

BROAD TOWN 2 - (5th Chapter of China trip, by Danny Gil, for his school friends)

After lunch, we started the first of two tours of the 43 acre compound, seeing the assembly shop. Our technical guide was a young engineer (“Shawn”, as pronounced), who recently joined Broad after a year or so working in Seattle, and despite that stint, still had difficulty communicating with us. One thing that stood out: he always was in praise of their “chairman” to the point where I thought he was referring to Chairman Mao and that he was reading from a little red book. As a matter of fact, one of the brochures we later saw did show the present China head honcho (what’s his name?), visiting the plant and rubbing elbows with the Broad CEO. We also were told that Broad was privately owned and the second largest taxpayer in China. When started 13 years ago, the founder had only \$6000 seed money. The first of the three factory buildings obviously were built much earlier, and apparently was once some other plant making something else. Their present chairman was in his mid 40’s who recently took over from his brother. He had a grand house beside the lake, and the other house beside it was his mother’s.

This was no communist cadre, toeing the party line, but indeed a closet capitalist living it up. He had a couple of Mercedes’ including a stretch version, Beemers, a yellow Ferrari, and a helicopter to boot. All these were clearly displayed at the central garage and hanger. And the other buildings and structures in the compound exuded attempts at grandeur: the pyramid housing the main museum where the entrance was via a trench below grade lined with hieroglyphics; the laboratories that were designed with glass motifs, clearly indicating that this was a showcase, and indeed it was, with a Perkin Elmer Atomic Absorption Spectrometer they claimed was the second in the country, not to mention the foyer with artwork of his mother; the life-size statues of the chairman’s heroes lining the streets that included among others Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Edison, a couple of presidents, some Greek demigods (I am sure one of them was Pygmalion and Galatea - and when I read the sign at the base, it was the Latin name of the grass growing around); and last but not least, the building that we never entered that looked like a smaller version of the NYC Post Office but had statues lining the parapets on the roof.

See below. Neither snow nor sleet



But we got to hand it to them; their product was good. They were on their 9th generation design, which incorporated anti-crystallization measures. That is the bane of absorption chillers: go off the design operating parameters and the lithium bromide solution crystallizes to something like table salt, inside all the tubes; and blowtorches and hammering on the shell might just bring it back to life, but that's no guarantee.

The Broad absorption chiller outsells all the other absorption manufacturers 6 to 1, if one takes their brochures at face value. Most of the equipment is sold in Asia and Europe. The size range was from 4.5 tons to 3000 tons, a very wide range of choice. They had a world globe where all the countries with sales offices were marked with a Broad sign, and the Philippines had such a sign.

But what blew us away was their latest development: solar powered chillers for the home-industry market. Think of a typical house in the sunny part of the US such as Arizona, where air-conditioning is a must in summer. A typical house needs about 4-5 tons of cooling. Get a 4.5 ton Broad chiller whose input is not electricity but heat. Put solar panels on the roof to heat water, and run it into the chiller. Voila, you get free air-conditioning. In the early evening, when you still need air-conditioning but have no more sun to heat water, fire up the auxiliary gas burner in the chiller. And by the way, in winter, the solar panels also produce hot water for your space heating. Well, Broad had this device as one neat packaged system. True, they were expensive, but with minimal input power costs, you can figure out the economics. In Korea, the solar powered chillers are selling like hotcakes because the government is subsidizing them.

All the facts when put together made an enigma: a 13 year old company, starting from scratch, in a huge compound that obviously was there more than 13 years, but now is a world leader in this niche technology, headed by a relatively young fun-loving communist entrepreneur, with a huge ego - what did it add up to?

To me, it was just like one of those early symbiotic enterprises of the Marcos years: Marcos-Benedicto, Marcos-Disini, Marcos-LucioTan, Marcos-Tanchoco, etc. It all made sense: top government man gives old factory to his friend, who gets all the preferential treatment to start an enterprise. Only this time, the Broad guy was visionary enough to bring in real talent and make his product pay off.

After the tour, we retired to our "hotel". Near the pyramid were 4 large houses built in different styles: Japanese, German, French and English. I was billeted at the Japanese house together with 5 others. I felt nostalgic. My second job years ago took me to Japan where I had occasion to live in a local hotel, called a ryokan - the terms all come back to me now. There was a tatami mat on the floor, where one slept, and a bathrobe in the closet called a yukata, that one used at the wooden communal hot tub called a furo-wah. This hot tub was relatively large, like a queen sized bed, good enough for all 6 of us residents. But, no, the tub was empty and no one else would probably have enjoyed a communal bath, nor would have had the time to fire it up and wait for the tub to fill.

Then the bus came to bring us to dinner. It was at the same dining hall where we had lunch. The menu was more sensible with special veggies and noodles and omelets for the vegetarians, and the regular stuff for westerners. And right beside was a well stocked bar. In the same area was a stage with combo instruments - guitars, drums, etc, and the latest in karaoke. Downstairs was the game room and swimming pool. Shawn and Pinky said that after dinner, we could come back and enjoy the amenities.

Only 7 of us came back. We hit the bar for the free drinks and sweated it off at ping-pong, badminton, etc. I hadn't played badminton since I was a kid, but found it just as exhilarating as ping-pong. We just played among ourselves and didn't join the dozen or so locals; the mere sight of a Chinese holding the racket in a pen-hold grip assured us of devastation. Later, over more drinks, the talk got serious and philosophical, and we started expounding about life's meanings to each of us. John, the extrovert and ice-breaker (who was more into sales than engineering) was steering the group. But pretty soon Adam, the young guy, comes up from downstairs where he had been bowling, and with his nth drink, joins us, and the talk turns to his girl friends and other topics that we found much more entertaining. When I left just after 10, John had joined the table where a group of Italian technicians (on training) were having drinks, and they were laughing like anything.

Who says a communist camp is dreary? To be continued.



Me and the Broad – chiller.



The game room