

Malaysian Furniture Designer Making His Mark in China

Is there hope for nurturing design in the Malaysian furniture industry? Is the industry too trapped in the OEM game? What does it take to raise the standard of furniture design in Malaysia? *TIMBER MALAYSIA* explores the answers to these questions and more, with Philip Yap, a Malaysian furniture designer who has been operating successfully in China for almost 10 years.



Philip Yap – Without innovative design, most Malaysian-made furniture will continue to be perceived as low-end furniture and will forever compete on price.

TM: When did you start operating in China and why?

PY: I have been in China since 2004. I've worked with three Chinese clients on 'total transformation' programmes as the work involved product design, sales materials, brand repositioning and sales training. Why China? The reason is simple: as the world's largest furniture producing country, China has the market size and provides plenty of opportunities. I believe that China will still be the number one furniture producer 20 years from today. There are two main furniture promotion seasons in China, which are in March in the Guangdong area and September at the Shanghai Fair. If I have clients who are active in the Western China market, then we include Chengdu in July. With three promotion seasons, we could be busy the whole year round.



Photo credit: Philip Yap.

TM: In your opinion, what is the role of design in furniture-making?

PY: Having run and managed an advertising firm for over 10 years, I am psyched to look beyond design alone. **Design is just a starting point for every factory, not the answer to sustain long term growth. It must be combined with the right strategy and marketing direction.** A strategy based on design alone is a weak strategy, especially in today's fast moving and highly wired market, where designs, without other disciplines like targeted market positioning and consistency of execution, could be drowned or hidden in the multiplicity of offerings that compete for consumers' attention 24/7. My objective is to provide services that help to reinvent or improve a company's business structure, where design becomes the driving force to propel more effective production, inspire management with fresh ideas, expand market share and enhance a company's brand substance.

TM: As a Malaysian furniture designer operating in China, what are the challenges that you've had to face?

PY: It has been full of ups and downs. The positive part was the fact that what I went through and experienced in Malaysia had not yet been fully encountered by the Chinese when I first established myself there. The Malaysian furniture industry has been through a few economic cycles, and I had learnt a lot from those cycles of ups and downs. The Chinese furniture industry is probably currently facing its first downward cycle after many years of rapid growth, and having experienced similar downward cycles in Malaysia, albeit on a smaller scale, has helped me in advising clients on the best way forward. Industry size and cultural aspects aside, the industry owners' profile of both countries share many common qualities, which make it easier for me to anticipate certain behaviours, consult and advise my clients in China.

One of the biggest challenges was to adjust to the business culture, build trust based on track records, and collaborate effectively with clients as well as their technical personnel. Other challenges include conveying innovation ideals effectively and



Photo credit: Philip Yap.

cost-efficient project management; the Chinese are practical business people, they evaluate innovations differently from Western-educated businessmen. Another challenge is managing those with deep pockets but without much patience. They are often excited and eager to invest in new ideas, but sometimes they lack consistency and would swing from one idea to another in a short period of time when instant results are not achieved.

TM: Where do you see Malaysian furniture going in terms of design?

PY: For Malaysia, the OEM model which helped grow its furniture industry is both a blessing and a curse. It was a blessing at the beginning because it provided a good platform for our industry members to sell the products globally. But this easy marketing process has placed many Malaysian furniture manufacturers in a comfort zone, which is not conducive for nurturing creativity.

Design must be the cornerstone of the industry's next level of success. Without design, most Malaysian-made furniture will continue to be perceived as a base for low-end, promotional furniture and we will forever compete on price, against the likes of Vietnam and Indonesia. Now, Myanmar has begun to open up and its hunger for investments, jobs and economic progress will ensure a steady pace of catching up with its more progressive ASEAN neighbours. It takes only a few years to train workers in a case goods furniture factory.

Sadly, due to the nature of OEM which entails mass production for overseas buyers, design has never been the key agenda for most export-oriented Malaysian companies. And it won't be easy to integrate this design culture into existing mindsets. Also, operations-wise, factories built for mass production are not able to provide design varieties.



Photo credit: Philip Yap.

TM: What other factors dampen the nurturing of a design-led culture in the Malaysian industry?

PY: A small internal market is another reason that discourages design from flourishing in the Malaysian market. Additionally, many owners have little understanding of the design process; many still think that designers are the ones that only provide CAD drawings. Marketing that is not based on the concept of lifestyle also dampens the effort for design and brand creation. We live in an environment that is exposed to “international styles”, and local factories are competing with imported brands that are rich in all aspects of brand substance, so they face tougher challenges in both design and brand development. On the other hand, **as the gaps of design preference are narrowing and forming a no-boundary global trend, we could start to provide our own creations to international buyers, instead of continuing with the OEM business model.**

TM: You were one of the judges for the MIFF Furniture Design Competition 2013. Is there hope for the future of a design-based Malaysian furniture industry through such competitions?

PY: This was my first year being involved in the MIFF Furniture Design Competition. I was pleasantly surprised to find that Malaysian young talents are more open minded compared to my Chinese students, thanks to the diverse culture and international lifestyle we have.

It is good to have such competitions, but there must be follow-through from the industry side.

