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# Great Wall Motors: Portrait of a Car Brand

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## Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Birth of Great Wall Motors: From Workshop to Manufacturer
- **Chapter 2** Visionaries at the Helm: The Wei Family's Leadership
- **Chapter 3** Facing Constraints: Navigating National Automotive Regulations
- **Chapter 4** The Great Wall Deer: Launching a Pickup Dominance
- **Chapter 5** Opening Borders: GWM's Entry into Export Markets
- **Chapter 6** Privatization and Public Listing: Charting a New Course
- **Chapter 7** Entering the SUV Arena: Early Models and Market Reception
- **Chapter 8** Building a Reputation: Quality, Affordability, Performance
- **Chapter 9** Haval: The SUV Revolution
- **Chapter 10** Global Expansion: Reaching New Markets
- **Chapter 11** Wey: Introducing Luxury the Chinese Way
- **Chapter 12** Electrifying the Road: The Birth of ORA
- **Chapter 13** Scale and Success: Milestones in Growth
- **Chapter 14** Partnerships and Joint Ventures: Collaborating for Progress
- **Chapter 15** Brand Evolution: The "One GWM" Strategy
- **Chapter 16** Tank and Beyond: Diversification and Niche Markets
- **Chapter 17** Engineering Innovation: Powertrains and Platforms
- **Chapter 18** Intelligent Mobility: The Pursuit of Smart Technology
- **Chapter 19** Safety at the Forefront: Developing Three-Dimensional Protection
- **Chapter 20** Sustainable Solutions: GWM and the New Energy Future
- **Chapter 21** The Global Footprint: Factories, Sales, and Service Networks
- **Chapter 22** GWM in Key International Markets: Case Studies
- **Chapter 23** Triumphs and Challenges: Navigating Global Competition
- **Chapter 24** Numbers that Matter: Financial Performance and Market Share
- **Chapter 25** The Road Ahead: GWM's Vision for 2030 and Beyond

## Introduction

Great Wall Motors: Portrait of a Car Brand tells the remarkable story of one of China's most influential and ambitious automakers. From its modest beginnings as a rural agricultural repair workshop in Baoding, Hebei, to its status today as a globally recognized automotive group, GWM's journey encapsulates the dynamism and rapid evolution witnessed in China's industrial landscape over the past half-century. This book traces not just the history of the company, but also the ingenuity, determination, and adaptability that allowed it to thrive amid local and global challenges.

GWM's ascent was never assured. Confronted by regulatory challenges that barred it from producing passenger sedans, the company made a pivotal decision to focus on pickup trucks and SUVs—segments that would eventually define its brand identity. Guided by the vision of successive generations of the Wei family, Great Wall Motors evolved beyond manufacturing, embracing global market opportunities and technological horizons that even its founders may have scarcely imagined.

Pioneering product innovation has been central to GWM's growth. The company's commitment to quality and affordability helped capture domestic loyalty while laying the groundwork for its expansion into international markets. Milestones such as the launch of the Great Wall Deer pickup and the emergence of the Haval SUV line propelled GWM to the forefront of China's automotive sector. Later, audacious ventures into luxury (with Wey), electric mobility (with ORA), and off-road (with Tank) demonstrated a willingness to lead on multiple fronts, transforming GWM from a niche player into a multi-brand global force.

Yet, the story of Great Wall Motors is not only about impressive sales figures or expanding manufacturing capabilities. It is equally a narrative of technological ambition. The company's embrace of cutting-edge advances in new energy vehicles, intelligent driving systems, and sustainable energy supply reflects a forward-thinking strategy oriented toward the future of mobility. Operating on a global stage, GWM has navigated cultural, economic, and political complexities as it expanded into new regions, forging local partnerships and redefining its international persona through initiatives such as the "One GWM" strategy.

This book also places GWM's evolution within the wider currents of industrial globalization and the rise of the Chinese automotive industry. Through adversity and achievement, GWM has demonstrated how a privately owned Chinese company can become a worldwide competitor—not only by scaling production but by continuously adapting to new energy paradigms, consumer demands, and market realities.

Great Wall Motors remains a work in progress, with its sights set firmly on the horizon. With a new emphasis on intelligent, sustainable vehicles and an ambitious global agenda, GWM continues to redefine itself and its industry. This book invites readers to explore that journey—one that mirrors not just the growth of a single brand, but the broader transformation of automotive ambition in the twenty-first century.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: The Humble Beginnings of an Automotive Giant**

The story of Great Wall Motors, or GWM as it is now globally known, is not one that began with gleaming factories and advanced robotics, but rather in the unassuming setting of a repair workshop in Baoding, Hebei, China. It was 1976, and the automotive landscape of China was vastly different from what it is today. In this year, Wei Deliang, the uncle of current chairman Wei Jianjun, laid the foundation for what would become an automotive empire by establishing the Great Wall Repair Factory. This workshop initially focused on the repair of agricultural vehicles, a humble but essential service in the rural heartland of Hebei province.

From these modest roots, the workshop slowly but surely began to evolve. By 1984, a mere eight years after its inception, the Great Wall Repair Factory took a significant leap forward. It ventured beyond repairs and into the realm of manufacturing its own commercial vehicles. These early forays into production included small trucks, notably the CC130, and a larger SUV-type vehicle, the CC513, both based on the widely used Beijing BJ212 chassis. This pivotal shift from a repair shop to a producer of vehicles marked the company's first major transformation and led to its renaming as Great Wall Industry Company. The ambition, even in these nascent stages, was clear: to build, not just to fix.

