

Frank Li's premium gambit: how Zeekr is winning a fight no Chinese brand has tried before

INSIDE LINE

Frank Li didn't come to Australia to compete with BYD and MG. He came to take on BMW, Lexus and Audi — and April's VFACTS numbers suggest he's not bluffing. Inside the strategy, the dealer network, and the NVES credit bank that gives Zeekr room no premium-only rival can match.



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There's a statistic that Vice President of Zeekr International and Managing Director of Zeekr Australia, Frank Li, often returns to.

Before Zeekr arrived in Australia, Chinese brands held less than one percent of the premium vehicle segment (cars priced above \$45,000 in the compact class, above \$65,000 in the mid-size, above \$85,000 at the larger end). The mainstream had been comprehensively colonised, but the premium segment, for reasons more about strategic ambition than product capability, had been left entirely alone.

Li looked at that gap and decided it was Zeekr's.

In April 2026, the 7X became Australia's best-selling premium electric SUV, recording 973 sales to edge past the Tesla Model Y on 822 and the Lexus NX on 508. Total Zeekr deliveries for the month cleared 1,000 for the first time, placing the brand 23rd in the national sales chart, directly behind Lexus and Audi, separated from both by fewer than 80 units.

The patient approach

Zeekr didn't launch with the 7X in Australia. That's worth understanding, because it shaped everything that followed.

The brand entered the market with the X compact SUV and the 009 people-mover, neither of which was ideally suited to Australian tastes.

Li makes no pretence otherwise. Australia isn't an MPV market, and the compact premium EV segment is a niche within a niche. But the lower-volume start gave Zeekr's Australian team roughly 12 months to do something more valuable than sell cars: find the right dealer partners, build the aftersales infrastructure, and establish the logistics chain.

"It's still not well prepared," Li says, with a candour worth noting. "We still have some shortcomings. But it's better than just starting from zero."

Scaling via the 7X was always the plan. Li calls it Zeekr's "nuclear weapon." By the time it began delivering in volume, the network was ready for it, imperfectly but intentionally.



Zeekr 7X exterior

A different kind of dealer network

Zeekr currently operates through 16 dealer partners nationally. The target is 25. The ceiling, Li says firmly, is 35, and he's not interested in moving it.

That's a deliberately small number for a brand chasing 8,000 annual sales this year and 15,000 next. The rationale is that each dealer group won't operate a single touch point. Instead, they will run a hub-and-spoke model within their primary market area: a flagship showroom, perhaps a shopping centre presence, other pop-up activations, and a dedicated delivery and aftersales centre. One partner, four or more customer-facing locations.

The groups already in the portfolio reflect the philosophy. Tony White Group, Autosports Group, Peter Warren Automotive Holdings and others. All have decades of Australian experience, several with premium brand backgrounds.

Li's selection process isn't complicated. He meets personally with dealer principals and business owners, evaluates whether they're genuinely customer-oriented, and only then moves on.

"It's people doing the business," he says. "That is very important."

The commercial model Zeekr offers sits, by design, between two reference points: [BMW's full traditional luxury network](#) and Tesla's leaner tech-brand approach. Traditional premium customer experience without the full heritage overhead. Li calls it tech-luxury, and the Zeekr dealer model is growing in this image.

