won the Ugly Taste Award at the 2020 Taobao Ugly Stuff Awards. And this design was described by many netizens as "an eyesore" at the online awards ceremony. To respond, Princess Butterfly said, "This event is very meaningful. It discusses the complex and thought-provoking topic of beauty and ugliness in a light-hearted and humorous way."

The items sold in Princess Butterfly's Taobao shop have a strong visual impact and a distinctive color scheme. Tassel dresses with printed patterns Jia Baoyu and Lin Daiyu (they are the hero and heroine of *The Dream of Red Mansions*, a masterpiece of Chinese literature), dresses with repeated motifs of semi-permanent eyebrows, eyes and lips, tracksuit suits with elements of her own and collected head stickers ..... Contemporary Chinese elements and symbols are used in her clothing designs as if she declares that these seemingly kitsch images, overlooked and even not acknowledged, are in fact components of Chinese culture and can be worn on the body.



In every picture, you will find her standing in the center position, wearing what is defined as a subcultural style, with the crowd or the street as the backdrop. "I want it to be shocking, to shock people at first glance." Shocking, blooming, sparkling, and gorgeous are words that she often uses.

Some people think Princess Butterfly and her designs are cool and confident, while others think they are ugly and corny. Meanwhile, Liu Min has gradually become famous in the fashion industry.

She has been interviewed by GQ China, and has started cooperating with various independent fashion brands. She has no idea in which situation her customers would wear her clothes. She thinks her clothes are not customized for life. Although she has the fame to some degree, she earns just a little profit from running her business. Monthly sales of her online shop are often in the single digits, sometimes zero, and the average monthly income is not enough to pay her shop's assistant. The selling price of these items is not cheap. The God of Wealth cheongsam is priced at 666 yuan(around£ 79). The high-heeled shoes with tiger-toe patterns are priced at 1,888 yuan(around £224). That means her potential target customer is the middle class and she has delivered a "low" taste among them. Distinct from influencers who chase a sense of luxury, Liu Min prefers to dress in local and small brands. In China, she hung out in the super wholesale markets, which are full of fake eyeballs and plastic plants. In London, rather than shopping in Soho, she likes to search for a cheap leopard print coat on Amazon.

LiuMin demonstrates how a girl from an ordinary middle-class family pursues her dream of becoming a famous star. On social media, she does not shy away from showing her efforts, ambitions, and the gap between her efforts and ambition. Her style of clothing design and modeling reveals a boldness and confidence that most Chinese girls don't have. Her words, however, give a pessimistic feel. For example, she once said, "Walking on the street and listening to love songs, I know I am in one of the most romantic cities.....I find the world slowly becomes less mysterious after growing up and many fantasies are just fantasies."

"I want people to see me as I really am", she says, which is why she uses Weibo as a place for free self-expression. Besides posting pictures about her looks, she posts selfies of crying and running nose. "There are bloggers who only show beauty as if beauty is something that doesn't require effort and is easily attainable. But the truth is, beauty comes at a price."

### **A Sexy Woman**

"Liu Min goes for the hot girl style. Her designs are very niche." Pei Shengjin, who makes clothes for Liu Min says. Despite the Chinese Z-Generation claims they have a diversified aesthetic, "white, young and thin" (白幼瘦, meaning white skin, a slim figure, and a young look) is still the mainstream aesthetic among young women in China. As a result, plain water style make-up(白开水妆) has also become prevalent, with beauty bloggers on Xiaohongshu, a Chinese lifestyle social platform, describing it as "easy to arouse the desire for protection", "making a sense of first love". These types of aesthetics show the vulnerability of the female and make oneself look non-aggressive, which is the opposite to be sexy. In her posts on Xiaohongshu, Liu Min uses tags such as "no retouched, no filter", "looking older hairstyle" and "looking older cheongsam" to ironically express her views on the current mainstream aesthetic.

