

MADE IN CHINA

On the face of it, the Brilliance BS6 seems like a lot of car for your yuan, but fleet managers might ask whether it really offers value for money and where it fits into the market. Sizewise, the car is up against the BMW 5 Series, the third-generation Ford Mondeo and the eighth-generation Honda Accord. But it's offered at a price that pitches it against cars in the Ford Focus and Volkswagen Sagitar class.

The BS6 has been around since 2003, and it's a fitting introduction to mainland cars. The saloon has been smartened up in a recent facelift, but it would seem unremarkable in a Hong Kong car park. Unmistakably Asian-looking, it could pass for a number of manufacturers' efforts. A raked bonnet and chrome outlined grille try to convey an aggressive stance, but it's hopelessly outclassed by even the new Mondeo. And from the side the car displays all the hallmarks of conservative design that so appeals to mainland buyers.

In China, Zhonghua, as Brilliance is known, is BMW's joint-venture partner, producing the 3 Series and 5 Series in the same factory compound in Shenyang. The finish suggests the mainland marque has learned a few lessons from its Bavarian buddies, with panels that fit together well and doors that close with reassuring thuds. Decked out in black, the test car seems respectfully poised.

The problems, however, start on the inside. Harsh plastics dominate the dashboard, which is in the two-tone charcoal and sand colour scheme that seems so popular on the mainland. Although the feel might not be significantly worse than the Toyota Reiz, Mark X, it pales in comparison to most joint-venture cars and the Roewe 750 and MG7. Luckily the fake wood trim in older versions of the BS6 has been removed.

Buttons and stalks seem cheap



The BS6 1.8T has plenty of space, but it's short on features that come as standard in many foreign saloons in its class. Photo: EPA

The BS6 1.8T shows Brilliance is serious about sedans, but it must try harder, writes Mark Andrews in Shenyang

Think big

and some give the impression of not being fitted particularly well. Their overall positioning and look is generic but functional. There are no controls mounted on the black leather-trimmed steering wheel, unlike in many new cars. The equipment is reasonably comprehensive and includes electric windows, mirrors, a sunroof, a CD player and air-conditioning. But one glaring omission in a car of such size is that sat-nav isn't available even as an option.

The front seats are firm in cream-coloured leather, but even though they're well stitched, they lack a luxury feel, and seat adjustment is

manual. There's room for five adults reasonably comfortably, rear legroom is quite generous and only the tallest of passengers will have problems with headroom in the back.

But one problem typical of a Chinese car is the fitting of only a lap belt for the middle passenger in the back. The boot has a large opening and is cavernous, but the rear seats do not fold down to accommodate long loads.

The car's European launch faltered after it received just one star in German motoring body Adac's Euro New Car Assessment Programme (NCAP) style evaluations. Since then a modified version has received three stars. Yet the model for the China market has never even been China-NCAP tested, so fleet managers and families might question the safety of the car, which has only two airbags.

Initially the BS6 was sold with just two- and 2.4-litre Mitsubishi engines that Brilliance, like many mainland carmakers, bought off the shelf. They were old, thirsty, sluggish units. But since last year Brilliance has started to produce the first of its own power plants. Its 1.8T engine is the result of collaboration with Germany's FEV, and the turbocharged unit, despite the smaller displacement, is currently the engine of choice. A 1.9-litre turbo

diesel using a Bosch turbo on an internally developed oil burner could soon be added to the range.

In a straight line on the flat, even with an automatic, the BS6 feels brisk on Brilliance's Shenyang test track. It accelerates nicely and you feel there's plenty of power underfoot, although it remains to be seen how the relatively small engine will perform in such a large car anywhere a bit hilly, however reassuring peak torque of 235Nm may seem.

In European tests, the car's ride came in for criticism, but it seems well-suited to uneven Chinese road surfaces. And although the steering is light, it's precise. The car copes well with being thrown into corners at a fair clip and doesn't suffer from the body roll of its younger brother, the BS4. On the track it remains composed and feels well controlled. One problem, though, is that despite the tilt-adjustable steering column and adjustable seat, it's difficult to see the top of the speedometer.

It's a competent, if unremarkable, drive by Hong Kong standards, even though the 1.8T engine is a promising unit that lends a touch of excitement to a car that's dull overall.

