The Power of Silk

Azula Camara

The New York City College of Technology

The luxurious fiber, silk, relays a significant aura of richness and lust. When wearing silk a person is automatically gifted with its power of wealth and seduction. Silk is seen as an item that is only for those of the rich and powerful. From almost 3000 BCE to our present day, silk has maintained its glory as the “gold” of fiber. This paper will be highlighting the history of this precious fiber, the status of it, and its end uses.

**HISTORY**

In an ancient Chinese story, Hoangti was the emperor of China. He and his beautiful wife, Si-ling, ran their empire. The emperor and wife were walking around in their garden. When drinking her tea, a cocoon fell into Si-ling’s cup. She then picked it out and the cocoon began to unravel into a little tiny thread. She was able to unravel it so much that it stretched from one side of her garden to the other and back again. Brightened by this event, Si-ling then came up with the idea that she can take this long and durable thread and make apparel from it. She saw the same exact cocoon that fell in her cup was from a mulberry tree and there were thousands of them. Si-ling discovered the silk worm and its diet, the mulberry leaf, and the means of how to extract the silk from the cocoon through heat, like that from her tea. Many variations of this story give Si-ling the credit of discovering the silk worms, cultivating them, and then in turn creating garments from them.

Silk derives from a cocoon that is spun by a worm that derives from the ancestor, Bombyx Mori. From the cocoon, a moth emerges from it. In due time, the moth will then lay about five hundred to a thousand pinpoint sized eggs, each weighing about only one gram. These eggs would then hatch, become larva, and in six weeks they become the silk worms. These silk worms will feast on these Mulberry leaves twenty four seven and will grow their weight about ten thousand times before they start the next phase of their metamorphic process.

The Chinese saw this process and found ways to best condition the growth and have optimum results for their silk fiber. They figured out the appropriate conditions such as the temperature, humidity, how much light was needed, and so on. These silk worms can really ingest an abundance of mulberry leaves. Thirty thousand silk worms can ingest about a ton of mulberry leaves and from those thirty thousand worms you only get about twelve pounds of raw silk. To feed these worms you need forests of mulberry trees in order to supply the demand for silk. In modern day China, there is about seven thousand square kilometers of land solely dedicated to growing these trees in order to supply the silk demand.

The oldest form of silk dates back to the Neolithic period of China, One of Ancient China’s greatest economic products was silk. This gave China such a prestigious perspective amongst its peers. China was the first to discover the silk worm (Bombyx Mori) and what was the correct process in which to be able to carefully cultivate it and create such a beautiful fabric from fiber. Silk was one of the reasons for China’s connection to the Western World and is even the reason why the “Silk” Road was given its name. China became a powerhouse due to silk being one of its greatest exports.

Starting with the Byzantine Empire, China did not necessarily directly export to them. The Byzantines had actually caught wind of the high quality silk being produced in China and ordered two monks to go in and steal some of the cocoons and study how they were able to harvest and care for the worms. The monks smuggled several eggs in the stems of bamboo out of China and back into the Byzantine Empire. From there the Byzantines were able to breed more worms and slowly have their own silk industry. The silk that they manufactured was nowhere near comparable to China’s, their silk was actually at a low/medium grade of silk.

Other than the Byzantine Empire, other areas surrounding China got their silk through the Silk Road. Silk was one of China’s leading export and the Silk Road allowed China to export all of it commodities to India, Persia, the Roman Empire, and the Byzantine Empire. No single trader would travel the Silk Road alone, there would actually be middlemen that would then continue the journey and drop off the exports and return with the funds. Other ways of trading included water travel across the Inland Sea to Japan.

**POWER OF SILK**

When the Chinese discovered the precious fiber of silk, they knew this type of material was like no other. The process of which to produce silk and the luscious product that becomes developed was not one for the common people. The use of silk was only restricted to those of the higher class or for those of the royal family. Imagine a fabric so pure that it is restricted of use by the lower classmen. This happened in many civilizations that silk came across. The lower class couldn’t use the fiber, let alone afford it. Silk was an extremely high priced item that only those with an abundance of disposable income can acquire. The lower class were struggling to put food on the table and survive so silk was not even in the question.

