

LOOKING EAST

The Story of Silk

By Liu Zhijuan



Foreign Languages Press



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Preface



Silk, one of earliest inventions in Chinese history, made China famous worldwide at a very early date through the “Silk Road.” This ancient trade route connected China with Central Asia and Europe from the days of the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD). Sericulture and silk weaving were a basic part of China’s agriculture and a major source both of livelihood for farmers and townsfolk and of taxes for their rulers.

Before the 20th century, sericulture and silk production were the main occupations of rural women in China. Raising silkworms and weaving silk fabrics were done by women, while men were involved in the transportation and trading of silk products. Indeed, there is a tradition that silkworms were originally raised by Lei Zu, the consort of the Yellow Emperor, the legendary ancestor of the Chinese nation, indicating how closely silk is related to Chinese culture.



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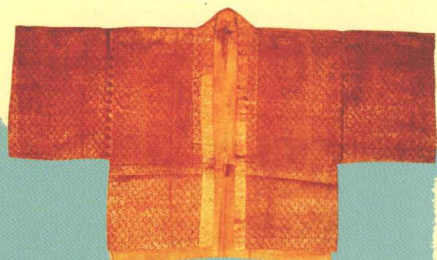
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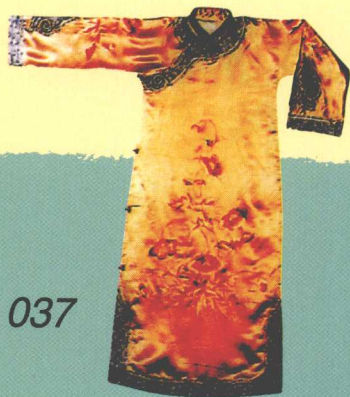
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The Origin of Silk

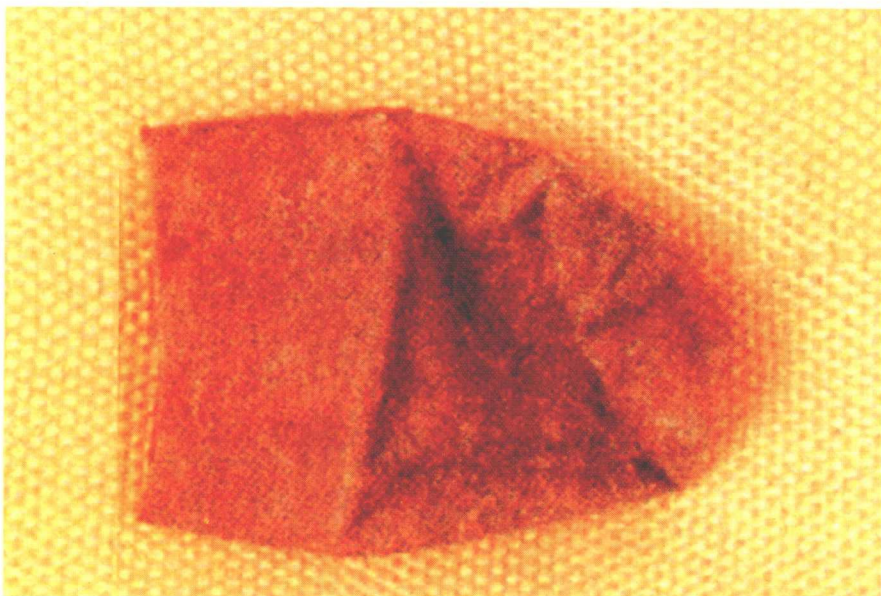
At the dawn of Chinese history, the vast region from the Yellow River valley to the Yangtze River valley was already covered in lush green mulberry trees, and people wore flowing silk robes. Since then, the division of labor decreeing that men cultivated the fields and women wove silk fabrics lasted for thousands of years in China. As early as in the Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 BC), the queen led the palace women in annual ceremonies to feed silkworms and reel silk, as appeals to the gods to bless these endeavors, illustrating the importance of the silk industry to the Chinese economy even in those far-off days.



