



Sometimes a chemist, sometimes a manager. Tom Zhang in the laboratory of Hermes Hansecontrol in the southern Chinese city of Dongguan

QUALITY? WHY CERTAINLY!

What began in 1982 as a laboratory for quality testing in Hamburg is today an international group of certified testing institutes: Hermes Hansecontrol

6 000 miles separate Dongguan from Hamburg. However different the locations are, the city on the Pearl River Delta and the metropolis on the Elbe have one thing in common: in both of them employees of Hermes Hansecontrol are helping to make products safer and more consumer-friendly.

Tom Zhang in Dongguan sometimes doesn't feel like a quality assurance manager but more like a doctor revealing a bad diagnosis to his patients. When he has to tell a customer that he has "unfortunately found something" in their goods. A chemical, for example, that doesn't belong in a product "made in China" and that shouldn't be exported to Europe.

Zhang finds such conversations unpleasant, but at the same time sees them as a success. It is his job, after all, to reveal the unexpected. Zhang works at Hermes Hansecontrol in Dongguan and tests the products of the "workbench of the world". Tom Zhang describes his work: "We always keep the actual needs of our 250 or so customers in mind; alongside substantiated test results, they also receive a range of other services. It's not enough to tell the customer that his product has failed. We also help to solve the problem."

From the "workbench of the world" to Germany

The Province of Guangdong is one of the powerhouses behind the Chinese economy. If it were an independent state, it would be in the top 20 leading industrialised countries in the world. Its capital, Dongguan, is particularly productive. With its 9.8 million inhabitants, it is a centre for the shoe industry. Trading metropolises such as Shenzhen and Hong Kong are less than 60 miles away and can be reached by car, train and boat.

Hermes Hansecontrol opened the laboratory there in March 2010 in bright, spacious premises. The employees are a young team; Zhang, at 40, is almost the oldest. The laboratory tests are largely automated in accordance with international standards and provide results that are just as accurate as tests in Hamburg. There are daily teleconferences and regular visits between both sites.

As in Hamburg, Zhang and his team detect contaminants using the latest technology. Their pride and joy is an ICP-MS autosampler from the United States, which can detect the smallest traces of heavy metals. "We were the first to use this model in China", says Zhang. However, his team also modifies equipment in innovative ways. "While our competitors carry out one to three tests at the same time, we have developed procedures which enable us to perform twelve and even 24 tests in one go.

Time is money. Since production cycles are getting ever shorter, even small disturbances in the production process can lead to stoppages. For example, when Zhang had to tell a customer that he had discovered harmful AZO dyes. In China too, statutory requirements are getting tighter and consumer awareness is rising. China is developing into an interesting market – including for Hermes Hansecontrol.

"Step by step we will become active worldwide in all procurement markets", says Managing Director Lutz Lehmann on the direction the company is taking. "But China will remain our main focal point. We want to offer our services in other economic centres in China as well." And there's a good reason for this: The economy and output of goods are still growing at a breathtaking pace in this the most populous country in the world, with a little under 1.34 billion inhabitants.

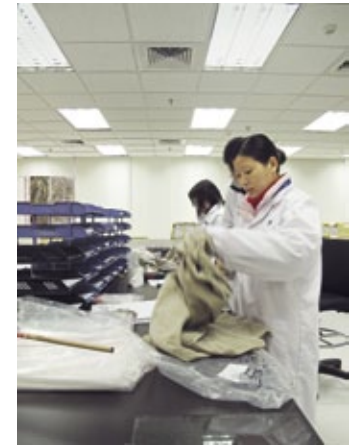
Lehmann sees proximity to the customer and trade as being the most important factor for Hermes Hansecontrol: "We test and give advice where production is happening. Our advantage is that we speak our customers' language and know their daily business so that we don't look through the spectacles of an advisor who is unfamiliar with their field." Since May 2011, Hermes Hansecontrol has belonged to the network of companies that is the Hermes Group. The company benefits from the brand's worldwide network and completes the value chain.

Accredited testing and advisory services

Hermes Hansecontrol began in 1982 as an institute that tested the textiles of the Otto Group. Over time, the laboratory extended its testing operations to a range of consumer products. In 1984, chemical analysis was added to the physical testing that the textile laboratory already carried out. At the same time, the circle of customers grew, and today more than 70% of the goods tested by Hermes Hansecontrol come from customers outside the Otto Group. This means that both needs and demands have also grown.

As a logical consequence, the company added sensory testing to its range of services in 2009. This involves testing any materials that come into contact with foodstuffs. "We deal intensively with two questions," says the company's second Managing Director, Dr Michael Neiser, who is responsible for operations. "Where do we test? And: What do we test?"

