

White Paper Automotive

Auto Shanghai 2025





„Change is the law of life.
And those who look only to the
past or the present are certain
to miss the future.“

John F. Kennedy

When Brand Becomes Space – and Not Just Concept

The Shanghai Motor Show made one thing unmistakably clear: brands today are not just designed—they're constructed, inhabited, and activated. While European manufacturers continue to orchestrate brand spaces with clinical precision and control, Chinese brands present a radically different interpretation of presence: open, usage-oriented, seemingly improvised—yet strikingly effective.



What fascinates me is the moment a strategic brand idea becomes physical—something you can enter, feel, and interact with. In Shanghai, the most powerful spaces weren't the most polished. They were the ones where the brand wasn't just presented—but lived. By people. By communities. By content.

So what does that mean for us? Perhaps we need to rethink implementation: not as a stage to perform on, but as a system to engage with. Not as a perfectly curated image, but as an open invitation to take part.

The real challenge: making brands resonate within dynamic, culturally shaped contexts—consistent, but not rigid. Engaging, but not arbitrary. Purposeful, but never generic.

Martin Tischer

Resting on Past Strengths Is a Fast Track to Irrelevance

Auto Shanghai 2025 was more than just a global auto showcase—it was a wake-up call. What we witnessed wasn't just technical innovation, but a new kind of confidence: Chinese brands are no longer challengers. They're shaping the future.

Conversations, exhibits, and products all reflected the same reality: Chinese manufacturers are preparing for European expansion with speed, clarity, and strategic discipline. The brand spaces they create aren't mere displays—they're connectors. They link product, market, and culture.

Rarely have I experienced a trade show that offered so many insights into strategic brand development and experience design. Anyone still relying on familiar Western playbooks to stay competitive underestimates the speed and intensity of this market.

This White Paper aims to broaden perspectives—and to invite a new conversation about brands, markets, and mobility.

Frank Marreau



Brand Strategy in Flux – and Europe in the Rearview?

Looking at China today means more than analyzing a major automotive market. It means observing a strategic laboratory for the future of mobility. Auto Shanghai 2025 made one thing clear: it's no longer enough to export familiar brand concepts. What matters is whether a brand holds local relevance—and whether it signals future-readiness.

Volkswagen, Audi, and other Western manufacturers reflect this shift. While many brands in Europe still defend their core identity as something fixed, entirely new sub-brands, platforms, and identities are emerging in China. EVO, ERA, AURA—these are not line extensions. They are original responses to a market defined by speed, context, and cultural fit.

In China, brands aren't being extended—they're being reinvented. Rooted in everyday use cases, digital routines, and societal narratives. What was once considered inconsistent is now a sign of strategic adaptability.

The core question is no longer whether Western brands can preserve their heritage. It's whether they're willing to transform it into new relevance—for China's critical market, yes, but more importantly, for the global markets of tomorrow.

Ralph Kaebe





Interview Recap Auto Shanghai 2025

1. Where did you notice the biggest difference in brand perception between Chinese and European manufacturers?

Martin: What surprised me most wasn't the look and feel—it was the functional openness of many Chinese brand spaces. It wasn't about control but about connectivity—architectural, social, digital. A single space could serve as a product stage, content studio, and community hub all at once, often shifting between these roles fluidly. That flexibility isn't coincidental—it's intentional. These spaces aren't stages, they're interfaces: between product and platform, brand and community, message and participation. For me, that revealed a whole new understanding of brand presence.

Frank: It's all about the staging. European brands still rely heavily on signature architecture, digital precision, and visual control. Chinese brands, in contrast, create open platforms—especially for influencers and multipliers. The brand often steps back and lets the product speak for itself.

Ralph: What struck me was how naturally Chinese brands integrate social media, co-creation, and community-building into their brand spaces. That's not a layer of marketing—it's the core experience. And it generates a completely different energy. Brand doesn't get showcased—it happens. In real time. In social settings. In constant negotiation.

2. In a market increasingly driven by technology and price, how do you see the role of brand?

Ralph: Brand becomes the operating system for relevance. In an environment where features and platforms begin to blur, brand is what gives direction—if it can define itself by meaning rather than origin. That means moving away from closed brand promises and toward an open system brought to life through use, exchange, and context.

Martin: I see it especially in physical space. As everything gets more technical, we need emotional guidance systems. Brand

connects function with feeling, information with intention. You see this clearly in China—there's no hesitation in fusing brand, product, and usage. Take NIO: sales floor, lounge, and livestream stage all merge into one.

Frank: Technology needs context—and that's what brand provides. Especially in a fast-moving market like China, trust becomes the real differentiator. And trust doesn't come from specs alone. It comes from a felt attitude. Brand translates technical potential into something culturally understandable.

3. If you had to sum up how Auto Shanghai 2025 redefined the idea of “brand” in one sentence—what would you say?

Frank: Brand is no longer what's printed on the product—it's what emerges in the interaction.

Ralph: In Shanghai, brand isn't what you show—it's what you do. With the audience. With data. With the community. It's not an entity—it's a process.

