



ENTER THE DRAGON

WORDS RICHARD WEBB

Are Western tastes in automotive style about to get a rude awakening as luxury car brands look to China for growth?

The biggest market for Porsche is not America, Europe or Russia. It's China. Fuelled by Chinese millionaires and their growing appetite for luxury, the Stuttgart brand has grown sales by 79 percent to 7 099 sales in the communist country in the first three months of 2012.

Car market analysts JD Power & Associates reckon that by 2020, three million of the 30 million cars sold in China annually will be luxury cars. So BMW is to join General Motors, Volkswagen, Toyota, Honda and PSA Peugeot Citroën by opening design studios in Shanghai, while Infiniti – Nissan's luxury brand – recently moved its global headquarters to Hong Kong.

All this is very distressing, of course, because it means we no longer are at the epicentre of the known "Car Universe". What if mainstream luxury cars "go Chinese" as carmakers woo the Chinese nouveau riche? Is the ghastly Bentley EXP 9 F (which will sell in China, like beer to students at an Oktoberfest) a pre-cursor of what to expect?

Will the traditional European sense of taste and style we are smitten with be modified to suit

Chinese tastes? This begs the question: What does Chinese luxury actually look like? The current crop of Chinese cars available in South Africa are generally underwhelming at best.

For the moment, the attempts of Chinese car-makers at prestigious luxury cars are comical. Happily, in the short term, Western tastes will dominate the luxury car market, but there can be no doubt that the Chinese will find their own definitions of luxury as the country's car brands gain confidence.

Affluent Chinese car buyers shun Chinese cars in favour of luxury European brands, whilst here the opposite is true. We buy Chana, GWM, Chery and Geely, which for the most part are cut-price, entry-level cars – for now.

If your granddad bought a Toyota in the early 70s, he'd have been considered eccentric. If you'd bought a Hyundai in the early 80s, you'd be considered odd. But Toyota is now the number one selling brand in SA and Hyundai is aiming to more than match BMW in the next decade. The Chinese learn fast, so you can expect some of their brands to be super desirable within the decade, if not sooner.

THREE MILLION OF THE 30 MILLION CARS SOLD IN CHINA ANNUALLY WILL BE LUXURY CARS

OPPOSITE Bugatti's Veyron 16.4 Grand Sport Vitesse comes with a two-tone paint job, complete with dragon motif.

RIGHT Ferrari's special-edition 458 Italia is bedazzled with Chinese themes, like a dragon coiling across the bonnet and a racetrack-like design on its back.

BELOW GWM's H5 Diesel 4x4



GREAT WALL MOTORS

The recent arrival of GWM's H5 Diesel 4x4 presented a welcome opportunity to evaluate one of China's leading brands in a local context.

At just R235 000 the car is competitively priced, especially considering it is supposed to compete with Toyota's Fortuner, which costs about R100 000 more.

The car looks decent enough on the road and cuts a fine dash on the school run as it jostles for street presence with BMW X3s, Audi Q5s, and Fortuners. Brand conscious snobs will not initially sneer at you in this, China's best local offering, which is inoffensive and good looking enough to pass as a decent mid-range Euro brand.

The lack of rattles and squeaks points to a build quality uncommon in this price range. The dash is not imbued with soft-touch plastics and the controls are a little agricultural, but the car is a worthy effort. The 110kW turbo diesel motor offers up 310Nm of twist, but is noisy and reminiscent of a John Deere. The feel of the six-speed manual gearbox is as fluid as stirring a screwdriver in a bag of marbles, so the automatic version is the best option. Ride quality is reasonable and there is a massive amount of space in the cabin.

The upmarket model has climate control, leather seats and a reverse camera with parking sensors for those who can't be bothered to look over their shoulder. It's well equipped for the price.

If you are in the market for a very well priced family-sized 4x4 and you don't mind the occasional agricultural dynamics, this car is worth a look. ■