



Should MG go Electric?

Mark Andrews drives the MG GS's electric Roewe twin in China, courtesy of a car sharing scheme in the company's home town of Shanghai.

In China, Roewe – created by SAIC after they bought the intellectual property for the Rover 25 and 75 – has always outsold MG. Quite why is probably enough for a whole different article, but suffice to say that MG initially going to Nanjing Auto and then reuniting after the 'merger' didn't help. 2016 was the best year yet for both brands in China, and 2017 final figures will exceed these. However, while MG accumulated 80,389 units, it was outshone by Roewe which achieved an impressive 241,328 cars sold.

For Roewe that was almost two and a half times its 2015 sales, and this

was largely on the back of two factors. Firstly, the unrelenting rise of China's new energy vehicle (NEV) market. NEVs are the name China gives to any vehicle not solely powered by a petrol or diesel engine. In reality this means pure electric vehicles (BEV), and plug-in hybrids (PHEV) which have a petrol engine, electric motor and a battery pack and which can be charged both from the mains and also by using the engine as a generator. With the Roewe brand SAIC has managed to position itself as one of the leaders in the NEV market, particularly when it comes to PHEVs. The Roewe 550 (on which the MG6 is based) sold only 2150 examples

of the petrol-engined version in 2016, perhaps not surprising for a car that had been on the market for eight years. However the PHEV version launched at the end of 2013 racked up 15,145 sales, its best year yet. For comparisons, the MG6 sold 2210 units.

The even bigger reason for the growth of Roewe, however, was the launch of the GS's Roewe twin, the RX5. This is simply SAIC's best selling car. Despite only launching in July 2016, it alone managed to chalk up 90,033 of the 2016 sales, and in 2017 regularly made up more than half of all Roewe sales. In China it outsells the GS by seven to one.



ABOVE: The EVCARD car sharing scheme currently offers 26,000 vehicles to subscribers, most of them small but now also including the Roewe ERX5.

RIGHT: With 3365 collection points in Shanghai alone, subscribers book the car they want by mobile app.



Last year saw the launch of first the eRX5 (a PHEV) and then the BEV version, the ERX5 EV400. To get some idea of these sales phenomenons, we got behind the wheel of the Roewe ERX5 EV400 as offered by car sharing scheme EVCARD, one of the largest car sharing schemes in the world with 1.2 million subscribers. Set up in 2015 with financial backing from SAIC and Shanghai International Automobile City, it claims to be the first electric car sharing scheme in China and is certainly now the largest.

Subscribers get a card which they use to open the doors of a car which they book by mobile app – an order is placed on average every 2.4 seconds. Shanghai is the largest base city with 3365 pickup points, but EVCARD also operate in an additional 31 cities and there are more on the way. The charge for small cars such as the Roewe E50 and Chery eQ is about £1.70 for the first half hour, followed by 6.5p for each subsequent minute. They

also offer some other cars such as the BMW i3 and Zinoro 1E (which is based on the BMW X1). The company currently operates in the region of 26,000 vehicles, and aims to increase this to 60,000 by the end of 2018.

For today's drive I was accompanied by Dr David Zhang, an expert on EV charging and car sharing companies. We met at Longyang Road station where the railway to Shanghai's Pudong airport starts and EVCARD has a large underground lot with space for more than ten cars. With no available ERX5 there, we set off in a Chery eQ in search of a station with an available

car – most EVCARD vehicles are, as we have seen, small like the eQ and the Roewe E50, making the much larger ERX5 (which is not currently available in large numbers) much sought after.

A smartphone app showed one available a few miles away. When we arrived, we found a much smaller station with space for four cars in front of the ambitiously named Blue Horizon Royal Parklane International Hotel. Waiting for us plugged in and charged was a mud-splattered ERX5, but sadly a blue horizon was nowhere in sight on a wet and grey day that wouldn't have been out of place in Britain. »



ABOVE: Inside the high quality cabin, the dash of the ERX5 is dominated by a 10.4in touchscreen that controls most of the functions.