The testing of packaging materials and storage containers which come into contact with foodstuffs have so far given rise to relatively few orders. Despite the most sensitive analysis techniques, the use of the human senses



Step by step active on all procurement markets: Goods testing directly at the "workbench of the world"

is vital. In future, Dr Neiser is confident that employees in the Hamburg laboratory will get to smell, taste and feel more. Without quality assurance, trading becomes a risk. Contaminants can damage consumers' health, while material faults can affect the use of the product. If they are not detected on time, fines and losses might be incurred and the company's image damaged. Recalls can potentially bankrupt a company.

An Indian home textiles manufacturer found out just how meticulously Hermes Hansecontrol carries out its quality assurance tests. Its goods passed a washing test in the laboratory at home without difficulty. When the test was repeated in Hamburg, the objects changed colour – orange curtains turned pink, green T-shirts brown. The reason was that copper pipes are not used to carry drinking water in India. In Europe, such pipes are often made of copper and release minimum quantities of copper ions into the washing water, with which the dye in the textiles reacted, thereby changing their colour.

Seals give security

The Hermes Hansecontrol certification company (Hermes Hansecontrol-Cert), founded in 2009, tests consumer electronics and household products and a range of other technical equipment for their electrical and mechanical safety. Toys, furniture, household equipment and sports equipment. Its highly modern laboratory operates independently – as a testing laboratory authorised by statute, Hermes Hansecontrol-Cert issues the GS (Geprüfte Sicherheit, or "safety tested") seal which certifies that a product meets the requirements of the German Product Safety Act.

For years now, product safety requirements have been stepped up in the EU, and consumers compare products more thoroughly than they used to. But aspects relating to eco-design – such as compliance with the energy efficiency labelling directive – are also checked. In addition, Hermes Hansecontrol-Cert certifies goods with proven good properties with the Hermes Hansecontrol seal for fitness for purpose.

The market has long been global, even for small and medium-sized firms. But these rarely have their own in-house quality assurance. Hermes Hansecontrol-Cert offers such import firms a market compliance check, known as a "marco". As Dr Wolfgang Kruschak, Managing Director of Hermes Hansecontrol-Cert explains: "We take over much of the quality assurance and review the technical documentation. This means that the company can concentrate on its core skills and doesn't need to employ and continually train people for the purposes of quality assurance. Their financial outlay is limited to the actual costs of testing articles.

The "marco" helps customers to enter a market without complications. It is also promoted through publications by Hermes Hansecontrol on testberichte.de, Germany's largest testing portal – without jargon but with the assessment of the independent testing institute. This creates visibility and trust.

Since 2009, Hermes Hansecontrol-Cert has been present on the American market on the basis of cooperation with a partner laboratory. "Our customers

are active on various markets", says Dr Kruschak. "We therefore want to offer them the service of worldwide product assurance – on a one-stop-shop basis." This is particularly interesting for traders who wish to introduce consumer goods onto the EU and US markets. Because Hermes Hansecontrol tests products according to the most stringent standards, it is not necessary to have goods tested repeatedly. At the same time, the company provides information in specialist seminars on the legal situation and market sentiment in a given region and drafting instruction manuals also forms part of its portfolio.

In September 2011, Hermes Hansecontrol inaugurated its new headquarters in Hamburg, which offer twice as much space as the old site. "We have not only expanded our spatial capacities but are also able to increase our staff in the long term and also expect our customer base to grow", says Lehmann. "In our headquarters, we have more opportunities to optimise our processes and services. In this respect, quality control is every bit as important as quality provision." Because the old Chinese proverb is also true for Germany: "Dig the well before you are thirsty".

Hermes Hansecontrol was founded in 1982. The institute tests clothing, shoes and leather goods, textile articles and toys for manufacturers and traders. The articles undergo physical and chemical tests and are also tested as to whether they meet statutory and environmental requirements.

Hermes Hansecontrol-Cert came into being as an offshoot of Hansecontrol in 2009. It tests consumer electronics, large electrical equipment, toys, medical equipment, IT equipment, maritime electronics and furniture. Also in 2009, Hermes Hansecontrol-Cert obtained authorisation as an official GS testing laboratory to issue the GS mark.

Hansecontrol Asia Its core business is in Hong Kong and Dongguan and covers the chemical testing of shoes, leather goods, textiles and toys for banned contaminants.

Partnerships and cooperation In cooperation with MET Laboratories, Hansecontrol now offers testing and certification services on the American market. The range of services offered by the institutes in Austin, Baltimore, Santa Clara and Union City comprises testing the electrical safety of consumer electronics, IT products and domestic appliances.

► Photo, top left:
An employee at Hermes Hansecontrol's chemical laboratory in Dongguan

► Photo, bottom left:
Removing harmful dyes from textiles using extraction equipment

► Photo, right:
Various samples in the search for contaminants

