

## Lady Silkworm

Huang Di marked his victories over Chi You and Xing Tian with a celebration in his palace. While songs of triumph rang out, the exhausted emperor rested on his throne, secure in the knowledge that he had restored order to the world.

Then, in the midst of this merry-making, came a strange apparition: Can Nü ("Lady Silkworm"), the goddess of silkworms, appeared wrapped from head to toe in horsehide. She bowed to Huang Di and offered him two delicately coloured reels of the finest silk, one golden and the other silver.

There were various accounts of the life of the silkworm goddess and of how she first made silk. In one the goddess was a star deity named Jian Si; in another she was identified with Huang Di's empress, Lei Zu (some sources say Xiling Ji). But in the most complete account, she was the beautiful and faithful daughter of a mortal man.

According to this tale, Can Nü's father left home and travelled far away; for an entire year his daughter pined for him and cared for the home. One day as she groomed the family horse, she murmured that she would willingly marry anyone who could find her father and bring him home. In that instant the horse bolted and Can Nü could only watch in despair as it galloped away.

Within a few days the resourceful stallion had tracked down the young woman's father. He was living at his ease in a distant place, without a thought for his daughter's needs. The stallion approached him and by stamping its feet and waving its head indicated that it wanted to return home at once. The father, wondering if his daughter was in trouble, leaped onto the horse's back.

The young woman danced with delight when she saw her father returning. They embraced tenderly and she told him how much she had missed him and how the horse, perhaps sensing this, had



Silk was a highly sought-after commodity and was kept a secret for centuries. This 19th-century embroidered robe depicts scenes of courtship and femininity.

left one day to bring him home. From that day on, the father lavished care upon the horse, providing regular grooming and extra hay. But the creature was distressed and whenever it saw Can Nü it stamped its feet and and neighed as if in pain.

After some time the father asked his daughter if she could explain the horse's behaviour and she told him of the promise she had made – to marry anyone who brought her father home. The father ordered that the affair be kept a secret, and then he shot the horse with an arrow.

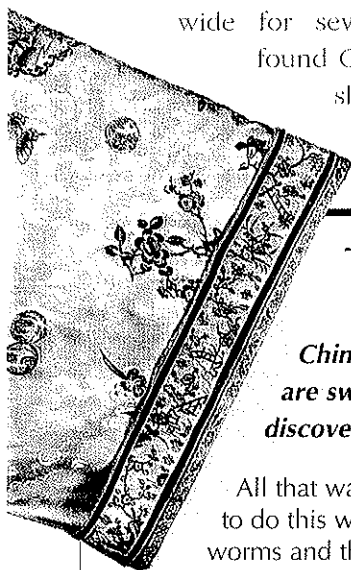
Now he thought his troubles were over. He skinned the animal and laid its hide out to dry. Then he had to go away again. That day his daughter and a friend were talking in the yard and Can Nü kicked the animal skin and laughed at it.

But as she turned away, still laughing, the skin rose up like a ghost, wrapped itself around her and whipped her away into the countryside.

Terrified, the friend ran after them but she could do nothing. When the father returned and learned what had happened, he searched far and wide for several days. Eventually, he found Can Nü, still wrapped in the skin, hanging in an unfamiliar tree. The poor man cried

out: she was no longer his fair daughter, for she had been changed into a worm. As she wriggled she moved her head like a horse, and a fine thread spewed from her mouth.

Can Nü's friend named the tree "mulberry", a word derived from "mourning" (*sang*). People experimented with the thread and found they could use it to make fine cloths; they took tree cuttings and planted them, and, in time, learned how to breed silkworms for the thread.



## The Fruit of the Worm

*Chinese sericulture – breeding worms and producing silk – is so ancient that its origins are swathed in myth, but by the middle of the third millennium BC it had already been discovered that the silkworm's cocoon could be unravelled and woven into a soft cloth.*

All that was needed to do this were the worms and the mulberry trees on which they fed – each day eating several times their own weight in leaves. Sericulture became a thriving cottage industry in rural China, with one of its bases in Henan Province in the north of the country.

For hundreds of years, the methods used were kept completely secret. Silk was not exported from China until the first millennium BC. Later, under the Han dynasty (206BC–AD220), a major trade in silk with Europe became established.

The cloth travelled along the Silk Road – a caravan trail, which ran almost 13,000 kilometres from Shanghai on the China Sea to Cadiz in southwestern Spain through Ankara and Byzantium (Istanbul), across the Adriatic to Italy and then along the Mediterranean coast. Han rulers

made diplomatic presents of silk garments and used the luxurious cloth to pacify raiders.

Tussah silk, a less fine cloth that is made using wild rather than domesticated silkworms, was produced in India from c.1400BC. But the secret of how Chinese silk was made was kept until the mid-sixth century AD, when two Persian monks

smuggled silkworms and mulberry seeds in bamboo canes to Byzantium at the request of the emperor, Justinian I, and sericulture was subsequently established in Europe. It had spread to Japan in the third century AD when, according to traditional accounts, a group of concubines secretly exported the Chinese method.

