

# Silk invention and progression in china

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Ancient China's remarkable intuition and distinguishable brainpower has allowed numerous inventions to evolve from Chinese society. The ideals and aggression for power has contributed to the invention and progression of silk throughout time. Silk convention has contributed to ancient China's economic prosperity by developing the Silk Road, displayed the use of sericulture overtime, and implemented a symbol of status in Chinese society. Silk has had major geographical and social implications on ancient China that have progressed China's relationship with foreign countries through international trade. The most ancient silk known to man was recovered during the Chinese Neolithic period in 3630 BC ("Silk History"). Silk was known as a hot commodity in ancient China allowing significant trade and an important economic uprise throughout China's history.

According to ancient legends, sericulture, as well as the weaving of silk cloth, was invented by Lady Hsi-Ling-Shih. She was the wife of the Yellow Emperor who is said to have ruled China in 3000 BC and is remembered as the inventor of the loom, introducing sericulture to the Chinese society ("Silk History"). Silk was highly valued and appreciated outside China, which made it a significant trading commodity between China and other foreign countries. An example of a silk by-product during this time was a braided silk belt that was recovered from the Liangzhu culture at Qianshanyang in the Zhejiang Province ("Silk History"). This was also established as one of the oldest silk artifacts and displayed unconditional worth. Another interesting silk commodity recovered was the oldest written reference to silk that was discovered on a bronze fragment at the Shang Dynasty site at Ayang ("Silk History"). These are only a few examples of silk's importance in ancient

China and the historical value has impacted China positively through advantageous growth. For a period of time silk was a material reserved for the Emperor of China and those very close to him, such as important family members, high ranked dignitaries, and individuals who portrayed great power.

There are a few known sources who wrote about how the emperor always wore white silk within his imperial place and yellow silk when venturing outside his imperial place. Silk was viewed as a symbol of status in ancient Chinese culture revealing power and dominance throughout the hierarchy (“Silk History”). Embroidered and colored silk robes became a status symbol in multiple societies and helped distinguish officials and courtiers from the lower classes. The lower class wore plain silk robes in which society could determine who held power in the society and who was worth little to nothing. In other cultures, such as Korea, there were even laws forbidding persons below a specific social rank from wearing silk at all. Gradually the restriction on who could wear silk in China began to diminish and more people could afford this valuable material. Eventually, silk production grew to be quite a large industry yet it was not until the Qing Dynasty that peasants were allowed to wear silk garments. Not only was silk utilized to make clothing, but it was also used for fans, wall hangers, banners, and sometimes even paper for writers (Cartwright). Silk was also used for fishing-lines, bowstrings to musical instruments, and cloth for clothing or decorated ornaments (“Silk History”).

The popularity of silk grew rapidly overtime and it quickly became a reliant source for an abundance of everyday items. Silkworm cultivation for silk production, also known as sericulture, is the production of silk through silkworms (*Bombyx Mori*) to form the cocoon wrapping which larvae develop (Cartwright). The production of silk is a tedious process which begins with the butterflies/moths laying of eggs resulting in death. Then the worms hatch from the eggs and are fed mulberry leaves as they grow and begin to spin their cocoons. Next the cocoons are steamed for the purpose of killing the moth inside and afterwards the cocoons are rinsed with hot water to loosen the threads in the silk. The weavers are then able to unwind the cocoons and combine the fibers into silk threads that are ready to be woven into cloth and pounded to create a soft texture. According to Carwright, " A single specimen is capable of producing a 0. 025 mm thick thread over 900 meters long" which illustrates the intricate patterns that silkworms were able to complete (Cartwright). Fabrics were created using looms, which is an apparatus for making fabric by weaving. Women usually weaved the silk therefore, it was their responsibility to make sure the silkworms were fed properly chopped mulberry leaves and were kept sufficiently warm enough to spin threads for their cocoons.

" The silk industry became a vital source of income for families that land dedicated to the cultivation of mulberry bushes was even made exempt from reforms, which otherwise took away agriculture land from peasant ownership and mulberry plots became the only land possible for farmers to claim hereditary ownership of" (Cartwright). This process created the quality silk that ancient China needed to successfully prosper during this era. The

process of sericulture reached Korea around 200 BC but it took years after 300 AD before the practice was established in geographical locations as far as India (“ Silk History”). Silk spread gradually throughout the Chinese culture both geographically as well as socially (“ History of Silk”). Sericulture is a major contributor to the excellence silk brought ancient China and continues to portray Chinese’s impact on production of silk worldwide. Moreover, sericulture spread throughout Africa, Sicily, and Spain as the Arabs swept across the globe making silk an advantageous product. Chinese authorities worked vigorously to keep all information surrounding silk production a secret to retaining the nation’s monopoly, but eventually, information was uncovered. This valuable information spread due to Chinese migrants who settled abroad and made a living from silk production (“ Silk History”). As demands in silk increased it was no longer just advantageous to China but other foreign countries began profiting off this luxury material.

The population began to understand silk’s importance and value as one of China’s largest exports. Silk garments began to reach regions across Asia and due to its texture and luster, it became a luxurious fabric in as many areas accessible to Chinese merchants possible (“ History of Silk”). Despite its popularity, silk reached Europe around CE 550 through the Byzantine Empire numerous years later. During the second millennium BCE, the Chinese Shang and Zhou dynasties produced silk at a more efficient pace creating larger scale production by involving more sophisticated weaving techniques (Cartwright). This improvement allowed silk to be exported more efficiently and silk production grew tremendously as the demand for silk increased. Silk quickly became one of the most important manufactured and

traded goods throughout ancient China. The Shang Dynasty progressed silks value as it was used in early international trade.

During the Han Dynasty silk became a considerable currency. There are documents from this era revealing farmers who paid their taxes in grain and silk (“ Silk History”). Today this technique would not be considered yet in this era of time silk was extremely valuable allowing it to be used as a currency resource for a number of instances. Silk was highly valued and appreciated outside China as well. It became a fundamental source of income for small farmers and as weaving techniques improved the reputation of Chinese silk spread, ideally becoming highly desired across all empires of the ancient world (Cartwright). For much of its history silk was China’s most important export, and gave its name to the remarkable trading network, the Silk Road. “ The Silk Road or Sichou Zhi Lu was an entire network of overland camel caravan routes connecting East Asia to Europe, India, and Africa” (Cartwright). It was named the Silk Road after the advantageous international trade in Chinese silk textiles that started during the Han dynasty. The high demand for silk eventually created the trade route now known as the Silk Road expanding silk westward and bringing gold, silver, and wools to the East. Although silk was the main commodity traded on the Silk Road, other goods such porcelain from China, sandalwood from India, saffron from Persia, myrrh from Somalia, and glass bottles from Egypt were alternatively traded for economic prosperity.

The Chinese realized the value of the beneficial material they were producing and kept its secret safe from the rest of society for over thirty

centuries. It was this network of trade that made it possible for people in places located far away from any silk cultivation and silk weaving to wear and utilize silk (“ Silk History”). “ Travelers were searched thoroughly at the border crossing and anyone caught trying to smuggle eggs, cocoons or silkworms out of the country were summarily executed” (“ History of Silk”). This practice was put into place because of the importance of silk to remain in China for as long as possible. The Chinese thought that if other countries gained access to silk they would lose their power and profitability, which soon became an accurate realization.