RIGHT: Digital display in the instrument binnacle shows how many kilometres are left before it needs recharging.

« Once booked, users have 15 minutes to collect a car before it is freed up for other people. For the ERX5, EVCARD charge the equivalent of nearly 15p per minute for use of the car, with the collection points being typically at hotels and near subway stations.

'We have ordered 6000 of the ERX5 EV400,' says Huang Chunhua, EVCARD's Chief Marketing Officer. 'We mainly offer small cars as the small size is more suitable for driving and parking in cities. Now with the ERX5, a mid-sized SUV, in our fleet it can satisfy even more customer needs for travelling, such as weekend outings or short trips with family and friends, thanks to its larger space carrying more passengers and luggage.'

Stepping out of the eQ and getting into the ERX5 – unlocked via David's card being placed on a windscreen mounted sensor – revealed how different the two cars are. The Chery



is cheap and utilitarian, whereas the Roewe is a car I would be happy to own – and bear in mind the EVCARD models are the base trim. But how does it compare to the GS?

While the MG6 and Roewe 550 were very obviously related (with the saloon Magnette being near identical), the relationship between the RX5 and GS is far less obvious. The first and most striking difference inside is the Tesla style 10.4in touchscreen which dominates the dashboard and controls most things, from the cabin climate to the navigation. Gone is the

GS's clunky gear selector, replaced by a Jaguar like dial – although it doesn't rise and fall from the console. The steering column control stalks are one of the few items that remain recognisable to GS owners. However, one of the biggest and most called for differences is the quality. Roewe in the 950 and W5, (both based on other manufacturers' vehicles,) proved that it could do decent interiors. At last with the RX5 range this has carried through to a car they have developed themselves, with soft-touch plastics predominating. While it is still not

RIGHT: 'Distance remaining' is also displayed on the touchscreen, but it is optimistic for inner city driving.

up to the standard of some of the private companies like Geely in its newly launched Lynk & Co 01 SUV, it is light years ahead of what SAIC has previously managed with any MG or cars like the 550.

Compared to the GS, the RX5 is far more generic in looks, but given the sales this seems to be no bad thing in China. The petrol versions share the same 1.5 and 2.0-litre turbos, but where things get interesting is when it gains an e prefix – small e for the PHEV and a capital for the BEV. The PHEV version adds a 30kW electric motor and 11.8kW battery pack to a 124kW (166hp) 1.5 turbo petrol engine. In the EV400 model, power comes solely from an 85kW electric motor powered from a 48.3kW battery pack.

The 400 part of the name comes from the supposed range in kilometres at a constant 60km/h – a measure used by many Chinese manufacturers – which in fact Roewe puts at 425km (265 miles). The NEDC cycle however puts the range at 320km (200 miles). Our test model, which when collected half full claimed a range of 193km, showed this is wildly optimistic – in six weeks from being registered, the car had covered 3824km and showed an average energy usage of 23.1kW/100km, so a more realistic range is 125 miles, at least for inner city driving.

Like Chinese versions of the GS, there is not much travel with the brake pedal, which takes some getting used to. However, with the ERX5 you don't need to use the brakes much. Like many electric cars it comes with a kinetic energy recovery system

(KERS). In front of the gear selector are three toggle switches, the middle one controlling the KERS. Drivers can select light, moderate or heavy KERS. With heavy KERS, when approaching a red light I lifted my foot off the accelerator and came to a near stop without touching the brakes.

On the left of the KERS switch is one marked Mode. This controls the performance setup of the electric motor with choices of Sport, Normal and Eco. In Sport there is no doubt

that the car is brisk: the official 0-62mph figure is a very respectable 7.5 seconds and the car always feels like it has plenty of power, with near instantaneous torque courtesy of the electric drivetrain. Even in Eco mode the car feels no slouch, and that setup is probably fine for most drivers in everyday situations. Theoretically selecting Eco should improve range, however the range indicator on the instrument panel never changed no matter which mode was selected. The third button marked Battery is a carry over from the PHEV version where it can be used to choose all-electric driving in situations like the inner city.

