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# Twist

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## Technical revolution

Why performance  
fabrics are on the  
catwalk

Rare and speciality  
fibres focus

The story behind organic silk

What's provenance labelling  
and why is it in demand?

Raphael le Masne  
de Chermont, CEO of  
Shanghai Tang, on China  
and luxury

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# Hidden value

The chance discovery of the outstanding benefits of the yak's soft wool fibre have led to the birth of a new company producing outdoor clothing which offers exceptional warmth and durability. Our US correspondent **John W McCurry** reports.

Aaron Pattillo describes the events that led him and business partner Julian Wilson into the yak wool garment business as "serendipitous." Both were living in Beijing in 2006 when they met and became friends through a cycling club. A subsequent vacation to the Tibetan plateau introduced them to the wool of the versatile yak. Camping out in the bitter December cold with a family of Tibetan nomads gave the pair a crash course on the valuable beast.

"They have very little up there except the yak," says Pattillo. "It's very much the analogy of the American Indian and the buffalo. They use this animal for everything. They eat yak meat for breakfast, lunch and dinner. They use yak milk and they burn yak dung for fuel."

They also use some of the yak wool to build the tents in which they live, and for ropes.

Pattillo, who is from Colorado in the US, and Wilson, from the UK, learned that the Tibetans use the coarser yak hair, while the softer fibres, the ones suitable for knit garments, mostly blow away in the wind. "We thought, wouldn't it be cool to use this part of the wool and give the herdsmen an extra source of income," explains Pattillo.

So the two men, neither with a background in the textile and apparel industry, left with two bags of yak wool and headed back to Beijing on a seemingly improbable quest.

They started asking questions, reaching out to anyone

they knew who was involved in the industry. They commissioned tests at labs in Beijing and Hong Kong. And they soon realised they might be on to something.

"The biggest thing that stood out was the thermal properties of it," says Pattillo. "In two tests the yak wool was determined 10-15% warmer than Merino wool. It is also durable and resistant to pilling."

The men made several trips back to the area where they had met the nomads and put out the word that they would buy as much yak wool as they could collect. A cooperative was organised, but the collection effort presented some challenges. While more than 90% of the world's estimated population of 15 million yak live on the Tibetan plateau in the Himalayas, they are usually found in herds about 200 miles apart.

"The timing is also an issue," says Pattillo. "Yak wool is collected by combing and picking once a year in the summer time when they are shedding naturally. That's also the time of year the Tibetans are collecting a particular kind of mushroom that is used for Chinese medicines that commands a premium price. For them, yak wool is a secondary source of income."

Finding the right manufacturing partner presented another challenge - very few textile companies have worked with yak wool. "Through persistence and good fortune, we were able to find a group that had some experience with it and were quite knowledgeable,"



Aaron Pattillo (left) and Julian Wilson, co-founders of Khunu, with yak on the Tibetan plateau.



The majority of the world's yak live on the Tibetan plateau.



Yak sweater from Khunu.



Yak women's sweater from Khunu.

says Pattillo.

Separate companies were contracted to do the knitting and final assembly of garments, which for now are comprised of sweaters. "We had some prototype garments made and we were convinced that we could make a good product out of it," says Pattillo. "We essentially did a soft launch in February 2009 with three styles in brown and black for men."

### **'In two tests the yak wool was determined 10-15% warmer than Merino wool'**

Initially products were just sold on the company's web site, [www.khunu.com](http://www.khunu.com). The pair also did a few 'trunk show' events to test the market. The reaction was encouraging.

"From there it seemed promising enough to continue. We got a designer and did a new round of designs, adding in women's sweaters, and we also spent more time in the region working out our wool sourcing plan."

A new round of products was launched and Khunu has taken its products to a small number of high-end outdoor shops at ski resorts in Colorado and Switzerland. Along the way, Ian Stewart, a founder of the US technology

magazine *Wired*, became a major investor in the company and now serves as its chairman.

The new company takes its name from a nomadic tribe in the region that pre-dated Genghis Khan. It is also the name of a mountain in the region. Khunu's product line-up consists of three styles of sweaters for men and women. More colours have been added.

"We keep thinking about product expansion," explains Pattillo. "It seems to do quite well in sweaters so that is where we will keep our focus. We will add a few styles and build out further." Khunu's sweaters retail in the US\$160 to US\$240 range. Future products may include lower price point items such as scarves and hats. Socks are also a possibility.

"We will never be able to get the economy of scale that Merino has," says Pattillo. "We are facing a situation where it is challenging to get the amount of wool that is needed. Sourcing will be a challenge and our business will never be high volume." However, Pattillo and Wilson are committed to returning 2% of Khunu's profits back to the Tibetan communities to supply basic needs.

Pattillo says he and Wilson are pleased with the quality of the yarn going into Khunu garments and will likely keep its yarn processing in China because of the manufacturer's expertise. "For our next round of products, we will have the knitting done in Italy," adds Pattillo. "We are focusing on Europe to a good extent. The benefit of having the final pieces made outside of China resonates with having it as a higher end brand." ●