Martin: For me, it's become clear: brand is no longer expression—it's invitation. An invitation to engage, to challenge, to co-create. That's the new quality.

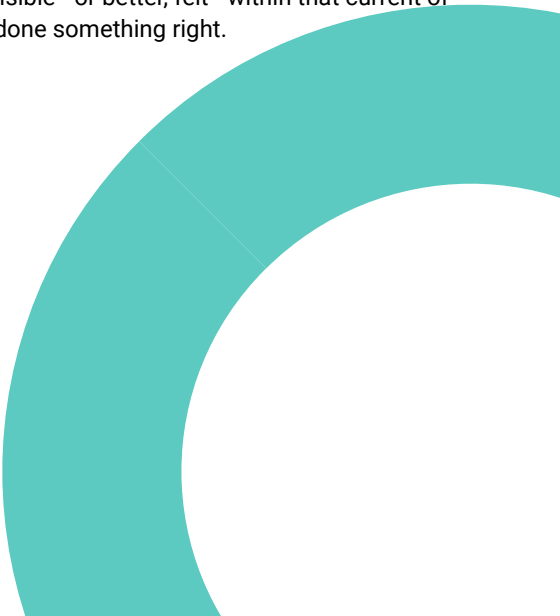
4. Finally: What should be at the top of your personal to-do list next time you're in Shanghai?

Martin: For me, it's a visit to a Chinese co-working space or an experience store. That's where you see how brands operate in hybrid contexts—blending everyday life, community, and digital

expansion. These places speak volumes about how dynamic and fluid brand thinking has become.

Frank: Absolutely. If you only visit the trade show, you'll miss how mobility and branding function in real life. A day beyond the showrooms—on the streets, in public transit, in the rhythms of daily life—reveals what truly matters: how people experience a brand, not how it's curated.

Ralph: Definitely. If you want to understand where branding is heading, take the metro during rush hour. Not just because of the shockingly punctual service—but because it shows how people navigate content: digitally, selectively, and fast. If your brand can remain visible—or better, felt—within that current of distraction, you've done something right.





Five Not-So-Daring Theses On the Future of Brand, Mobility, and Market

Thesis 1

The European car brand is losing its universal appeal.

What once defined “premium” around the globe must now be reimagined—culturally, functionally, and emotionally. Global relevance only comes from local resonance.

Thesis 2

China is no longer just a production site—it’s a positioning powerhouse.

Chinese OEMs use branding not for self-affirmation but for strategic global conquest.

Thesis 3

A brand without experience is like an engine without a road.

Auto Shanghai made it unmistakable: brands that don’t create spaces where people can experience them will lose their impact.

Thesis 4

The next disruption isn’t technological—it’s psychological.

It’s no longer just about range, charging time, or sensor precision. It’s about trust, identification, and cultural connectivity.

Thesis 5

The real question is no longer if Chinese brands are coming to Europe—but how European brands plan to respond.

Those who fail to prepare today will be overtaken tomorrow—not just on the road, but in perception.



International Brand Architecture

What was once considered a strength—consistent brand leadership across all markets—is now under pressure. In China, brand identity alone is no longer enough. Auto Shanghai 2025 made one thing unmistakably clear: international brand architecture has become a strategic challenge.

Some brands still rely on total recognizability—and risk appearing oddly out of place in the local context. Others attempt a balancing act: Volkswagen, for example, has extended its global ID nomenclature with new sub-brands like EVO, ERA, and AURA. Audi has gone even further, launching “AUDI”—a sister brand with four letters instead of four rings, created exclusively for the Chinese market.

The trend is clear: global brand systems are becoming hybrid. Between masterbrand and localization, fluid architectures are emerging in which cultural, technological, and emotional relevance outweigh strict consistency. What matters most is brand connectivity.

The critical question: how far can you fragment a brand—before it starts to fall apart?

Brand Staging

The contrast couldn't be sharper: European manufacturers leaned into familiar formulas—signature architecture, carefully choreographed multi-screen displays, precision lighting. From Porsche's "Man Cave" pavilion to MINI's playful product theater—everything was visually orchestrated, emotionally charged, and meticulously on-brand.

Chinese exhibitors followed a very different logic. The brand stepped into the background to give full focus to the product and its features. The exception: NIO—combining futuristic design with smart, interactive functionality.

At first glance, many of these setups may seem improvised—but they're anything but accidental. Influencers, livestreamers, and key multipliers are given space to perform—right next to the cars, in the middle of the crowd. Visitors are drawn in actively, data flows freely in exchange for small giveaways.

And the vehicles themselves? They impress—not just as prototypes, but as production-ready models. The oft-cited "Tesla killers" have long become part of China's everyday streetscape. Add to that a clear forward gaze: flying taxis, humanoid robots, AI-driven interfaces.

The days of Europeans smirking at Chinese brands are over. One brand made that especially clear: AUDI. Not Audi with four rings—but AUDI in capital letters. Built by SAIC. For China. Claiming the heritage of German premium—but making a break with the past. And a statement for the future.

