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'It's a myth that China goods are of poor quality'

Venkatesan Vembu

China's reputation as the world's factory floor has been dented in recent years by horror stories about the poor quality of made-in-China goods. Children's toys were found to be coated with lead-laced paint, and medicines and pet foods with toxins caused fatalities overseas. But beyond those aberrations, which perpetuate something of a myth, it is possible today to find many "nicely made-in-China" products, argues Lionel Derimais, a French national who until recently lived in Beijing. Derimais is quite an unlikely authority on Chinese-made merchandise: an itinerant professional photographer — he travelled in the Sunderbans with French writer Dominique Lapierre in 1999 — he came to Beijing in 2005 to document a country in the throes of an Olympics fever. Earlier this year, disquieted by the erroneous image being conveyed about the quality of Chinese merchandise, he started a blog (www.nicelymadeinchina.com) to showcase manufacturers and service providers in China who measure up to international standards. In just eight months, his blog has become a gateway for people looking to source quality goods from China. In an interview to Venkatesan Vembu, Derimais explains his motivation in promoting the made-in-China label.

How did you, a professional photographer, come to write about China merchandise?

Whenever I read reports about the poor quality of made-in-China products, I've felt that they don't reflect the reality of people who live in China, for whom things are improving every day. One evening in November 2009, after one of those 'bad China' days, my girlfriend showed me a beautiful bag and said, "See, there are some nicely made-in-China products." That gave me an idea: I immediately checked if the domain name ([nicelymadeinchina.com](http://www.nicelymadeinchina.com)) was available, and bought it, with no particular idea in mind. In mid 2010, I began to write about people I knew of who made quality stuff to an international standard; my friends and associates referred other products and services. That's how it all started.

What is the biggest myth about the made-in-China label?

The biggest myth is that it's all not well-made: contrary to what the world thinks, there are a lot of people in China making fantastic products and offering great services to an international standard. You can of course find products that are poorly made — in China, just as you can find them anywhere in the world where people don't care about their work. It all boils down to price: we have to realise that we must pay the right price for things that are nicely made in China. We're always looking to buy cheap things. But there are limits to that. Nicely made in China products are not particularly cheap, but why should they be?

What kind of goods and services have you showcased?

I've showcased products and services that touch all aspects of life: hand-crafted furniture, ceramics, yak-wool shawls, embroidered house linen, jewellery, surfboards, double-bass violins, cheese, hats, equestrian equipment, and services like pet vets, tailor-made travel services... The list is long.

Many of the people you showcase are foreigners in China. Why is that?

I've interviewed a few Chinese people, but yes, there are many more foreigners. One reason is that Chinese people have been a little reluctant to come forward, although that's changing. I've been featured in Chinese magazines, and I hear from overseas Chinese people who say I'm showing them a side of China they didn't know!

How can you vouch for the quality of the products or services?

Before I feature any manufacturer or service provider, I do a bit of research. I take recommendations from my wide circle of acquaintances who are knowledgeable in their respective fields. I then interview the manufacturer or service provider. If I'm not personally satisfied about the quality or with what I'm told, I don't write about them.

What are the challenges to having things nicely made in China?

Education and training are the two most important. Curiously, most of the people I've featured started up their businesses because they couldn't find something they were looking for. These days, with more and more Chinese people travelling overseas and buying expensive goods, they expect the same quality when they return to China.

Does it cost more to have things nicely made in China?

There's certainly an issue with the price. People elsewhere must understand that for anything that is nicely made — in China or elsewhere — they have to pay the right price. People still expect to pay a lot less than they pay in Europe or in the US, but we have to stop thinking on those lines. You can't get things done cheaply and nicely.

Most of your posts feature not mass-produced goods but boutique stores or services, where it's easy to maintain quality. Is the quality of mass-manufactured made-in-China goods still an issue?

It's true that many of them are boutique products or services, but I don't think mass production necessarily entails poorer quality than boutique production. If you're looking for bad stories and fakes, you can find them anywhere in the world — even in France!

China is trying to transition its economy from manufacturing to consumption: is that reflected in your blog?

Sure, my posts reflect the fact that China is changing from mass manufacturing to small-production units of higher quality. I showcase not just products, but also services across every area of the Chinese market. My blog is only eight months old, and there are many 'hidden' products and services to be showcased. I've only scratched the surface in terms of featuring Chinese people who are making fantastic products. There are many brands in China that nobody outside of China has heard of.

Do you worry that you might run out of 'nicely made-in-China' things to write about?

Sometimes I worry, but then I quickly find three new companies of which I'd never heard. There are literally hundreds of people out there that deserve to be featured. The way I look at my blog is this: I like networking and putting people in touch. With my blog, I can build a community of people who have something to tell the world that wasn't told earlier. I'm helping to get the word out. It's like a puzzle: there are people working in their particular corners, and everybody adds a few pieces. I'm putting the puzzle together and presenting a more accurate image of what life in China is like.

Email: venky@dnaindia.net

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