

Automotive: death of an icon: Hummer goes down

It was a car that generated lust or nausea: born as the road-going equivalent of a military vehicle, Hummer wanted to be the Jeep of the 21st Century. It was a car that, had the idea arisen today, would never have been born. And with its Tonka-toy styling, its ridiculous demand for real-estate in the middle of a busy road and a fuel consumption that only oil-rich show-offs could realistically afford, there is little doubt that it was doomed. Until Sichuan Tengzhong Heavy Industrial Machinery Company rode to the rescue - only to run into a quagmire of bureaucracy - and the Chinese government pointing out that building it would hardly improve the country's green credentials.

It might just be the one firm decision that came out of Copenhagen. China doesn't want to make cars that burn fuel faster than a power station: it would rather power power stations.

Chinese companies have been picking over the bones of western motor manufacturers for a while - unlike TATA which spent a shedload of cash on Jaguar-Range Rover and then asked the UK government for the money to pay for it (not exactly, but remarkably close) China waits until a business fails then picks up the bits it wants for song.

It did that with MG Rover - and although progress has been slow, there are MGFs and Rover &%'s on the roads now that would not otherwise have been - and there are people employed in the UK who would otherwise have been out of work.

Then Beijing Auto bought the production lines for the SAAB 9-3 and 9-5 paying USD200 million to GM for a deal that also included SAAB's powertrain technology. It was the powertrain stuff that excited Shanghai Auto over at MG Rover.

Geely is negotiating with Ford to buy its Volvo arm: like SAAB, a new American parent took an niche product and turned it into a mass-market bus with little differentiation from other brands. To be fair, Ford did not go as far down that route with Volvo as GM did with SAAB but like GM they did change the nature and character of the brand taking it far away from its previously loyal customer base.

Last week, GM said it was closing Hummer and started to wind it down. Then, with echoes of

SAAB, came news that two new offers had been received and the board were thinking about them.

So may be it's not all over for Hummer which tried to downsize by the launch of the H3 - only to see Honda make a copy of it that was even uglier and therefore sold to those who were buying a car the day after having a taste bypass. That'd be all of them, then.