

Zhang Yiping

# Story of the Silk Road



Translated by Jia Zongyi



CHINA  
INTERCONTINENTAL  
PRESS

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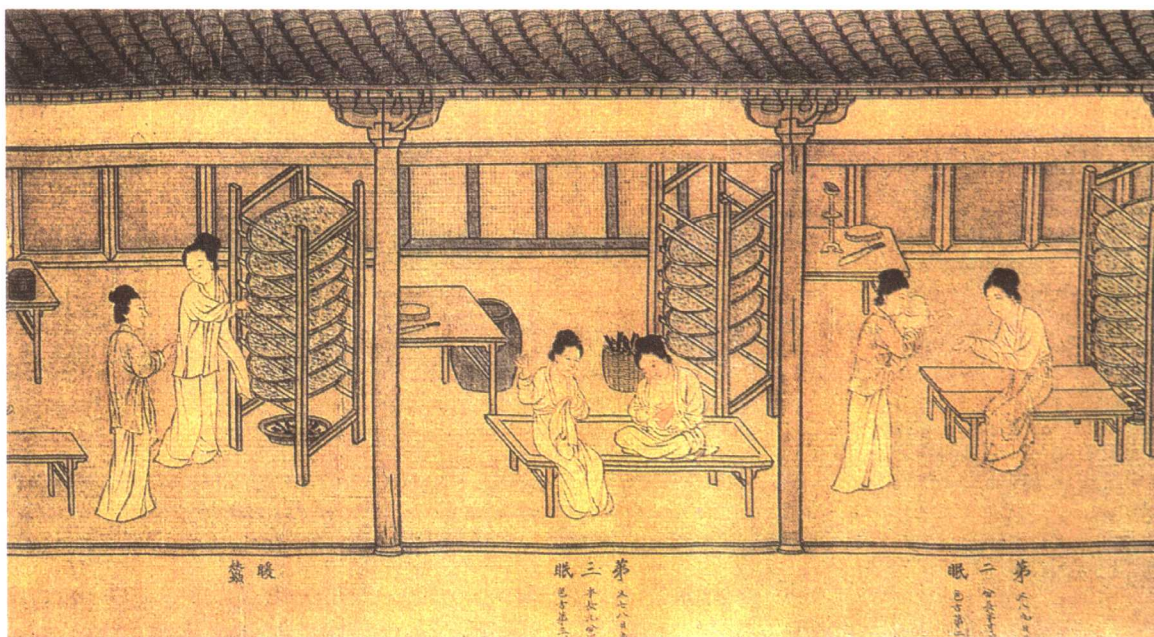


# The Home of Silk

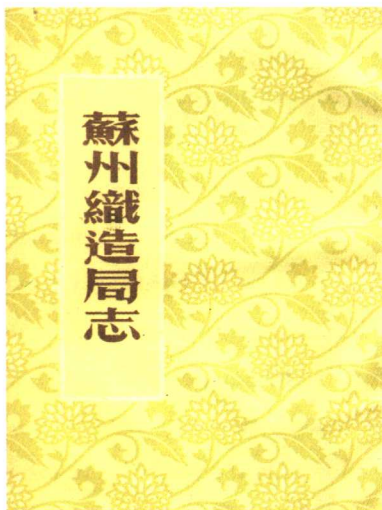
When ladies wear chi-pao, a close-fit woman's dress with high neck and slit skirt, they look gracefully slender and charming. When gentlemen wear Tang-zhuang, a Tang Dynasty-styled dress, they look elegant and handsome. Both Chi-pao and Tang-zhuang are made of silk, a fabric almost defined a civilization and brought fashion as well as culture, romantic vision and imagination from a remote and mystical country China to the western world and today this ancient fabric still enjoys a high degree of popularity.

The silk reaches the Western World along a long, time-honored merchant route and the Silk Road as known to the world today connects three continents of Asia, Europe and Africa, runs through China, Afghanistan, India, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, and finally stops at Rome in Italy. The Silk Road has witnessed bustling traders, carefree tourists, and devoted religious believers. During chaotic years of its history, some sections of the Silk Road were full of soldiers and refugees. Frequent trade and cultural exchange made this great route a common historic legacy for many countries and nations and brought prosperity to the people in the regions.