When first discovered silk, the Chinese kept this a secret from the rest of the world cause they felt it was something that was precious to the culture and something that no one else should have. The Chinese were able to strategically create a process that enabled them to rapidly produce silk and have it be a fine and sturdy product. When the Chinese began to trade the silk, many people loved the silk and became extremely addicted to its automatic status symbol and high quality. Nobles and high royalty in the neighboring nations adored silk and wanted an abundance of it. Many tried to imitate the silk of the Chinese but couldn’t exactly get it right. Silk became a powerhouse for trade in China and was one of its top three commodity products that they had exported, along with porcelain and tea. Silk was an evolutionary industry for Ancient China and allowed it to grow exponentially.

During the Han dynasty, silk was seen as somewhat of a currency. In this time period, there’s evidence that some citizens used silk as a form of payment. For example, there is a document supporting that a farmer once paid their taxes in the form of grain and silk. If taxes were paid in silk, then that also meant that the state could also pay in forms of silk. Many different types of workers would be paid in silk as well. Silk was measured in length in correlation to the work, just like how gold would be measured in weight. Emperors and those of the royal family wore silk on common days. They would wear white silk while in the home and while venturing outside of the palace they would present themselves in a yellow silk. The silk would be the most pristine and lustrous, displaying their great wealth and power. The silk was something that wasn’t given or available to everyone, everyone just couldn’t afford it.

Another civilization that adored the great fabric of silk was the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire was China’s greatest export, not only cause of the size but of the demand of the silk from the Romans. Imported from the treasured Silk Road, the Romans greatly desired the silk but it was only for the well-off Romans, those only from the high class and of nobility. These were the only ones who could afford it. Often individuals would steal silk from the high class, this is how much individuals desired this fiber. Around third century AD, the great Roman emperor, Heliogabalus, allegedly wore absolutely nothing but silk.

**SILK END USES**

The lustrous silk is used as a fine fabric that is meant to shine and look luxurious. Those with money were able to distinguish themselves from the lower class with its high shine and resilience.

The reason for the high shine of silk is due to the canal of the worm the silk comes out of. As the silk worms begin to spin its cocoon for metamorphosis, the worm ejects the specimen out of a canal that is triangular shape. This calls for the silk fiber to hold a triangular shape. This triangular shape calls for the refraction of light causing it to have such a high shine. The angle of the fibers allow it to refract the light and have a high shine.

Silk is used for apparel, furniture, wall hangings, upholstery, screens, robes, gowns, blankets, jackets, hand fans, and many more. Any kind of object you can use a fabric in, silk was most likely used for it to have an aura of elegance. Silk is also used as a writing surface just like bamboo or paper. Silk was famously used by artists during the Tang Dynasty. The artists would often paint and print on silk. Books and other forms of literature would be printed in silk as well. Many officials such as Taoist priests, set themselves apart and distinguish themselves through their shiny silk robes.

An interesting end use that many don’t think of is silk being used in military banners. When some nations would go to war, the other nation would see the high shine lustrous silk on the banner and retreat. They thought that the other nation was too technologically advanced and they wouldn’t be able to stand a chance against them.

In conclusion, silk was a revolutionary industry for Ancient China. Silk was able to generate an abundance of money for China and allowed its economy to exponentially grow. Silk is a one of a kind fiber that is still sought out and valued by many. Its status symbol of wealth and royalty allows silk to be such a unique fiber.

REFERENCES

Angela Sheng. Why Ancient Silk Is Still Gold: Issues in Chinese Textile History. Retrieved from: https://www.jstor.org/stable/4629553?seq=1#page\_scan\_tab\_contents

Cartwright, M. (2019, November 18). Silk in Antiquity. Retrieved from <https://www.ancient.eu/Silk/>.

Hand Designed Silk Embroidery Art with Over 2,500 Years of History. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.artofsilk.com/blogs/news/6565365-importance-of-silk#.Xdwani3Myb8.

History of Silk Fabric. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://www.historyofclothing.com/textile-history/history-of-silk/.

Silk history. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.silk-road.com/artl/silkhistory.shtml>.

XIN Riu. The Influence of “Silk” Export on the Silk Road on Currency Circulation in Tang Dynasty. Retrieved from <http://en.cnki.com.cn/Article_en/CJFDTotal-XJCY201503003.htm>