

## MOTORS

# Up to the marque

The MG 6 was the spearhead of Shanghai Automotive Industry Corporation's (SAIC) assault on Europe. It is the Business Car of Choice for the British Pavilion at the 2010 Expo. And by the end of the year it should go on sale in Britain and be produced – most likely from CKDs (“completely knocked-down” kits) – at Longbridge.

Despite a number of test drives being conducted in Britain, MG is unwilling to allow official test drives in the mainland.

With a car park full of the model, it seems that you can have any version you like as long as it's in burned orange. Other colours can mean a two-month wait.

The MG 6 is essentially a hatchback version of the successful Roewe 550, but it's longer, wider and sits lower. As such, the design ethos is essentially a five-door coupé, which MG refers to as a fastback.

While the concept model caused a stir at last year's Shanghai motor show, recent comments on British motoring magazine websites have criticised its bland styling. Our base model, the 1.8 DVVT manual test car, rode on 16-inch wheels that leave a large gap under the wheel arches – a far cry from the aggressive stance of the concept, with its low-profile rims. Its champagne colour did not look as good as the examples in orange, red or black.

Internally, the MG 6 has largely the same interior as the 550. While the Roewe is available with a choice

SAIC hopes the MG 6 sells in Europe despite a 'bland' label, writes **Mark Andrews**



of a split-colour interior or black, the MG is available only in black.

Sitting in the black cloth seat, the most obvious internal difference is in the instruments. While the general look of the dashboard and the positioning of the vents is unaltered, the digital speedometer has been swapped for a more traditional, analogue model.

Squeezed in between

the tachometer and speedometer are the trip computer and a panel for warning lights.

Manual versions of the MG 6 forgo the GPS and have only a CD-

radio unit that can link to MP3 players and has a slot for SD cards.

Gone is the fake wood of the 550: the central console has a black plastic covering. The base model has

no sunroof but there are electric windows and mirrors.

Rear headroom is tighter than in a Ford Focus, thanks to the sloping roofline, but the legroom is sufficient. One unfortunate change is that the middle passenger loses the full seatbelt of the 550 and has to make do with a lap restraint.

Loading luggage is easy thanks to the low hatch sill. Split-folding seats add to the utility, and capacity appears more than acceptable.

Engine choice comes down to a 1.8 DVVT unit and a 1.8 turbo. On a limited test drive on city roads the DVVT unit seems more than adequate, and was not straining to cope. It does, however, lack the urgency and power of the turbo unit.

There is a choice of five-speed automatic and manual gearboxes with both engines. However, in both cases the manual is only a base

model with the lowest equipment specification. Gear changes were smooth, and the unit feels solid.

The ride is smooth and the suspension soaks up a level crossing with ease. On largely straight urban roads the handling is more difficult to ascertain, but if the 550 is anything to go by it should be good.

Undoubtedly for the Chinese market the car is a good package with competitive looks, pricing and specifications. Its size is similar to a Skoda Octavia and considerably longer than the BMW 3 series, Ford Focus and VW Golf. However, the mainland market traditionally favours saloons. Although this appears to be changing, few large hatchbacks have proved successful. Despite being on sale for nearly six months, there appear to be few MG 6s on the road. The real question is how this car is going to compete in

## At a glance: MG 6

**What drives it?** A choice of 1.8-litre DVVT or 1.8-litre turbo engines provides power to the front wheels.

**How fast is it?** A top speed of 188km/h is claimed for the manual model and 185km/h for the automatic. Curiously, no 0-100 times are quoted for this car or the Roewe 550, which has the same engine.

**How safe is it?** With stability control and six airbags it has five stars under the China NCAP system, but has yet to be tested by Euro NCAP.

**How thirsty is it?** At 90km/h the manual version is said to drink 5.6 litres per 100km; the automatic is said to sip 6 litres/100km.

**How clean is it?** No emissions figures are quoted.

**How much is it?** The manual DVVT is 122,800 yuan (HK\$144,000) and the automatic 149,800 yuan. The turbo models start at 146,800 yuan and range up to 192,800 yuan.

the European market. Despite rumours of a 1.5 turbo model and DSG gearboxes, the MG 6 was launched on the mainland with technology that is largely a hangover from the MG Rover years. Of course, it has been updated, but compared to what is on offer in Europe the proposition doesn't look so inviting. Most cars of this size in Europe come with six-speed manual or automatic gearboxes. The Golf comes with a seven-speed DSG unit.

