



Photographs: John Sacks

# AN ASIAN AFFAIR

The CIFF Office 2013 show in China reflected the country's entrepreneurial skills and competitive streak

BY JOHN SACKS

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, then thunder, lightning and heavy downpours are the order of the day.

As the CIFF (China International Furniture Fair) Office show ends, it will take some time for the memories and impressions to arrange themselves 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 space available.

Although a fleet 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 an area of 2,10,000sq-m (2.3m sq-ft), lasted for four long days; but unless a visitor 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 interesting-looking products – which 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 1,000sq-m (11,000sq-ft) in size. There were

some very imaginative, well-executed presentations. There was also good use of lighting and bright colours, which added up to an attractive environment.

Walking around a Chinese show is unlike anything in the West. The noise levels, like everywhere in China, are outrageously high with everyone trying to get their message across at the same time. The same competitive streak can be seen in 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 to a stand, there's no chance of a quiet unaccompanied stroll. The salespeople are incredibly numerous, invariably young, extremely enthusiastic, very polite but exceptionally 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 different parts of Asia, including many from India, but there was also a good smattering from Europe – mostly from France, Italy and the Netherlands, as well as from South Africa and Australia.

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. Besides, 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

1. Dramatic display for one of the stands at the China International Furniture Fair.



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in recent years. Bearing in mind that products will have been chosen especially for the show, or have even been specially manufactured for it, the manufacturing quality on display still hasn't always reached international standards. There is noticeable 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, design 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, use technology or just relax in offices. That step is missing with most companies in China, where products are designed in a vacuum or 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 majority 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. Also, 70 per cent 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. Some of the larger companies showing were already successfully supplying western markets. Rainbow (Foshan Hongqiao Furniture Co), for example, from Foshan City employs over 1,200 people; and their customers include OFS in the USA and TC Group from the UK.

Greenlink System Furniture from Beijing, with sales of 370m RMB (\$US 60m), were founded in 1994 and has a strength of 2,000-plus employees. The 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 – such as Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou – each had office furniture markets worth 10bn RMB (about \$US 1.6bn).

Sunon (Zhejiang Sunon Furniture Manufacture) from Hangzhou is probably the largest Chinese office furniture manufacturer with 2,300 employees and total sales in excess of \$US 240m. 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 per cent of their sales devoted to exports, their international visitors were keeping them very busy.

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) among their export customers. They showed attractive workstations and European-styled high-back meeting area seating.

One excellent example of Chinese entrepreneurship could be seen as one left the show. There were people waiting outside to ask 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! <sup>AG</sup>

*Note: The writer, John Sacks, is partner at JSA Consultancy Services ([www.jsacs.com](http://www.jsacs.com)).*

2. Desk and sliding screen from Zhongtai.

3. My Idea office.

4. Work stations by Rong.

5. Greenlink System Furniture's space featured a real glass lawn.