


HOW TO SELECT

CHINESE SOUVENIRS

Jennifer Pooley & Shirley Ren



CHINA INTERCONTINENTAL PRESS



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Foreword

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However, with time you could find that some of the finer details have faded. You may start asking yourself exactly how did Longjing green tea taste, or catch yourself trying to conjure up the exquisite beauty of that rare white jade sculpture which is simply not done justice in the photograph.

Why put your memory under such stress? Whatever your budget, taste and luggage capacity, there is inevitably a special little something waiting for you in China either as a personal souvenir wrapped up in fond memories for your home or office, or as a thoughtful and interesting gift for friends and family which will explain so much more about Chinese culture than any book or encyclopedia.

Here we have listed a selection of art crafts and other items unique to China, along with some linguistic help and key listings to get you started on your quest for the perfect souvenir. Happy shopping!

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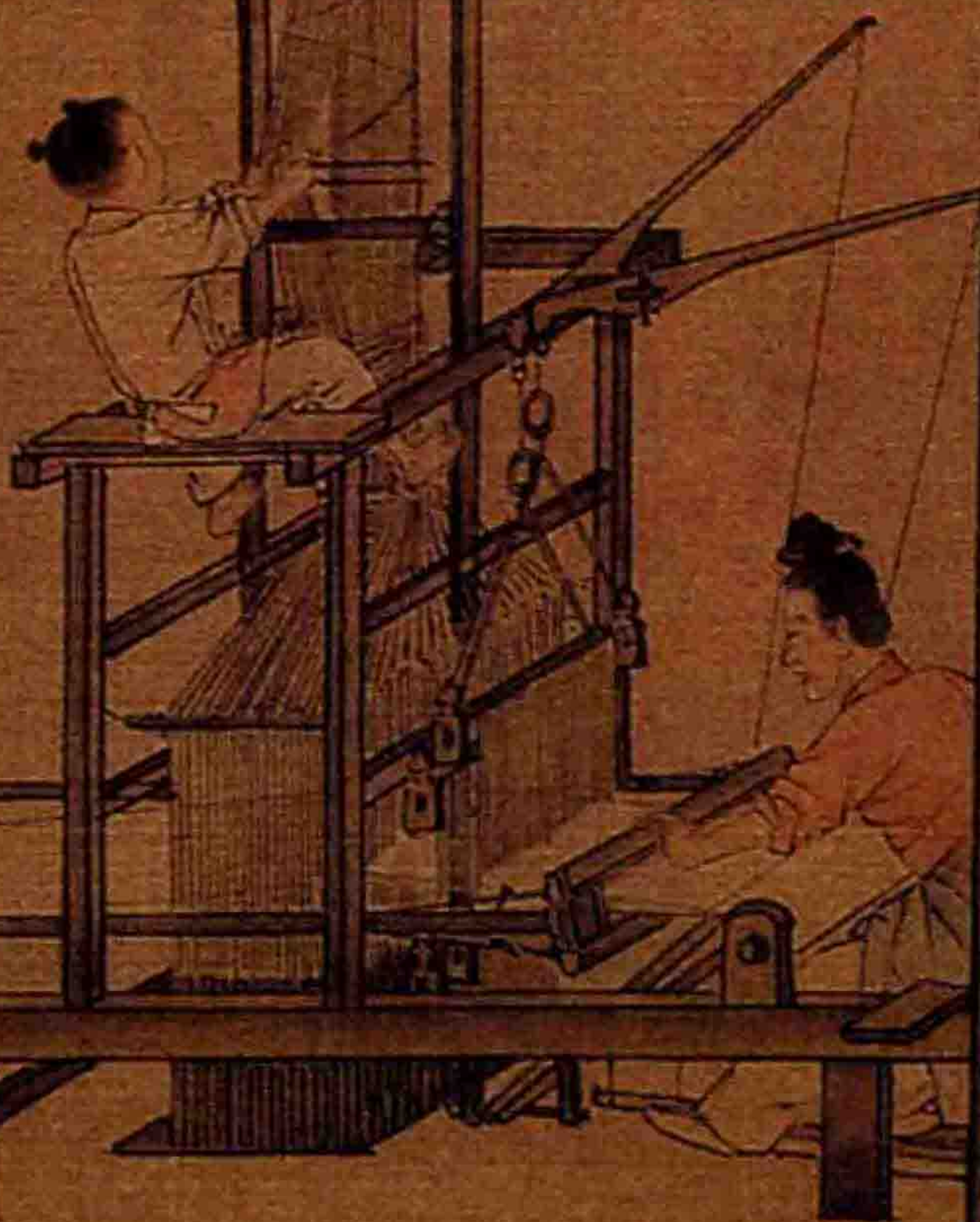
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Silk and Costumes



