

READING**READING PASSAGE 1**

You should spend about 20 minutes on Questions 1–13, which are based on Reading Passage 1 below.

THE STORY OF SILK

*The history of the world's most luxurious fabric,
from ancient China to the present day*

Silk is a fine, smooth material produced from the cocoons – soft protective shells – that are made by mulberry silkworms (insect larvae). Legend has it that it was Lei Tzu, wife of the Yellow Emperor, ruler of China in about 3000 BC, who discovered silkworms. One account of the story goes that as she was taking a walk in her husband's gardens, she discovered that silkworms were responsible for the destruction of several mulberry trees. She collected a number of cocoons and sat down to have a rest. It just so happened that while she was sipping some tea, one of the cocoons that she had collected landed in the hot tea and started to unravel into a fine thread. Lei Tzu found that she could wind this thread around her fingers. Subsequently, she persuaded her husband to allow her to rear silkworms on a grove of mulberry trees. She also devised a special reel to draw the fibres from the cocoon into a single thread so that they would be strong enough to be woven into fabric. While it is unknown just how much of this is true, it is certainly known that silk cultivation has existed in China for several millennia.

Originally, silkworm farming was solely restricted to women, and it was they who were responsible for the growing, harvesting and weaving. Silk quickly grew into a symbol of status, and originally, only royalty were entitled to have clothes made of silk. The rules were gradually relaxed over the years until finally during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911 AD), even peasants, the lowest caste, were also entitled to wear silk. Sometime during the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), silk was so prized that it was also used as a unit of currency. Government officials were paid their salary in silk, and farmers paid their taxes in grain and silk. Silk was also used as diplomatic gifts by the emperor. Fishing lines, bowstrings, musical instruments and paper were all made using silk. The earliest indication of silk paper being used was discovered in the tomb of a noble who is estimated to have died around 168 AD.

Demand for this exotic fabric eventually created the lucrative trade route now known as the Silk Road, taking silk westward and bringing gold, silver and