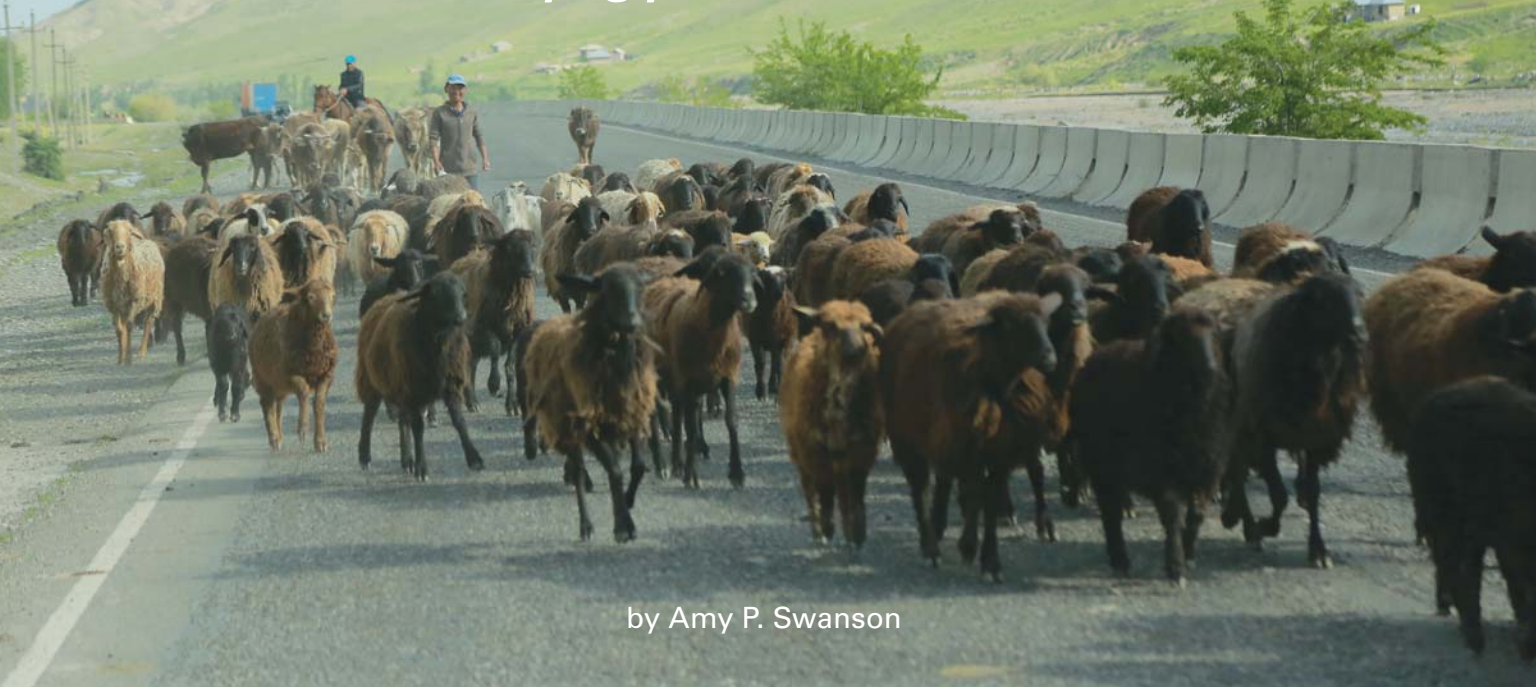


June Cashmere

Inside the Campaign to Renew Kyrgyz Cashmere



by Amy P. Swanson

Photos by Ilya Tarasov

The southern region of Kyrgyzstan offers a most formidable terrain. Twenty-thousand-foot mountain peaks tower over the long and wide Chong-Alay Valley, a remote and barren east-to-west connector. Although majestic, the rugged landscape is often bleak with its long winters, brown vegetation, and clusters of mud, brick, and whitewashed homes. The only vibrancy in the landscape comes with spring, which provides a green backdrop for colorful woven rugs and bands, handiwork of the local women, which are hung out to air in trees and on fences.

To reach the Chong-Alay Valley, you travel by car some 200 miles south from Osh, the nearest city. If you don't own a car, your portage arrangements are with the *marshrutka*, literally the "routed taxi," at the taxi stand in the Osh bazaar, where you await the filling of the minibus destined for the region. Only then can you begin your five-hour journey over two mountain passes that once were part of the Silk Road.