For the MG 6 to succeed in Europe there is also an urgent need for a diesel option. However, if MG can offer a car of sufficient quality at a cheap enough price it will sell. In appearance, however, it is going to be outclassed in Europe by the French and Italian competition, but should hold up against cars from Japanese and South Korean manufacturers.



The MG 6 is essentially a hatchback version of the Roewe 550



## Foreign actors enjoy bigger demand on the mainland

### TELEVISION

Bonnie Cao

Along with men in fedoras and 1930s cars, the costume drama *Grassroots King* has a feature that nearly every Chinese television show seems to require these days – a Western character.

Kerry Brogan, an actress from Newton, Massachusetts, who plays the lead character's British girlfriend, is one of dozens of foreign performers on mainland television, recruited to appeal to increasingly worldly audiences.

"Our audiences are no longer satisfied watching foreign characters played by Chinese in a wig," says Yan Hao, a producer of *Feng Yu*, a spy thriller whose cast includes three Western actors.

Producers who used to hire exchange students and other foreign amateurs to supply a dash of non-speaking exotic colour to television shows now put out casting calls as far afield as the United States and Europe for professionals. They appear in productions ranging from war stories to romances, and some host variety shows.

Brogan, a Putonghua speaker in her 20s, says she has appeared in 40 Chinese movies and television productions. In *Grassroots King*, a saga set in the years before the second world war, she has a speaking role as a regularly appearing character. "There's a greater desire to work together between Westerners and mainland Chinese people," Brogan says. "The market has a greater need."

Yan says audiences are looking for entertainment that reflects the world they see on the internet and in China itself as society becomes more cosmopolitan.

"When I turn on the TV these days, sometimes even I am surprised that there are so many foreign faces in Chinese shows," says Zheng Feng, a casting agent who has been finding foreign performers for domestic producers for 11 years. Zheng says he is setting up an English-language website to advertise abroad for actors.

The trend sits awkwardly with the government's culture officials, who have issued directives limiting the use of foreign programming on mainland television and ordering on-air personalities to limit their use of foreign words.

Rules issued by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (Sart) limit the number of major foreign actors or crew members to one-third of the total workforce for a film or television programme made on the mainland. There are no statistics on the number of foreign actors working on the mainland, but Zheng believes the number has risen 20 to 30 per cent a year over the past decade.

Zheng shows the résumés of dozens of American and European actors he represents and says 20 to 30 talent agencies in the mainland's major cities also represent foreign performers.

The mainland's vast television audience is the world's biggest – studios filmed 12,910 episodes of television programming last year and sales totalled 2.1 billion yuan (HK\$2.39 billion), according to the industry regulator, Sart.

"China is more opened-up. Every movie today contains some Western-Chinese elements, so you have to get some foreigners," says film director Song Yeming.

Song says appearance alone is no longer enough to get the job, and the industry's financial resources



German actor Volker Helfrich plays a spy in the mainland thriller *Feng Yu*

and demand for skills has grown to the point that he sometimes contacts groups abroad to find the right person.

Producer Li Junyu regularly invites foreign actors or winners of Putonghua-speaking contests to co-host his show *Baika Quanshuo*, or *Encyclopaedic Talk*, about healthcare and traditional Chinese medicine. "A foreign co-host on the show can offer a different way of thinking about our themes," Li says.

Volker Helfrich, a Putonghua-speaking stage actor from Germany who plays a spy in *Feng Yu*, came to China four years ago and says he has been given more complex roles. "I don't want to get dubbed. I try to get different roles in different kinds of movies and productions," he says.

Foreign actors are usually paid 50 per cent more than their local counterparts, but Helfrich says he could have made more money in Europe. "This is one reason why I don't see too many very good, very well-known actors from foreign countries coming over here."

Dr Zhu Dake, a cultural critic at Tongji University in Shanghai, says many Chinese people love hearing compliments about Chinese culture from foreigners. "Foreigners in China taking supporting roles serve Chinese values, while the main players are still Chinese. Essentially, it's a worship mentality," Zhu says.

Li says he does not plan to give his foreign co-hosts a major role on the show because he believes his audience won't accept it. "The culture gap is too difficult to overcome," he says. "They are the icing on our cake."



Kerry Brogan, an actress from Massachusetts, on the set of Chinese costume drama *Grassroots King*. Photos: AP

Associated Press

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