The Origin of Silk

001

● An ancient silk cocoon, found in Xiyin Village, Xiaxian County, Shanxi Province





Captivating Legends

Legend has it that Lei Zu was drinking water from a bowl under a mulberry tree, when a silkworm fell into the bowl. Removing it with a twig, she noticed that the delicate filament had started to unravel. Curious as to the nature of this thread, and finding that it was light but extremely tough, Lei Zu experimented with feeding wild silkworms and weaving the filaments they produced into fabric, and thus was born China's glorious silk industry. Empresses and palace women of later times honored Lei Zu as the discoverer of silk, and offered annual sacrifices to her. Temples to Lei Zu sprang up in silkworm-rearing areas, one of which can still be seen today. Built in the seventh year (1827) of the Daoguang reign period of the Qing Dynasty, it is preserved in Shengze Town, Suzhou City, Jiangsu Province.

At another temple in Suzhou, silk industry workers used to offer sacrifices to the Yellow Emperor, who was accredited with inventing the silk loom, aided by 12 animal deities. It is also said that he invented the bamboo splint installed on looms to prevent the warp being cut during the weaving process.

Another legend about the origin of sericulture is found

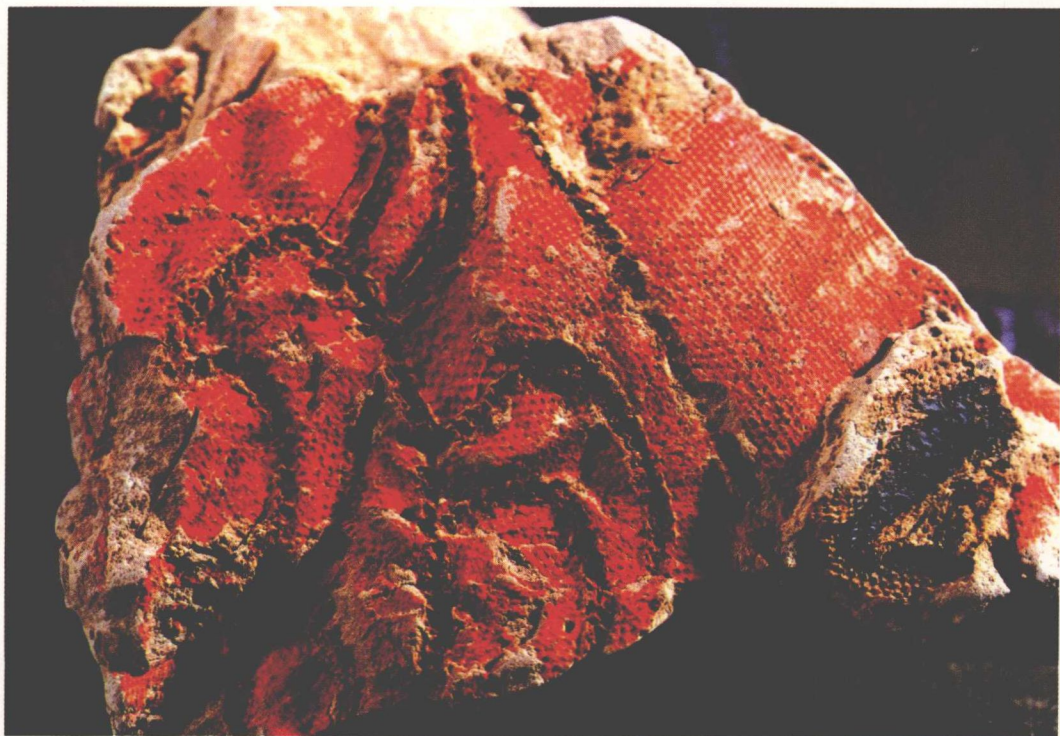
in a book titled *Probes into the Supernatural*, compilation of myth and folklore written by Gan Bao of the Jin Dynasty (265-420). The story goes that a man in Sichuan left home to look for work. After a long while, his daughter, pining for her father, said jokingly to the family's horse, "If you can bring my father back home, I will marry you." Thereupon, the horse galloped off, found the man, and brought him back. When the girl told him of her promise, the man, horrified, shot the horse with an arrow. He skinned the horse, and hung its hide up to dry. Suddenly, the horse's hide wrapped itself around the girl, and flew off with her to a big mulberry tree, where the two of them turned into a batch of silkworms.


● Remnant of a piece of braid-stitch embroidery, Western Zhou Dynasty, unearthed at Rujia Village in Baoji, Shaanxi Province



The Origin of Silk

003





The Archaeological Evidence

Archeological investigations have shown that the cultivation of silkworms and the manufacture of silk fabrics started as early as in the Neolithic Age (about 10,000-over 5,000 years ago).

