

Style without limits

Taipei's plus-size clothing stores offer fashion-forward, figure-conscious styles

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STAFF REPORTER



A black-and-white outfit by miniMe.



Plus-size clothing brand miniMe adheres to the philosophy that its customers do not define themselves — or their sense of style — by their clothing size.



MiniMe's designs highlight the brand's use of luxury fabrics.



A button-down shirt by 5XL is dressed up with a lace overlay that plays up the bustline and waist.

The stereotypical Asian female figure is petite, and a decade ago clothing stores in Taiwan almost uniformly catered to a very limited size range, says Amy Tu (杜慧芳), founder of 5XL, a line of plus-size clothing stores.

"The plus-size clothing back then wasn't very nice or professional looking. Women sometimes had to resort to wearing maternity clothes or men's shirts. Otherwise they had to shop when they were abroad," says Tu. A clothing designer, Tu opened 5XL in part because she was frustrated that she could not find stylish clothes that flattered her own voluptuous figure.

Women who wear plus sizes now have a greater variety of clothing to select from — and some of it is quite stylish. MiniMe, which recently opened in Taipei's East District across from Breeze Center (微风广场), sells well-tailored suits, dresses and formal wear made from luxurious fabrics. Many plus-size clothing stores embrace the philosophy that all sizes are beautiful. Instead of hiding figures behind oversized tunics and baggy pants, styles now lean toward curve-flaunting silhouettes that take their cue from the latest runway fashions.

"It used to be difficult to be fashionable if you wore a plus-size and there was a very limited selection of styles to choose from. In the US, plus-size clothing designers keep an eye on trends and that is the spirit that we try to bring to our clothes," says Vickie Chang (張偉琪), miniMe's marketing director.

miniMe

MiniMe's racks are hung with clothing made from a wide array of fabrics: white-dotted Swiss, shimmering brocades, plush velvets, warm tweeds and soft jersey knits. The textures and weaves are shown off in tailored shift dresses, suit jackets, blouses and skirts.

The store, which opened last year, was founded by Merryson Corporation (美立信實業股份有限公司), a maker of luxury bedding for export to department stores in the US and Europe under different designer names. When Merryson launched its own brand, it decided to differentiate itself in a crowded retail marketplace by creating a line of plus-size women's clothing with a focus on office wear and formal dresses in US sizes 10 to 20.

"We thought we could make our clothing unique by making it more fashion-conscious," says Chang. "Our clients are stylish women who want to downplay the parts of their body they don't like while at the same time highlighting their figures."

Many designs show off the waistline: A-line shifts are shaped with darts and even casual jersey tunics meant to be layered over leggings curve in gently over the torso.

The brand was named miniMe to move away from the custom of putting the words "plus size" (大尺碼) and "super plus size" (超大尺碼) in store names and signs. MiniMe's slogan is "love yourself" and it adheres to the philosophy that its customers do not define themselves — or their sense of style — by their clothing size.

"Our unofficial rule is that we don't use words like 'plus size' or 'big' around the office," says Chang.

Dresses and pants in the store start at NT\$2,000 and coats and formal wear at NT\$4,000. Recently available styles included a blouse made of white-dotted Swiss fabric (NT\$2,980), a black-and-white polka dot print dress with a fashionable self-tie collar (NT\$4,280) and capri leggings (NT\$480). The store can customize designs and do in-store alterations.

MiniMe recently launched a branch in Taichung and plans to expand to southern Taiwan and open boutiques in department stores.

ADDRESS: 36 Fuxing S Rd, Taipei City (台北市復興南路一段36號); 7-1 Jingjheg Rd, Taichung City (台中市精誠路7-1號)

HOURS: Noon to 10pm
TELEPHONE: (02) 8772-6918 (Taipei); (04) 2327-2938 (Taichung)

ON THE NET: tw.myblog.yahoo.com/minime-blog; www.minime.com.tw

5XL

Amy Tu founded 5XL in 1999 to address her own style dilemma: not being able to find fashionable, affordable clothing in her size.

A clothing designer with 20 years of experience, Tu christened her new store 5XL because five is an auspicious number in Chinese numerology and to represent the wide range of sizes carried by the chain. 5XL now has 14 stores selling clothing in US sizes 14 to 24, with some designs also available in size 26.

