

EVEN POPULAR DOLLS SOMETIMES NEED A BIT OF DOLLING UP

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Many women who aspire to be glamorous undergo plastic surgery to correct what they consider flaws in appearance. It turns out some doll collectors think their toys are no different.

Customizing dolls is becoming big business as the retail toy market introduces ever more creations, such as ball-jointed dolls, Blythe dolls, plush idol dolls and Disney dolls.

Wang Han, 41, was one of the earliest to go into the profession about 10 years ago, when the idea of giving dolls a makeover was rather new. She became a big name in the growing community of doll collectors.

Wang herself is a doll lover. She has hundreds of them in her workshop on the fourth floor of a house in suburban Jinshan District.

“Like many other girls, I fell in love with all kinds of dolls during my childhood,” Wang



Customizing dolls requires a large array of tools and doll parts like customized doll faces. — All photos by Jiang Xiaowei

said. “When I earned money at university, I would rush out and buy Barbies, Yue-Sai WaWa Dolls and Monchhichi toys.”

It took Wang, who was an art student, about five years to go from being kindergarten teacher who loved dolls to a doll customizer.

The decision coincided with the burgeoning boom in the

toy doll industry and especially the “blind box” trend that featured dolls.

The designer toy market in China grew from 6.3 billion yuan (US\$903 million) in 2015 to 20.7 billion yuan in 2019, and may hit 76.3 billion yuan by 2024, according to global consulting company Frost & Sullivan.

In a market awash with dolls of all shapes and sizes, it’s no wonder that many people want their dolls to be more distinctive. The original look may just not be original enough.

Over the past decade, Wang has customized hundreds of dolls, both for individuals and for companies that want their dolls to look like celebrities such as Chinese actress Yang Mi.

One of the most popular versions for makeovers is the Blythe fashion doll, characterized by an oversized head and large eyes that change color and direction with the pull of a string installed at the back of head.

The doll was created in 1972 by a US toy company and later sold to major toymaker Hasbro. In 2001, Japan’s Takara began producing a new edition of the dolls.

Wang’s decision to make a living from doll makeovers faced bitter opposition from her parents, who didn’t regard the endeavor as a stable career. In a fit of anger, her father even smashed some of her dolls and kicked her out of the house.

Wang had to struggle as a divorcee rearing a daughter, but she stuck to her guns and was

eventually rewarded.

Her doll makeovers attracted lots of fans, some from overseas. As her reputation grew, toy companies sought her out.

From an expanding business of customizing dolls, product and event designing, graphics arts and photography, Wang earns about 750,000 yuan a year.

In such an obviously lucrative market, competition was certain to emerge.

One duo of customizers specializes in OB11 and GSC Nendoroid dolls. Xi Ya, who works in the financial industry, handles the pair’s online store, social media accounts and simple makeovers. Her partner, an arts graduate, does more complicated customizing and sources diecast molds when needed from factories.

“Generally, it takes a month to customize a batch of dolls and our monthly income is often in the thousands of yuan,” Xi said. “Because we both have other jobs, we don’t care much about the income and do this purely out of personal interest.”

A personal obsession with dolls is usually the driving force behind customizers.



Wang Han combs the hair of a doll. Hairstyle is an important element in giving a doll a new look.