The late 1980s, however, brought unforeseen challenges and a change in leadership. In 1989, Wei Deliang tragically passed away in a car accident. As a cooperative venture with the local government of Nandayuan Township, the ownership of Great Wall Industry Company reverted to the local community. The company, at this juncture, was struggling. It faced debts and a scarcity of technically trained workers, presenting a daunting prospect for any new leader.

It was at this critical juncture, in 1990, that a young and ambitious Wei Jianjun stepped forward. At just 26 years old, Wei Jianjun, with a keen interest in cars and a desire to forge his own path, applied for the director position. He secured the role, leaving his father's company, where he had been involved in metal construction and automotive suspension, to take the helm of the struggling Great Wall Industry Company. His appointment marked the beginning of a new era, one characterized by strategic pivots and relentless determination.

Upon assuming leadership, Wei Jianjun immediately set about steering Great Wall towards a new direction. Initially, he aimed to develop passenger cars, even going so far as to teach himself automotive engineering alongside his team. By 1993, Great

Wall had indeed produced several passenger car models. These early models, like the CC1020 and CC1020S, were notably inspired by existing designs, such as the Nissan Cedric (Y30) and Toyota Crown (S130). The company even ventured into variants like station wagons and a crew-cab pickup version of the Toyota copy. One particularly intriguing creation from this period was a Crown-based CC1020S featuring a Rolls-Royce grille and headlights.

However, this initial foray into passenger car production was short-lived. A significant national regulation introduced in 1994 restricted sedan production to a select few manufacturers, a list that, unfortunately for Great Wall, did not include them. This regulatory hurdle forced a strategic re-evaluation and, ultimately, a decisive pivot. Wei Jianjun, ever the pragmatist, recognized the global potential of pickup trucks. Unlike sedans, pickup trucks were not subject to the same stringent regulations, and the market was ripe for disruption. State-owned companies produced pickups in China, but their quality often left much to be desired, while imported Japanese models were prohibitively expensive.

This realization led to one of Great Wall's most defining moments: the decision to focus on pickup truck manufacturing. This strategic shift was a stroke of genius, transforming a regulatory obstacle into a clear market opportunity. The company set its sights on developing a competitively priced, high-quality pickup truck. The fruit of this endeavor arrived in 1996 with the launch of the Great Wall Deer. Modeled closely on the sixth-generation Toyota Hilux, the Great Wall Deer quickly made a name for itself. Its combination of affordability and solid quality resonated with Chinese consumers.

The Great Wall Deer was an instant success, rapidly establishing Great Wall as China's leading pickup producer. This early triumph in the pickup market was more than just a commercial win; it was a testament to the company's ability to adapt and innovate in a challenging environment. The Deer's durability, capable of hauling heavy loads and traversing rough terrain for hundreds of thousands of kilometers without major engine or gearbox issues, laid a strong foundation for Great Wall Motors' reputation for quality. This success provided the momentum and financial stability needed for the company's next big step. In October 1997, Great Wall began exporting its pickup trucks, with the Middle East being among the first international markets to receive these vehicles.

The year 1998 brought another significant transformation: the privatization of Great Wall Industry Company by the local government. This restructuring led to the formation of Great Wall Motor Group Co. Ltd., with Wei Jianjun initially holding a 25% stake. By 2001, the Wei family's ownership had increased to 56%, while the Nandayuan Township retained the remaining shares. This privatization was a crucial turning point, freeing the company from some of the constraints of state ownership and paving the way for greater agility and investment.

However, the path forward was not entirely smooth. In 1999, Great Wall faced a supply chain crisis when its sole engine supplier entered into a partnership with a competitor, threatening to cut off Great Wall's access to vital components. Wei Jianjun's response was swift and decisive. He established the Great Wall Internal Combustion Engine Company, securing a 51% stake, and invested heavily in advanced equipment for independent engine production. This move was a strategic masterstroke, ensuring the company's self-sufficiency and control over a critical part of its manufacturing process. Over the next two years, he further solidified the supply chain by forming over ten holding companies through mergers and acquisitions, dedicated to producing various automobile parts.

During this period of expansion and consolidation, Great Wall also broadened its product lineup. Beyond the popular Deer pickup, new pickup models such as the Sailor and SoCool were introduced, further cementing Great Wall's dominance in the pickup segment. More significantly, the company ventured into the burgeoning SUV market. The Great Wall Safe debuted in 2002, marking the company's entry into the passenger vehicle market with an SUV. Resembling the second-generation Toyota 4Runner, the Safe was lauded for its safety, meeting European requirements in crash tests. This was followed by the introduction of the Sing and Pegasus SUVs. The Pegasus, for instance, shared its body design with the Isuzu MU, produced under license, and featured a Toyota-sourced engine, further showcasing Great Wall's resourcefulness in leveraging existing technologies.

The culmination of this foundational period, marked by strategic pivots, determined leadership, and a growing product portfolio, was Great Wall's initial public offering on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange on December 15, 2003. This was a monumental achievement, making Great Wall the first private Chinese automobile manufacturer to go public. The listing not only provided significant financial investment, but also propelled Great Wall Motors onto the international stage, signaling its ambition to become a major player in the global automotive industry. From a modest repair workshop to a publicly traded automotive manufacturer, GWM's genesis was a testament to its entrepreneurial spirit and strategic foresight.

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