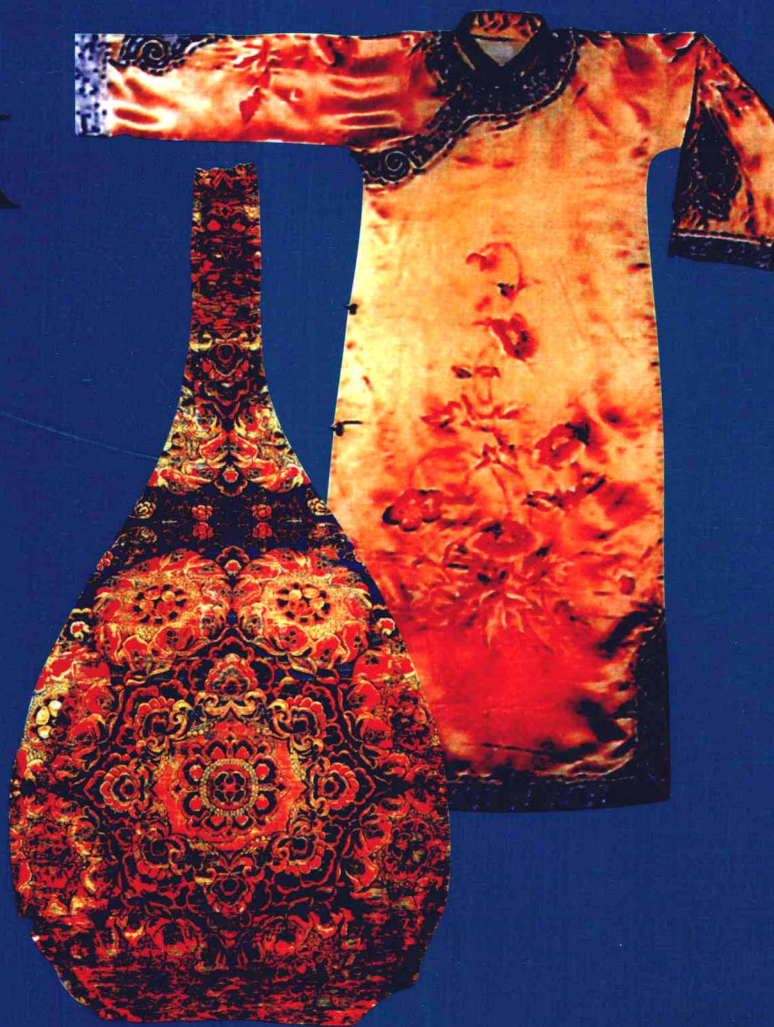


LOOKING EAST

The Story of Silk

By Liu Zhijuan



Foreign Languages Press

The Story of Silk

by Peter Brown





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● Persian girl's silk outfit



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.





● Silk-carving brocade with flower patterns,
Yuan Dynasty, found in Urumqi, Xinjiang

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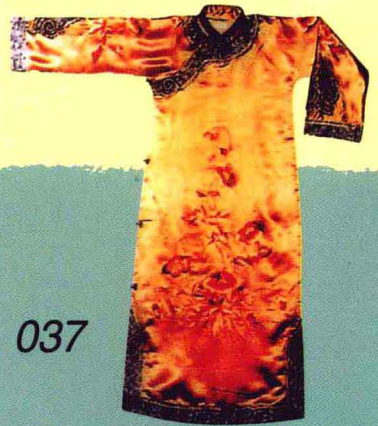
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The Origin of Silk

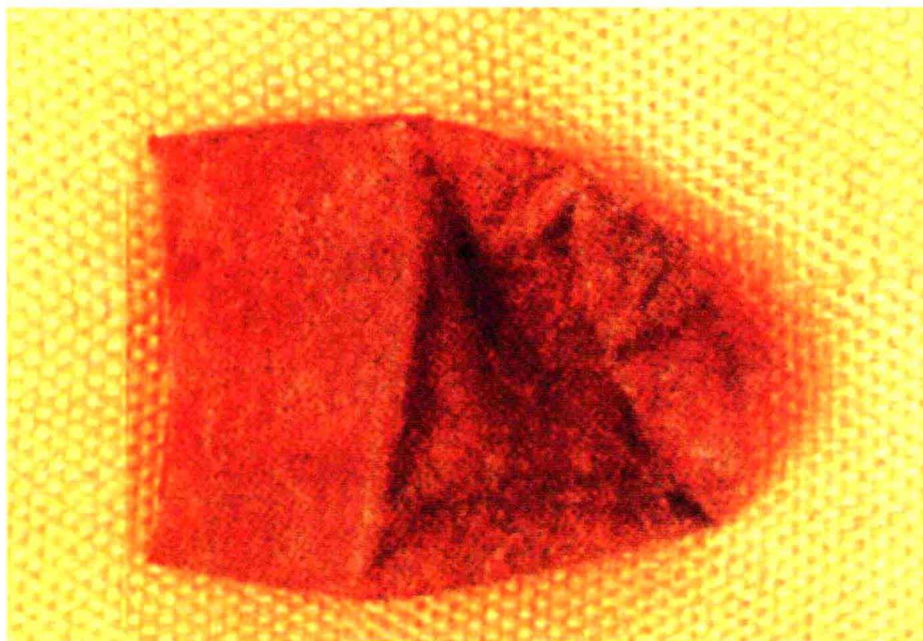
At the dawn of Chinese history, the vast region from the Yellow River valley to the Yangtze River valley was already covered in lush green mulberry trees, and people wore flowing silk robes. Since then, the division of labor decreeing that men cultivated the fields and women wove silk fabrics lasted 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

