



From top: FAW's GO concept; Baojun 630; MG5 concept; FAW X concept; Gleagle Star CC convertible concept. Photos: Mark Andrews

Market driven

The Shanghai Auto Show reflects the mixed fortunes of the mainland car industry, writes **Mark Andrews**

When it comes to Chinese producers, this year's Shanghai Auto Show clearly separates the men from the boys. Unlike previous years, the show – which opened to the public on Thursday – has largely ignored the plethora of smaller Chinese producers.

With China now the world's largest car market, the Shanghai show, held on alternate years with Beijing, is becoming one of the most important on the global circuit. While the world launches of the Audi Q3 and Chevrolet Malibu at the show grabbed the headlines, a more important battle is taking place amongst the Chinese producers.

On home turf it comes as no surprise that Shanghai Automotive Industry Corp (SAIC) is putting in a strong showing. Amongst the bigger state-owned carmakers, it appears to be by far the strongest. Matching joint-venture partner Volkswagen near enough square metre for square metre, SAIC's display for Roewe and MG models features the production launch of the small MG3, giving SAIC's stable an almost complete range. It is also displaying the upcoming Roewe W5 SUV, largely a rebadged Ssangyong Kyron, as well as the W5 concept, which has been given a more thorough makeover. The show-stopper, though, is the aggressively angled MG5 concept.

Both Changan and Dongfeng chose to hide their own brand offerings among a display of all their cars produced by their various joint ventures. While Guangzhou Auto is making a big show of its Trumpchi car, based on the Alfa Romeo 166, Beijing Automotive Industry Holding Co (BAIC)

surprisingly decided not to display its Saab-based offerings.

FAW is one of the few large state-owned companies displaying a coherent own-brand range. As ever, its Besturn cars fail to excite, but it also offers four strikingly good concepts. The X concept is a radical-looking SUV that also sports a futuristic interior. Similar design flair is seen in the GO sports concept and B9 saloon.

In the past, the large state-owned companies were happy to sit back and reap the profits from their joint ventures. The true domestic car brand powerhouses

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are either private or provincially controlled companies, most of whom until recently have not had the luxury of a joint-venture partner. Traditionally, they have concentrated on smaller cars, sold in the second- and third-tier cities. Now, though, they are coveting sales of larger cars they hope will be placed on the government's multibillion-yuan procurement list and are increasingly looking to increase their markets overseas.

Compounding BYD's recent financial problems, the Shenzhen-based company's offerings fail to excite visually. The premiere of the G6 does, though, mark the

introduction of some important technology with its direct-injection, 1.5-litre turbo engine and six-speed dual-clutch transmission – both firsts for a Chinese manufacturer. With the e6 electric car – on display in the guise of a taxi – appearing no closer to production and the Lexus RX clone, the S6, about to go on sale next month, BYD appears to be struggling for direction.

Chery's large floor space appears to be trying to make up for a lack of development. Cars spread across the three brands of Chery, Rich and Rely still seem to be at a loss for a distinct identity. New models such as the E5, G6 and New Oriental Son, while appearing competent, are lacking in style.

Geely, on the other hand, seems to have more clearly defined its three brands; the awkwardly named Englon, Gleagle and Emgrand. And if its off-the-wall creations are anything to go by, Geely's designers are brimming with confidence. Concepts such as the London-taxi-inspired SC7-RV and the stunning Gleagle Star CC convertible show a sense of humour, if not flair. However, nothing yet appears to utilise the expertise the company bought into last year with the purchase of Volvo and Australian transmission company DSI. Production-ready cars, such as the Emgrand EC8, seem miles away from the cars of a few years ago.

Great Wall has also come a long way, showing a coherent range of vehicles and having largely ditched the copied designs of its earlier vehicles. As can be expected, SUVs in the Haval (formerly Hover) range play a dominant role. The H5 now sports a six-speed manual gearbox and a vastly improved interior, and due to launch in July is the

impressive new H6. Largely absent were small hatchbacks and in their place was a comprehensive range of Volex saloons.

Always the dark horse, Brilliance Automotive, while having relatively few models, manages to cover a large market sector with its family of vehicles. Displayed along with a stunning concept is the new 530, the replacement for the BS4 Splendor. As with Brilliance's cars in the last few years, the 530's interior has been vastly improved over models from four years ago and is at last matched with a stylish, well-proportioned exterior.

Smaller manufacturers, such as Hawtai and Zotye, appear to be aiming at niches such as diesel or electric-powered vehicles. Lifan, however, appears lost. With the new X60 SUV and 720 saloon on display, they still seem to be building cars for the market of a few years back. Unless their designs pick up quickly, they are destined to remain increasingly minor regional players.

A small car from Guangxi, though, promises to change everything for the Chinese manufacturers. The Baojun 630 produced by a General Motors joint venture is the first in a wave of new cars from brands created for the Chinese market aimed at the developing provinces. Produced using internationally tried and tested technology, it does not scrimp on quality or safety. And if these brands produce cars as good-looking as Dongfeng Nissan's Venucia concept, then the local manufacturers might have a real fight on their hands in their traditional heartland.



Colombia's Easter menu – anyone for iguana?

CULTURE

Michael Cancela-Kieffer

Green iguana, slider turtles and the world's largest rodent, capybara: it's not a trip to the zoo, but traditional Easter dinner in Colombia.

"This is the season we have them all coming in," says nutritionist Carolina Rangel, at a centre for confiscated animals in Bogota. She shows 30 confiscated slider turtles, common in Colombia and in Venezuela, and a rogue green iguana that officials picked up on a bus.

Sometimes problems crop up when the animals escape from their "caretakers", especially in the busy Easter season; many Colombians travel for hours on intercity buses to spend the holiday with family and prepare special meals.

"People bring them in [from far-flung provinces] secretly, even stashed in suitcases so they can eat them with relatives, or sell them at the markets," says environmental official Andres Alvarez.

Colombia has wildly varied geography, with tropical Pacific and Caribbean coasts; cool Andean mountain climates and a huge range of plant and animal life that thrive, sometimes in relative isolation.

Recipes based on local animals have close ties to the northern and northwestern parts of the country.

Among the seasonal treats: turtle egg omelettes; iguana soup; cayman or turtle stew, which is served up with coconut rice and fried yuca, all washed down with cold beer.

"The gastronomic wealth reflects the country's biodiversity, says anthropologist Julian Estrada.



Easter eggs seized by Colombian environmental police. These eggs are from iguanas. Photo: AFP

How the custom of eating this food at this time evolved is not so clear. But people who lived along rivers in what is modern-day Colombia ate these animals before the Spanish colonial era in the 15th century, anthropologists say.

"For our indigenous people, the turtle and iguana are historically symbolic, mystical animals and part of age-old customs. Ultimately, what happened was that the Catholic calendar matched the fact that those animals are plentiful" during the Easter period, says anthropologist Ramiro Delgado.

So while many Colombians are eagerly awaiting the arrival of an exotic little something on their Easter table, hundreds of others are trying to make sure that passengers on intercity buses are people and not animals.

Rodolfo Mendoza, chief of the environmental police in Barrancabermeja, northwest of the capital, says his men intercepted someone with a mini-herd of eight capybara. They are the world's biggest rodent and can top 100kg.

Though not endangered, they are not supposed to be hunted at this time of the year so as not to interfere with their reproductive season.

Authorities have to balance trying to protect the species with respecting indigenous Colombian traditions, they say. That is why the hunting and sale of slider turtles, iguana, and small crocodiles is illegal; but at the same time, they may be consumed by people in communities where food sources are limited.

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