

China poised to be world leader in electric cars

September 5 2011, By Jim Motavalli

Do you have an electric car-charging station in your neighborhood? In your garage? I didn't think so. They're still pretty scarce, but that situation is likely to be short-lived. By 2017, according to a new report from Pike Research, there will be more than 1.5 million charging stations in the U.S. But that's not the news; the important factoid is that there will be nearly 7.7 million places to plug in worldwide, and "The Asia Pacific region will lead global electric vehicle charging equipment sales due to strong government incentives and directives in China, Japan and Korea."

That's right, China in particular is prepared to swamp the current [charging station](#) leader - the U.S. - in just a few years. The Chinese government says it wants to have 10 million chargers in place by 2020.

Chinese consumers are currently being offered a staggering subsidy, 60,000 renminbi (\$9,400 U.S.), to buy an electric vehicles. And in Beijing and Shenzhen, local governments offer that same amount again. EVs in China are double the price of gas cars, so these subsidies will certainly help make up the difference. Also overcoming sales resistance is that electrics are exempt from the license plate lottery that limits new car registrations in Beijing and Shanghai.

Jim Fisher, who heads the [Asia Pacific region](#) for General Electric's Industrial Solutions division, told me that China is in the 12th of its five-year plans, and that [electric cars](#) are among the top five priorities, with Shanghai as the principal pilot city.

And GE is joining with Hertz to provide the all-electric BYD E6 (at right) for rental service in Shanghai, as well as Beijing and Shenzhen. "We will put several thousand of our WattStation EV chargers in China, and we're working with Hertz on locations," Fisher said. He added that the Pike report gives "a very positive outlook" for the quick spread of EVs in China. And Chinese utilities are enthusiastic EV backers, with a special emphasis on swappable batteries that would make it easier to take long trips.

Michael Mahan, a product manager for EV infrastructure at GE Energy, said the company wants an "end to end" network in China that includes 480-volt DC fast charging. "We're exploring that, but haven't made any announcements," he said.

It all sounds very promising, but there are some obstacles. Even with the subsidies, the Chinese haven't yet flocked to [electric vehicles](#). The BYD F3DM plug-in hybrid, priced at what sounds to westerners like a very attractive \$21,000, had sold only about 10,000 since 2008. Keep in mind that the non-hybrid F3 is China's bestselling car (with 92,000 sold in the first quarter of 2011) and sells for only \$8,000, so it's no wonder there is price resistance.

Brad Berman of PlugInCars.com took a test drive in the F3DM, which is aimed at U.S. sales (with a tentative price of \$28,800), and this is his video report:

The E6 also sells for a fairly absurd \$47,000 in China, which explains why GE and Hertz are bundling EV leasing and charging as a special package for government fleets and multinational companies operating in China. And for consumers, maybe renting one is the best bet. "Market research has suggested that most [Chinese consumers](#) will resist paying extra," the New York Times reported.

China has still not adopted a single charging standard, as has the U.S. with the Society of Automotive Engineers' J1772 plug. And the urban Chinese tend to live in high-rise apartments, which makes home garage-based charging out of the question. That's why GE is working with [local governments](#) on the optimal placement of its WattStations - likely in big communal parking garages.

But beyond these hurdles, EVs are on a roll in [China](#), and it's not surprising that American companies like GE and Hertz are going along for the ride.

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