

Thread of Time by Clive Garner
History of Silk - Part 1, Origins of Silk

Ancient China, probably the first civilisation in the world.

Around 10,000 years ago, early Chinese settlers began farming along the banks of what are now known as The Yellow and Yangtze rivers. The rich earth proved to be extremely fertile; good for growing grain as well as raising livestock and soon the early settlers began to build villages. Over time, more and more of the land was settled as tribes were formed and territories were established. No doubt competition arose among the tribes along with territorial disputes and from time to time wars would have broken out. For several thousand years the tribes of the central plain continued in this way until, around 2700 years before the birth of Christ, a leader arose who drew the tribes together and founded the Chinese nation.



Little is known for certain about The Great Emperor Huang-Ti. For some, he is a legend about whom wonderful stories have been told concerning his influence and achievements as the architect of the nation we know today as China. For others, he is a credible historical figure who established a single government in a large area around the Yellow River and who led his people to a hitherto unprecedented level of civilisation.

Whatever the truth, Emperor Huang-Ti, known as The Yellow Emperor (2697 - 2597BC) is still regarded by some Chinese as the first great emperor. As well as bringing law and order to a large area of central China, he has been associated with the development of many cultural and scientific innovations.

The time of Huang-Ti's reign is known as the period of Liangzhu and archaeological finds have suggested it was a period of advanced culture, for example, there is evidence that diamonds were used for grinding and polishing tools.

It is a mystery as to exactly how silk was first discovered, so I offer this... possible... scenario, a mix of fact and fable with a little of my own imagination. For centuries white Mulberry trees had been grown for their fruit throughout the central belt of China. In mid summer the large purplish fruit would be picked in huge quantities and eaten as soon as possible as a succulent, slightly sharp treat. However, there was a problem. A strange disease affected the trees. At first small holes appeared in the leaves. Then the holes grew larger and larger until the leaves disappeared. In many cases the trees then died. The emperor was regarded as all powerful and as such it was his responsibility to solve the problem. The greatest minds in the court were summoned to find an explanation. Many theories were suggested and an equal number of remedies tried but the trees continued to die. Without mulberries, life in Huang-Ti's China would never be the same. Desperate to find a solution to the problem, the emperor consulted his wife, Empress Lei Tsu. She longed to help her husband find the answer and became determined to solve the mystery that confounded the experts.

It was the empress's custom to take tea in the palace garden each day and it was on one such occasion that the solution to the Mulberry crisis was first revealed. Whilst Empress Lei Tsu was sitting under a mulberry tree in the palace garden one day something fell into her cup of tea. The peculiar, white object began to swell. Alarmed by this strange occurrence she ordered a servant to remove the object and as the terrified girl obeyed, the empress realised that it was in fact a ball of very fine thread. Furthermore, hidden inside this ball of thread was the corpse of a most peculiar creature, a sort of worm with wings. Looking into the tree, the empress noticed more of these balls of thread. Could these be the reason for the dying mulberry trees? On telling her husband about what had happened, the emperor placed the greatest scientists in the court under her command to test her theory. She was right. Worms ate the leaves, then spun cocoons around themselves before miraculously turning into moths. Later the moths laid eggs that hatched into worms and the cycle continued.

Now that the emperor knew what was killing the mulberries, all he had to do was find a way to keep the worms under control. Again, the empress found the solution. She persuaded the emperor to plant a grove of mulberries inside the palace grounds. These

trees were kept free from the voracious worms but a proportion of the leaves from each tree were used to feed a number of worms kept inside a special room. Studying these worms carefully, the empress was able to discover exactly how long it took for the worm to turn into a moth once inside its cocoon. She then selected just the right moment to plunge the cocoons into near boiling water to loosen the gossamer like thread. The single filament that formed the cocoon was so fine that it would have been of little use on its own. Several would have to be twisted together to produce a useable thread. It's the twisting of long continuous filaments rather than spinning short filaments that gives silk its uniquely luxurious qualities.

Realising that such a remarkable discovery would need specialised handling, a handful of local women were chosen by the empress to be trained to become the most skilful weavers in the land. They became the first silk weavers. The soft, shimmering, gauze-like cloth produced was presented to the emperor and, delighted with his wife's work, he ordered it to be made into ceremonial garments. Before long, the entire court were wearing silk. Within the palace, court officials wore white but outside they dressed in yellow, the emperor's chosen colour. In this way they could easily be identified as VIPs and demand respect. Before long, production outstripped the demand for courtly robes and the emperor gave his blessing for any and all of his subjects to be dressed in clothes made from silk. Realising the potential economic value of silk, laws were enacted to protect the secrets of how silk was produced. Only the workers directly engaged in sericulture knew the whole process and faced summary execution if caught trying to sell or give away the secret.

No longer were mulberry trees planted solely for their fruit. Now forests were planted so that their leaves could be harvested for the rapidly expanding silk industry. Workers were trained so that all aspects of sericulture would be tended to with care and to ensure only the highest quality silks were produced. As the industry developed, silk became almost commonplace in ancient China and its use expanded far beyond that of producing luxury clothing.

Prized for its strength and lightness, silk thread was found to have many uses including fishing lines, bow strings and for the strings of musical instruments. The fibres also became an important element in the manufacture of paper.



Overtime, silk came to be seen as currency in its own right. It could be used as payment for other goods or services. Some government officials received part of their wages in silk and even taxes could be paid with the highest quality cloth.

The discovery of this remarkable thread was to become the crowning glory of the reign of the Yellow Emperor, Huang-Ti and his empress Lei Tsu. The achievements of the emperor have earned him a legendary status in China and his wife is still revered today as Si Ling-Chi, "Goddess of Silk."

Whatever the truth about Huang-Ti and Lei Tsu and we may never have all the facts, archeological studies have shown that the origins of sericulture began in the third millennium BC around the area of the Yangtze River.