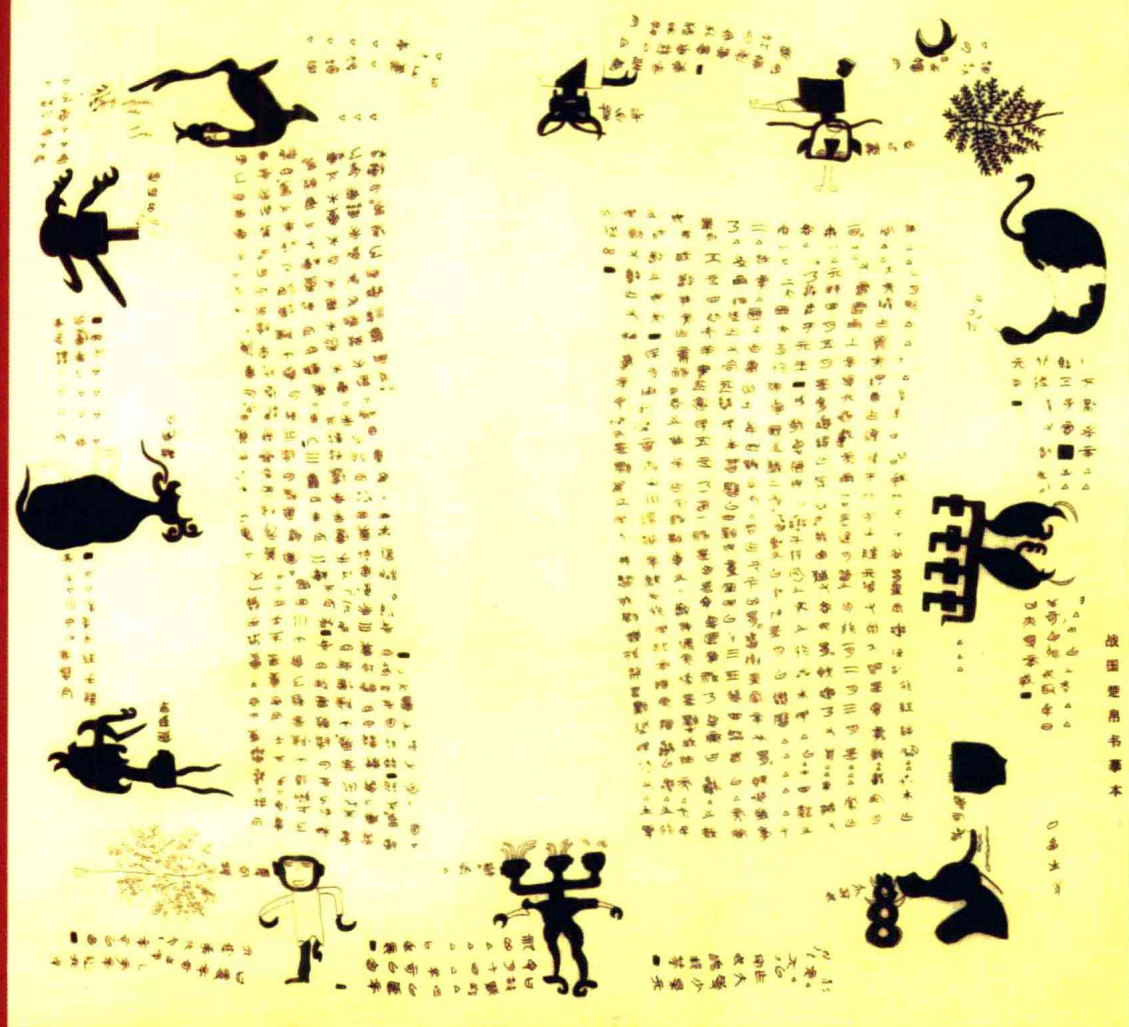


The Archaeological Evidence

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.



● Book on Silk of the State of Chu, Warring States Period

In 1958, archaeologists discovered some silk thread, silk ribbons and un-carbonized silk pieces at Qianshanyang, Wuxing City, Zhejiang Province. They are estimated to be over 4,700 years old, and therefore the earliest silk items discovered so far in southern China. The pieces were tan colored and apparently woven with home-grown silk fibers. The warps and wefts each had 20 single fibers, woven in