

□ Silk—the Queen of Textiles



Cotton is cool; wool is warm. They're practical. But silk? Silk is soft, it is smooth, it is sophisticated—the queen of textiles. It is also possibly the most expensive material in the world, and indeed in ancient Rome it was more expensive than gold. But it is strong as well—a thread of silk is stronger than **steel**.

I wanted to discover more about this mysterious material, so I decided to go to China. China is where the secret of silk was discovered more than 4,000 years ago, and today it is still the biggest producer of silk in the world.

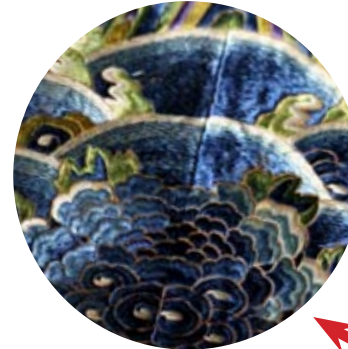
The first person I visited was Shen Congwen, advisor on ancient textiles to the Palace Museum in Beijing. He showed me some silk that workers found in a **tomb** in Jianglin, in Hubei Province. It was more than 2,000 years old but still beautiful. He told me that he thinks these old silks are more beautiful than modern silks. “In ancient times, weaving was done from the heart. In modern times, weaving is done for **commerce**.”

So, how do you make silk? The first problem is that the silkworm only eats leaves from one tree—the mulberry tree. “It

▼ Silkworms feed on mulberry leaves.

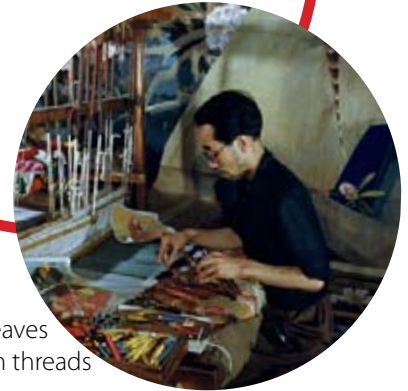


▼ A silkworm spins a cocoon from silk thread.



▲ A silk tapestry

► An artisan weaves silk cloth from threads on a loom.



is easier to prepare food for a human than a silkworm,” says Toshio Ito, a Japanese silkworm physiologist. Silkworms only live for about 28 days, but in that time they increase in weight 10,000 times. At the end of their short lives, they **spin** a **cocoon**. In China, I watched workers collect the cocoons and kill the silkworms with steam or hot air. They then put the cocoons into hot water to make them softer. Next, they pulled the fibers from the cocoon and spun them to make silk thread. Finally, they wove the thread into cloth on machines called **looms**.

But why is silk so expensive? Well, it takes 110 cocoons to make a man's tie, 630 cocoons to make a blouse and 3,000 cocoons to make a heavy silk kimono. That's a lot of mulberry leaves and many hours of hard work. But many people believe its beauty is worth it. As Kokoh Moriguchi, a textile artist told me, “A woman is more gentle when she wears a silk kimono.”