5XL's silhouettes are simple, relying on small dressmaking flourishes, like pleating or embroidery, for ornamentation. Tu uses her patternmaking experience to flatter curvy figures when designing clothing.

"We use darts and pleats for shaping, which is the most important part of plus-size design. People think, for example, that plus-size women should wear flared pants, but they can end up making your legs look thicker than they are if they are not carefully tailored," says Tu. "Right now there is also a fashion for baggy, empire waist tops, but we still focus on ways of making those styles flattering."

The company's bestsellers include its line of jeans, which start at NT\$600, and office wear and party dresses, which range in price from about NT\$1,000 to NT\$2,200. Styles currently available in 5XL stores include a button-down top with a bustier-shaped lace applique that highlights the waist and bustline (NT\$1,900) and a tweed dress shaped with pin tucks (NT\$2,500). 5XL also sells shoes by Sandy Ho, a chain that specializes in larger-size women's footwear. Merchandise available in 5XL's Shilin (士林) store included brown boots with brass buttons for NT\$3,280 and Mary Jane pumps for NT\$2,200.

5XL's main Taipei locations are in Shilin and Gongguan.

ADDRESS: 545, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 5, Taipei City (台北市中山北路五段545號) (Shilin); 222, Roosevelt Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市羅斯福路三段222號) (Gongguan). For additional locations, call (0800) 555-365

HOURS: Noon to 9:30pm
TELEPHONE: (02) 2880-1988 (Shilin); (02) 2368-8693 (Gongguan)

WHERE TO SHOP

There are several convenient clusters of plus-size clothing stores in the Taipei area, including two blocks on Zhongzheng Road (中正路) in Yonghe (永和), Taipei County, near the Dingxi MRT Station (頂溪捷運站), a small group of stores near the Shilin MRT Station (士林捷運站) and cheap-chic vendors in the Wufenpu (五分埔) garment district.

Yonghe

Stores between 628 Zhongzheng Rd and 660 Zhongzheng Rd in Yonghe carry casual togs, office suits and stylish shoes and boots.

YBS

YBS' signature style rejects floral prints and baby doll dresses in favor of trendy streetwear, including metallic silver cotton skirts (NT\$2,880), dark boot-cut jeans (NT\$3,680) and a cardinal red wool-blend coat with double-button closures (NT\$6,080). The chain's upcoming spring/summer collection features graphic-print hoodies, more dark denim and asymmetrical hems on jersey tunics and vests.

ADDRESS: 660-1 Zhongzheng Rd, Yonghe City, Taipei County (台北縣永和市中正路660-1號). There are 25 additional locations in Taiwan, including 17 in the Taipei area
HOURS: 11am to 10pm
TELEPHONE: (02) 8660-8353
ON THE NET: www.ybs.com.tw

Sandy Ho

Sandy Ho's stylish boots, pumps and flats save women with larger feet and wider calves from footwear fashion oblivion. The chain's shoe sizes fit women with US size 8.5 (European size

39) to US size 12 (European size 46) feet. Styles include a pair of basic ballet flats (on sale for NT\$1,200), low pumps with double straps and modish flower appliques that are reminiscent of Mary Quant's 1960s designs (NT\$2,280) and a pair of black boots with sexy lacing up the back (NT\$3,680).

ADDRESS: 660 Zhongzheng Rd, Yonghe City, Taipei County (台北縣永和市中正路660號). There are seven other stores in Taiwan, including another Taipei location at 68, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市中山路一段68號)
HOURS: 11:30am to 9:30pm
TELEPHONE: (02) 8923-1917
ON THE NET: www.sandy-ho.com.tw

HL

HL, which also stocks clothing for taller women, may not be as fashion-forward as miniMe, 5XL or YBS, but the chain can be relied upon for casual wear and wardrobe staples at reasonable prices, including pinstripe trousers (NT\$1,380) and long-sleeved T-shirts (NT\$780). There are 15 stores in the Taipei area, as well as additional locations in Taoyuan and Hualien.