In many ways the 1.8T is the best thing about the car. The BS6 is a large saloon whose interior is severely lacking in everything but

Brilliance BS6 1.8T

What drives it? A 1.8-litre four-cylinder turbocharged engine produces 170bhp (125kW) with a four-speed automatic or six-speed manual.

How fast is it? A claimed top speed of 170km/h for the manual and 195km/h for the automatic.

How safe is it? This is a big question with only two airbags fitted and no stability control.

How much is it? The manual version gets through 6.5l/100km at 90km/h and 8.5l at 120km/h. The automatic at these speeds drinks 7.1 and 9 litres respectively.

How clean is it? The marque doesn't provide any CO2 emission figures but the engine does conform to Euro IV standards.

How much is it? The manual model sells for 149,800 yuan (HK\$170,000) and the automatic for 165,800 yuan.

space and, although its exterior is well put together, it's never going to stand out. And then there's the iffy safety rating and the question of reliability.

Earlier versions of the BS6 are already looking decidedly ropey. Let's hope this version stands up.

Footdown

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BMW unveils new 7 Series
The new BMW 7 Series will probably arrive in Hong Kong at the "end of 2008", says BMW Concessionaires (HK) spokesman Eric Leung. The marque last Friday revealed details of its new 730d diesel and 740i and 750i petrol variants, both with stretch options. Prices of the fifth-generation 7s have yet to be revealed but the cars (below) look terrific.

The 730d gets a new, 245 horsepower 2,993cc straight-six cylinder diesel engine that has a "class-leading" CO2 emission figure of 192 grams per kilometre. And "no other competitor comes



Trackwork in top gear

Hong Kong's racing and showjumping fans might appreciate British firm Roush Technologies' mobile horse training vehicle for Istanbul-based racehorse and camel training equipment firm Kurt

Systems. Launched last month, the ground-up, diesel machine enables continuous

monitoring of horses in runs up to 60km/h (16 metres per second). The four-tonne vehicle (bottom) provides a moving enclosure similar to a starting stall, in which the animal can walk, trot or gallop freely while being monitored and trained.

"The target price for the units in production is £500,000 [HK\$7.6 million]", says Roush spokesman Adrian Graves.

The cabin behind the horse includes a centrally mounted driver's seat (below) and seats for a trainer and an owner or vet.

"Onboard systems include 12-volt and 240-volt electrical supplies to power systems such as computerised heart, blood, oxygen and fitness monitoring," Roush says.



The BMW 750i and 750Li have the new XG's 4,395cc all-aluminium V8, twin-turbocharged engine, which bangs out 407hp from 5,500rpm to 6,400rpm and 600Nm of torque from 1,750rpm to 4,500rpm, BMW says. The 750i accelerates from 0-100km/h in 5.2 seconds (the 750Li takes 5.3 seconds) to reach an electronically-limited top speed of 249km/h. Consumption on the combined cycle is 11.4l/100km for 266gpk in CO2 emissions.

The six-cylinder 740i and 740Li have a 2,979cc power plant that promises 326hp and 450Nm of torque, and 100km/h sprints in 5.9 seconds to 249km/h, BMW says.

The 3.0-litre BMW 740i and 740Li post combined fuel consumption figures of 9.9l/100km and 10l/100km respectively, returning emissions figures of 232gpk and 235gpk.

All 7 Series models have lots of new electronic boasts, but we particularly like the sound of the marque's brake energy regeneration system, which uses the engine's power on overrun such as braking to charge the battery. And the marque's new side-view camera system should be a comfort in Central.

"Two forward-facing cameras mounted in the front bumper can show an overview of traffic conditions on the iDrive display," BMW says. "This allows the driver to negotiate a partially obscured junction, leave a car park or drive through a narrow gate with confidence."

The marque has also developed a new pedestrian recognition system for its 7 Series. "A control unit analyses video data of human behaviour as part of the night-vision camera's reach and can subsequently alert the driver if it detects a human moving into the path of the vehicle," BMW says.

The 7 Series is also the first BMW



The unit also carries accessories such as a silicone saddle to simulate a rider's weight. The open-fronted stall section of the vehicle requires linked independent hydraulic steering combined with electronically controlled reins to steer the horse in the same direction as the vehicle.