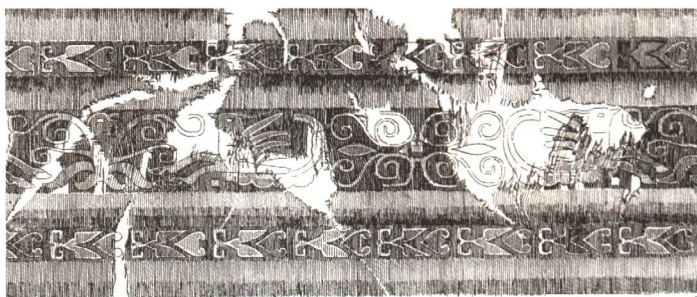
The culture of silkworms using mulberry leaves as well as silk reeling and weaving, are the invention of ancient Chinese people. Almost 5,000



An ancient Chinese silk painting entitled "Mulberry leaves and Silkworms."



History of Suzhou Bureau of Silk Weaving, edited by Sun Pei in Qing Dynasty. The book recorded in details the economy of Suzhou City when it was at the centre of the ancient China Silk Industry.



A piece of ancient Chinese silk found by Stein on the Silk Road during early 20th century.

years ago, Chinese began to farm silkworm to produce silk. Archaeological discovery shows, as early as in the late Neolithic Age, residents along the Yellow River and the Yangtze River already learnt to make silk threads, ribbons and silk fabric.

There are lots of moving stories about the origin of silk. One of these tells a legendary story of silk and Yellow Emperor. More than 4,000 years ago, when a clan leader called Yellow Emperor—said to be the ancestor of the Chinese people—held a celebration, a beautiful girl came down from the heaven. She held a bundle of bright, yellow silks in one hand, and silver ones in another, and presented them to the Yellow Emperor. The ruler was delighted and ordered to make them into soft, light silk cloth. And this girl was respected as the “Goddess of silkworm.”

Another story says, it was the imperial concubine of the Yellow Emperor called Lei Zu, who first discovered silk, and she taught people to grasp the art of sericulture and silk reeling and weaving. From that time on, the production of silk was gradually prospered in China.

The hieroglyphs of the silkworm, mulberry, silk and silk thread appeared in the inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells as early as in Shang Dynasty (c.16th-11th centuries BC) In the ancient tombs of Shang Dynasty also discovered jades carved with pictures of silkworms and embroidered silk fabrics. All this indicates China has mastered the technology of silk fabrication in Shang Dynasty at latest.

