It's a bird...it's a plane...it's a Volkswagen!

Sara Cohen, Editorial Intern

The 'People's Car Project [1]' debuted in China last year, as an experimental website aimed at soliciting ideas for future car models from Chinese inhabitants. The site received 119,000 concept-based ideas from its 33 million hits. The project aims to bring the Chinese public- VW's largest market- to the forefront of its design team, and help the German automaker [2] develop the "Volkswagen model of the future."

Of the hundreds of thousands of ideas posted, Volkswagen chose its three favorites, which debuted at the Beijing Motor Show (2012). In first place: the Magnetic Suspension Vehicle, a.k.a. the Hover Car [3]—an exciting prospect for those of us who have been dreaming of a Star Wars-based vehicle for years. Coming in second, was the Music Car [4], which uses a series of exterior OLED lights to create light shows in tune to the driver's music preference. The outside of the car changes color as the driver changes songs. The third runner-up was the Smart Key, which improves on current smartphone and automobile integration. The Smart Key [5]is a touch screen-equipped hand-held device used to open and start the car, but it also provides the owner with useful information about the car, such as fuel level and security.

The Hover Car was the brainchild of Wang Jia, a student at the Chengdu Vocational College of Agricultural Science and Technology. Wang envisioned a small urban vehicle, designed as a solution to traffic congestion in her hometown city of Chengdu, China. The small "floating rice ball" [5] can be parked anywhere- even in the air. It uses electromagnetic levitation, is powered by minerals found underground within the roadway systems, and has thrusters connected to the back to propel the car forward. In order for the Hover Car to "hover," electromagnetic strips would need to be embedded into the road below. The car would also use

electromagnetic suspension to provide new security features, such as distance sensors to avoid crashes with stationary things and other moving cars.

The Hover Car's design is a little wacky; the prototype was an open, wheel-shaped pod that sat two. It's controlled by a single joystick, offering enhanced control and maneuverability. With the joystick, the driver can move forward, backward, left and right in varying degrees, and turn a full 360 degrees on its axis. It's even smart enough to drive drunk passengers home by itself. The true future-bending benefit to the Magnetic Suspension Vehicle is that it produces zero emissions. The Hover Car's concept was such a hit that Volkswagen leaked a video showcasing Jia Wang's parents testing the prototype on the streets of Chengdu.

The 'People's Car Project' gained so much positive attention that Volkswagen has agreed to extend the one-year website event indefinitely. Rumors are circulating that Volkswagen plans to increase the scope of the project to other markets--hopefully the United States. Although the concepts have yet to be produced and manufactured, Volkswagen has created a new conversation with consumers through the where the company is no longer merely designing cars for, but with the consumer base. Luca De Meo, Director of Marketing, Volkswagen Group, told gizmag.com [4] that, "The 'People's Car Project' in China marks the beginning of a new era in automobile design;" he continues [4], "If at some time in the future we are to produce a vehicle from the 'People's Car Project' it will be a combination of customers' opinions and brand tradition." One can only hope that the Hover Car becomes the first of many new vehicles to be produced from this unique project.

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