





## DESIGNER PROFILE

# CREATING SUCCESS IN A FAR-FLUNG LAND

## TAHDA TEXTILES

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Photos courtesy Tahda Textiles



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**D**erek and Anna Homsher have accomplished what first appears to be a remarkable magic trick. Not only have they created a thriving alpaca textile company, they've done so more than 7,000 miles away from home.

Maybe that's why the name "Tahda" sounds so fitting to American ears.

But don't be fooled, this feat didn't happen "just like that." Instead of being conjured out of thin air, it took hard work, patience, diplomacy and tenacity for them to bring their woven alpaca textile company to life.

In reality, "Tahda" is the local Tibetan word for "the weaving place."

"It is 'a sanctified place,'" Derek says,

"an area of the home set apart for the quiet and methodical art of weaving, a place of deep thought, artistic survival and heartfelt conversation."

## Jumping the Language Barrier

Derek, the son of a cabinetmaker and teacher, is a natural handyman and entrepreneur — he's adept at making something out of nothing. Adjusting to life in various cultures comes natural for Anna, who grew up traveling, attending an international boarding school and honing her love of art.

Even with powerful skill sets, youth and adaptability, the Homshers had to start with a blank slate in terms of communication — before they could do anything else, they

had to learn Mandarin Chinese, a famously difficult task.

In 2014, the Homshers, with their one-year-old child, moved to a Chinese city with a population of about eight million people where they began studying Mandarin Chinese and researching business opportunities in earnest. Derek describes learning the language as "honestly probably the hardest thing we have ever done."

They approached it pragmatically, with a daily lesson plan and goals. They pushed themselves to follow a "pretty rigid schedule" and found that taking breaks was also essential to helping their brains digest "all we were learning."

After three and half years, when they finally felt fairly capable in Mandarin, they moved to a Tibetan area





of the country and set up Tahda, an alpaca textile weaving business.

## Expanding Their Reach

One might say that the Homshers are living an intellectually challenging and physically remote lifestyle. They admit it isn't for everyone, but they love it. It must be going well because since they moved to China, their family has grown — they have three children now.

**Opposite:** The White Yak throw blanket and three pillow set includes: the White Yak throw blanket, two White Yak throw pillows and the Nomad lumbar pillow. This heirloom set uses the stark contrast between black and white alpaca fiber to create a modern, fresh design.

**Above:** Inspired by the traditional striped aprons worn by Tibetan women, the Bangdian pillow is made from white and grey hand-spun alpaca fiber.

## Area Traditions

Fiber from sheep, goats and yaks is traditionally used to make practical home items such as blankets, tents and everyday clothes in the area. "Until recently, there was never a huge need in this type of survivalist culture to make anything soft. Life was too pragmatic to think about comfort in the same way many of us do," Derek says.

In fact, in the area the Homshers are doing business, it is rare to see anyone spinning or weaving with natural fibers because synthetic yarn is very cheap and easy to attain, which in turn makes natural fiber traditions unsustainable for most people personally, Derek explains.

But how does the alpaca, thought of as primarily a South American animal, become the cornerstone of a business run in China by Americans?

## Ecological Concerns

The area where the Homshers live and work is facing desertification from fiber animals as a result of overgrazing.

"There is a ton of erosion and destroyed mountains from the goats and yaks," Derek says. "The people who live here are sustenance farmers and herders; they depend on their animals as a means of survival."

While there is no easy answer to desertification, Homsher says that the situation informed the Homshers' choice to use alpaca fiber exclusively in Tahda Textiles.

They also chose alpaca fiber as a result of Derek's former job state-side shearing with Pete Hofmann of Top Knot Shearing. It was through that experience that Derek says he began to understand the alpaca industry and the nature of the luxury



**Above:** Eden, Anna, Phinehas, Derek and Haddon Homsher.

**Inset:** The Bangdian throw is a handwoven, thick, white hand-spun blanket with grey tassels inspired by the traditional Tibetan aprons (the bangdian) that Tibetan women wear. Weighing in at more than five pounds, the blanket is meant to last for generations. 60x43 inches.

**Far right top to bottom:**

The Niru scarf is one of Tahda's most popular scarves. It was named after the Niru area, known for its spinning and weaving traditions. Scarves are available in 12x66 inches, 13x66 inches and 14x71 inches.

In the United States, Tahda's most popular items are scarves and stoles. This tri-colored De-qin scarf is named for an area with some of the most unique and diverse biomes in the area.

