

CIFF Office, Shanghai – 2016

A Review

John Sacks



NECC Shanghai

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CIFF Office, Shanghai, September 2016

Shanghai is vast and only sensibly navigated by an excellent, extremely fast but crowded subway system. Taxis are very cheap but that's not much of an advantage when the roads are virtually gridlocked. The weather this September lurched between very hot with rain and very hot with high humidity. Uncomfortable.

The Shanghai pollution levels were atrocious, causing everything to be covered with a permanent coating of smog and grime. The sky was only very occasionally visible. In nearby heavily industrialised Hangzhou, where the G20 Summit had been held the previous week, all factories had been ordered to close for the previous month and residents were requested to leave for the week of the Summit, all funded by Government grants and holiday vouchers. As a further incentive, food shelves in supermarkets and local shops were suddenly found to be empty. By the time of the Summit, pollution levels had improved to such an extent that there was a beautiful display of stars in the night sky which had previously been invisible.

There is another type of pollution in China which isn't talked about so often – noise pollution. Wherever you go, you are bombarded by a cacophony of sounds; some natural – people shouting and screaming; some artificial – often blasted from loudspeakers, including outside so many shops and eating places, blaring repetitive, mind-numbing entreaties to buy their wares. It is very wearying.

The shamrock-shaped National Exhibition and Convention Center claims to be the largest single block building and exhibition complex in the world with a total construction area of 16m sq ft. The 2000+ exhibitors in the 4.3m sq ft of indoor exhibition space of its 13 massive halls, together showed more than enough furniture to satisfy the most ardent enthusiast. Indeed, there were some signs of indigestion – exacerbated by a competing show on the other side of town - possibly accounting for the empty spaces and a disappointingly light foot-fall. The furniture industry is a very important element of the Chinese economy but whether it yet can adequately support so many shows of such proportions each year must be in some doubt.

CIFF (China International Furniture Fair) Shanghai is the second of a pair of shows held each year. The first, considered by the industry as the more important, is held in Guangzhou each March.

The show is professionally separated into areas of different interest including halls for “Modern Furniture”, “Upholstery” and “Outdoor & Leisure”. The office furniture halls – three in all totalling about 1m sq ft – were gathered together which conserved shoe leather and could be seen in a relatively easy two day visit. Most of the exhibitors had also taken somewhat larger stands at the March show and, although the two exhibitions are meant to

separately serve companies from each of these two important furniture manufacturing regions, Guangdong and Shanghai, there was considerable overlap in the companies and products.

If anything, the show which has always had difficulty attracting exhibitors from outside east Asia, was even less international than previously. Although there were some western products on display, there were virtually no US or European companies exhibiting, other than one or two, such as Interstuhl from Germany, under the banner of their local partners.

Some of the reluctance of western companies to exhibit undoubtedly comes from a belief that they are exposing themselves to copying and although there were some blatant examples of fakes, there seemed to be far fewer than at previous shows. Maybe some of the Chinese Government's IPR protection work is beginning to pay off? As one manufacturer reported, there's no point in copying western products; I can't export them.

Trends

The show was large in terms of space but skewed towards seating and not particularly design focused. There were some companies with well designed, interesting, stands and some vaguely innovative products – invariably variations on themes from European or North American companies - but not many. Furniture suitable for breakout areas and sit-stand tables were on display, but if the products themselves weren't actually copied from western companies, the ideas certainly were. There is still no linkage between the products displayed and how or why they are relevant to an office environment.

The Chinese market continues its transition towards the styles of products seen in the west with fewer of the massive executive desks, tables and chairs and with more product which is easier on the western eye. There were examples of some of the more recent trends as seen in European and US shows such as bright, primary colours, wood legs and finishes and sit-stand tables, but these were heavily outnumbered by aisle after aisle of mesh chairs of every shape and size.

There were a few examples of European designers, mainly Dutch and Italian, working with Chinese companies and also some companies' in-house design teams such as Qumun are producing promising results but there is much still to be achieved before general standards can be said to have improved.

