



*the*ChineseMG

by Stanton Belland

Even in my geezerhood, I've tried to adapt to the inexorable march of progress. I've adjusted to the digital age and have even gotten over the shock of going into a record store and finding no racks of "records" to browse. I surf the Internet and do most of my work online. I've learned not to call a refrigerator an icebox. I've gotten used to a world of iPods, MP3s, and blogs. I'm even ready to concede that perhaps "digital photography" is not really an oxymoron. But it's been a struggle. As a British-car buff, it took me a while to accept that my latest Jaguar was just a sleeker Ford. And Bentley's acquisition by Volkswagen was a blow to my Anglophilic sensibilities. I adopted a certain detachment, though, realizing that I'll probably never own a Bentley (British or German) anyway.

But now progress has really marched over my foot. Last year, my beloved MG company was bought by Nanjing Automobile, a company owned by the Chinese government. It says it will move MG manufacturing equipment to China but continue some production in Britain. Yeah, right. Production may continue in Britain but the soul and spirit of MG looks like it's going to emigrate.

I've owned MGs for 50 years and, to me, their essence has always been a certain English jauntiness. The name MG originally stood for Morris Garage, where the Morris Car Co. started making a little sports car in the 1920s. It's an oddly charming name for a quirky little car. Some say that the name is really just "GM" reversed to hide the truth that the car was actually made by General Motors. I just relish owning a marque so universally misunderstood.

That cachet has always been part of the car's appeal. Truthfully, the MG has never been much mechanically. My 1947 has the ride of a donkey cart and wanders on the road. The brakes don't really stop it so much as gently impede its progress. Its electrical system is so whimsical that the Lucas company, who made the electronics, has come to be known among MG drivers as "The Prince of Darkness."

This commentary isn't meant to be a complaint against international trade. I make my living from such endeavors. The Chinese invented the noodles on which the entire pasta industry is based, so I guess the world owes them one. But they've already adopted the hamburger. Why do they need MG?

Perhaps my real fear is not that the MG name will fade, but that the Chinese, with the utmost efficiency, will bring the car's engineering up to date. And then, whatever it may say on the badge, it will no longer be an MG. The gas gauge on my '47 is a notched stick that I poke into the tank. The car was designed that way. It's hard to imagine the 2008 Nanjing model MG with so picturesque an arrangement.

We MG owners have been pretty much on our own ever since British Leyland started fumbling with the company back in the '60s. We're not accustomed to popping in to our local factory-authorized dealers for service or receiving recall notices or safety updates. The service department is your own garage on a Saturday morning. The parts department is your car club's next old-car parts exchange or Moss Motors, a California company that has made a pretty good business out of selling reproduction parts to MG owners. We old-car nuts kind of like it that way. It's a sort of brotherhood of desperation, nourished by a sense of interdependence and glorious afternoon drives.

I don't expect Nanjing Automobile to start making parts for 60-year-old cars or to make cars that we would even recognize as MGs. But I would like to see the MG name and spirit continue to evoke cloth caps, English drizzle, and the other things that make a sports car, well, sporty. And I can't imagine how that's going to happen. I've spent a lot of time in China and love it, but I don't think there's even a Chinese ideogram for sporty.

Perhaps my fondest wish would be for Nanjing Automobile to create a beautiful, efficient, modern car with all the features that the daily driving public has come to expect—a soulless device to transport you from point A to point B. Let it be economical, kind to the environment, dependable, and sleek. Just don't claim it's a sports car. And in the name of decency, please don't call it an MG. To paraphrase Lloyd Benson in the 1988 vice-presidential debate with Dan Quayle: "I know MGs. I've driven and owned MGs. And you're no MG."

I'm not very sanguine about that prospect. Nanjing Automobile will undoubtedly crank out beautiful, modern, and affordable "MGs" and the public will buy them, creating a sort of spiritual trade deficit—and that's depressing. It would be like seeing your grandma in low-rider jeans. It certainly would be her right, but you'd wish somehow you didn't have to witness it. ○○

(Reprinted from a 2006 United Airlines *Hemispheres* article.)

Addendum: Thoughts on political correctness.

I've been writing for *Hemispheres* for years now on everything from Juan Fangio to searching for an ancient scientific instrument in the Middle East. This was the first time I've run into Political Correctness – or at least a reasonable facsimile. And the article wasn't even my idea. I got a call from my editor who said: "You've written articles on MGs and on China. Now the news is out that China is acquiring MG. You must have something to say about that."

I gave it about one second of deep, analytical thought and said "Sure. I'll get something to you. When do you need it?" He said they wanted to run it in the December (2005) issue and that I should get it in right away.

I wrote the article and sent it in and they sent me an enthusiastic acceptance, a contract and a check. In December I went, as usual to the nearest United counter and talked them out of a stack of *Hemispheres*. No article. I sent a note to my editor and said I apparently had not made the cut. He replied, rather sheepishly that a "reader" for United had felt that the article might not be the best idea at this time since United had just concluded an agreement with China for its landing rights in Shanghai.

And I had to agree. After all, it is their magazine and they don't need some curmudgeonly comments messing up their deal. I pretty much forgot about it. (Of course I kept the money.) Then in April I got an email from someone in Indonesia who saw the article on a United flight and loved it.

I got a copy of the magazine and there it was – edited a bit and somewhat gentled up, but the editors at *Hemispheres* always do a good job and improve what I have submitted.

Go figure. Maybe the editor went to bat for me. Maybe they changed their minds. As it was, there were things I left out. Bob McKarney, the King of Curmudgeons, suggested the name of the new car should be changed to MSG. Someone else suggested the cat's eye lenses should be set diagonally.

I have a lot of thoughts about Political Correctness and what it has done to all of us, but relax, I'm not going to air them here. I like *Hemispheres* and it's an honor to write for them. They're literate, they pay well and lately accept virtually anything I write on any nutty subject. The circulation they give me is great. The magazine is on every seat pocket for every flight around the world for a month. I get responses from every corner of the globe. (I have an article on Baghdad in there now waiting for acceptance – maybe now I'm the one being Politically correct!)

But I'd sure like to know what went on back there. ○○