The chassis and running gear comprise a complex, box-section, cross-braced frame, with suspension derived from a Ford F150 series truck. Power is provided by a Volvo 2.4-litre, five-cylinder diesel engine linked to a conventional automatic gearbox and drive is delivered via hub reduction on the rear axle only. The body is fabricated from glass-reinforced plastic, with the forward "stall" area enclosed by soft, padded, pneumatically controlled arms that surround the horse. Inquiries: kurtsystems.com



A little bit of history made in Manila

Mynardo Macaraig

Thailand has the tuk-tuk, London's got the black cab, and Russians still drive the world's biggest fleet of Ladas. The Philippines has the Willys jeep, which has served generations of Filipinos in both war and peacetime.

Now the jeep has been given a new lease of life by a small factory in Manila, which is reproducing the classic second world war vehicle for a growing international market nostalgic for the past. The company, MD Juan, exports about 95 per cent of its output to collectors mainly in the US and Europe who still treasure the rugged workhorse that was the automotive backbone of the US army during the war.

Plant manager Roberto Cruz says American collectors want their jeeps as authentic as possible, complete with imperfections and outdated materials such as wood and rubber instead of plastic.

"The purists, they want it correct to the smallest detail," he says. "If you make the body too nice, they don't like it. They ask, 'Where is the spot weld part here?'"

MD Juan (mdjuan.com.ph) sells about 1,500 units a year, most of them on order, although the engines are usually left to the buyer.

European and American collectors

also prefer to have carefully restored original jeep engines installed in their vehicles, says Cruz, adding that his company cannot undertake motor restoration.

The few Filipino collectors are content to install modern Toyota or Isuzu engines in their vehicles, says Cruz. "They would laugh at such jeeps in the US," he says. "We don't sell running units. If

we did, whatever profit we make would be eaten up by warranty claims."

He declines to say how much his firm's jeeps sell for, but says a fully restored model sold recently on eBay for US\$30,000. "Most of the buyers are veterans who have a romance with the jeep," he says.

But there are also younger collectors entranced with the wartime history of the vehicle. Everywhere America fought there are people who remember the jeep, says Cruz. "It was the original all-terrain vehicle."

The US made more than 600,000 jeeps during the war, and they played a crucial part in both the Pacific and European theatres, in roles from basic transport to carrying weapons. The squat, boxy vehicle garnered a huge following for its rugged durability, low cost and widespread availability.

Allied commander and, later, US president Dwight Eisenhower said the jeep was crucial to the Allied victory in the war.

It's perhaps not surprising that a Philippine company is specialising in replicas of jeeps, as they have played a key role in land transport in the archipelago. As a newly-independent Philippines was recovering from wartime devastation, surplus jeeps were often the only motorised transport available.

Enterprising Filipinos extended the bodies of their jeeps, added seats, fixed roofs and gaudy decorations to produce the jeepney, a minibus that is still a cornerstone of local commuter transport and a symbol of the country.

Maximiano D. Juan, the founder of MD Juan, started his company in 1966, importing parts for jeepneys. As the supply of surplus parts dried up and more jeepneys switched to

using imported Japanese engines, he had to find a new niche.

Company vice president Raphael Juan, Maximiano's grandson, says the same people who once supplied his grandfather with surplus jeep parts asked if he could provide reproduction parts for their vintage jeeps. That led the firm to set up a stamping factory that eventually grew to make parts for those wanting to restore their old jeeps.

Juan says about 80 per cent of the company's jeeps are exported to the US and the remainder to European countries, particularly France and the Netherlands.

And although the ranks of nostalgic second world war veterans may be dwindling, the market for the jeeps doesn't seem to be shrinking.

"Recently, when we went to a jeep convention in Lodi, California, we noticed there were new enthusiasts in the market who are younger," Juan says.

MD Juan has also diversified, making small jeep bodies in which hobbyists can install lawnmower or golf cart engines to produce a kiddie-car. And it has been contracted by Greenpeace to build the bodies for a fleet of electric-powered jeepneys that local governments are promoting as an eco-friendly alternative to the smoke-belching originals.

Another project is the "tourist jeep" – a bus-sized vehicle with all



the amenities of a luxury tourist bus but with the colourful exterior of a jeepney. Cruz says it is aimed at tour agencies, resorts and hotels looking to add local colour to their services.



Some people have even asked the firm will expand into making reproduction bodies for vintage roadsters, although Cruz says that would be too difficult. But after some hesitation, Juan says with a smile: "We're studying the market for that."

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