The Exhibitors

[Novah](#) had one of the most impressive displays at the show. They sell direct to end users on projects in China and abroad and supplement their own manufactured products with lines from companies such as Buzzispace and Four Design. They were founded in 2000 and now have a factory employing 500 as well as a 6,000sq. m. Shanghai showroom.



Novah storage system



Omnipart sit-stand workstation

[Omnipart](#) from Yangzhou had commissioned UK designer, Tim Wallace to create a fixed and variable height workstation system for both home and export markets which stood out from many of the other sit-stand offerings for its functionality.



The internationally active company [Merryfair](#) from Malaysia are known for their well-designed task seating. They showed some new, attractive, breakout furniture.

[Fursys](#), from Korea, are another internationally oriented company with some successful ranges of mesh seating who also showed a leaning towards breakout furniture with some new soft seating products.



Fursys soft seating and new *Flight* chair



[Aobin](#), based in Foshan City, were another company displaying attractive casual seating products.

There were plenty of examples of mesh chairs with hundreds of different variations on the theme. When will we see the back of them?



Chayowa, Anji



Batman chair by Jia Goang, Taiwan



Anji HaiLong seating

One idea from the Shanghai-based company, [Solidform](#), which might find a market was their Foldable Bed Cabinet for emergency siestas, providing a pull-out bed from a small steel, tambour-fronted, cupboard.



Training room chairs from [Bosen](#), based in Jiangmen, seemed to have taken their inspiration from a certain US manufacturer.



Bosen training room chairs

The industry-leader, [Sunon](#), headquartered in the G20 Summit city of Hangzhou, had a large attractive stand and showed a wide range of products including new LED lighting and a further-developed version of their acoustic screen system.



Sunon screen system

Other large local manufacturers with a major presence included Victory from Guangzhou whose featured products included a soft seating system from the Italy-based designer, John Bennett and [Qumun](#) from Zhaoxiang whose display is always attractive and professional.



Victory furniture





Qumun casual seating

Classic, quality solid wood traditionally-styled furniture from companies like [Chang Jiang](#) reminded visitors of some of the ancient furniture-making skills which have generally been replaced by modern styles and manufacturing technology.



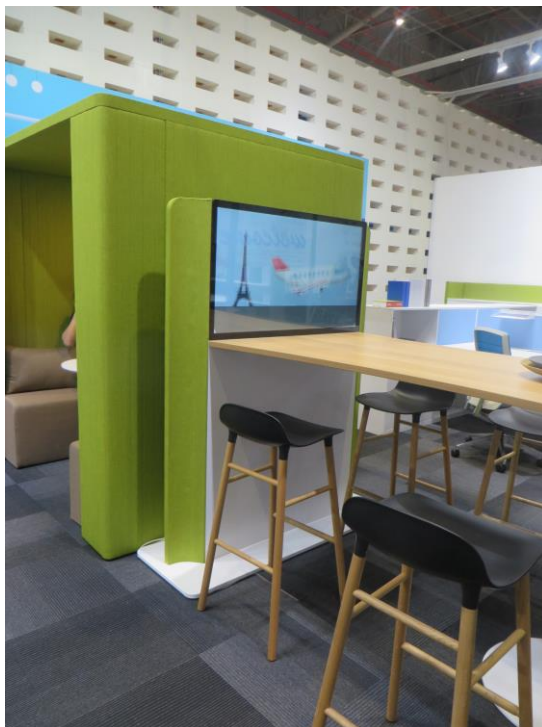
Chang Jiang

Joying from Guangzhou, whose byline is “spiritual office space” had some in-house designed soft seating which attracted attention.



Joying breakout furniture

[Headway](#) from Nanjing had a well-designed presentation table and monitor enclosure and [Gowell](#) based in Foshan City presented attractive soft seating and PVC-covered executive furniture.



Headway



Gowell

And finally, we are still trying to find out just what this parade was celebrating.....



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