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# How Crocs Conquered China

Fans flock to U.S. brand after it discovers the secrets of Chinese tastes

By [Jon Emont](#) [Follow](#) | Photographs by Qilai Shen for WSJ

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SHANGHAI—For the better part of a decade, [Crocs](#) CROX -0.18% ▼ stumbled in China. Its stores stocked shoes Chinese people didn't want, such as loafers, and its celebrity endorsers were the likes of reality-show contestants and midtier actresses.

Today, Shanghai subway cars are packed with fashionable Crocs-wearers, often young women in platform clogs studded with charms known as Jibbitz. So many fans of the hole-filled shoes make posts with the hashtag “dongmen”—Chinese slang for Crocs fan—that the company has announced on earnings calls the number of dongmen mentions, which today tally in the hundreds of millions.

Once a tiny fraction of Crocs sales, China has grown into the brand's second-largest market after the U.S. This month, the company said revenue in the most recent quarter [fell 6.4% in North America](#) but was up more than 30% in China.

Crocs, based in Broomfield, Colo., has become a rarity: an American company that is growing rapidly in China.

[Nike](#) and [Starbucks](#) have struggled against fast-moving local competitors with lower prices, though both say they are turning a corner. China's [slowing growth](#) has caused many budget-conscious consumers to turn away from premium American products.

Retail experts say that Crocs offers lessons for Western brands. The biggest is to focus on the unique preferences of the Chinese consumer—such as a love for platform clogs, which many Chinese women consider a leg-lengthening, comfortable alternative to heels.



People spotted wearing Crocs in Shanghai, where company marketing campaigns are devised.

Crocs marketing campaigns, such as an ad featuring pop star Tan Jianci in pink platform Crocs riding a pink whale through the sky, are dreamed up in Shanghai, not Colorado. The company recruits the glitziest names in Chinese pop culture as brand ambassadors.

It tweaked its global slogan “Come as you are” to a Chinese-language version, “Born to Be Free”—appealing to many young Chinese who yearn for a more relaxed and less competitive life.

The company has taken creative risks, partnering with Chinese-born designer Feng Cheng Wang, who released a knee-length biker-style Crocs boot that one fashion website called “straight from the future.” An American TikTok influencer asked, “Those are Crocs?!”

They are. So are the KFC collaboration Crocs, with chicken-shaped Jibbitz charms that smell like fried chicken, released in China and the U.S.

“Crocs has run a playbook that most global organizations know that they should run,” said Zak Dychtwald of the Young China Group, which researches Chinese youth trends. “They’ve just done it well.”

While some U.S. brands are tarnished by their association with China’s main geopolitical competitor, Crocs has another advantage: Few Chinese know it is American.

Even as Crocs revenue has begun to flag in North America, it has more than tripled since 2022 in China, where certain sought-after Crocs can go for \$250 or more a pair. It reinvests much of the margin it earns on its shoes into marketing.

Anne Mehlman, Crocs’s brand president, visited Shanghai in early 2020 and hardly saw any Crocs on the street. When she came back in 2023, she remembers stepping off the plane and immediately seeing a fashionable man with a Balenciaga bag and platform “Crush” Crocs.



The black knee-length Crocs boots seen at Paris Fashion Week. PHOTO: VALENTINA FRUGIELE/GETTY IMAGES

“I was like ‘OK, this is real,’” she said.

Andrew Rees, Crocs’s CEO, said the company groups its buyers into two buckets. There are the “feel-goods,” represented by a suburban mom looking to purchase durable and affordable shoes for the family. Then there are the “explorers”: young urban women with bold fashion tastes.

In the U.S., Crocs-wearers are mainly feel-goods, said Rees. In China and other Asian countries, explorers are better represented. “We wanted to exaggerate their classic clog and provide height and more fashion and more style,” he said.

“It’s a shoe to anywhere,” said Sylvia Yiu, 30 years old, a Shanghai-based marketing professional who clip-clopped into a Shanghai Crocs store in black platform Crocs studded with Jibbitz. She said she wears her Crocs to nightclubs or for daily errands—such as picking up another pair of Crocs. This time she tried on a few, but ended up settling for a shiny flower-shaped Jibbitz.

“I just take what I like, what matches my vibe,” Yiu said. Her vibe, she said, is “Cool girl, with a bit romantic,” hence the rose Jibbitz displayed prominently on her right Croc.

The vibe of Wang Tianyang, 29, has more parts: The athletic young man said the tiger-like creatures in his right clog symbolize his love of animals, while a basketball hoop and football goal post in the left clog symbolize his love of sports, and two fried eggs next to the hoop stand for his love of protein. His collection also includes a red flame-shaped Jibbitz for the dance floor, which lights up when he takes a step.