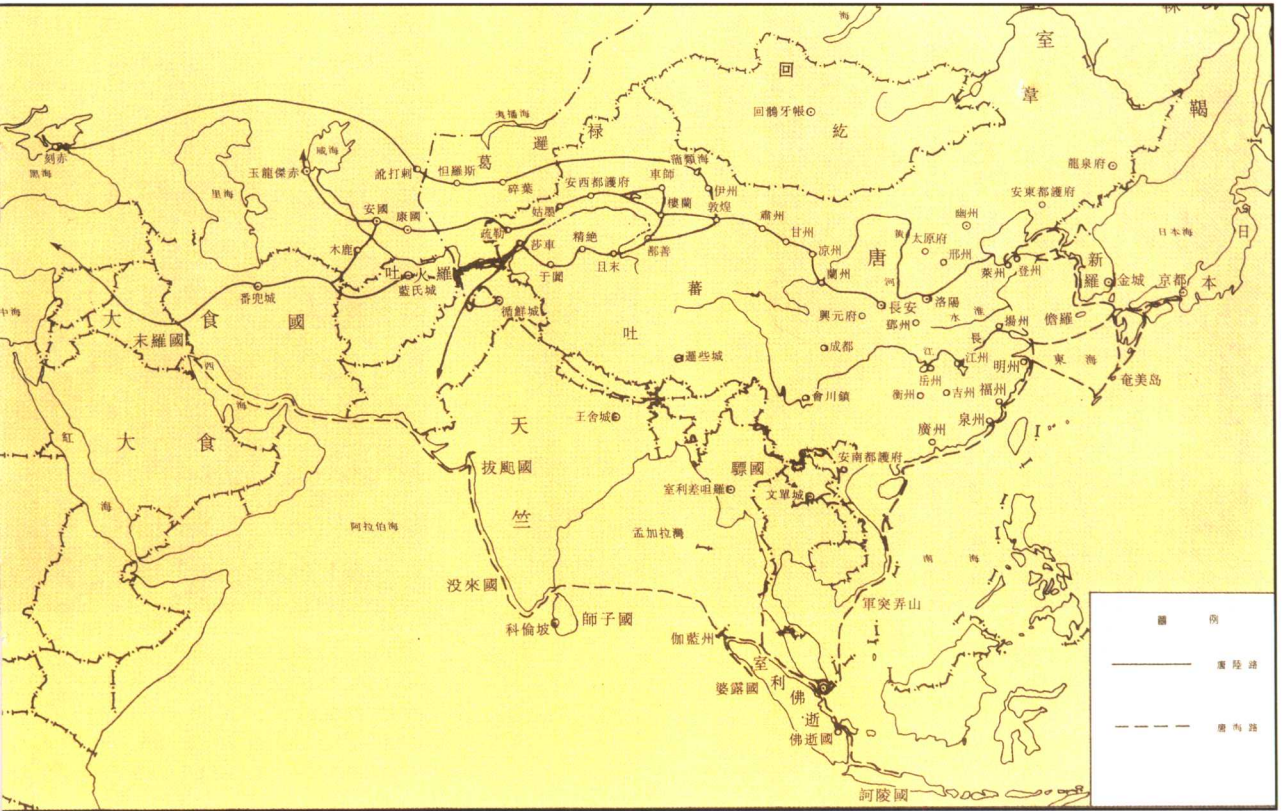
Whoever sees such exquisite silk dress would ask, how the silk fabric is manufactured. This is undoubtedly a marvelous process. Silk is reeled from several cocoons together. During reeling, it is very important that silk thread must not be broken. The process is similar to that silkworm makes its cocoon. Once the construction of cocoon is completed, the silkworm becomes chrysalis, which evolves into moth. The moth bites out its cocoon and flies away. Once the cocoon is open, the silk thread is broken. If it is broken, silk thread has to be repaired and spun as other fabrics. In order to keep the silk thread intact, the moth must be killed

before its maturity. That is where the secret lies. Silkworm must be fed with mulberry leaves in order to make silk thread flexible and elastic as well as tenacious.

Silk fabrics have played an important role in both Eastern and Western lives from ancient times. Before Chinese silk was exported to Europe, Greece and Rome were mainly using wool and flax as raw material for their dress. As soon as the colorful, bright and soft Chinese silk cloth was introduced to Europe, the new fabric caught the imagination of local residents. Because it was expensive to produce then and the journey of Silk Road had many trade barriers and Custom duties between borders as well as the monopoly of the trade in each section of the Silk Road, silk became more valuable than gold when it reached Europe. Only a few aristocratic ladies can afford it and silk had become a symbol of high social status. Because of its huge commercial value, Europe went to a great length to acquire the knowledge of sericulture and the technology of silk manufacture. There are many stories about how the technology was introduced to Europe.

Xuanzang, a famous Chinese Buddhist monk, recorded an interesting story in his book *Da-Tang Xi-Yu Ji* (Tang Dynasty Travels in the Western Regions). In ancient time, the king of Kustana (in present Xinjiang Hotan region) learnt that the neighboring country at its east side, China had silkworm and mulberry, he sent his envoy to ask for a favor. The emperor of the eastern country not only denied the knowledge, but also ordered to implement strict border inspection to prevent the export of silkworm stocks. But this did not deter the king of Kustana and he thought out a new strategy. He wrote a flattering letter together with valuable gifts and presents to the Emperor and asked for his permission to marry his daughter. Out of an intention to cultivate a good will of the neighboring ruler, the emperor of the eastern country granted his demand. The ruler of Kustana asked his envoy to tell to the princess that he hoped her to bring some silkworm stocks with her so that he





