The Legendary Invention of Silk

Is the fabric known as silk 7,000 years old? Did people wear it from as long ago as 5000 B.C. - before civilization began at Sumer and before Egyptians built the Great Pyramid?

The Silk Road Foundation says that silkworm cultivation, or sericulture, is at least 7,000 years old. If that’s true, chances are we will never know exactly who invented it. What we can learn is what the descendants of the people who discovered silk wrote about it, and what their legends say about the origins of processing silk.

Although there are other stories and variations, the basic legend credits an early Chinese empress. She is said to have cultivated the silk-producing caterpillar (Bombyx mori). She also fed silkworms the mulberry leaf, which was found to be the best food for producing silk. Lastly, she invented the loom to weave the fiber.
Raising silk

On its own, the silkworm larva produces a single, several hundred-yard strand of silk. Normally, this thread breaks as the moth emerges from its cocoon, leaving bits and pieces of silk all over the trees. Rather than round up all the tangled silk strands caught in the trees, the Chinese learned to raise the silkworms. They did this by giving silkworms a fattening diet made of leaves from mulberry trees. They also learned to watch the development of the cocoons so they could kill the chrysalis by plunging it in boiling water just before it became a moth. This method ensures that long strands of silk are created.

The boiling water also softens the sticky protein holding together the silk. That allows the long strand to be carefully unwrapped without breaking it - a process called reeling. The thread is then woven into beautiful clothing.

Who was the lady of Hsi-Ling?

The lady of Hsi-Ling was the principal wife of Huangdi (2697–2597 B.C.), who is also known as the Yellow Emperor. The Yellow Emperor was a legendary ruler credited with almost godlike abilities. Huangdi is believed to have given the Chinese many gifts, including magnetic compass and possibly silk.
The lady of Hsi-Ling is also credited with discovering silk. Likewise, she gets credit for many of the developments that make silk production possible. This includes the invention of reeling and the first loom.

The Yellow Emperor, who was honored as the First Sericulturalist around the year A.D. 550, may be the male figure depicted in later art as a patron saint of sericulture. The lady of Hsi-Ling is more often called the First Sericulturalist. Although she had been worshiped and held a position in the Chinese pantheon since A.D. 550, her official position as the personification of the First Sericulturalist with a divine seat and altar only came in 1742.
Silk clothing altered the Chinese division of labor
The job of making fabric was women's work. Therefore, the associations were made with the empress, rather than her husband, even if he had been the first sericulturist. The Yellow Emperor may have invented the methods of producing silk, while the lady of Hsi-Ling was responsible for the discovery of silk itself.

Chinese scholarship from the 600s A.D. says that before the Yellow Emperor, clothing was made of bird and animal skin, but the supply of animals didn't keep up with demand. The Yellow Emperor decreed that clothing should be made of silk and hemp. In this version of the legend, it is Huangdi (actually, one of his officials named Po Yu), not the lady of Hsi-Ling, who invented all fabrics. This includes silk and the loom.

Evidence of five millennia of silk

Archaeological evidence reveals that silk existed in China as far back as around 2750 B.C., which puts it close to the dates of the Yellow Emperor and his wife. Shang Dynasty (1766-1122 B.C) oracle bones also show evidence of silk production. Silk may have also been used in India at this time. Evidence found on ornaments and beads there have yielded silk fibers. Much later in history, China had sole control over silk production.

A silken economy

The importance of silk to China probably can't be exaggerated. The exceptionally long and strong threads clothed a vast Chinese population. Silk also became incredibly valuable. It was sought by rich and powerful people in far-flung places across Asia and Europe. In ancient Rome, silk was worth its weight in gold. Silk was traded along the Silk Road, a trading route thousands of miles long that stretched from China to Europe. Money from the silk trade supported China's government.

Fancy silk fabrics with patterns became status symbols of Chinese ruling families starting more than 2,000 years ago.

How the secret of silk leaked out

For centuries, China alone possessed the knowledge about how to make silk. The Chinese guarded this secret carefully and successfully. Then, in the 400s, silk eggs and mulberry seeds were smuggled out of China.

According to legend, the silk eggs were taken from China in an elaborate headdress by a Chinese princess. She married a prince in a nearby kingdom. Another more likely story says that two Christian monks from Byzantium (roughly where Turkey and Greece are today) cracked China's grip on the silk trade. In the 500s, these monks arrived in Byzantium with silkworm cocoons hidden in their bamboo walking sticks.
Silk worship

Patron saints of sericulture were honored with life-size statues and rites in China. In the Han (206 B.C. - A.D. 220) period, the silkworm goddess was shown as a person in drawings and statues. In the Han and Sung (A.D. 960-1279) periods, the empress performed a silk ceremony. The empress also helped with the gathering of the mulberry leaves necessary for the best silk. Later on, there was a silkworm palace that the empress supervised.
Legends of the discovery of silk

There is a fanciful legend about the discovery of silk, a love story in which a magic horse falls in love with a woman. In one version, the horse is betrayed by the woman’s father. After the horse is ambushed, killed and skinned, the hide wraps up the woman and flies away with her. She is later turned into a silk moth.

There is also a more believable story of how silk was actually discovered. In it, the cocoon, thought to be fruit, wouldn’t soften when boiled. So the would-be diners got their anger out by beating it with sticks until the thread was found.
Quiz

1 Read the following statement.

Ancient Chinese cultures had traditional social roles for men and women.

Which sentence from the article provides the BEST support for the statement above?

(A) She also fed silkworms the mulberry leaf, which was found to be the best food for producing silk.
(B) The Yellow Emperor was a legendary ruler credited with almost godlike abilities.
(C) The job of making fabric was women's work.
(D) In one version, the horse is betrayed by the woman's father.

2 Read the sentence from the section "Raising silk."

They also learned to watch the development of the cocoons so they could kill the chrysalis by plunging it in boiling water just before it became a moth.

HOW does using the word "plunging" affect the TONE of the sentence above?

(A) It implies that the process of making silk requires cultivators to handle a chrysalis with great care.
(B) It implies that silk cultivators must act quickly when working to halt further development of a chrysalis.
(C) It implies that silk cultivation requires little knowledge of the lifespan of a silkworm.
(D) It implies that the Chinese had to use extreme methods to kill the chrysalis.
3 Read the sentence from the section "Who was the lady of Hsi-Ling?"

This includes the invention of reeling and the first loom.

Which of the following phrases from the article provides context clues to the meaning of the word "reeling"?

(A) carefully unwrapped
(B) magnetic compass
(C) bird and animal skin
(D) cracked China’s grip

4 Which section highlights the idea that China used its silk as a form of currency?

(A) "Who was the lady of Hsi-Ling?"
(B) "Silk clothing altered the Chinese division of labor"
(C) "Evidence of five millennia of silk"
(D) "A silken economy"