

Liu Wen, known as "Xiu Ba"
(fashion show queen),
modelling for Prada in Beijing.

With the world's eyes on the Chinese economy, we thought it was time to take a close look at the country's appetite for all things luxury. In this special report we look at the boom in elite sports, the quest to establish a homegrown, premium fashion brand and meet China's first breakthrough supermodel, Liu Wen

Made in China

Story **Sharon Krum**

Chinese model Liu Wen stands 1.79m tall in her bare feet. So the fact she is wearing towering heels when she enters the room strikes every other woman present as just cruel. She has, you note, already been blessed with striking beauty, zero body fat and killer cheekbones. How are mere mortals supposed to feel next to her now? "High heels make you confident and feel more pretty," she responds, when it's suggested she might take her shoes off so the self-esteem quotient in the room won't plummet too fast. She laughs, but the shoes stay on. Apparently even models like to give themselves a psychological boost, although Wen, 23, surely doesn't need one.

Since 2005, her modelling career has paralleled the forward thrust of the Chinese economy – unstoppable. She has graced the pages of global editions of *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* and walked all the best runways, including



Liu Wen became the first Asian face of Estee Lauder.

“Now the world sees Chinese faces are beautiful and have character”

Prada, Gucci, Chanel, YSL and Lanvin, earning the moniker “Xiu Ba” (fashion show queen) from the Chinese media. She is the first Asian model to walk the Victoria’s Secret show and last year became the first Asian face signed to a contract with cosmetics giant Estee Lauder.

“Now China is a big market and everyone is very friendly to China,” she says, acknowledging that the rise of a cluster of Asian models correlates equally to shifting global ideals of beauty and Western companies looking to grow their businesses among China’s rising affluent class. According to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the domestic luxury market in China hit \$9.4 billion at

the end of 2009 and is predicted to grow to \$14.6 billion by 2015. Estee Lauder sales in China grew nearly 30 per cent in 2009. Since entering the market in 1993, Lauder has opened a research and development centre in Shanghai to focus on Asian skincare and subsequently launched two product lines for Asian skin.

“I remember I was doing Fashion Weeks in 2008 and there weren’t a lot of Asian models, sometimes one girl or possibly two,” recalls Wen. “Now there are three or four Chinese women opening the show [in January this year, Givenchy couture featured only Asian models]. So it’s a big deal for China, and for me too.”

“The Chinese are very status-conscious,” says Patricia Pao, chief executive of Pao Principle, a luxury goods, beauty and retail business consultancy with offices in New York and China. “People don’t have huge homes, they don’t have boats, you are judged by what you carry and what you wear. In China now, everything Western, particularly French and American brands, is considered better.” So for the Lauder company, the planets are lining up. Adding Wen’s face into the mix allows Chinese women to identify more closely with the brand.

Born in Yongzhou in Hunan province, Wen was studying tourism when she entered a modelling contest in 2005 because she wanted to win a laptop. “All I wanted to do was win the computer but now I am living my dream,” she says. After moving to Beijing to model, she started gaining traction in the Chinese editions of *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Marie Claire*, *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* and from there was catapulted onto the European and US runways. “She exudes confidence but is fragile at the same time. I love girls who are strong and different, and Liu Wen is both,” designer Jean Paul Gaultier told *Women’s Wear Daily*. “One season I walked in 74 shows,” says Wen, still sounding stunned. “What is not to enjoy about wearing beautiful clothes and amazing make-up?” she smiles. “But it is tiring.”


The ad campaigns started piling up too – ck Calvin Klein and Gap among them. Now the girl who planned to be a tour guide is approaching supermodel status and boasts half a million followers on the Chinese iteration of Twitter. Still, she seems distinctly unaffected by her newfound fame, which is possibly due to her upbringing. “I grew up in a small town, there was no fashion in my city,” says Wen. Beauty for her was embodied by the actress Gong Li. Her mother, she says, “never said I was beautiful. Chinese people are very shy that way.”