Personalized Jibbitz charms can be attached to Crocs.

Joseph Ranieri Jr., Crocs's first distributor in China, came to Shanghai in 2006 with a duffel bag full of Crocs. He clomped around the streets of Shanghai wearing matching colored shirts and Crocs, handing out business cards and asking if anyone wanted to buy a pair. "Guerrilla brand building," he calls it.

The brand gradually gained traction. But a few years after Crocs bought out Ranieri's distributorship in 2008, it began to struggle. Ranieri said the company made misguided decisions such as emphasizing loafers in China instead of clogs.

It was a difficult period for Crocs outside of China too. The brand had [soared in the 2000s](#), riding on controversy over whether its signature look was fun or ugly, but it was hit hard by the global financial crisis. In 2013, investment group Blackstone agreed to put \$200 million into the company and Rees, the current CEO, became a senior executive the next year.

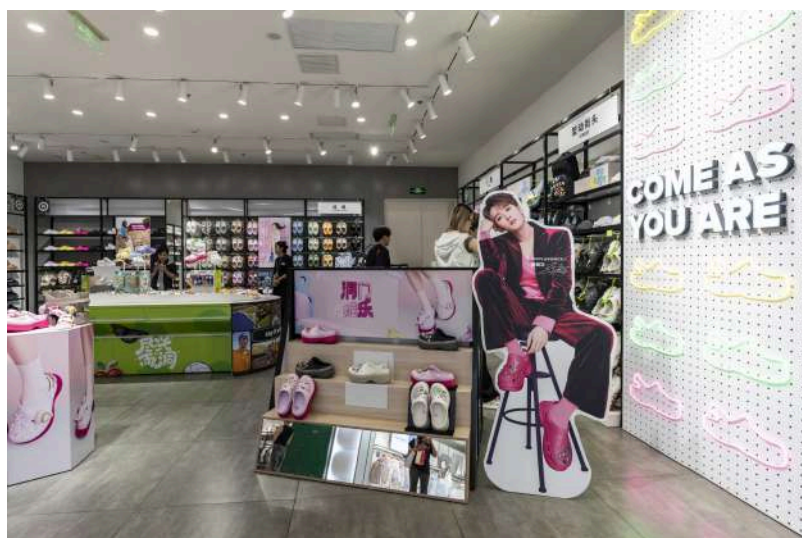
He quickly realized China was both an opportunity and a problem. One issue was Crocs's reliance on local distributors, which often bought too much stock and dumped merchandise in sales that undercut the brand image. The answer was to focus on directly operated stores in buzzy shopping malls.

"It was a long reset because we needed to actually change the entire perception of the brand," said Mehlman, the Crocs brand president.

In 2020, the company announced its first A-list Chinese celebrity ambassador, actress Yang Mi from the drama "Eternal Love," a smash hit with tens of billions of views. Off-screen she was photographed in Crocs adorned with personalized Jibbitz charms such as golden bees and foxes. These were a nod to Yang's fans, who are known as "honey bees" and address her as "Little Fox."

When Covid hit and foot traffic dwindled, the company debated pulling back as other big brands did. Instead, Crocs doubled down, funding Chinese advertising with money from sales in the U.S., where the pandemic-era work-from-home set drove a boom.

"That was the big turning point," said Mehlman.



Crocs has a roster of celebrity endorsers, including Chinese pop star Tan Jianci, featured in this ad.

Mia Wong, 30, a Shanghai tech worker, saw a stranger on the street in 2021 pairing platform Crocs with light-colored socks. "It was ugly at first, but the more I wore them the more I liked it," Wong said. She eventually ordered four pairs.

Influencers and ordinary people took to posting photos of their Crocs with a customized selection of Jibbitz on the Chinese social-media app RedNote. It played well on a platform based around user-generated content and self-expression, with many posting it under the "dongmen" hashtag.

“Crocs, just the product itself, lends itself really well to social media and this Gen Z culture around personalization,” said Olivia Plotnick, founder of Wai Social, a China-based marketing agency.

Today it has a roster of celebrity endorsers and collaborations. Crocs is working with the hottest Chinese retail brand, [PopMart](#), maker of the viral Crybaby dolls—with Crybaby-themed Jibbitz that can be attached to Crocs.

Rees said there was plenty of room for growth in China—despite, or because of, its torpid economy.

“I think in the current environment where people are having a tough time, we’re winning because of that fun factor,” Rees said.

*—Reddy Zhao contributed to this article.*

Write to Jon Emont at [jonathan.emont@wsj.com](mailto:jonathan.emont@wsj.com)

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