Until the last decade, these mountain passes were narrow, winding, and harrowing, covered only in gravel and dirt and taking twelve hours to traverse. Now a two-lane paved road, it still makes for a careful journey often interrupted by animal herds crossing the lanes.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF GOATS

Under the former Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan formed part of a larger textile region that processed silk, cotton, and wool. Cashmere was not valued as a fiber commodity. Instead, the indigenous cashmere goat was bred with imported Angora and Don goats to create cashgora, a single-coated longer-haired fiber. (Don goats are sturdy multipurpose goats from the Lower Volga area of Russia.) The textile region enjoyed government support for fiber processing infrastructure, collective farms, and a market for selling goods. When Kyrgyzstan achieved independence in 1991, it lost this government-supported infrastructure and found itself

in need of economic rebuilding.

In the 1990s, researchers considered revitalizing the Kyrgyz wool market as a means for returning economic growth to the country, but it wasn't until 2008 that researchers looked toward the Chong-Alay Valley as an economic catalyst. Social anthropologist Carol Kerven of the Odessa Centre in England traveled to the valley to study the fiber quality of the native goat, the Jaidari. Tests revealed that the remoteness of the area and isolation from Soviet-era mixed breeding had preserved in the species the potential to produce high-quality cashmere.

In 2007, a group of Kyrgyz artisans touring the United States Midwest visited Morning Star Fiber Mill, a small fiber-processing mill then located in northern Ohio. The artisans believed that small-scale mills could provide regional fiber processing in Kyrgyzstan. Morning Star owner J. C. Christensen invited his friend Sy Belohlavek to travel to Kyrgyzstan to see about setting up such mills. When the mills did not work out, Sy turned his focus to the Odessa Centre's research on the Jaidari goats. Knowing that demand for inexpensive cashmere contributed to poor goat husbandry practices, land overuse, and inferior fiber quality, it became clear how to restore integrity to cashmere. Through education and an emphasis on quality over quantity, Kyrgyzstan could create a world-class identity in cashmere. This led Sy to launch June Cashmere, a cashmere yarn company sourced entirely from Kyrgyz cashmere. (*June* is the Kyrgyz word for animal fiber.)

The goats' downy undercoats should be collected in a short spring window of natural molting, before shepherds lead the goats up the mountains for summer



OPPOSITE PAGE: Call it the Cashmere Road. TOP: Shepherds have learned to comb the fine cashmere from the goats using special tools. MIDDLE: In the spring, after the goats have molted but before they move to higher pastures, the shepherds comb their goats. BOTTOM: Women spin wool from sheep, camels, and yaks using drop spindles. LEFT: The felted *shyrdak* rugs are made from coarse fiber for durability.



ABOVE LEFT: The hard-wearing felted cloth can last a decade before it needs replacement. ABOVE RIGHT: The project centers on the Jaidari goat, whose isolation preserved its fine-fiber genetics.

or before the fibers become matted. Until recently, Chinese buyers would enter the villages early in the season to purchase sheared fiber, leaving goats bare against the chilly mountain air. To change such practices, educators travel from town to town in search of women with goats, since it is the women who gather the fiber.

During early visits, most in the region did not know about combing; they had not seen a comb. Only one woman in her eighties remembered combing cashmere decades prior. Disappearing momentarily, she returned with a comb fashioned from the seat spring of a 1950s car. Educators brought newly designed combs and demonstrated proper technique. They also explained what to look for in the cashmere: a micron diameter smaller than mohair, a fiber length of 3 centimeters, a crimp of about seven waves per centimeter, and a distinct differentiation between the cashmere fiber and the long, coarse guard hair. Education is making a difference. In one town where the fiber was particularly poor in quality, Sy and his team note a distinct improvement in the overall quality of the fiber in just the third year collecting in that town.

KYRGYZ FIBER TRADITIONS

The Kyrgyz shepherds do not have a tradition of using cashmere for themselves. They spend their summers in yurt camps, grazing their livestock farther up the mountain and away from their villages. This semi-

nomadic living requires rugs for the earthen floor and walls for the yurts. Hence the shepherds rely on fibers that are coarse and strong, felting or weaving wool from the local sheep as well as camel and yak fiber. When felting, the women and children work with the fiber on mats, kneading it with their forearms, beating on it, stomping on it, dragging it behind a donkey, and ultimately placing it back on the mat to pour boiling water on it. They use the felted material to make *shyrdak* rugs and large sheets that form the walls of the yurts. The cloth is warm, durable, and waterproof and lasts ten years in the harsh mountain climate before needing to be remade.

