

Case Study: Shipping Furniture from China to Dubai — What Went Wrong and How It Was Fixed

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Furniture is among the operationally heaviest categories to ship internationally from China. It's bulky, heavy, fragile in transit if poorly packed, and often produced in assembled configurations that weren't designed with international shipping economics in mind. This case study documents a real shipment: a UAE-based interior design company importing 35 pieces of dining and living room furniture from a Foshan manufacturer to a Dubai showroom, via 20-foot FCL sea freight to Jebel Ali Port. Two decisions made early in the process compounded a production delay into a 15-day total delivery setback with significant additional cost.

While the figures below are typical for the UAE in 2026, the live rate feed on the [China-to-UAE shipping rate page](#) shows current pricing for each weight bracket and channel.

Shipment Specification

- **Goods:** 12 dining chairs, 4 glass-top dining tables, 8 sofas (mix of 2- and 3-seat), 11 coffee tables
- **Factory:** Foshan, Guangdong (major furniture manufacturing cluster)
- **Destination:** Dubai, UAE
- **Mode:** 20-foot FCL sea freight
- **Container loading:** 19.5 CBM loaded (assembled packing)
- **Gross weight:** 3,200 KG
- **FOB value:** USD \$28,500
- **Target door-to-door transit:** 35 days (allowing for Dubai showroom opening)

If you want concrete numbers right now, you can [check live sea freight pricing for China to the UAE \(all weights\)](#) before reading the rest of this guide.

Decision 1: Assembled vs Knock-Down Packing

The buyer requested fully assembled shipping to minimize on-site assembly at the Dubai showroom. Fully assembled dining chairs measured approximately 0.35 CBM each (105×55×95 cm including stacking clearance) — 12 chairs = 4.2 CBM. In knock-down (flat-pack) configuration, the same 12 chairs would occupy approximately 1.7 CBM — a 60% volume reduction.

The 20-foot container loaded at 19.5 CBM. In KD packing, the same furniture would have loaded at approximately 11–12 CBM — comfortably within LCL range and avoiding the fixed FCL cost entirely.

Cost comparison: 20-foot FCL ocean freight China to Jebel Ali: \$2,650. LCL equivalent 12 CBM at \$185/CBM all-in: \$2,220. The assembled-packing choice cost an additional \$430 over LCL — but more importantly, it eliminated the scheduling flexibility that LCL provides (weekly consolidation sailings vs. fixed FCL booking).

Decision 2: Container Booked Before Production Was Confirmed Complete

The container was booked 3 weeks before the expected production completion date to secure a preferred sailing. Standard practice — but it created a dependency that became a problem when a quality issue surfaced during final inspection.

Two of the four glass-top dining tables had surface blemishes on the glass that the buyer rejected. Factory rectification required 8 additional days past the originally planned completion date. The container booking was for a sailing that departed 3 days after the original completion date — now 5 days before the revised completion.

Result: missed sailing. Container detention for 6 days at the Foshan pickup point (CNY 580/day = approximately \$480 total).

Rebooking on the next available sailing: 7 days later. Total delay to original ETA: **15 days**.

Under LCL, the same production delay would have meant rebooking the cargo on the next weekly consolidation — a 3–5 day delay with no detention charges and no fixed booking to miss. The FCL's inflexibility compounded the production delay into a significantly worse outcome.

Jebel Ali Port and UAE Customs

[Dubai Customs](#) processes imports through the Mirsal 2 digital system. For this shipment, clearance ran 3 business days — within the standard 2–4 day window for normal commercial imports at Jebel Ali. UAE import duty on furniture from China: 5% of CIF value. UAE VAT: 5% on (CIF + duty).

Duty calculation: CIF value approximately \$30,800. UAE duty 5% = \$1,540. UAE VAT 5% on \$32,340 = \$1,617. Total customs cost: \$3,157. No physical examination hold — straightforward clearance.

The Emergency Air Freight Consequence

The 15-day delivery delay meant the showroom opening occurred without 6 high-priority pieces (the dining chairs needed for a client event). Emergency air freight for 6 dining chairs in KD configuration (estimated 85 KG chargeable): 85 KG × \$9.50/KG DDP = \$808. Plus factory re-disassembly for air shipping: CNY 400 (\$55). Total emergency cost: **\$863 on top of the original sea freight**.

What Should Have Been Done Differently

1. **Request KD packing wherever practical.** For FCL/LCL furniture imports, knock-down reduces volume, enables scheduling flexibility, and typically reduces transit damage on chairs and table legs. The assembly labor saved in Dubai rarely justifies the shipping cost premium and rigidity of assembled freight.
2. **Confirm production completion before booking container.** A rolling weekly booking system with the freight forwarder eliminates missed-sailing risk when production schedules slip — and production schedules almost always slip on complex furniture.
3. **Use LCL for volumes under 12–15 CBM where delivery flexibility matters.** The cost difference vs. FCL is often small; the flexibility difference is significant.

4. **Stock a buffer of glass components for separate air freight.** Glass tabletops are the highest rejection risk in furniture shipments. Ordering 1-2 spare units that can be air freighted if a production defect occurs costs less than emergency air on assembled chairs.

View current sea freight rates to Dubai at our [UAE freight rates page](#).

More Resources for Shipping to the UAE

Use these live rate pages for current pricing at the weight bracket you actually ship at:

- [Live shipping-to-the UAE rate hub](#)
- [Shipping from China to the UAE calculator](#)
- [China to the UAE air freight cost \(100kg\)](#)
- [China to the UAE air freight cost \(1kg\)](#)
- [China to the UAE sea freight cost \(all weights\)](#)

FAQ

What is the best way to ship furniture from China to Dubai?

Under 12 CBM: LCL sea freight to Jebel Ali — preserves scheduling flexibility and is often cost-competitive with FCL at small volumes. Over 15 CBM: FCL 20-foot. Over 30 CBM: FCL 40-foot. Knock-down (flat-pack) packing wherever assembly can be done in-country.

How long does sea freight from China to Dubai take?

Ocean transit from Chinese ports to Jebel Ali: 18–26 days. UAE customs: 2–4 business days. Inland UAE delivery: 1–2 days. Realistic door-to-door: 22–33 days under normal conditions.

What customs duty applies to furniture imported into UAE from China?

Standard UAE import duty of 5% on CIF value. UAE VAT of 5% on (CIF + duty). Total fiscal cost approximately 10.25% of CIF value. No anti-dumping or specific trade measures on standard furniture from China.