*A sketch map of the Silk Road.*

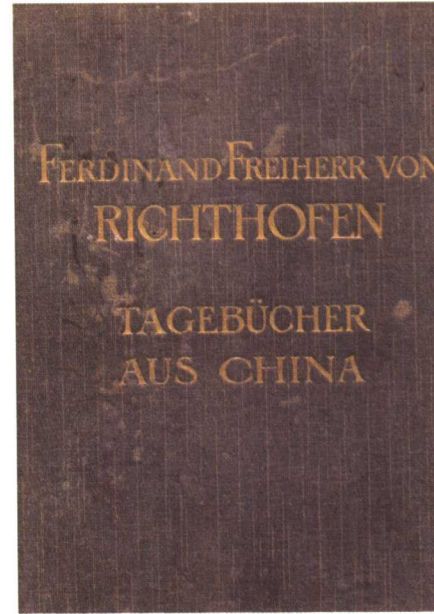


*A legend on how silk was brought to the west on a mural painting in ruins of Hotan Dandan Oylik site.*

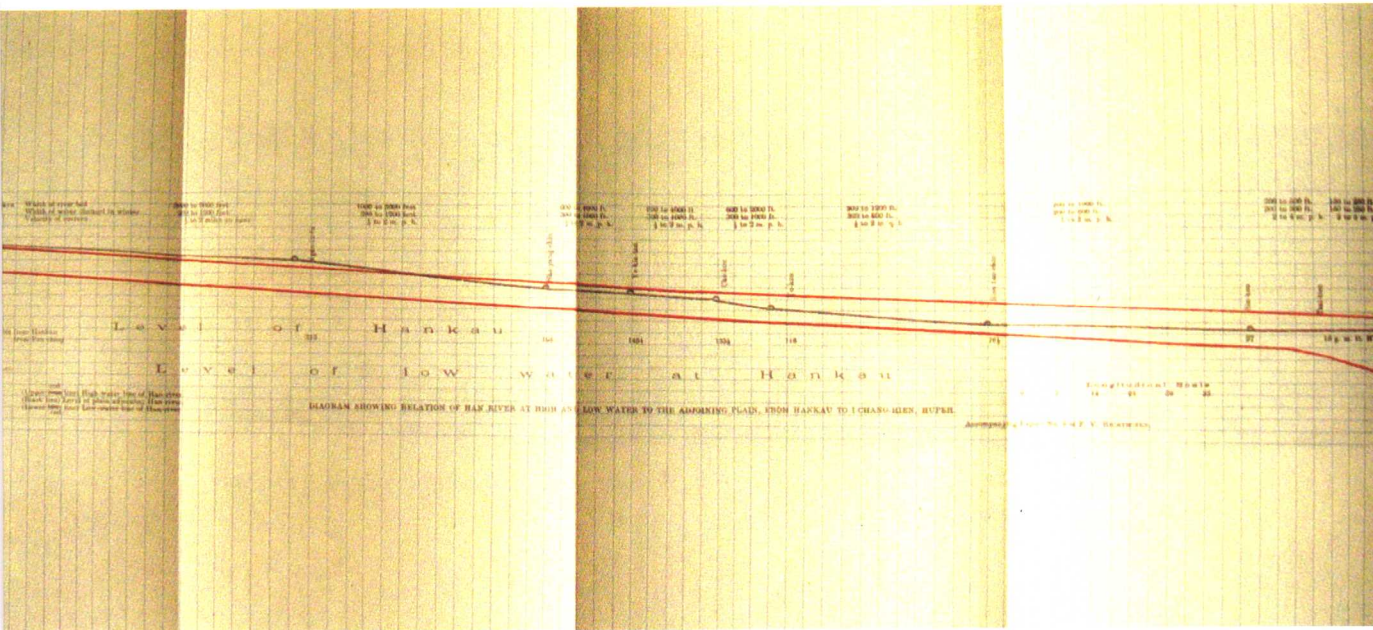




*Ferdinand von Richthofen in Chinese costume and his family.*



*China, the Results of My Travels and the Studies Based Thereon, by Ferdinand von Richathofen, who named "the Silk Road" for the very first time.*