Adds Pao: “We are raised [in Chinese culture] that looks are an expiring asset, that you focused on what you needed to be attractive and it [beauty] was part of a circle of excellence, including getting good grades in school and working hard. The concept of Asian supermodels like Liu Wen is new.” And surely powerful, too. When millions of Chinese women see Wen as the face of Estee Lauder, it realigns advertising images from luxury Western brands that have long focused on Caucasian faces.”

“Estee Lauder before never had an Asian face,” says Wen, “and I think it will change perceptions for Asian women. The campaign I think will give Chinese people new ideas about beauty. You never thought of Asian people using many colours of eye shadow or nail colour, and now they do.”

Alva Chung, the beauty editor of Hong Kong *Harper’s Bazaar*, says of Wen’s rise: “The experience of having her recognised as a beauty icon internationally is very good to us. A few years ago, seeing Chinese supermodels was rare. We had American, English, Western models, with big eyes. Now the world sees Chinese faces are beautiful and have character.”

“A lot of Chinese girls are getting plastic surgery to look more Westernised,” says Pao. “So I think this whole statement – Wen, along with models Constance Jablonski from France and Puerto Rican Joan Smalls, they are the multi-ethnic faces of Lauder’s new skincare launch – will mean something.” And yet Wen demurs when asked if she feels pressure to represent all Asian women. “I just think I have a great job, I don’t think about it on that level.”

Today she lives in Beijing and New York, and seems very taken with New York’s museums, shopping and Chinese restaurants. “All I wanted in life was to meet different people [hence the tour guide ambitions] and I am doing that,” she says of what modelling has created for her. “And I love food, and I wanted to eat different food.” Thanks to constant travel, she has accomplished that, too. Although where Wen puts all those newly discovered dishes is a mystery. 



Christopher Bailey, Burberry's chief creative officer, is mobbed by the press in Beijing.

Silk road to riches

Luxury brands can't get to China fast enough. Fashion shows are conducted on Olympic scale as designers compete for their share of a projected \$200 billion market

Story **David Meagher**

“It’s the biggest event ever to happen in Beijing,” a Chinese socialite told the packed media scrum at a gathering last month in the country’s capital for British fashion brand Burberry. It’s easy to see why she might have forgotten the huge event Beijing hosted way back in 2008. Fashion events here are conducted on an Olympic scale. More than 1000 guests attended the Burberry party at the Beijing Television Centre, including Burberry CEO Angela Ahrendts, chief creative officer Christopher Bailey, Chinese celebrities Maggie Cheung and Fan

Bing Bing, a smattering of Brit actors and models flown in for the occasion, media from all over the world and last, but certainly not least, loyal Chinese Burberry customers.

The number of microphones and cameras thrust into Bailey’s face as he arrived at the event would make you think he was a world leader instead of a fashion designer. Officially, the occasion was the opening of the brand’s new, 1160sqm store at Sparkle Roll Plaza, one of 57 Burberry stores in China and the second-biggest globally – but it was much more than that. Multi-million-dollar fashion events in China by Europe’s luxury brands are part brand-building exercise and part diplomatic mission. Burberry was selling Britain almost as much as it was selling trench coats with a show that combined luxury with digital technology and

featured holographic models, images of buildings along the Thames and a unique celebration of British weather.

“To us, this is a global event that happens to be taking place in Beijing, happens to be taking place in arguably one of the fastest growing markets in the world,” Ahrendts told *Women’s Wear Daily*, although there is no argument about it. Last July, Burberry bought back its mainland Chinese franchises, totalling 50 stores, for £65 million (\$100 million). Since then the company has opened seven more stores and established a headquarters in Shanghai. So, despite having 57 stores trading, this event marked something of a new beginning for Burberry in China.

China is the luxury industry’s El Dorado. With a sluggish US recovery, a Japanese economy that was