LiuMin designed a light-pink crop top with the Chinese character 性感女人(sexy woman) two years ago. When she wore it for a modeling shoot in an underground mall in Beijing, a mall security guard took photos and videos of her with his mobile phone. When she questioned him, he not only didn't delete the photo but threatened to force her to leave, reproving that she was disrupting public

order.



"Sexy is a unisex word. It means sex appeal." She shows how sexy an ordinary woman can become. she wears clothes that outline her body's curves and designs such clothes. Under a post in which she wears a purple see-through dress of her own design, a Weibo user asked, "Would you dare to wear that in front of your parents?" She reposted and replied, "I dare. My parents visit my blog, and my mum often shares my posts with her friends."

Having a sexy look has become increasingly challenging in China because of the retreat in the freedom of expression. When fashion designer Tresumduas wore a crop top in heartbroken shape designed by Liu Min and did a shoot on the campus of Beihang University, many people mocked her and snickered. On the Chinese Internet, being sexy is suppressed under stern censorship. Bloggers are self-censoring on various platforms that they have to retouch their pictures with stickers and mosaics on their bodies before posting. Otherwise, their accounts might be suspended forever. A video posted by Princess Butterfly on TikTok a year ago is reported as pornographic content recently. Her traffic is therefore restricted by the platform. Princess Butterfly thinks that in the video her skirt might be slightly short but she is not scantily clad.

On the other hand, gender and sex-related discussions are growingly heated on Weibo. For instance, the word "touch the edge"(擦边) is created, which refers to showing sexy aspects while avoiding violating the rules of censors. Some netizens doubt "touch the edge" might not be confirmed to core socialist values. Princess Butterfly said, "If our perspective is assimilated little by little, we can have

bad sexual associations with anything we see and negatively judge it every day, I'd like firstly to declare that I am a wanton woman."

Miles away from, home in London, the invisible rivals and endless questioning suddenly disappear and Princess Butterfly owns the freedom of dress to some extent. In the UK, being sexy is not a novel dress style. No one would point at her or interfere with her when she is photographed on the streets of London, and no one would drive her out for disrupting public order. The most frequent compliment Liu Min heard is "you are so sexy".

"Why are you so confident, Princess?" is a common comment dropped by female followers under Princess Butterfly's photos. In fact, she feels frustrated at the moment she gains freedom. "I like the feeling of being oppressed and breaking the rules. It's very cool. Now I can't find that feeling anymore."

"What's the biggest change since you came to the UK?" I ask her.

"I lost my confidence a lot," She says.



On English social media platforms, Liu Min is hard to define herself. On the image-oriented Ins, she is unable to fully present herself. She fails to express her humour in English, let alone show her personality since her English is not good enough. With the pluralistic hashtag of Ins, the subculture she represents in China is no longer the symbol that questions and rebels against the dominant culture but is compressed to mere sexy images. In addition, her followers on Ins prefer to leave emojis under her post when compared with those on Weibo. Nor is sexiness or feminism a scarce icon in the English Internet world. By using "sexy model" as a keyword to search for London-based influencers on the UK search tool website buzzsumo, it shows 877 results. And the top-ranked internet celebrity, Vixen, has 322,000 followers on her Ins.

When Princess Butterfly turns back to Weibo, she becomes hesitated. She loves to discuss "things

that every girl wants to talk about", and express her views on topics such as aesthetics and feminism. Now, under so many verbal assaults and questions, she is more and more cautious with her words.

She recently reposted a set of maternity portrait photos taken by a famous photographer named Guttiandazi. The set of photos is captioned "My 44-year-old sister says I let her go back to the age of 20 after I make up for her". Princess Butterfly made a comment, which claimed that the pregnant woman appeared moronic with cake cream smeared on her mouth. Her comment once again sparked an online debate. The most-liked message under her post questioned her, "you have always advocated aesthetic freedom, but why are you now judging other people's aesthetics?" "I think the female of that set of portraits doesn't look like a real human. The photographer has put the female who hasn't been eroded by consumer culture into a commercial template." She says, "But it's gone too far to explain clearly. Most comments abuse me." She is a little confused about whether influencers, especially fashion influencers can't make mistakes and shouldn't say so much about their opinions. And she doesn't think she's said anything wrong.