Shanghai made one thing clear: brands are no longer just presented—they are contextualized.





Brand Positioning

In China, Audi has introduced a “sister brand” called AUDI—four letters instead of four rings. This new brand builds on Audi’s core DNA, aiming to attract tech-savvy target groups with electric and intelligent models.

But branding is never an end in itself—it serves business objectives and must always be read in context. Audi, once the epitome of German premium in China, has lost much of its shine. And in the electric mobility space, it’s no longer technologically competitive.

The new “joint platform” is being developed by SAIC in China, manufactured locally, and sold exclusively within the Chinese market—at Chinese price points. That reality raises serious questions about the brand promise of “Vorsprung durch Technik.”

AUDI is Audi’s brand refresh for its most demanding and strategically important market—and seeks clear differentiation from its parent brand. Meanwhile, in Europe, we’re still driving the expensive but outdated e-tron models—vehicles that barely register with Chinese consumers.

The real test will come when competitive pressure in Europe intensifies—and Audi begins bringing AUDI to the European market. That’s when things could get tight for German factories.

Volkswagen faces the same challenge. But it’s following a different playbook.



Brand Strategy

For Volkswagen, China is the ultimate stress test for future viability. Unlike Audi, the Wolfsburg-based company hasn't formally split its brand. The VW name remains intact—but behind it, products, processes, and partnerships are now conceived entirely locally.

While Europe continues to wait for an affordable electric compact car, Volkswagen is developing more than 20 new EV models at high speed in and for China, in collaboration with local partners such as SAIC, FAW, and JAC. The development hub in Hefei exemplifies this new mindset: faster, more integrated, market-driven.

In contrast to Audi, Volkswagen's brand architecture remains outwardly untouched. The ID family continues, expanded with new sub-names like EVO, ERA, and AURA—a hybrid model combining global recognizability with local independence. At the Shanghai Motor Show, this was clearly on display: booth architecture remained familiar, while the digital content was fully localized—from UI design to product messaging.

At the same time, Volkswagen is quietly stepping away from the old "Engineered in Germany" paradigm—at least in China. Market-driven innovation is moving to the center. The brand core is not abandoned, but redefined with more flexibility. The question is whether this dual approach—a global brand with locally tailored meaning—can hold up over time.

And just to put the scale in perspective:
Shanghai alone has roughly a third of Germany's population.

Guest commentary



Steffen Hildebrand

Architect, interior architect, and brand space thinker. For over two decades, he has worked between Europe and China—first as a university lecturer, later as a designer focused on retail, corporate workplaces, and exhibitions. His work is never just about spaces—but always about making brands visible and tangible.

The Booth Is Glowing – But Who Feels Addressed?

A guest commentary by Steffen Hildebrand

The first impression at Auto Shanghai 2025 was visually overwhelming: glaring lights, high-gloss vehicles, nonstop display loops. Lots of booths – lots of light – lots of movement. And yet, beyond the surface dazzle, there was little design depth at first glance.

In contrast, the European booths almost came as a relief: brand-typical spaces, iconic architecture, clearly defined presentation logics. Mercedes, Porsche & Co. staged their brands with precision—well-rehearsed, globally tested. Brand spaces as controlled forms of expression.

And still, the question remains: why do the two approaches—European and Chinese—

feel so fundamentally different, even though they aim for the same things? Attention. Appeal. Activation.

Cultural differences alone don't explain it. Many staging strategies today flow freely between East and West. What remains is a different reading of brand—shaped by local context and by a different understanding of function.

While European brands emphasize recognition and consistency, Chinese manufacturers push the product relentlessly to the center. Not as an object of desire, but as proof of technological

superiority. The space doesn't serve the brand—it serves activation: for influencers, communities, and interaction. It's not the brand that speaks—but what the brand enables.

Where European players rely on familiar brand images, Chinese brand spaces become platforms for connection. The goal isn't recognition—it's relevance. It's not about celebrating the brand—it's about enabling the product experience.

Conclusion





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What we saw in Shanghai was not a snapshot—it was a strategic outlook. Brands are no longer evolving through linear planning, but in response to markets, cultures, and platforms. Auto Shanghai 2025 demonstrated with striking clarity that brand leadership today is fluid, networked, and context-driven—especially in China.

Five key learnings from Auto Shanghai 2025:

- 1 Relevance beats origin.
- 2 Positioning happens on the ground.
- 3 Brand becomes effective only through experience.
- 4 Trust is the new competitive edge.
- 5 The greatest threat to European brands is not disruption—but stagnation.

European manufacturers must learn to stop thinking of brand as an asset to be preserved—and start understanding it as a form of movement. The real question is no longer: “How do we protect our identity?” but: “How do we keep our brand connected—technologically, culturally, and socially?”

China is not just a frontrunner—it’s a catalyst. Anyone seeking to understand how mobility, branding, and markets are evolving needs to look to China—not as an outlier, but as a preview of global standards.

Because what is standard there today will be expected everywhere tomorrow. Not the other way around.

The window for reaction is closing. What matters now is whether European brands are ready not just to observe change—but to actively grow into it.

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