

The shoe is on the other foot as comfort triumphs over sexiness



High heels are seldom seen on Shanghai street nowadays. Instead, all styles of flat shoes steal the show. — IC

Lu Feiran

White-collar worker Louise Wang suddenly realized one day that the sound of clicking of high heels in her office had disappeared.

Wang works for a Shanghai multinational company producing fast-moving consumer goods. The dress code was rather loose. For several years, she wore high heels to the office, but when one of the heels got stuck in an air outlet, she gave them up.

“Now even colleagues who are relatively short don’t wear high heels anymore,” she said. “And it’s not just in our office in the suburbs, but also in the other office downtown. You seldom see anyone wearing high heels in the 40-story building.”

Is the era of sexy spiked heels over?

E-commerce platforms provide some answers. On leading online platform Taobao, for example, the most 10 popular shoe brands are now mostly flat shoes, such as sneakers, Martin boots and loafers.

In the flagship store of Belle, the bestselling shoe brand on Taobao, the most popular high heel is one matching wedding dresses. It ranks 23rd in the shop.

Another popular brand, Staccato, which was known for its fashion high heels just several years ago, is now featuring mostly flat shoes, with sales almost five times higher than for heels.

“This should have happened a long time ago,” Wang said. “High heels are instruments of torture for women. They are neither comfortable nor practical.”

Meanwhile Wang Yanfei, who is in post-production at a short-video company in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou, said that there is no dress code at her workplace, so everybody wears T-shirts, jeans and sneakers to work.

Almost a decade younger than Louise Wang, she said she never understood the beauty of high heels.

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Our customers will undoubtedly prioritize comfort, and that will also be reflected in shoe styles.

Sissi Gao

General manager of FRAME China

“I studied in the United States for three years, and I never saw a pair of high heels on campus,” she said. “It was my impression that the fashion trend of spike heels was washed out. It actually happened earlier than we realized. In fact, the only person I have seen recently in high heels was a woman in her 50s. That tells you a lot.”

For a long time, high heels represented fashion elegance and sexiness. Marilyn Monroe once said, “I don’t know who invented high heels, but all women owe him a lot.”

Oddly enough, raised heels were first invented for men. They emerged as shoes to grip stirrups, and by the late 16th century, they became the fashion about noblemen. You often see French kings in paintings wearing heels.

In 17th century, the fashion spread to noble women just as men were beginning to abandon raised heels because they were regarded as heavy and clumsy.

In the 20th century, shorter dresses and high heels became a symbol of women’s liberation — viewed as showing female power over their own bodies and a way to display physical beauty. Meanwhile, fashion brands in Italy invented stiletto heels that featured higher and extremely thin heels. At first, they were revered as the height of feminine fashion; later they began to draw criticism as health hazards.