



Crouching dragons

**Can Chinese PSV manufacturers hit the big numbers in the UK?
Brian Weatherley examines progress and considers the prospects
for Scania's latest Touring coach, built in China by Higer**

Despite interest in the Sinotruk eight-wheeler at this year's CV Show - the first Chinese heavy truck offered in Britain - it's China's PSV (public service vehicle) manufacturers that have so far made the running. That phenomenon shows little sign of abating, given the £19 million order struck between BYD (the world's largest maker of all-electric bus chassis) and bodybuilder Alexander Dennis, to supply 51 pure electric single-deckers to Go-Ahead London.

This order for 51 units reflects TfL's (Transport for London) policy to make all single-deck buses emission free by 2020. When they arrive next August, the capital will have the largest fleet of all-electrics in Europe. But while inner city bus routes clearly lend themselves to electric operations, it's a different story with touring coaches. So how are Chinese manufacturers tackling this market - with diesel-engined vehicles?

The first Sino PSV-maker in the UK

was Xiamen King Long, which celebrates its 10th anniversary here this autumn. Originally handled via an importer, this year saw sales and support move to King Long Europe UK.

To date, 415 King Long buses and coaches (mostly coaches) have been sold in the UK and Chris Cassar, managing director for King Long Europe UK, is keen to grow the brand. "The immediate growth area is for a 10-metre executive [coach], with or without toilet," he says. Why? Because the market wants cheaper upfront costs and fuel savings over 12-metre coaches.

LUXURY WITHOUT THE COST

King Long's Euro 6 two-axle 9m-12m RHD touring coaches are powered by Cummins' 6.7-litre ISB (250bhp) and 8.9-litre ISL (400bhp) engines, with a 360bhp Cursor 9 optional on its Day Tourer. Tri-axle models come with the ISL or DAF's 440bhp MX-11. ZF AMTs (automated manual transmissions) are standard throughout.

Currently, there are 18 King Long UK aftersales points: five more are expected by December. Residual values are also doing well, according to Cassar. As for customers, they range from big-league touring firms to smaller independents. Cassar describes them as operators who expect luxury as standard, but want a lower price tag and reduced costs.

Last year saw the arrival of another Chinese contender, as Leeds-based Pelican Bus & Coach became UK and Ireland distributor for Yutong buses and touring coaches - again, powered by DAF or Cummins diesels. PB&C is wholly owned by CV specialist Pelican Engineering, and sales director Ken Grindrod sees similarities between Pelican's PSV customers and its former Foden truck buyers. Many, he says, are small, family-owned concerns who "still write the cheques themselves" - although there are larger operators, too.

PB&C registered its first Yutong demonstrator in March 2014. "We ordered eight for stock, working on the assumption that it would take a while to shift those. But, by the time they arrived they were all sold. We then ordered an additional 12 and it's just gone from there," reports Grindrod.



“There are a lot of European components, which allows [customers] to get virtually what they had - but with bodywork and seats made in China”

Ken Grindrod

Today, over 70 Yutong coaches are running on UK roads. Initially, the only model available was a Euro 5 Cummins 12m variant. But for Euro 6 Yutong has extended the choice with the 400bhp Paccar MX-11 for its 12m coach, while a 280bhp Cummins ISB drives the 9.35m model.

As with King Long, Yutong’s price tag, especially at Euro 6, is fuelling interest. And Grindrod says the Yutong’s drivetrain is also attractive. “There are a lot of European components, which allows [customers] to get virtually what they had - but with bodywork and seats made in China.”

As well as selling to local firms, Pelican has supplied Yutong coaches to operators in the south of England and Scotland. “We’ve been trying to set up dealerships in areas where the operators are based, but we’ve also got vehicles here equipped to attend breakdowns or issues anywhere in the country.”

Arguably, though, the most intriguing of the Chinese dragons is the Scania Touring Coach built by Higer, first shown in RHD form at last year’s PSV Show. Scania has maintained a collaboration with the Chinese manufacturer (itself part of King Long Group) since 2005, with the A80 bus project - a Higer-bodied Scania single-decker for Egypt. The pair then developed a coach for Europe, launching the Scania Touring in 2009 at Kortrijk Bus World - with the first RHD model going on the road in March this year. To date, some 20 RHD Scania Higer models (all 6x2s) have been registered in the UK - a modest share of the 500-plus units supplied across Europe since 2011.

Scania Touring is built on its own assembly line at Higer’s Shanghai plant under a Swedish quality control system. Scania’s Sodertalje, Sweden plant supplies short frame two- and three-axle chassis. These are split and incorporated

into the semi-integral Higer body, with its stainless steel exterior panelling, aluminium hatches and box-section galvanised steel support structure.

CHINESE BUT EUROPEAN TOO

The Touring’s front styling owes much to the grille on the R range truck cab. All vehicles are built to European WVTA (whole vehicle type approval) standards, with production overseen by representatives from the UK’s VCA (Vehicle Certification Agency), in China.

Toilets, luggage racks, curtains and carpets are fitted in China. The 99% complete shells are then shipped to Scania’s coach centre in Antwerp, where Kiel reclining seats are fitted, along with kitchenette/drinks machines, AV and wheelchair lifts, if specified.

As for the Touring’s spec, that includes electronic stability control, reversing camera and Xenon headlights - as well as LDWS (lane departure warning) and AEB (autonomous emergency braking), both mandatory from 1 November registrations. To these, Scania adds ACC (adaptive cruise control) as part of its Active Safety Support package - standard



across all chassis from November.

Scania’s Higer-bodied Touring line-up is currently restricted to the 13.7m 6x2 57-seater. That’s based on the Euro 6 K410 13-litre SCR (selective catalytic reduction) 6x2*4 rear-steer chassis, which has an optional 450bhp rating. However, it will soon be joined by a 12.1m 4x2 49-seater, based on the Euro 6 K360 9-litre SCR-only chassis. Scania’s two-pedal Opticruise automatic GR875R eight-speed box is standard on both (the 450bhp unit has a 12-speed auto).

But doesn’t Scania’s existing range already serve the UK market? After all, its RHD line-up includes not only two- and three-axle Irizar-bodied models (70% of Scania’s RHD touring coach sales), but also the versatile two- and three-axle OmniExpress, from Finland.

Scania general manager for bus and coach retail Martin West explains that it’s all about strategy. On a like for like basis, the Higer-built coach costs £25,000 less than an equivalent EU-sourced Irizar or OmniExpress. Additionally, with Higer, Scania can compete against rival Chinese products, yet with its own chassis and drivetrain and a body built to its standards. Moreover, the vehicle is supported through its 93-strong UK dealer and service network.

And if the Higer body performs to Scania expectations, the Euro 6 Touring may well attract express coach companies. West says the first UK 12.1m 4x2 Touring will arrive in November. “We plan to ... invite customers to view it from around December to March-April 2016.” And he adds: “We’ve also taken the first order for two 12.1m coaches for delivery next spring.”

He believes that, with both RHD models in place, sales of 40–50 Scania Higer Touring Coaches per year is not unreasonable. That may not happen overnight, but, as the Chinese proverb has it: one step at a time is good walking. [TE](#)