ADDRESS: 640 Zhongzheng Rd, Yonghe City, Taipei County (台北縣永和市中正路640號)
HOURS: 11am to 9:30pm
TELEPHONE: (02) 8921-3589
ON THE NET: www.hl-jordenyah.com

EFE

Flirty details like lace ruffles, fur trim and pink bows abound at EFE, but if you want to tone it down for the workplace, professional-looking outfits like a cream boucle Chanel-style suit (NT\$6,880) and a pinstripe jacket with small,

unobtrusive bows on its pockets (NT\$3,880) can also be found. Formal wear includes a blue satin shift with black lace trim (NT\$3,880).

ADDRESS: 636 Zhongzheng Rd, Yonghe City, Taipei County (台北縣永和市中正路636號); call (02) 8228-0022 for additional locations
HOURS: Noon to 10pm
TELEPHONE: (02) 8923-8337

dn

Dn carries a wide variety of sizes: waists on the store's suits, dresses, skirts and pants range from 61cm to 102cm. Suits at dn (NT\$3,300 for most) are generously embellished with lace and made in pastel colors, but trendier items, including a pair of tweed knee-length shorts with black buttons (NT\$1,300) can also be found.

ADDRESS: 628 Zhongzheng Rd, Yonghe City, Taipei County (台北縣永和市中正路628號)
HOURS: Noon to 10pm
TELEPHONE: (02) 8921-3454

Shilin

Conveniently located a few blocks away from the Shilin MRT Station, this cluster on Zhongshan North Road has four plus-size clothing stores.

5XL

(see above for address and store description)

HL

(see above for store description)

ADDRESS: 531, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 5, Taipei City (台北市中山北路五段531號)
HOURS: 11am to 9:30pm
TELEPHONE: (02) 2881-7189

SBJ

A sleek, well-organized boutique, SBJ's dresses are made in quality fabrics with bold prints and start from about NT\$3,000 each. The chain has six stores in the Taipei area, as well as branches in cities throughout Taiwan, including Taoyuan, Taichung, Tainan and Kaohsiung.

ADDRESS: 521, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 5, Taipei City (台北市中山北路五段521號)
HOURS: 11am to 10pm
TELEPHONE: (02) 8861-1456
ON THE NET: www.sbj.com.tw

EFE

(see above for store description)
ADDRESS: 515, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 5, Taipei City (台北市中山北路五段515號)
HOURS: Noon to 10pm
TELEPHONE: (02) 8861-2071

Wufenpu

If you can stand elbowing your way (and being elbowed) through the crowds in the narrow alleys of Taipei's garment district, Wufenpu's plus-size vendors offer night market chic at rock-bottom prices.

Color Pencil (色鉛筆)

Intrepid shoppers can find deals in Color Pencil's crowded storefront, like a pair of dark denim bootleg jeans for NT\$980 and

warm down coats for NT\$2,000.

ADDRESS: 6, Ln 37, Zhongpo N Rd, Taipei City (台北市中坡北路37巷6號)
HOURS: 1pm to 10pm
TELEPHONE: (02) 2756-2475
ON THE NET: www.color-pencil.net; prices at the Wufenpu outlet are about NT\$200 to NT\$300 cheaper than prices listed on the Web site

Enjoy (享受)

Enjoy also trades in night market chic and sweatshirt dresses — appliques of cute, furry cartoon animals abound. Bargains include a coffee-colored toggle coat with faux-fur trim for NT\$980 and a sleek pair of black satin pants for NT\$380.

ADDRESS: 27, Alley 7, Ln 443, Yongji Rd, Taipei City (台北市永吉路443巷7弄27號)
HOURS: 1pm to midnight Mondays through Saturdays; noon to 10pm on Sundays
TELEPHONE: (02) 2762-2882

Plus One

The sizes at Plus One vary greatly despite its name, and customers must sort through its clothing in order to find plus-size items, but the store, located directly on Zhongpo North Road, is easy to find and the selection of merchandise is better-edited than at other Wufenpu vendors. Items include double-breasted coats for NT\$1,980 and gray tunics with crochet-style lace trim for NT\$980.

ADDRESS: 1, Ln 30, Zhongpo N Rd, Taipei City (台北市中坡北路30巷1號)
HOURS: 2pm to midnight
TELEPHONE: (02) 2785-8875