Personally, I also feel that the industry needs good guidance on assembling an effective marketing and designing team, to facilitate a clear direction on design management.



Photo credit: Philip Yap.

There are also too few successful local designers. These students, industry members and furniture manufacturers need good role models that they can perhaps benchmark against their design ability or design team capabilities. Manufacturers, for example, need design-focused operation models to manage their internal design team.

Malaysia’s edge is its multi-racial society that also has a global perspective in many areas, making its people generally talented and creative. I believe the reason that we haven’t capitalized on our design talents for the furniture industry is because we do not have a workable “cross platform” dedicated for design-focused talent to perform.

There are plenty of Malaysian colleges and universities offering excellent design-based courses, but not enough of such efforts are channelled directly to the furniture industry, and little focus is placed for the integration of talents from different design disciplines to collaborate through this platform. **At the end of the day, what makes a design successful may be due to a cross-fertilisation of ideas from different disciplines: design, engineering, material technology etc.** A well-designed furniture is sometimes more than just ‘designed’ furniture.

TM: Who is your role model in design?

PY: I don’t have any particular designer in mind, but I simply like good designs and learn from every designer’s success journeys.

TM: What is your forte in design? (i.e., is there a particular piece of furniture that you’d prefer to design - sofa, desks etc - or does your talent run across all types of furniture?)

PY: **Once an Italian designer asked me: “What’s your style?” My answer to that was: “My style is to challenge every style!”** Coming from an advertising and fine art background, I take design as a process in creating something new and interesting to meet each target market. This actually goes beyond creativity alone. It requires intelligent planning, and the concept of how to balance the right dosage of design, production and efficient costing to eventually come up with products that meet the consumers’ needs.

I have designed many case goods using MDF and veneer to meet clients’ production and market requirements. We will soon be designing a few series of solid wood furniture based on modern-traditional Chinese style. The timber used will mostly be Ebony, Rosewood or Teak. 🌿

Philip Yap – From College Dropout to Award-Winning Designer

Born in 1966 in Kuala Lumpur, Philip knew from as young as 12 years old that he wanted to be an artist of some sort when he grew up. When he was 18, he took part in an art competition which won him a full scholarship in 1986 to study Graphic and Fine Arts at the Malaysian Institute of Art. Subsequently, he enrolled in an art college in Melbourne, Australia in 1989. Unfortunately, due to a shortage of funds, he could not complete the course and dropped out. Not one to give up easily, Philip started a design agency in 1991, called Primo, whose corporate clientele ranged from property to the furniture industry.

“I’ve never had any formal training in furniture design. My involvement in the furniture industry began with a company called Primo in 1991, when we got a job to provide creative direction for advertising campaigns for a few leading Malaysian furniture manufacturers. I was also requested to be involved in product development during those campaigns. This was a crucial period in my design education as it gave me an excellent grounding of the technical and production aspects of furniture manufacturing,” said Philip.

Working with different furniture factories meant that Philip had to be versatile enough to cater to their different styles and production methods, which significantly contributed to Philip’s flexibility in designing. By 1999, he had begun to dabble in furniture design.

“Furniture design is not ‘rocket science’. The concept is simply about understanding the way we live and use furniture, and the design process is about introducing ideas to aesthetically enhance a piece of furniture through shape and form, and sometimes through advanced technical aspects. Of course, one has to love furniture in order to become a good designer,” explained Philip.

Having built up an impressive portfolio of design briefs from numerous furniture manufacturers in Malaysia and China, Philip is often invited to speak at design seminars or share his expertise in a teaching capacity. He has conducted seminars in many furniture design-related courses in universities in China and is currently a visiting professor at the Beijing-based China Academy of Art, one of China’s renowned design-based institutions.

“To me, design is an experiential process, as opposed to an academic journey. This is the basic tenet of designing that I try to inculcate in my students. When design is perceived as an experiential process, it is easier to infuse one’s



Philip Yap – Furniture design should be focused on the indulgence of a refined lifestyle.

soul into the design to make it something more outstanding,” enthused Philip.

It doesn’t end there, of course. To Philip, beyond conceptualising ideas, effective communications and efficient collaboration with the production side are equally important steps in materialising a particular design. In short, delivery of the design concept also requires full commitment from the technical personnel involved in every project. He currently has about 10 clients that have been with him from previous or earlier projects, which involved only product design and some extension on branding development. A firm believer of quality over quantity, Philip usually actively works with only five clients at any one time.

Given the deep passion for his craft, it is not surprising to learn that Philip’s company has won several awards, the recent being the “2012 Top Ten Excellent Furniture Design Firm” by the China National Furniture Association and the “Top Ten Design Contributor” award by the Guangdong Furniture Association in 2011.

“Furniture design should be focused on the indulgence of a refined lifestyle. The materials do not necessarily have to be expensive or luxurious. **Ultimately, what matters most is to fulfil the customers’ different levels of needs, whether in terms of comfort, design or both.** As a designer, of course, I always hope that my end-users will, first and foremost, appreciate the design of a piece of furniture. For it is design that will catch the buyer’s eye first,” explained Philip. 🌱



Photo credit: Philip Yap.