In the spring of 1926, half of a silkworm cocoon was discovered at a Neolithic site in Xiyin Village, Xiaxian County, Shanxi Province. It was estimated to be about 6,000 years old, and appeared to have been cut in half in order that the owner could eat the chrysalis inside. Therefore, the experts concluded that people of that time had not yet discovered that the silk filament from a cocoon could be spun into fabric.

In 1973, a small bowl engraved with silkworm images was unearthed at the Yuyao Hemudu Neolithic Culture site in Zhejiang Province. It was between 6,000 and 7,000 years old. The four silkworms look as though they are in the process of wriggling forward. The horizontal veins on their heads and bodies could be seen clearly, indicating that they were not yet domesticated.

even lines. The density of the warps was 52 fibers per cm, and that of the wefts 45 fibers per cm. This indicates that some kind of loom was already in existence at that time.

In 1984, some pieces of silk fabric were found at the Yangshao Culture Ruins (dating back over 5,000 years, and characterized by painted pottery) in Qingtai Village, Xingyang County, Henan Province. The discovery included some evenly woven plain silk pieces as well as some loosely woven gauze fabrics in light crimson. These are the earliest silk relics discovered in northern China so far. The relics unearthed at several other ruins dating from the Neolithic Age included a large number of ceramic and stone spinning wheels and other items used in weaving. Spindles with engraved patterns were found at such ruins as Cishan in Hebei Province, dating back about 5,000 years, Hemudu in Zhejiang Province, dating back over 4,000 years, Banpo in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province (a Neolithic site dating from 6,700-5,600 years ago) and Jiangzhai in Lintong (a Neolithic site dating from 4,600-4,400 years ago). Some of the spinning wheels discovered at the Yangshao Culture site have an oblate shape, while others are drum-shaped. Spinning wheels found at the Qujialing Culture site on the middle reaches of the Yangtze River (dating from some 4,800 years ago) were particularly well made, and some even had designs painted in color.

In 1975, a great number of weaving tools, including

wooden and pottery spinning wheels, tubular bone needles, wooden and bone blades for warp sorting as well as yarn spindles were found in the Hemudu Neolithic site. Wooden pieces of various shapes, possibly the parts of a primitive loom, were found at the site, too. These were most likely wooden warp blades, the cloth roll and the harness levers. These could be the earliest weaving devices ever found. A bone shuttle was also discovered at the Longshan Culture ruins, dated to about 2000 BC. The bone shuttles from this period consist of two main kinds. One is flat, with a hole drilled at one end or both. The other kind is barrel-shaped, sharp at one end and with a hole drilled in the middle.

The area of what is now Sichuan Province has been connected with sericulture since mythical times, according to tradition. Ancient records inform us that the first king of the State of Shu (an old name for Sichuan) was named Can Cong (silkworm cluster), and it seems likely from this that the silkworm was the totem of his tribe. A scene of mulberry picking is painted on a bronze kettle dated from the Warring States Period (475-221 BC) unearthed at Baihuatan, Chengdu, capital of Sichuan. Bronze wares unearthed at Sanxingdui in Guanghan, Sichuan showed some dragon images which are strikingly similar to silkworms.

The archeological evidence, however, points to several places in China where the breeding of silkworms and the manufacture of silk probably evolved independently.



The Origin of Silk

Silk Production in the Pre-Qin Period



Characters identified as meaning “silkworm,” “mulberry,” “silk” and “fabric,” as well as “rinsing” and “dyeing” have been found inscribed on bones and tortoise shells (the so-called oracle bones) dating from the Yin-Shang period (1600-1046 BC). This is evidence that sericulture and silk manufacturing were already an intimate part of people’s life at that time.

The *Book of Odes* (the first comprehensive collection of poems and songs in Chinese, containing 305 poems from the first year of the Western Zhou Dynasty until the mid-Spring and Autumn Period) records folk songs from 15 states, covering the vast area of what is now Shaanxi, Shanxi, Henan, Hebei, Shandong and northern Hubei provinces. Many of the poems contain descriptions of picking mulberry leaves, raising silkworms, weaving silk fabrics and tailoring silk clothes. In one of the poems, a girl begs her lover, “Please do not climb over my wall, as you might break the mulberry trees in my courtyard.” In another poem, a young man offers silk as a bride price.

