

China's Booming Auto Exports Test Shipping Industry

Plus: Tyson plans to close another beef plant; tariff-refund process proves smoother than expected

By

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Aug. 14, 2026 6:54 am ET



Chinese-made cars await loading onto car carriers in Yantai, China. CN-STR/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

China's auto factories are building so many cars for export that the global shipping industry can't keep up, the WSJ Logistics Report's Paul Berger writes.

Specialized car carriers are booked out years ahead to export cars from Chinese factories. Rates to charter the roll-on/roll-off, or ro-ro, ships are up 65% this year on the surging demand. Some automakers are so desperate to get vehicles to Europe, Australia and Latin America they are squeezing them inside shipping containers.

Chinese carmakers are flooding foreign markets because of fierce competition between more than 100 domestic auto brands, overproduction and a sluggish economy. China exported just under 600,000 cars and vans in 2019, according to Mobility Global. This year, it forecasts China could ship up to 10 million vehicles.

Now, the shipping industry is navigating skyrocketing rates and scarce capacity. Carriers have gone on a record buying spree in recent years to meet demand, with the global car-carrier fleet growing by about an estimated 40%, but still can't meet China's needs.

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“You’ve got China moving from being insignificant to being the world’s largest vehicle exporter in only a five-year period.”

— Andreas Enger, CEO of Norwegian car carrier **Höegh Autoliners**