### **A female warrior in armor**

Liu Min now often wonders if going abroad is the right decision.

Studying abroad is something that most middle-class Chinese families consider studying abroad a valuable investment, and so does Liu Min's family. The Chinese government provides preferential policies for the employment of overseas returnees. People who return to China after completing overseas study might have the possibility to gain a high-quality life. "My dad has long wanted me to go abroad to achieve a high educational qualification. As much as I want to stay in Beijing and do my business, I also want to go out and see the rest of the world. After all maybe in a few years, people won't be able to get out." Liu Min says. Since the breakout of the pandemic, China's travel policy has been very stern, and the National Immigration Administration has issued an order about China "strictly limits" unnecessary travel outside the country. Many individuals predict that it will become increasingly difficult to go abroad.

After arriving in London, Liu Min gradually feels that the trip is a waste use of money. The weather in London is changeable, which always impedes shoot. And few people have interest in learning about contemporary Chinese life, let alone the life of the young Chinese generation. She thought that when she comes to the West, where being sexy is a popular style, her clothes will be more welcomed. But she only sold five pieces on *u3official*, a western independent designer platform. She dreams of becoming an International influencer so she starts by marketing herself on Ins, but to little avail.





She is worried about the plight of her friends in China. In April, under the zero-Covid policy Pei temporarily stopped his cooperation with Liu Min since he was ordered to close his studio for several days. Liu Min's friends in Shanghai were quarantined in their homes without a food supply from the government. At the same time, Liu Min spent most of her time in the library and studio of Central Saint Martins, in addition to her Taobao business. She was busy editing fashion videos in order to maintain traffic and make money. "What can I do? What else can I do but continue what I'm doing?" She asked herself when thinking about China's pandemic situation.

In May, she designed a dress made of British tourist souvenir gadgets like key chains, which is fully covered with the words "I Love London" from top to toe. All the materials were purchased on Taobao. LiuMin couldn't afford the high price in London. Her assistant concatenated these materials together and delivered the dress to her by international transfer after finishing it.

In June, she was invited by *untitlab*, an independent shoe brand based in London and Shanghai, to transform a sustainable bag. She chose to use tiny decorations on the outfit of the doll, which she brought from Beijing. "You can't find these kinds of interesting gewgaws here." She recalled.

She tries to get more work in London, but every time she is a bit irresolute: "I have a modeling job tomorrow, shall I go or not?" The last time the brand dressed her with a hip-hop look, which she thought "not being herself". She knows that as a model, she doesn't have to consider the brand's positioning or style, but she is still hesitant.



In contrast, she prefers to model for designs she loves. The shoot by the Regent's Canal has impressed her to this day. It was a cold, sunny day. She quickly took off all her clothes except for her underwear and stepped into the dark green river water. As her feet steadied on the bottom of the river, the water came close to her pelvis. The designer, Xixi Tong dressed her in the costume for the shoot. The icicle-shaped armor she wore, originally designed to propagate Frozen the Musical and inspired by its heroine Elsa, the princess of her frozen kingdom, was so glaring in the sunshine.

“It fits Butterfly well. I try to mold an image, an invincible female warrior,” says Xixi, the designer of the armor. “It is useless for women to be soft in China, they have to be tough. I hope more and more Chinese women can stand up and be strong just like her.” After the shoot, Princess Butterfly climbed ashore, her legs covered in mud. At this moment, we just remembered how dirty the river was. So far, the photo shoot on that day has been topped by Princess Butterfly as the first post on her Ins, with 2,823 likes, which isn't much.