A Culture of Silk

Silk is considered one of China's oldest and greatest discoveries, and not just within the textile industry. Although today we tend to associate the fabric with elegant cocktail dresses or perhaps grandma's favorite scarf, in reality silk has been employed in a fascinating range of uses during different periods of history, and its global trade has played a significant role in the development of many ancient civilizations, influencing their modern-day cultural identities.

The central position of silk in China's culture is reflected in the Chinese language. Every Chinese character is made up of two parts: a radical, indicating the linguistic family, and a phonetic part which links groups of characters by sounds. Silk has its own radical, 糸 (traditional form) or 纟 (simplified form) which is often seen in words typically associated with the fabric, such as the adjectives "fine" (纤) and "pure" (纯), and the verb "to spin" (纺), as well as the more abstract zong (纵, "to indulge oneself"). It also appears in a number of commonly used idioms: a woman with raven hair



◆ Beautiful silk cloth in White Peacock Art World — a large and famous store in Beijing showcasing top-quality products.



◆ *Bathe the Silkworm Cocoons (Ancient Chinese Picture). This is one method to help silk worms hatch.*

could be said to have locks of "black silk" (黑丝), and tender feelings are sometimes described as "feelings of silk" (丝的感觉).

Myths and Legends

Like almost anything else authentically Chinese, silk has a long and interesting history – at least 5,000 years and as long as 8,000 years according to some reports! The finding of half a cocoon in Xia County, Shanxi Province dating back to between 5,000 and 3,000 B.C. has been hailed by some as the first evidence of silk. Credit for the invention is usually awarded to

the wife of the legendary Yellow Emperor Lei Zu (嫫祖), who, back in the 27th century B.C. not only discovered silk but also established the sericulture industry.

Popular Chinese legend has it that it was a silkworm cocoon accidentally dropping into the queen's cup that started the matter. The cocoon was dissolved by the hot liquid into a mass of long, smooth strands, which when unraveled gave Lei Zu the inspired idea of trying to spin it to make cloth. Today, she is often referred to as the "Queen of Sericulture" and commonly thought to be the founder of China's textile industry.

Silk Science

So what is silk exactly? Silk is a natural protein fiber containing fibroin protein and sericin. It comes in many forms, some of which can be woven into textiles. Most of the silk we buy in the West comes from cocoons made by the mulberry silkworm, or *bombyx mori*, which is artificially reared. Uncultivated silks also exist and are obtained from caterpillars living freely in the

wild. Silk can also be made from a number of other insects, such as hymenoptera (bees, wasps and ants) and arachnids (spiders), although not in fabric form.

Silk from the *bombyx mori* differs from other types in color, shape and texture. *Bombyx mori* have a remarkably short and paltry existence: the moths are flightless

around the clock. They are kept in a strict environment in which temperature changes, loud noises or strong smells are not permitted.

After approximately one month, during which the larvae happily munch their way through an astounding 10,000 times their own weight, they begin to spin



Silkworm Rearing and Silk Weaving (I) Picking mulberry leaves to feed the silkworms.

and blind, and their only purpose in life is to reproduce. They typically lay around 500 tiny (all 500 together weigh no more than 5 grams) eggs over four to six days then promptly die, their life's work complete.

The larvae then hatch into worms which are cultivated in highly controlled conditions; they are fed a diet of 100 percent chopped mulberry leaves twice an hour

their cocoons. The fluffy white cocoon takes three or four days to construct, after which it is incubated for about one week. The cocoons are then steamed or pierced with a needle to kill the worm inside, protecting the smooth, round shell from being ripped apart by a hatching moth.

Just as silk-founder Lei Zu found all those tens of centuries ago, dropping a cocoon into