



The traveling life

by IRENA JOSOEB in Malaysia

Panels & Furniture Asia catches up with Dato Tan Chin Huat (left), Managing Director of MIFF Sdn Bhd, who shares his insights and perspectives on the Malaysian and Southeast Asian furniture industries and life at large, in an interview held at Kuala Lumpur, December 2008.

Q: How did you enter the industry and specifically in organising the Malaysian International Furniture Fair (MIFF)?

A (by Dato Tan Chin Huat): I started off in the furniture materials supply sector about three decades ago and got to know the furniture manufacturers then. I later started taking the company to participate in exhibitions and from there they started getting export orders. After seeing the effect of participating in exhibitions on a company's growth, I decided in 1995 to launch the first MIFF. From a mere 12,000 sqm, our show is 80,000 sqm in size today.

Q: What do you see as your most significant career milestone in this industry?

A: The biggest satisfaction I have is that I can provide feedback to the industry and help improve it.

There is a Chinese saying that those by the side see better than those who are directly involved in a matter. As an observer and organiser of this exhibition, I use this advantage to give feedback to the industry. I am very satisfied also with the performance of the exhibition, as through this we are able to gather data from the industry and see the changes happening every year. This is the biggest satisfaction that I get.

Q: If you were not in the events organising sector, what do you see yourself doing instead?

A: I would probably be involved in marketing work. I had in my younger days been a marketing manager in a big corporate company that produces materials related to the furniture industry.

For developing countries like us, once we have the manufacturing scale, having a good marketing strategy becomes

even more important. Hence I have always put the marketing aspect in high priority as it's a proven strategy all through these decades.

Q: Please share a little on your family and what you like to do in your free time.

A: I enjoy a simple family life with three sons. My wife passed away 1.5

years ago after a long period of illness. Two of my sons are working together with me. However the only time we can meet for meals is during dinner at weekends as I travel frequently.

Traveling is my hobby as I enjoy traveling to various locations and yet at the same time get to meet relevant people, so

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Dato Tan (in orange top) at a company outing to Cameron Highlands last year

that's like putting work and pleasure together. If I can find the time during weekends, I enjoy driving to a nearby resort for a night or two. In fact, I just came back from a company holiday trip to Cameron Highlands.

I also enjoy reading and wherever I go, I would bring a book and dictionary with me as I dislike reading books which I cannot understand; I would even read the same book 2-3 times to understand it fully!

Q: Any particular country that you like visiting best?

A: Every country is equally interesting but to me, motherland (Malaysia) is still the best.

The interesting part of the traveling life is that you get to meet different people, different cultures... and different food! For example, in my younger days I would never dare to touch the sashimi, but now it's my favourite food. I understand now why we have to pay a premium for certain foods!

Q: What do you see for the Malaysian/Southeast Asian furniture industries in the coming future?

A: In 2008, we did not see the full impact of the downturn but we might in the first half of 2009. However, the crisis is not necessarily bad and could awaken people to meet new challenges. It may not necessarily translate into

a loss of opportunities but will also compel local manufacturers to divert themselves and while taking into account their weaknesses and strengths, reposition themselves in a niche market. It can be a good thing.

Malaysia is actually different from other countries in that I think it is easier for our industry to change quickly than the surrounding countries and that the impact on our furniture industries could be shorter than that for China's or Vietnam's. There are still opportunities for us, but of course we have to work hard. Like a Malaysian saying goes, we cannot just wait for the durian (a Southeast Asian fruit found in abundance in the country) to drop.

Most Malaysian companies are also beginning to understand the design aspect of furniture manufacturing; this is why we have worked with Mico Chipboard to organise an annual design competition involving the use of particleboard in furniture-making. We have had very good responses for this competition, but I wish to point out that design is actually a branding process and that the design department also has to

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At a function with friends in 2007

be able to meet the requirements of buyers themselves.

Q: What will be your personal goals for yourself and MIFF in 2009?

A: For MIFF, I'll be very happy if we could manage to remain the same exhibition size as in 2008 and get the same buyer response. One thing I want to tell exhibitors is that they should not be worried; maybe there would be fewer people who would take the risk now, but those who come would be mostly genuine buyers.

Things are changing and things are improving. The economic crisis is a cycle of process of economics for a period of time. That is why without crises, there is no change. It's only a cycle of life in which it is important that both the old and young adapt to changes. This is how you can catch up with the rest of the world.

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Malaysia's then-Prime Minister Dr Mahathir (seated at table) visiting MIFF in the year 2000