Electric cars tend to be heavy, but the use of a ternary lithium battery on the Roewe (this has much better energy density than many of its competitors) means it can make do with a smaller, lighter battery pack. The FWD version of the 2.0T RX5 weighs in at 1592kg, whereas the ERX5 EV400 (also FWD) only comes in marginally heavier at 1730kg.

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LEFT: Mark found the ride and handling to be good, even in the poor weather and on pot-holed roads.





ABOVE AND RIGHT: The generous size of the ERX5 cabin when compared to EVCARD's generally small car offerings makes the model a popular choice.



« What does that mean on the road? Well, the car is well planted with little observable body roll. Only when cornering at speed on a spaghetti junction between expressways did I feel the rear drifting out slightly.

Steering at low speeds is overly light, but once you get up to around 50mph it tightens up nicely, giving precise feel. After deliberately throwing the car at some potholes, the ride seemed to hold up well. On an inner city expressway with a speed limit of 50mph, the ERX5 proved a good match for fast moving traffic. Despite our base version not having blind spot warning indicators, overall vision is reasonable, making lane changing not unduly harrowing.

What proved more of a problem was misting up of the windows. Selecting the demisting button created a loud blowing noise in an otherwise largely silent cabin environment. This meant that we kept having to switch it on and off, and as far as I could find there was

no gentler setting which would allow more hushed constant use.

Roewe bill the RX5 family as the first internet car thanks to its Aliyun cloud-based operating system environment known as ZEBRA, provided by Chinese Internet giant Alibaba in cooperation with SAIC. On the EVCARD vehicles this is partly disabled due to the need to provide a Chinese ID card to get full 4G internet functionality.

We did, however, test the voice activated navigation system. Strangely it seemed to sometimes understand my Chinese better than native speaker David's. Whether this is to do with microphone positioning as I was in the driver's seat or whether it was programmed by foreigners is unclear! Luckily it is also possible to input addresses using the touch screen, as often it was unable to recognise speech input from either of us.

Overall, I would say that whatever your thoughts on electric cars in general, MG needs a car like this.

Many MG enthusiasts believe that what the brand needs in the UK is a halo car, and last year's MG e-motion displayed at the Shanghai show has given them some hope. I believe what MG needs more is what's known in marketing as a unique selling proposition (USP). This can be provided by cars like the eRX5.

The MG6 was a great handling car, but one of the main problems for the UK market was always the drivetrain. It would have been easy for MG to introduce a PHEV Magnette, and I think they should have done just that. Mitsubishi, generally a brand hanging on by a thread, has had an amazing degree of success with its Outlander PHEV, a car which has dominated UK sales of low emission vehicles with over 30,000 units sold to date.

A Geely executive recently told me that with Lynk & Co they realise that if it is to be a success in Europe, they have to offer something a bit different and for that reason from the beginning the cars will come as PHEVs. This is exactly what MG needs to be doing. Sister brand Roewe shows that SAIC has the technology, and as my drive shows, it works. Huang from EVCARD also says customer feedback welcomes the ERX5 due to the longer driving distance and space.

According to Huang, ZEBRA makes the vehicle more fun and convenient. Certainly it seems that the operating environment is much better than that offered by MG. Unfortunately the system is only available in Chinese and it seems that the deal between SAIC and Alibaba only covered the Roewe brand and not MG. However, I can't help feeling that a PHEV or BEV version of the GS would give the Outlander some serious competition, and give people who otherwise might not think of an MG a fresh reason to consider the brand.



ABOVE: Mark reckons that a PHEV MG could offer the marque a USP in the UK market, and emulate the success that Mitsubishi have had with their Outlander.