The Yangla stole is generously sized at 22x71 inches, not including tassel length. It is named for the relocated Yangla Tibetans who now live in Shangri-la, many long for the mountains of their homeland.

Yading Nature Preserve is home to three holy mountains: Mt. Chenresig (19,790 ft.), Chana Dorje (19,547 ft.) and Jampelyang (19,547 ft.) and a religious destination for many Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims who gain merit as they do a holy kora around the mountains. The Yading stole measures 22x70 inches.





fiber. Derek was also aware of the fact that “many U.S. alpaca farmers have piles of fiber in their barns and are looking for a meaningful place to sell it.”

## Where Skills and Commerce Meet

Thinking globally, Derek’s entrepreneurial mind saw surpluses in some areas and need in others — and also an impending irreversible cultural loss for the people in the Tibetan area.

“When I saw that many of these minority cultures were going to lose their fiber arts traditions if someone didn’t help them market their skills, we saw a perfect match,” Derek says.

“These people have amazing skills, but the natural fibers they were working with traditionally are really coarse and scratchy — it is hard to sell a scarf like that! So, we thought, ‘Let’s introduce alpaca fiber and make some beautiful products that

have meaningful social impact!’”

## The Raw Deal: Sourcing Fiber

Originally, the Homshers’ idea was to run an alpaca farm to produce fiber, a trajectory that at first seems obvious.

However, any alpaca in China costs about \$3,000 now, Derek says, and a few years ago that figure was a lot higher.

“However, there is no show industry here, so most sellers don’t seem too concerned about the fiber quality or genetics. Currently, alpacas are mostly purchased as pets or sold to zoos or attractions,” he says. This made sourcing fiber tricky.

Also, they knew that they needed to have a marketable product before launching an entire farm.

So the next idea they explored was sourcing alpaca fiber locally. “We had visited one of the largest alpaca farms in China, home to more than



**Above:** The Herdsman lap throw and three pillow set in warm cinnamon brown and white alpaca was created to last generations. Tahda Textiles’ tagline, “Weaving timeless heirlooms in timeless places,” is perfectly encapsulated in their wide range of products.

**Left:** “Tradition says that you can’t cut your cloth off from the loom once the sun has already started to go down. You need to wait till the next morning. If you do cut it off, the saying goes that for each string you cut you receive the bad merit like that of killing one life. So, for many of our weaving projects this would mean having the sin debt of taking 300-500 lives!” Derek explains.





1,000+ animals, down from a few years ago when there were 2,000.”

However, the “price of fiber there and at various places in China was between \$200-\$300 USD/kg for ungraded, unsorted fiber,” Derek says. So, they switched gears and sourced their fiber from the United States.

However, as their need for fiber grew larger, the process became more difficult. “After many attempts,

and almost a year trying to figure out the correct way to import a large shipment of fiber from the U.S., we gave up and found a supplier willing to sell us white alpaca fiber that they had already imported from Peru.”

“We still get all our colored fiber in smaller shipments from the U.S., mostly from Spring Grove Alpaca Ranch in Quarryville, Pennsylvania, but because of shipping costs and

import problems, it’s not really a sustainable plan,” Derek says.

Derek says, “Sourcing fiber in an efficient way has probably been the most difficult.” That’s why they haven’t given up on starting their own herd in the near future.

### **Waste Knot, Want Knot**

Derek describes part of what has been humorous about melding their

own culture with that of the local weavers.

“We earned a nickname very early on,” Derek says. “They call us the ‘wasteful family.’ In our desire to keep knots out of the middle of our products, when warping the loom, we will often tie on a new ball of yarn at the beginning or end of the warp, not in the middle, wasting a bit of yarn.”

To the local Tibetans, this is an unthinkable waste of resources.

Wasting time is equally appalling to the local weavers. If the weaving pattern gets an error, Derek insists it is time to take out the string and re-do it.

The local weavers don’t seem to mind the knots or flaws in the pattern because they do not have previous experience selling items they make. Instead, they usually pragmatically make things to use themselves.

Whether items are good or bad quality is also largely a matter of perspective.

The ancestors of the people working at Tahda needed to create garments that could stand up to the extreme cold common in these areas — and their clothes and blankets needed to last many years.

The Tibetan weavers “often say that our scarves are a bad quality because they are not super tightly woven,” Derek says. “To them, if it is not woven as thick and as tight as a carpet, it’s not good quality. Trying to convince them that people don’t want to wear a floor rug around their neck with absolutely no drape has been quite a challenge!”