*A drawing of the Silk Road by Ferdinand von Richarthofen.*

could make dress with silk fabrics for her after the marriage. The princess believed him and hid silkworm stocks under her hat when she was traveling to Kustana to marry the king. The border soldiers strictly examined and checked everyone of the entourage except the princess herself. In this way, the silkworm stocks were introduced to Kustana.

Among Western scholars, ancient Greek poet Aristofen was the first to write on silk. He referred to a long frock called *Amorgia*, which was made from silk fabrics. It was around the sixth century AD that Chinese silkworm stocks and sericulture were finally introduced to Europe. Before that time, the West had no knowledge of the technique of sericulture and filature. But Europeans were able to spin raw silk imported from China or to use Chinese thin silk to produce silk thread before mixing with twine and turning into finished products. These semi-transparent silk yarns had been one of the fabrics most favored by ancient Occidentals.

It was not until AD 552 that Chinese silkworm stocks and sericulture technology were introduced to Constantinople, the capital of East Roman Empire (in the present Istanbul, Turkey). A large scale silk production started in Europe. At that time, emperor Justinian was in power. In order to break the monopoly of Persians on the silk trade, Justinian encouraged Persian merchants and Indian monks to bring the silkworm stocks and sericulture technique to Byzantium. Lots of royal silk spinning workshops arrived at Constantinople, employing a great number of working women in silk production.

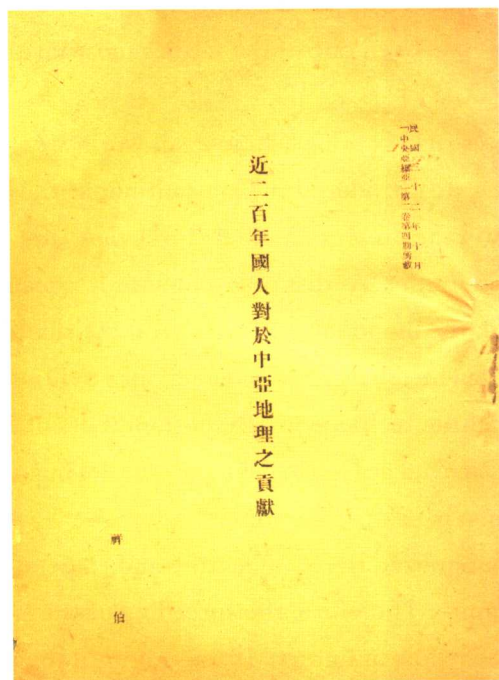
Justinian monopolized the manufacture and trade of silk fabrics in East Roman Empire. Therefore, the spreading of the silk production technique was very slow in Europe. It was not until the middle of 12th Century that Italy began the production of silk fabrics, when it captured 2,000 silk spinning workers from Byzantium and moved them to the south of the country. As for Spain, France, Britain, Germany and other European countries, it was only until 13th century that they began



to master the technique of silk production.

According to a report of the US *National Geography*, German archeologists discovered an ancient tomb dated 500 BC in a village near Stuttgart and identified relics of Chinese silk cloth on corpses unearthed. Chinese silk was also unearthed In Crimea, Russia. The inscriptions on other utensils, excavated at the same time, showed they were belonging to the period of 3rd century BC. These evidences indicated that silk fabrics found their way to the western world long before Zhang Qian traveled to Xiyu (Western Regions).

There are lots of ancient Greek sculptures and potteries which preserved to date with colored portraits in fine, thin, bright and transparent garments. It is estimated that, as early as in 5th century BC Chi-



The Contribution by Chinese Scholars over Last Two Centuries to the Studies on the Central Asian Geography, a book by Xiangbo, 1943. The book reviewed the progress made by Chinese Scholars on the Silk Road and its associated culture.