

MADE IN CHINA

Common concerns with contemporary Chinese rugs

By **LISA WAGNER, CRS**



Lisa Wagner is a RIA/NIRC Certified Rug Specialist, a member of the RIA Textile Council, and an owner of the San Diego Rug Cleaning Company. She is a rug care instructor for Jon-Don and a business coach for Piranha Marketing. She has served on the board of directors of CFI, IICRC, and Connections, and was *CM/Cleanfax*® Magazine's 2006 Person of the Year. For more information on Lisa's rug training and knowledge products visit www.RugSecrets.com.

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With the label "Made in China," there are a few thoughts that come to mind:

Cheap. Commonplace. Inferior quality control. Disposable goods.

I am often asked which countries weave the "best" rugs.

The truth is that I have seen exceptional rugs *and* downright garbage rugs produced in just about every single weaving country.

There is good and bad everywhere, and with rugs there is no exception. And so China produces some very high-quality textiles, as well as some extremely low-quality ones.

China produces a very large number of rugs.

In this article, I will focus on rugs from one specific era of production (the fourth quarter of the 20th century) that you will recognize because a lot of people own them, and you have surely cleaned a few.

These are sometimes called "sculpted Chinese wool," because of the tool they use around the floral

designs, and also are referred to by their knot count as 60-line, 90-line, 120-line, and so on.

They are thick, deep pile, heavy to lift, in a variety of colors and motifs, and have a huge pristine white fringe along both ends.

This Chinese production has some concerns unique to its construction and some potential dangers waiting for the inattentive or inexperienced rug cleaner.

Chinese chemical exposure

As with most rugs woven in the past half-century, Chinese rugs are chemically washed. This is a solution (often utilizing chlorine bleach) to dissolve the wool fiber cuticles in order to produce a few desired textile effects.

This process helps to make the wool reflect more light (so it looks more silky), to mute the colors (so it is more appealing to the eye), and to soften the feel of the wool (so it feels smooth rather than scratchy).

Using chemical treatments on hair as an example (wool is a protein fiber, just like hair), everyone can understand that light treatments can create some attractive results, while aggressive treatments can create damage that can really look like "damaged goods."

Who hasn't seen someone who has overused bleach — or hydrogen peroxide — on her hair that makes the color tones look far from natural, and the feel like brittle straw?

This type of treatment always causes damage to the fibers; it's just a matter of how much.

And with this particular era of production, the answer to "how much" seems to be: "Enough that cleaners should be on their guard."

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Sun dangers

These rugs are sun-sensitive and will fade.

In fact, depending on how much the fibers were damaged with their initial chemical wash, you might see the fading occur right in front of your eyes.

I have seen some lower quality Chinese sculpted-rugs put out damp in the sun to dry and literally lose their color completely.

The tips of the fibers, already frosted with a loss of dye from their prior stripping, continued to release color down a good one-half inch into the pile.

Even in a fully dry state, the rugs will fade with direct sunlight. But sun drying, or utilizing high temperatures when cleaning, will make the reaction occur faster.

Rug precautionary measures

Before cleaning, flip over half of the rug on to itself to see that there is, in fact, fading. The back side has had no environmental "exposure," so those colors will be more true to the original.

Also, "grin" the fibers open on the front side so you can see the difference between the color vibrancy at the *base* of the fibers versus the top *tips*.

All rugs have a light and dark direction, depending on if you are looking into the grain of the face fibers or looking with

the grain.

With these rugs, the difference between light and dark is very noticeable, so walk around the piece to note this difference.

Be sure to point this out to your client.

Tips to minimize further fading during your cleaning:

- Do not dry these rugs in the sun — ever. Also, avoid high heat in your cleaning process.
- Mark the direction of the rug in the home, and be sure to lay the rug in the *same* direction or it will look lighter or darker than it should. Rugs should be rotated annually to even up fade and wear, but if you lay the rug in a new direction the client may freak out that you changed the entire look of her rug.

Spotting dangers

These rugs are sensitive to spotting solutions. I have seen coffee stain remover fry an area white (total dye loss), and I've seen rust remover do the same.

Remember, these fibers are already deteriorated from the manufacturers who used a "wool dissolving" chemical treatment on them.

Any products that would normally work for you on other "less compromised" wool rugs may not do so on these, and when you make the spot or stain worse, then the client's problem becomes your

problem in the blink of an eye.

Rug precautionary measures

Be very attentive to the front and back for spills, especially pet stains.

Pet urine goes on hot and acidic and can either create permanent staining or a loss of original dye color in the affected areas.

Your options for stain removal on these particular rugs are very limited, and the likelihood of making areas worse increases.

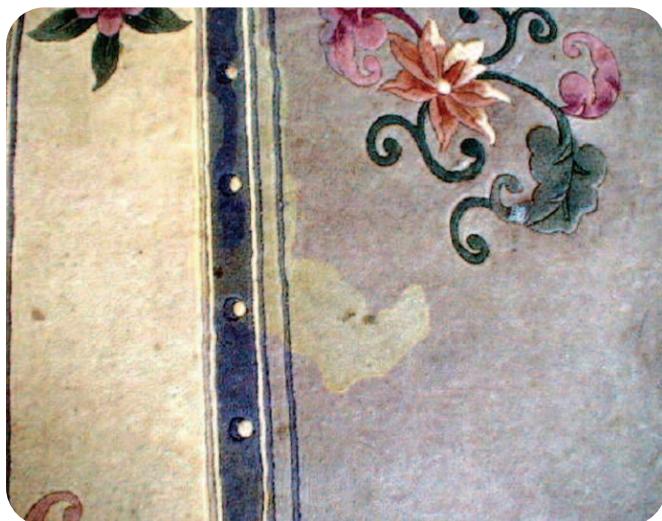
Best to stick to *just* a wash and hope for the best.

