

Raising The Flag For Hongqi – Test Driving The H7

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Most Chinese car brands have a history of less than a decade with one very notable exception, Hongqi (Red Flag). Founded in 1958 as China's first car brand, its roots are in building cars for the top echelons of the political leadership. When First Automobile Works (FAW), the owners of Hongqi, got hold of the designs for the third generation Audi 100 as part of the joint venture agreement, they thought the sky was the limit. Armed with a Chrysler engine, they set about sullyng the Hongqi name with cars being used as taxis and producing even a pickup truck version.

The H7 is about claiming the heritage back. Launched in March, sales were initially only to government departments and of the three engines available, the 2.5 litre V6 is exclusively for official

procurement. In May, the 2.0T and 3.0l V6 versions went on sale to the public.

Externally the H7 is conservative in the manner favoured by Chinese consumers and the German competition. This car is squarely aimed at vehicles like the Audi A6L and BMW 5-series. One striking feature though is the raised red fin on the bonnet showing that it is clearly a Hongqi. Whilst generally well put together, the boot is extremely heavy to close and the doors also need more force than the competition.

Inside, there is an obvious attention to luxury, however the top of the dashboard is easily scuffed and the veneer is fake

wood. The large touchscreen infotainment system is mounted at a height suitable for easy use by the driver and, as can be expected on our regal trim 2.0T test car, most toys such as DVD, rear view camera with aiming grid, etc. were included although, surprisingly, there was no USB connection.

Rear seat passengers get both seat heating and cooling whereas curiously, there is

only heating in the front. Whilst the car can accommodate three in the back, it is aimed more as a two seater with a large fold down armrest complete with controls for the seats and an entertainment system. There is also a fridge hidden behind the armrest. In addition, passengers also get a massage function that can be electrically adjusted. The rear passenger can move the front passenger seat for extra legroom but rear screens are not an option.

Coupled to a six-speed automatic gearbox, the two litre turbo engine lacks urgency when driven in the normal drive mode. Drop it into sports mode and it changes up at around 5000 revs rather than below 4000 in drive. It can also be used semi-manually but there are no paddle shifts.

For a Chinese car the H7 has well

weighted steering but, thanks to largely straight roads, handling could not be fully tested. In the front seats the ride was not a problem but the rear seats are too flat and do not provide much support making it not as comfortable as a 5 series.

FAW claim the H7 is self-developed but Internet sources show the platform is based on the Toyota Crown and the V6 engines are also from Toyota. However the 2.0T is their own. Undoubtedly, the H7 is a sterling effort with many commendable points and goes a long way to restoring prestige but it doesn't quite match the German competition and is more realistically an alternative to cars like the Buick LaCrosse. Plus, in a move that no doubt Henry Ford would approve, it is only available in black. Prices range from RMB 299,800 to 479,800.



What's In A Name? The New BMW 4-Series Coupe

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The past decade has seen rising fuel prices, larger power output from small engines, reductions in urban car parking availability, all combining to make the mid-size coupe market increasingly competitive – and car manufacturers have been quick to respond. The premium segment has seen particularly heavy competition in China, from the Audi A5 to the Mercedes C-Class. Now, first images of the BMW contribution to title bout are gradually arriving in the form of the new BMW 4-Series Coupe range.

With the first models forecast to premiere at the Frankfurt Motor Show this September, the new two-door should be arriving in China early enough for generous parents to be placing a set of keys in hongbao during Chinese New Year celebrations next year.

And what will you get for your money? One thing is clear: increased sportiness. Suspension has been lowered in comparison to the previous 3-Series, reducing centre of gravity and roll. It's evident at first glance. The wheelbase is now 50mm longer, while overhangs have been shortened, pushing the wheels further towards the corners of the car

providing a firmer grip on the road. Furthermore, the overall height has been reduced by 16mm. It all adds up to a dynamic styling significantly more aggressive than its predecessor.

But it shouldn't just look like it packs a punch. The most powerful model in the initial release, the 435i, will wield a turbocharged 3.0-litre inline six-cylinder pushing out 300 bhp. Automatic and manual models will be available in each variant. Naturally, for the social or cost-conscious, the smaller 420d will be holding the aces, with claimed combined cycled consumption of 4.7L/100km/h

(manual) and CO2 emissions of 124g/km. With the 435i able to hit 100 km/h in 5.3 seconds – hardly sluggish and only 0.1 seconds slower than the M3 Coupe – the increased grunt will be evident within a few heartbeats of ignition.

Reports indicate that the 4-Series Coupe will be available in three different trim lines – Luxury, Sport and M Sport. Similar to the 3-Series range, the Luxury package will focus on overall options and an upscale appearance, while the Sport and M Sport models will offer more driver-oriented equipment and a more dynamic exterior. With 19-inch wheels

available on all models, this is a car that could turn a few heads.

Of course, as with all the German premium automotive manufacturers, tradition remains ever present. The distinctive rear silhouette that first emerged with the 3-Series based coupe in 1975 remains strong, while at the front the 4-Series adopts that perfectly BMW-esque kidney-shaped grille.

So, why the name change you ask? The official line from Bavaria, is that by leaving behind the

traditional "3-Series Coupe" name in favor of the 4-Series Coupe designation, they have instilled their new two door with a more individual flavor, both stylistically and dynamically. It sounds bigger and it sounds faster. It's a move that's been copied throughout the model range with the addition of the 6-Series and the appearance of the 2-Series coupe as a replacement for the 1-Series coupe.

But now to the big question, I know you've all been asking... how will sales fare when the model designation is now the Chinese bad luck number? Only time will tell.

