

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Is childrenswear the growth engine of China's luxury market?

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Can luxury turn the heads of China's millennial parents, or is it down to local brands to dress their little princes and princesses? Image courtesy of Fendi

By [Gemma A. Williams](#)

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Fashion designer @superRenee has 700,000 fans online and is just one of China's new mother-daughter influencers. Her fun and carefree account is awash with cute pictures and emojis of her impossibly adorable daughter Yuri. One video of Yuri has earned 57,000 views, which has made her mom, Renee, a leading niche influencer in China's children sector.

Social media in China is now full of blogs, posts and videos from Chinese parents and hot mammas such as Renee offering style tips, brand choices and advice. Childrenswear is now a serious part of Chinese parents' social currency, and some see this sector as or "the persuasion to have a second child."

According to Euromonitor, the sector outperformed womenswear and menswear in 2019, reaching almost \$37 billion, representing a year-on-year increase of 14.4 percent.

After the opening of China's two-child policy in 2016, data from the National Bureau of Statistics show that in 2019, there were around 250 million children under the age of 15 in China. Since then, a further 14.65 million babies were born.

Accounting for children under 16, the category and much of everything else in China suffered a rough start in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the second half of 2020 saw a strong recovery.

Luxury childrenswear makes up roughly \$5 billion of the sector, mostly from parents in large and medium-sized cities who might even have two children. The "BM Style," which has been on the rise in China, will have impacted figures, too, as some smaller adults may be bumping up sales figures.

Despite the impact of the pandemic, sales of children's clothing were expected to grow in 2020 and may climb above \$40 billion in 2021.

Baby apparel has witnessed the fastest growth with a 17.2 percent increase, and the high-end market has been expanding quickly, too.

Tmall International Maternal and Child Industry and CBNDATA jointly released the "2021 Tmall International Maternal, Child and Child Market Trend Report." It is estimated that China's maternal and child market will exceed 4 trillion in 2021.

Though China is currently bracing itself for a population decline beyond 2021, there is still a huge opportunity attributable to the increase in per capita spending on childrenswear from style conscious parents. Here, *Jing Daily* looks at how online platforms are shaping the sector, dominant local brands, and luxury gifting.

Online and KOL interventions

Much like the rest of the world, there is a new attitude to parenting issues on Chinese social media.

For example, a photo of Chinese actor Rayza Alimjan breastfeeding her daughter on set went viral recently. While it divided netizen opinion, the local media was more than supportive and JD.com unveiled Alimjan as its Maternal and Infant ambassador, tapping her five million Weibo followers.

JD.com also invited celebrities such as Xuan Liu and Liang Tian to join its recent baby carnival to talk about their parenting experiences.

Mother-child influencers and parenting bloggers have emerged on social platforms such as Little Red Book, the aforementioned @superRenee are niche but others have bigger followings like KimNico, @ (1 million fans) or Diu Ma @ (2 million devotees), whose posts are devoured.



KOL @superRenee offers style tips and advice for other young parents. Image credit: @superRenee

Many KOLs operate their own brands. Some like @SuperRenee run womenswear links, many of these parent bloggers have moved into childrenswear.

Take the local brand **Chenchenma**, which has risen alongside the founder @CCM who blogs about her daughter online. The brand featured in Tmall's top-performing brands on Taobao and Tmall. @Luson is a parenting blogger with an eponymous childrenswear line too who has bagged herself another one million followers.

The desire for particular styles worn by influencers and celebrities are being accelerated on social media too which has also impacted this market. This new generation of parents grew up in the Internet age and are keen to follow celebrity "buying lists" for their children, too.

Compared to the years 2017-2019, today's consumption trend for online children's clothing and Internet celebrities in the same style has now increased 16 times especially the Mini-Me matching trend.

Local dominators lead the way in retail innovation

In China, Balabala is one of the biggest local kidswear brands in the market, topping Tmall. In fact, most leading children's companies are Chinese.

Recently, Balabala launched an extravagant runway show and exhibition at **Shanghai Fashion Week**. There it debuted its three-pronged collection in **collaboration with different sectors**: a co-branded domestic agency with China Mars Mission, a cultural tie-in with the Suzhou Museum, and a nod to luxury via fashion designer Jason Wu.

The runway featured the young star Nan Nan Jackson Yee's younger brother, who has been gaining attention from

the media and netizens alike after appearing in kid magazines such as *Milkenfant*.



Balabala showcased collaborations with China Mars Mission (left) and designer Jason Wu (right) at the Tmall Super Brand Day "Endless Dreams" SuperShow. Image credit: Balabala

In an attempt to rail against typical children's **bricks-and-mortar retail** experience, 2020 saw Balabala add a new flagship store concept at the Wanda Plaza in Jiangsu Province's Huishan.

As many younger parents are more accustomed to buying children's clothes online, offline stores need to work harder to entertain shoppers.

In March, 2021, Wuhan Henglong department store opened three new kidswear stores: Alice Pi, Rolling Kids, bonbon et bonbon.

And while the post-lockdown landscape has fed family appetites for communities, amplified IRL entertainment, and tech-laced interactivity, Balabala's store does not disappoint. Its "Young Zone" features footage from the brand's fashion shows and campaign content. Meanwhile, its "Kids" area is dominated by the 360-degree installation, "Infinity Wardrobe."

Luxury dominates gifting and offline experiences

China's parents are known for spoiling their little princes and princesses, which extends to buying luxury clothing despite their limited shelf life.

Thom Browne recently debuted a children's line at his men's calendar at **Paris Fashion Week**, indicating a strategic shift for the brand. It was well-received on Weibo. Meanwhile, names such as Burberry and Dior have long dominated the sector.

According to mother of twins and art agency founder, Lang Xiao, it is all about creating offline experiences.

"I think for these super brands, the subtle networking offline is quite important," Ms. Lang said. "I was at a birthday party at Baby Dior recently and made connections with all the other mothers in a very special way.

"It's not about a price point," she said. "It's about creating a privileged and exclusive experience."

Moreover, when it comes to gifts for children, branded luxury names often top the trend, and here choices can be more obvious.

"Gifting is very important in this sector, and that is where superbrands can excel," Ms. Lang said.

And, while she prefers to dress her children in more low-key brands such as the the popular, chic French line Bonpoint, which is not branded, she will often receive gifts that are "more logo-heavy such as from Fendi."



Fendi released logo print rompers for kids as part of its SS20 collection. Image courtesy of Fendi

Luxury retailers are working with leading influencers in the sphere, too, such as Mytheresa, which has been stepping up its China offensive. It has leveraged fashion blogger Wan Wan@, a mother of two children who has promoted nine popular kidswear brands on the platform to her 3 million followers.

Apps are also popular for luxury names, and Lang mentioned Children's Salon as a source for discounted super brands.

Where luxury is also making unexpected gains is with the many parents who have turned to [daigou](#) to purchase international brands not available in China, including the popular Japanese brand Miki House.

Meanwhile, the launch of a new luxury gender neutral kids' section by retailer SSENSE featuring Balenciaga and Rick Owens, among others, will be shipping even more luxury names to mainland parents soon.

Finally, luxury brands who make strong connections among parental networks via kidswear can often reap the rewards of the halo effect for other product lines or offerings making this a vibrant and valuable market on which to capitalize.

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