Tips to minimize buying a rug because of bad spotting:

- On these rugs, because of their inherent dangers, it is best to simply say that all stains are permanent. This way, if the client wants the rug washed anyway, you will not be expected to create any miracles, and if some come out, then you are the unexpected hero.
- Test, test, test! Never apply product in multiple areas to work on spills or stains. Test one area, and then look at the results from both *ends* to see if you have made it worse in one or both directions.
- If, despite my warnings you want to live dangerously by applying aggressive stain removers (I've seen even products designated "safe" for wool cause damage), then wet down the area first in order to slow the reaction (this will give



When sun damage is suspected, look at the back of the rug. Compare color differences as part of your inspection.



Urine goes on hot and acidic and often creates permanent damage on these types of rugs.

you more control to stop it when it goes bad on you).

- One final note on the face fibers of these rugs: It is not uncommon to hear of a rotary scrubber (or other stiff brush or rake) “scarring” these rugs by tearing the face fibers. Be careful.



Chemical treatments can damage and weaken the tassels on these types of rugs. Tug on just one single tassel and see if it is secure.

Fringe dangers

The fringe on these rugs is often rotten.

In fact, if you’ve grabbed one by the end to tug it and the tassels ripped away like a handful of hair — then I’m not telling you anything new.

The chemical treatment on these rugs tends to yellow the cotton fringe. So to make them white again, an aggressive whitening treatment (with hydrogen peroxide) is applied in China.

This deteriorates the fringe, resulting in yellowing with age, rotten kelim ends that can tear, and fringe tassels that untwist and pull away easily.

Rug precautionary measures

Always pay special attention to the fringes on these rugs.

Look for tears and for missing tassels.

Grab a *single* tassel and give it a tug. If it pulls off easily, then you will have to be extra careful to prevent further damage.

Tips on minimizing further damage to your fringe:

- Do not *scrub* very damaged tassels to

clean them; instead, use some very warm (or hot) water to pour over the ends, after the rug itself has been thoroughly cleaned, to help release soil or shampoo residue from the cotton tassels.

- My favorite solution to bad fringe? *Replace it.* Fringe replacement on Chinese rugs is one of our more common, and profitable, repair services.

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Final foundation dangers

On many hand-woven rugs, you can see white weft and warp fibers that “peek” at you from the back.

But modern Chinese rugs are so tightly knotted that you do not see any white foundation threads at all. It has what is called a “closed back” weave.

These cotton foundation threads are quite thick, which contributes to that stiff feel that the rug has, as opposed to the tribal rugs that can feel more like a blanket, very pliable.

Knowing that cotton is an absorbent fiber, it is a good analogy to consider all visible spills on these rugs as the tip of the iceberg.

Anything coming from the top, or the bottom, of these rugs will absorb through the wool knots and get trapped within those inner cotton foundation fibers.

Also, because of its hefty, tight weave, serious damage from the back may not make itself visible on the front.

Rotten areas, perhaps from longtime pet urine exposure, may still have face fibers intact on the front, and they might pull away during cleaning. In other words, if the inner cotton “skeleton” of



The thick pile construction with these rugs means there could be more hidden dangers than you originally thought.

the rug rots, then the wool has nothing strong to hold on to, so it simply pulls away.

Rug precautionary measures

Be aware of pets, plants, and insects in the home.

Inspecting the back of the rug can show you areas of pet urine exposure, mold or rot from plant watering, or insects having a Chinese buffet of the wool.

This is damage you need to document *before* you begin cleaning, instead of after you’ve created a bald area, a hole, or an even smellier rug (urine wicking up during a surface cleaning).

Tips to avoid damage you cannot reverse:

- If the rug is heavily soiled, and there are pets in the home, assume there will be pet stains on the rug. Make certain to evaluate — and digitally photograph — the back side to protect yourself from the client being surprised by stains she cannot recall. (Also, whenever a rug is heavily soiled, you need a waiver that explains that you cannot inspect the front at all for any pre-existing conditions because it is simply too dirty.)
- For rugs near plants, look on the back for visible mold. Also feel the area closest to the plants — dry rot will make the rug feel stiffer, and will crack when bent. Dry rot is not reversible and can cause the area to disintegrate, so be careful.
- Dry the rugs face down (after you’ve groomed them) if you are concerned about any wicking problems. This, as well as an acid rinse, will give the face fibers a less “crispy” feel when dry.

One plus about the Chinese rugs from this era is that the normal worry about “dye bleeding” is lessened considerably by the prior chemical washing (as well as having been around long enough to have already been washed a few times).

Rugs are like people in that damage done in their younger years becomes more and more visible with time.

These rugs are no different.

But if you know what to expect, and the key dangers to look out for, you’ll be able to wash these without worry.

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