

INTERIORS

Edited by Charmaine Chan  
charmaine.chan@scmp.com

Dutch designer Danny Fang is leading a charge to bring beauty to the bulk business of Chinese furniture, writes Jo Baker

# Wicker man



Dutch designer Danny Fang's recent focus has been on wicker furniture, such as his Mstrovka chairs (below)



**D**anny Fang wouldn't call himself a design crusader exactly, or even a "knight" as he terms it, tongue in cheek. But there is something of the missionary in his manifesto. With each toothbrush holder or picnic bench he creates in southern China, the Dutch designer is striving to bring a little western finesse to the region's frenzy.

"China is a production hulk. Its body is bigger than its brain," he says, gesturing out of the train

window at an almost clichéd scene of smogstack industry – bleak warehouses wrapped in hazy grey – as we draw closer to Guangdong. "It's out of balance and this is why these stories are coming out about toys and toxic paint and so on. They are growing so fast and hard here that workers often don't know where the stuff is going, or what impact it will have on its users."

Back in Amsterdam with design guru Marcel Wanders, Fang used to spend his days working on high-profile projects for clients such as Puma, Italian furniture supplier Poliform and glass mosaic brand Bisazza. For six years he was an integral part of the studio, helping to launch and shape glam household brands Moolool and Droog Design. Now he works from a sponsored cubicle in an office in Kowloon Tong's Innocentre, tackling such things as bathroom accessories and small plastic fans, and he spends hours on trains barreling through southern China's industrial heartland. There's less money, clearly. Less prestige, certainly. So what on earth was he thinking?

"There are so many great designers in Europe – Cappellini, Moroso – and they are going to do great stuff with or without me," he says. "If you want to change the world you have to go to a place with a s\*\*\*load of manufacturing, but where they don't really have an understanding of good design. You can lift the level and make a change more substantially than working for top-end brands. If you have engineers designing bulk, the world stays ugly."

So Fang, who has Chinese, Dutch and West Indian ancestry, decided to head straight to the source – the hub of bulk production – China. But within just a few months he found his morality sorely tested. Many firms that ask for Fang's design assistance have ripped off European products – including stuff by his friends' back home.

"He concluded that the only way to beat the fakers would be to convert them, to hook Chinese business owners on original design. Now Fang's getting his chance. Industry may still swamp the Pearl River Delta, but competition has grown so intense that prices can't be slashed much further and rivalry is fierce."

"Big companies have made their fortunes without design," says Fang. "But a few are starting to recognise that they need to start investing in it to stay ahead."

Arriving last year with dreams of sleek plastic buckets and Muji-

quality kitchen implements dancing in his head, Fang was quite surprised to find himself drawn to handicrafts. He had worked with basket weavers and potters in Kenya and Zimbabwe for the Dutch Fair Trade Organisation, and had discovered a knack for discussing design across language and cultural barriers.

Last summer, after meeting James Ng of Klan, a Malaysian furniture company looking to reinvent itself, Fang realised he could make his mark by developing and refining Chinese handicrafts for mass production. Klan's outdoor furniture line took the top prize at the Malaysia International Furniture Fair last month.

"Because of industrialisation, the old knowledge of handicrafts is dying out in China," says Fang. "But with our weavers I try to challenge them by doing round things instead of square, or doing new, unconventional patterns, and I'll work closely with them to see how we can make it happen. All of a sudden it's not only about getting cheap labour... we generate a lot of pride and joy in the development and in the production stage."

At the factory about 40 workers toil in an airy workshop, straddling furniture and deftly swinging lengths of bright synthetic wicker about. Wong Sheong Ching, Klan's general manager, spends about half of his time in China and half at the firm's Malaysian headquarters.

"When [the workers] come here, they're used to just earning money for a living and they don't care much about the product," he says.

"Danny's got them thinking about who will own the products and why we want them to work better and more slowly."

One of Fang's designs, launched at the Guangzhou Trade Fair, is a curvy, synthetic wicker screen made to go between sun beds around a hotel pool. Among the piles of aluminium, Wong shows the frame that Fang wants to weave around,

here, and I like that I can learn new techniques," says Nick Liu Yun-fu, a softly spoken man with calloused hands.

