

CIFF Office 2013 Guangzhou, China

A Review

By John Sacks



Part of the China Import and Export Fair Complex (note the two window cleaners!)

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An Asian Affair

Just a two hour, luxurious, train ride from downtown Hong Kong, [Guangzhou](#) is the third largest city in China with a reported population of 15 million. It's a city of vast skyscrapers and tower blocks, with districts kept apart by the various branches of the Pearl River. March is the rainy season in Guangzhou which means that if it's not drizzling or raining, thunder, lightning and downpours are the order of the day.

As the [CIFF Office](#) show ends, the memories and impressions will take some time to arrange into a balanced set of perspectives. The exhibition site with its catchy name – China Import and Export Fair Complex – is vast. So large that, even though 37 exhibition halls were used for the Office show plus the concurrently held Woodworking Machinery, Furniture Materials and Interzum shows, that was less than half the total available. Although fleets of dozens of eight-seater, electrically powered, shuttle buses ferried visitors all day long from one section to another, the distances walked were still invariably immense. The Office Furniture show in 210,000sq m (2.3m sq ft) lasted for four, long, days, but unless a visitor merely dashed through the halls without stopping, it wasn't possible to see all the 900+ exhibitors in the time available. If one wandered out of the aisles to stop to talk to exhibitors or view some interesting looking products - which of course is what visitors are meant to do – you found the show had closed and you had not managed to visit all the halls.

Despite the relatively short duration of the exhibition, considerable effort and cost had been invested in many of the stands - particularly those of the larger companies- some of which were at least 1,000 sq m (11,000sq ft) in size. There were some really imaginative, well executed presentations.



There was also good use of lighting and strong, bright colours which made for an attractive environment, and modern western music was playing quite noticeably wherever you went.

Walking round a Chinese show is unlike anything in the West. The noise levels, as with everywhere in China, are outrageously high with everyone trying to get their message across in competition with their neighbours. And the same competitive nature can be seen with the salespeople who don't confine themselves to their stands but try to make sure you don't walk past them without giving their products due heed. If you do walk on a stand, there's no chance of a quiet unaccompanied stroll around! The salespeople are incredibly numerous, invariably very young, extremely enthusiastic, very polite but very persuasive.

The exhibition was very busy indeed, especially for the first two days. High numbers of visitors flooded the stands and joined the salespeople in blocking the aisles. The vast majority were from all parts of Asia, including many from India, but there was a good smattering from Europe – mostly from France, Italy and the Netherlands, as well as from Australia and South Africa.

The organisers divided the exhibitors into product sectors with eight halls of systems, six for seating, one for filing, two for accessories and so on. This is just fine for dealers but not particularly helpful for end users or their advisors. After all, seeing seating, for example, on its own and out of context with the other products with which it will be set is not realistic and serried row after row of seating manufacturers' stands becomes very tedious.

There was a noticeable improvement in many of the products, compared with those we've seen in Western markets, even in recent years. Bearing in mind that products will have been chosen especially for the show, or even specially manufactured for it, manufacturing quality on display still hasn't always reached international standards, with evidence of joints that don't meet, sharp edges, untidy upholstery and welds not cleaned off. However, the quality was better than in the past. Product styles were clearly more up to date, with many manufacturers explaining that their products were designed by their own, in-house, designed teams. However the results displayed were either very much "me too" products following the styles that they will have seen at shows such as Orgatec and Neocon or, where any originality was shown, the results were sometimes incongruous, and unattractive to Western eyes.

When product designers in the West create a piece of office furniture or a system, the form and style of the products flows from a consideration of the way people work, meet, communicate, collaborate, interview, use technology or just relax in offices. That step is missing with most Chinese companies where products are designed in a vacuum, or more usually just follow from other products that they have seen. In due course, Chinese manufacturers will decide that their products need to be created by reference to the way the organisations they supply will use them. If they then go on to commission designers with an international perspective to create new designs for them, they will start to become international leaders, rather than followers in the field - and then the West will need to look out.

Of the 900 or so manufacturers, all but two were from Asia, and the overwhelming majority of those were from China. There are no accurate statistics about the size of the office furniture market in China but the total furniture market is thought to be worth about \$US 500bn in addition to which,

\$US 60bn is exported. 70% of furniture manufacturers are in the Canton region and the internal market for furniture is growing more rapidly than is the rest of the economy.

Chinese manufacturers couldn't be blamed if they ignored export markets and concentrated instead on their ever burgeoning home market where unrelenting demand appears to be continuing to outstrip supply. However, some of the larger companies showing were already successfully supplying western markets. [Rainbow](#) (Foshan Hongqiao Furniture Co), for example, from Foshan City employ over 1,200 people and their customers include OFS in the USA and TC Group from the UK.



Rainbow workstation

[Greenlink System Furniture](#) from Beijing with sales of 370m RMB (\$US 60m) were founded in 1994 and employ more than 2,000 people. Their floor of their stand featured a real grass lawn; a first in my experience. David Li, their President said that it was believed that the largest Chinese cities - Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou - each had office furniture markets worth 10bn RMB (about \$US 1.6bn).



Greenlink's green grass



Greenlink workstation

[Sunon](#) (Zhejiang Sunon Furniture Manufacture) from Hangzhou are probably the largest Chinese office furniture manufacturer with total sales in excess of \$US240m and 2,300 employees. They are certainly the best known outside China. Their very large stand was in prime position and they were showing some attractive products. With 30% of their sales devoted to exports, their international visitors were keeping them very busy.



Sunon Media Area

The unfortunately named [Rong](#) (Hangzhou Rongye Furniture) from Hangzhou, whose name translates as “glory”, employs 800 people and count Global of Canada and OTG (Office to Go) amongst their export customers). They were showing some attractive workstations and also European styled high back meeting area seating.



Rong workstation system



Boya's colourful, but rather more traditional display



Mlern desk



Electrically height adjustable table from Quama

["My Ideas"](#) storage



["My Ideas Office"](#) desk



Seating by [Numen](#) (Zhejiang Chunguang Mingmeu Furniture) from Hangzhou



[Wosen Office](#) from ZhongShan – workstation and



Zhongtai workstations and sliding screens

A selection of seating of all shapes and sizes!



[Gaosheng](#)



[BOP Furniture](#)



JC Bendauid and his GymyGym



Lightspace



And finally, for something rather more traditionally Chinese!

One excellent example of Chinese entrepreneurship could be seen as one left the show. People standing outside were asking for your entry badge which they collected and then gave to a runner who dashed over to the exit from the Metro to sell them to arriving visitors!

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