

Is Everything Made in China?

If you've noticed that a great percentage of furniture for our homes is now being made in China, you may wonder about the quality of construction.

Most of the major U.S. owned furniture manufacturers have moved their manufacturing factories to China. The demand for less expensive everything has caused manufacturers to follow their competitors' lead and move their operations overseas.

There will always be U.S. manufactured products, and some companies have good quality, and some do not. The same is true of imports. When you see a bedroom set of 5 pieces selling for \$999, you can be relatively certain the quality is not the same as something of similar design that sells for \$9999.

The differences are this: U.S. wood products are mostly made of wood, which can consist of a plywood type base with beautiful exotic veneers, or a solid wood. Wood or other hard surface furniture products are referred to as "case goods." Many case goods made in China are painted on the surface to look like wood, but are actually made from a composite of unknown substances. "Rubber wood" is a new "species" that has recently hit the market.

Case goods manufactured in Indonesia and Mexico that are made with recycled wood of unknown species are finished in very dark colors, because the grain is not particularly beautiful. They tend to be heavy, and have drawers and doors that function poorly with no drawer stops and creaky doors. This is a look that, if you are willing to put up with the nonperformance of the parts, do give you solid wood, at very inexpensive prices. Other case goods are made with new woods that are plentiful, like pine; but they may not be dried properly before fabrication, which causes cracking of the wood. Dining chairs with cracks are dangerous; be careful, or your next dinner party may end up in disaster, especially if your friends have been living it up!

Many high quality wood products made in the U.S. are made with carefully milled veneers and substrates of miscellaneous wood products. Veneers can vary in thickness; thinner veneers wear through to the substrate faster and may not hold up to abuse as well as solid woods or denser veneers. The reason manufacturers use veneers is that it is easier to control warpage and expansion and contraction of wood when it is constructed in layers. By laminating layers of wood that have been compressed and dried to a thick density, the finished product is more stable. Because a piece of furniture is veneer, it does not mean it is inferior. It all depends on the density of the layers, their composition and the thickness and quality of the veneers. This can only be spotted by carefully inspecting a piece. Veneered furniture is also higher quality if the edge banding is one piece of solid wood; edges are more vulnerable than horizontal or vertical planes.

A handful of U.S. furniture manufacturers make solid cherry, pine, oak and maple furniture. They are usually very high quality, handmade with hand-selected, beautifully grained wood. They are finished and sanded carefully; and their prices reflect this. A solid cherry cabinet, made in Vermont is a beautiful sight to behold, and will become a collectible antique.

If you are buying furniture that will not be heavily used, you should be fine with imports of less durable materials. If you are buying bunk beds for your children, buy quality. Know what you are buying, ask questions. Reputable furniture dealers will share the pros and cons of each of your selections. When you know what you are buying, you will have realistic expectations.