Fang tries hard not to mount his post-colonial high horse. In Africa he used to find children helping their parents in workshops, but refrained from the blanket criticism of working children that's common in the west.

"If you're not in a position to educate your kid, let them help you survive," he says. "In certain conditions it's also an education."

In a similar manner he acknowledges that China, as a developing country, needs to be allowed to make its mistakes.

"Look at how they lived in England during the Industrial Revolution. All we can do here is try to set an example."

Fang has his sights set on other areas of industry that rarely see a designer – the production line plotters that are doomed to short, unappreciated lives before they hit the landfill. Design, says Fang, has the power to inspire pride both inside and outside the factory.

He may not be preaching to the converted, but then the righteous rarely have it easy.

**China is a production hulk. Its body is bigger than its brain. It's out of balance**

and he shows the one the workers have proposed in return. Fang's model, they say, will result in messy, uneven curves, but they're going to try anyway. Another product, a chair called Gradient, has wicker colours from dark to light. And Fang has a few more experimental styles he aims to show off at the Shanghai fair next month.

The workers seem to appreciate the variety. Many of the factories in the Pearl River Delta have a high turnover of seasonal workers, but there's less movement at Klan.

"The product is always developing

## On the Web

**MyHomeIdeas.com** features home and garden information from its design, decor, architecture and landscaping experts, plus material from magazines such as *Cottage Living*, *Coastal Living*, *Southern Living*, *Southern Accents* and *Sunset*, and Osborn House books.

With original content added weekly, the site (right) offers decorating basics, interior-design trends, how-to videos, step-by-step instructions for home and gardening projects, virtual tours, new products, before-and-after photos, polls and blogs. It also shows a range of styles including coastal, cottage, traditional, contemporary and eco-friendly. Themed channels on topics such as organising, remodelling and entertaining rotate each month.

Other features include *Weekend Project*, which takes projects from inspiration to installation; *Educated*

**Shopper**, which guides users through shopping using videos; *Room of the Day*, which explains why the rooms work and offers ways to steal the look; *Year of Gardening*, which features garden tips and tricks; and *Stuff You'll Love*, which highlights must-have products.

**Martha Philfer (MCT)**



## Fixit: Paint it black

by Tim McKeough

**Is dark moulding appropriate in a modern interior?**

Crisp white baseboards, cornice mouldings and window casings are more common in modernist interiors, but you can make those elements dark. Even interior designers and architects who are considered minimalists sometimes use dark trim (right).

"Most of the work I do is very modern, and I usually don't get involved with the whole mouldings thing," says interior designer Stephen Roberts, whose projects are mostly "whiter than white". But that didn't stop him from painting the mouldings black in a modern apartment he designed in a 19th-century Greenwich Village brownstone.

"It seemed to feel right for the apartment," says Roberts, adding that he was trying to create a contemporary space "that had a totally different look

than the modernist white box. Roberts has also covered the windowsills in a Tribeca loft with chocolate-colour wood veneer to pick up the colour of the flooring and kitchen cabinetry.

In both cases he kept the wall white for contrast, he says.

"It's a trick," says Randy Germer of Germer Kronick & Valcor, Architects. "The greater the contrast you set up, the more you create an illusion that the space is actually bigger than it is. A lot of times you'll see white apartments with dark furniture in them, and that's for the same reason."

Germer used this technique in an apartment where he painted the baseboards, mantle and windowsills a deep grey-brown, setting them off against a light straw-coloured wall. This created visual interest and gave the apartment a sense of warmth.

Piet Boon, a Dutch interior designer whose projects combine modern and



traditional elements and exude a sense of calm, says he uses black baseboards "because it gives contrast".

"We also use black floors," he says. "Most of the time, if we use a black floor, we make the baseboards and walls white. But if it's a light wood floor, we'll use black baseboards and doors."

So feel free to use dark mouldings in a modern interior, even if it seems as if most people are doing the opposite. Just make sure the mouldings are part of a larger design plan.

He also suggests other ways of creating contrast. For example, he is designing a library that will be entirely black except for the furniture, which will be pure white. "We also sometimes paint ceilings black," he says. "It sounds crazy, but it's just a little bit dramatic."

So feel free to use dark mouldings in a modern interior, even if it seems as if most people are doing the opposite. Just make sure the mouldings are part of a larger design plan.

The New York Times