In the winter, women spin the wool, camel, and yak fibers with drop spindles constructed from sticks and stones. A machine is used for plying, and dyeing (mostly with commercial dyes) takes place in spring. Women weave bands in colorful patterned fabric called *taar* on a type of backstrap loom that is tensioned by stakes in the ground. The bands are woven in differing widths and lengths according to the band's function for the yurt. Because of the strength of the fibers, the bands won't stretch or shrink with the weather. Inside the home, weavers use knots to create the piles of vibrant rugs on upright looms. Some of the spun yarn is used for knitted socks, taking further advantage of the strength, warmth, and waterproof nature of the fibers.

Life in Kyrgyzstan is hard, and a shepherd family's income comes from many sources, as family members share labor and income. On average, a family owns ten to fifteen cashmere goats, with a single goat providing some 150 grams of fiber each year. A family can earn a springtime bonus equivalent to one-third or one-half of one month's salary at spring shearing time, and the production of June Cashmere yarn has boosted a family's spring income by 40 percent over what shepherds received through shearing and selling to the Chinese. Still, it's by making the yarn available on the world market that Sy hopes to impact the region, through funding additional fiber processing infrastructure and meeting community needs in the villages. In the process, the Kyrgyz shepherds are experiencing a sense of pride upon realizing that their efforts produce a beautiful yarn that is desirable to the rest of the world. As Sy, his team, and the shepherds continue their work to improve the quality of Kyrgyzstan's native cashmere, fiber artisans everywhere can look forward to a traceable source of sustainable and responsible cashmere, a welcome modern-day narrative along the ancient textile trade route of the Silk Road. ●



ABOVE: Woven bands air in the sun, bringing a splash of color to the muted landscape. BELOW: A woman prepares fiber, sitting next to a machine used for plying.

Amy P. Swanson is in her second career, now pursuing her loves of culture, making, and textiles (preferably all together). Dabbling in weaving, spinning, knitting, and print design, Amy recently began blogging about textiles at www.fiberlogue.com. She met Sy Belohlavek in 2016 at a fiber show and immediately wanted to tell his story. You can find June Cashmere yarn at www.junecashmere.com.



June Cashmere for Spinners



Raw jaidari (cashmere) fiber, combed from the goat but otherwise unprocessed.



After it leaves Kyrgyzstan, June Cashmere fiber travels to Europe for scouring, dehairing, and spinning into yarn, then to the Saco River Dye-house in Maine for organic dyeing. A few select stockists carry the yarn in addition to June Cashmere's online store.

Spin Off was captivated by the project and approached June Cashmere to hold back a limited amount of fiber from the spinning mill. We are delighted to support the shepherds of the Chong-Alay Valley while offering handspinners the opportunity to spin this exceptional cashmere. Visit interweavestore.com to get your own scoured, dehaired cashmere cloud.

You may not have come across "cloud" as a fiber preparation before. Some describe it as only picked, while others say it has been carded but not organized into roving. In any case, fine, short fibers such as cashmere, yak, and pygora are most likely to be found in this disarranged form.

Sampling is not only important but even delightful when a new fiber crosses your path. Spinning teacher Pat Bullen; teacher, author, and *Spin Off* assistant editor Elizabeth Prose; and editor Anne Merrow each received a handful of cloud to experiment with. For a complete description of their experiments, see "Spinning a Cashmere Cloud" at www.interweave.com.



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2

Pat Bullen aimed for a two-ply laceweight worsted yarn that would provide structure in knitting.

Pat's Sample #1, spun worsted with double-drive from cloud. Pat's Sample #2, spun worsted with scotch tension from rolag.



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2

Elizabeth Prose spun the June Cashmere fiber with a warm, lacy cowl in mind.

Elizabeth's Sample #1, spun with long draw on a suspended spindle. Elizabeth's Sample #2, spun with long draw with double-drive from rolag.



Left, scoured and dehaired cloud; right, combed top (the next stage before commercial spinning).



Anne Merrow spun on a takkli, preferring the support spindle for a pure woolen yarn with high twist.

Anne's Sample #1, spun with long-draw from a cloud using a takkli. Anne's Sample #2, spun with long-draw from a cloud using a takkli.



June Cashmere Cloud to Spin available at interweave.com