

2014. Nov 8 Felt Workshop on the outskirts of Kashkar (18 km)

<Kighiz> is felt in Uighur language

We visited three Uighur felt-maker families in the mud walled Avat Village area. Clearly the end of the felting season with lovely dust covered yellow Poplar tree leaves drifting down to the ground as we entered the compounds. It seemed they had already used up their wool for the current year. With a feeling of desertion around us, like everyone had just ran off to the fields for harvesting, we entered the high walls of the buildings beside the running stream.

I saw wool staple opening/separating machines, the traditional five pronged wooden fork-shaped tool (as used in Turkey and Iran, too, today) for laying the fluffed out wool base on top the prepared motif, as well as fulling machines to roll the moistened wool into a durable, hard felt. The motif was prepared with strips of Prefelt (lightly fullled non-structured wool fabric), both in straight narrow strips, as well as, saw tooth cuts with a zigzag edge on one side and a straight edge on the opposite side of the strip, also, dyed staples for the the border fringe were hanging up and scattered around the work areas.

Evidence of chemical dyeing at each workshop site was documented as we saw in the sectioned off courtyards there were large, metal cauldrons, fired by wood or a gas heat source.

Designated work areas for wool fiber separation/ opening (either separate room or a walled off area to keep drifting wool fiber consolidated in an enclosed area), dyeing area which composed of one large Chinese "wok" raised above a fire pit, a wall area to prevent wind from effecting the laying out of the design usually with a reed roof overhead to keep out of the heat of the sun and the falling tree leaves, and a machine used for fulling the rugs.

What an indelible image to see the brilliant yellow cobs of the drying corn on the ground, in contrast with the dark, mixed brown felt rugs with their oh, so, colorful ethnic geometric designs in purple, dark pink, red, green, yellow, black and white.

In fact, only the presence of the children and grandparents was evident on the premises at the time of day and month we visited. The parents were said to have gone to the fields for harvesting cotton, pomegranates, Chinese dates (The Jujube date is dried on the plant, as well as, by the side of the road and is used cut up in rice porridge and smaller fruits put in water bottles for flavoring) and other seasonal produce, so clearly their felt work was just one of the various part-time jobs generating income still today in this late autumn season.

We were there just in the nick of time and I will be forever impressed by the scenes and traditional presence of feltmaking in this region. Although we rarely found any felt items in use we saw it on display in other locations like museums, from the bus window on a donkey cart, rolled up and abandoned at the animal market, and an old piece in position for prayer at the Imam Asim Shrine and tomb, at least it was evident that there are still artisans producing new felt rugs in this area of the Silk Road today.

2014 Nov 9 Outskirts of Hotan, Xianjiang Prov., CN

Feltmaker workshop in Yulonglashi

Address: Takta kuwruk 4-059, Hotan, Xinxiang, China

Tel: 1500 140 8998

Name: Mamatieli Family

A second generation family business of large felt rugs, employing three workers producing machine fulling felt rugs in two varieties, solid color natural dark brown or a dyed red version of the same both with border fringes, and patterned rugs of brilliant colors on a natural medium beige base, also with fringed edges. Also lying around the compound were large dye basins suggesting the use of chemical dyes in pre-dyeing of the wool fiber before separating the staples and processing into rugs. They do not wash the wool before use. (Note: due to the dry climate there is much less oil in the wool to begin with compared with conditions of other countries.)

The current young owner said his father died five years ago, and when he was working he could make more than ten different rug patterns. Now the workshop produces about ten colorful, cut out "prefelt" inlay patterns on a natural medium beige wool base.

Sizes 1.5 x 3 meters; 5-6kg per rug

Machine beating for 1.5 hours, fulling two rugs at a time.

Fringed edges with spots of brilliant color (red, rose pink, purple, orange, green) or one color, as the red dyed wool version, with wool dyed at this workshop.

Some years ago there were three to four workshops but now two workshops in this village. We were informed that each village has one or two felt workshops, even today.

13 years ago they got a fulling machine which helps them produce four rugs a day during the rug making season from mid-March through the end of November. The fulling machine accommodated two rolled reed mat bundles. As the bundles were pushed forward into a curved metal wall they naturally turned as the machine arm retracted allowing them to roll back towards the plow type arm, then again the bundles were pushed forward into the curved wall asserting pressure on the bundle and then again, as the arm was released the bundles rolled back towards the machine.

If clients send their own wool the cost is 90 yuan, if all prepared by workshop then it is 250 yuan, plain solid rugs cost 100 yuan (2014. November 100 yuan for a rug was approximately \$16) Numerical markings on the back of the rugs in "chalk" designate the order number of the client.

It was mentioned that they do not use soap, but possibly make an alkaline felting solution from ash and water.

Red felt rugs are used on the floor and on top of the wooden platform/ beds whereas the colorful patterned rug is used on the floor at the entrance to the house. It is said that the dark natural mixed brown wool felt with fringe is healthful for the kidneys, knees and bones of the elderly.