“Living in this harsh climate has not been easy, and the thicker and heavier the blanket the better; to them, warmth and long-lasting textiles equal good quality. So, we have had to push for a bit of shift in their thinking as we train them to

follow what the market wants. We have pretty much followed their tradition for our throws, but for scarves this was a no-go.”

## Enduring Products

Tahda sells handspun alpaca yarn, pillows, alpaca throws, scarves, stoles, spinning tools and heirloom sets. All of the Tahda products are made from undyed alpaca fiber, with some products featuring hand-blended natural colors to create more color ways.

Currently, Tahda’s best sellers are their scarves, which they offer both in China and in the U.S. However, pillows and throws are especially popular with Americans.

The Homshers are committed to producing high quality items that last and are valued through generations, thus their tagline, “Weaving timeless heirlooms in timeless places.”

Luckily, their workforce had some inside knowledge about this way of thinking. When the Homshers asked their artisans about the life of their woven products, they said that their traditional blankets would last five generations with proper care.

“We knew we wanted to try and create products that are timeless, that don’t go out of style,” Derek says. “We try and do this by sticking to simple patterns that they have always used; this is also the reason we stick to natural colors.”

## Provenance

The landscape includes inspirational features many Tahda consumers may not be able to conceive of: glaciers, ice-cold waterfalls and extremely forbidding mountain peaks, including one that measures more than 22,100 feet tall.

The Tahda scarves and stoles



are identified with place names like “De-qin,” “Niru,” “Dongwang” and “Abuji,” to name just a few of the remote geographic points Tahda gets their inspiration.

“From high, glacier-covered mountains to deep river gorges, Tibetans take great pride in the natural beauty of this area,” Derek says. “These people appreciate beauty, and it is this timeless natural inspiration we encourage our artisans to pack into every one of our products.”



## A Uniquely Interconnected Workforce

The Homshers are aware that the Tibetan weavers and their rich cultural traditions are essential to their business. Each of the individuals working for Tahda brings a unique culture to work each day, borne from generation upon generation of weaving experience and skill.

Among Tibetans, weaving and spinning are considered a traditional

women's art. Artisans are taught by their mothers, grandmothers and aunties, and techniques are honed from a young age through daily practice.

Employees are featured in vignettes on the Tahda website, where videos show some of them at work at the looms.

In their profiles, many spinners and weavers identify themselves as the sisters of other employees or as spouses. It's clear that the Tahda community

is tight-knit and that the Homshers value each worker and strive to bring them inclusion and recognition.

"On every item we sell, the tag gives the name of the artisan and the time they spent creating that product; both the hours spent spinning and the hours spent weaving," Derek says.

"Why? Because we want our customers to know and feel the social impact of their purchase — our website just facilitates that introduction.

"We made a decision very early

on in our business to stick to hand-spun yarn. We don't even use spinning wheels! The hand-spun yarn accounts for much of our labor cost, but it was a decision that positively impacts a community on a social and economic level much more than if we used machine-spun yarn."

## What the Future Holds

Tahda domestic sales are primarily derived from the tourist area of the town where the Homshers live from local shop displays of their products. "Most of the domestic tourists who like our products are from the east of the country, from cities like Beijing and Shanghai," Derek says.

Tahda also has a robust digital presence in Asia. "We are continually looking to expand our domestic reach so we are looking into selling on platforms like Taobao Live and WeChat."

The Homshers are definitely looking to expand their reach in the U.S., too. Tahda is openly seeking American partners interested in selling their woven products in American alpaca farm shops and boutiques.

They are also preparing to launch an alpaca farm/guesthouse and will continue to train their spinners and weavers to meet their rigorous quality standards.

"Our goal is to purchase a few animals in 2021 and see if we can grow a herd to become a sustainable source for our fiber supply," Derek says. "We would love to try and make it sustainable and profitable enough for local farmers to want to raise these animals and sell us their fiber at a fair price."

And they aren't done expanding intellectually either.

Despite the herculean effort the Homshers put into learning the language, barriers remain. "Mandarin



Derek explains, "In Tibetan culture, if the weaver dies, the heddles from looms need to be cut up or burned because they say that the spirit of the weaver will get lost in it and never find its way out. This is why you won't find heddles for sale — they all make their own and won't ever lose track of them."

Chinese is the language taught in all the schools here on the mainland," Derek says, "However, in some of the more remote areas, some people haven't had the opportunity to go to school and so you will find people who can't speak Mandarin."

"Currently, we are feeling the need to spend the time to learn Tibetan as many of our artisans cannot speak Mandarin Chinese." ●

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