

# Silk

## What is silk?

Silk is a thin, but strong fiber that silkworms produce when they are making their cocoons. It can be woven into a very soft and smooth fabric. Silk fabric was invented in Ancient China and played an important role in their culture and economy for thousands of years.

## Making Silk

The ancient Chinese bred special moths to produce the quality silk they wanted. Here are the steps in the process for making silk:

- A moth lays 500 or so eggs and then dies
- Baby worms hatch from the eggs are fed mulberry leaves for one month until they are fat
- The worms spin cocoons
- The cocoons are steamed to kill the growing moth inside
- The cocoons are rinsed in hot water to loosen the threads
- Women would unwind the cocoons and then combine six or so fibers into silk threads
- The threads are woven into cloth
- The cloth is then pounded to make it softer



## Silk in Chinese Culture

Silk cloth was extremely valuable in Ancient China. Wearing silk was a sign of being important. At first, only members of the royal family were allowed to wear silk. Later, silk clothing could be worn by other rich people, but ordinary people were not allowed to wear silk. Silk was even used as money in Ancient China.

## Keeping silk a secret

Silk became an important export for the Chinese. Kings of foreign lands desired silk and would pay high prices for the cloth. The emperors of China wanted to

keep the process for making silk a secret. Anyone caught telling the secret or taking silkworms out of China was put to death.

## Smuggling Silk

The Chinese managed to keep silk a secret for over 1000 years. However, in 550 AD the secret of silk became known to other countries when two monks from Europe managed to smuggle some silkworm eggs out of the country. They hid the eggs inside of their bamboo walking sticks.

## Interesting Facts about Silk

- Silk was used for other purposes than clothing such a paper, fishing lines, bowstrings, and canvas for painting.
- Around the thirteenth century, Italy became one of the major producers of silk. Some of the finest silk in the world is made in Italy today.
- Silk clothing was often embroidered with designs. The most popular designs were of flowers and birds.
- Silk was such an important product from China that the trade route from Europe to China became known as the Silk Road.



SILK-WORM MOTII (Male).



1. Draw the life cycle of the silk worm.
2. Write the steps of how silk is made, starting from when the moth lays the eggs.
3. Why is silk such a special cloth?
4. Who wore silk in China in the early days?
5. Why do you think the poorer people were not allowed to wear it?