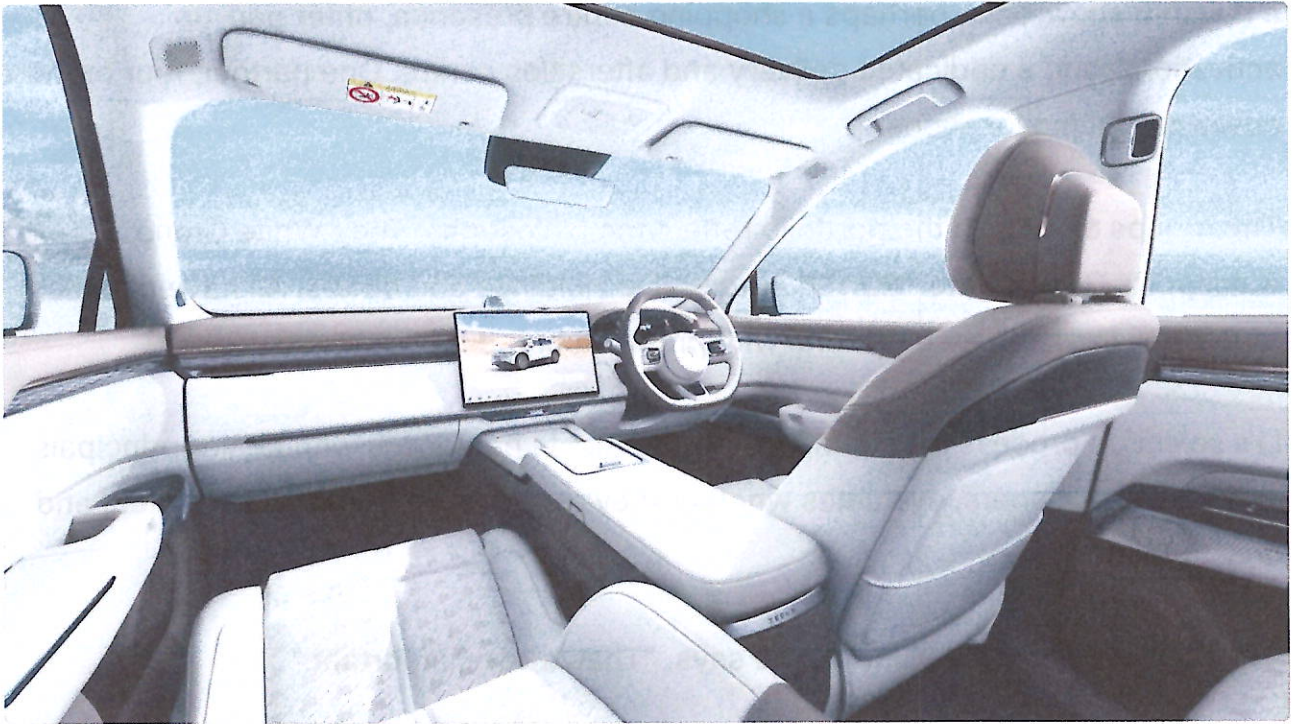
Inside the Geely group

Zeekr's position within the Geely group is worth examining separately from its brand identity, because the two operate differently.

On the factory floor, Zeekr, Volvo and Polestar roll off the same assembly line in China. The shared SEA platform underpins multiple group vehicles sold in Australia. In the market, the brands operate independently, with separate sales teams, separate marketing, and separate aftersales.

Li acknowledges there are efficiencies yet to be realised across the group's Australian presence. Zeekr, Volvo and Polestar collectively represent significant shared infrastructure potential. For now, each runs its own race.

"I can see that there is some chance to be integrated or leveraged with each other in the future," he says. He's diplomatic on timing.



Zeekr 7X interior

The customer-level differentiation is more straightforward, says Li. Volvo is European safety heritage. Polestar targets the high-performance EV buyer who wants Scandinavian minimalism.

His brand targets buyers coming up into premium for the first time, as well as those migrating from European premium brands. Consumers who still want physical buttons, a traditional gear shift, Napa leather rather than high-tech vegan fabrics, and performance delivery that feels familiar.

Li describes Zeekr as being "more friendly for the first EV owner." That's a larger segment than it sounds. For more on how [Volvo Australia navigates the same premium space](#), the contrast is instructive.

The NVES lever

The structures NVES imposes on the Australian new-car marketplace make Zeekr's position genuinely interesting to the broader industry.

The brand accumulated more than 250,000 New Vehicle Efficiency Standard credits in 2025 on fewer than 2,000 sales. An all-electrified fleet from day one was good news for accumulating credits despite modest volumes.

Andrew Stamatakis, Head of Digital, Integrated Marketing, Communications and Strategy, told [TheAutoExec](#) that Zeekr's headquarters hasn't mandated how those credits should be used. The Australian operation is sitting on a substantial buffer without the revenue pressure that will push some credit-rich brands to trade early and at a discount.

How Zeekr will use those credits hasn't been finalised. Stamatakis says options include CSR investment, reinvestment into marketing, or simply holding them as a compliance buffer. What the credit bank actually enables, strategically, is the more significant story.

The larger 8X and 9X SUVs will arrive in Australia as plug-in hybrids, Super Hybrids in the latest vernacular. Zeekr's use of the term covers a next-generation extended-range architecture in which the combustion engine is effectively decoupled from the drive wheels at everyday speeds.

In typical Australian commuting use, most buyers will rarely engage the petrol engine. The vehicles behave as battery electrics.

Stamatakis is direct about the strategic logic.

"Even with CO2 limits dropping between now and the end of the decade, we still believe that we can bring PHEVs deep into this decade and into early next decade because of our electrified fleet."

He adds that the platforms are also engineerable as pure battery electrics, something Zeekr's engineering team confirmed publicly at Auto China earlier this month.

In short: Zeekr isn't shaping its model range around NVES compliance. It's making product and commercial decisions with the luxury of a credit position as the buffer. For a detailed breakdown of [how NVES credit trading works](#), [TheAutoExec's compliance handbook](#) is the reference point.



Zeekr 7GT in the wild

What 15,000 looks like

In an increasingly crowded market, Li's Australian volume targets are ambitious: 8,000 units in 2026, and 15,000 in 2027. That volume should place the brand within the top five premium brands in Australia.

The product pipeline to support that is taking shape. One new model arrives this year, either the 7GT or the 9X Super Hybrid, with the possibility that both will be launched before December, deliveries starting early 2027. The 8X, a large premium Super Hybrid SUV positioned against BMW M, Mercedes-AMG and Audi Sport, arrives next year.

Whether those targets hold will depend on factors partly outside Li's control: supply from Ningbo, the pace of aftersales infrastructure development, and residual value performance as the used-car market for Zeekr begins to mature.

The brand has deliberately avoided rental fleets, kept sticker prices stable, and resisted the temptation to use discounts, above and below the line, to clear stock. Stamatakis notes that one 7X sold at auction recently above the sticker price. It's early, but the signals are encouraging.

April's result doesn't stand alone. In the first quarter of 2026, Zeekr recorded 1,832 sales, ahead of Volvo's 1,806, and substantially clear of Polestar. [Outselling both sister brands](#) within 18 months of arriving, on what's effectively a two-car line-up in a segment no Chinese brand had previously attempted, is not what the market expected.

Li expected it. Whether the next 18 months justify his continued confidence is what many of us are now watching.

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