



# *Sichuan: An Important Cradle of Chinese Silk Civilization*

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**Abstract:** Silk is a unique token of ancient Chinese Civilization that is not owned by any of the other three ancient civilizations of the world. It originated in China, synchronized with the start of the entire Chinese Civilization and germinated in various areas as early as the Neolithic period. Sichuan, the known “Land of Abundance” gifted with unrivalled natural and cultural resources, used to be one of the cradles where the Chinese silk culture originated and evolved, and a key hub for the Silk Road in history. Ever since the Han and Tang Dynasties, Sichuan brocade, Sichuan embroidery, Sichuan cloth, lacquerware, Qiong bamboo rod, as well as other specialties from Sichuan have found their way into the trades along the Silk Road, earning Sichuan an especially distinctive reputation. Today, with the cultural communication and cooperation made by the Belt and Road Initiative, Sichuan will also play its due part in promoting mutual learning between countries.

**Keywords:** the Belt and Road Initiative; Silk Road; Chinese Civilization

## 1. China is where the silk civilization originated

**H**uman culture stemmed from clothing, food, housing and transport. Of these it was clothing that ushered in civilization. The process of sewing animal skins and tree leaves gave way to woven coarse grass linen and the earliest clothing aesthetics thus emerged. Early in the most ancient times, when humans lived by picking fruit, fishing and hunting, “making fishing nets with ropes in the way spiders build their webs,” the Chinese stitched animal skins and tree leaves with bone awls and needles for their clothing. Later, during the middle and late Neolithic Age, ceramic and stone spinning wheels appeared alongside the primitive horizontal looms and plain coarse grass linen, also turquoise and jade ornaments marking

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The bone awl unearthed in Yuqiao site of Ziyang

the start of Chinese clothing civilization. What is worth mentioning is that in areas that were suitable for sericulture and where silk was first found, silk-oriented weaving and sewing techniques were developed. An ancient story in *Classic of Regions Beyond the Seas: North of Classic of Mountains and Seas*, a fabulous geographical and cultural account of pre-Qin China as well as a collection of Chinese

mythology, tells about a woman who knelt beside a tree, found a silk worm eating a mulberry leaf and vomiting silk, brought the silkworm home and raised it for silk production. It is arguably a historical process how silk producing technology came into being. According to the research of Meng Wentong (1894-1968, a famous historian in contemporary China), *Classic of Regions Beyond the Seas: North of Classic of Mountains and Seas*, was authored by people in Sichuan, where the silk worm was found. The book is a document that first recorded sericulture and where the earliest trace of the Chinese silk civilization can be found.

Archaeologists have found several locations and relics in China that have ties with silk production in the Neolithic Age, such as the silkworm-patterned ivory carvings unearthed from the Hemudu Site in Yuyao, Zhejiang (7,000 years ago), the silkworm cocoon from the Shanxi Xiaoxian Site of Yangshao Culture (about 5,500 years ago), and the silk and



Brick painting of mulberry garden unearthed in Pengzhou (rubbing)

linen fabric fragments from the Henan Qingtai Site. The most famous discovery would be the silk and linen woven products in the Qianshanyang Neolithic Site of Huzhou, Zhejiang (about 4,750 years ago). The silk woven products include silk cloth, silk ribbons and silk threads, all woven with cultivated silk in various fabric weave types like single thread twisting, unbalanced twill weave and plain weave, indicating that as early as four to five thousand years ago, several places of the Yellow River Basin and the Yangtze River Basin had already developed techniques of silkworm farming and silk weaving. It also proves that the Chinese silk culture began like stars as under, in line with the entire Chinese Civilization, which sprouted simultaneously in different places.

According to historical documents, silkworm farming and reeling was initiated by Lei Zu, a legendary Chinese empress and wife of the Yellow Emperor, who lived 5,000 years ago. “Lei” (嫫) means “women are worn out by silk reeling,” indicating the feminine origin of silk production, which is in accordance with the Chinese tradition, “Men do farm work and women engage in spinning and weaving.” According to the *Great Treatise of Book of Changes*, Lei Zu used silk to make magnificent clothes for the Yellow Emperor, “contributing to his impressive and dignified manner which helped him rule the country,” and the ceremonies thereby formulated brought China into a civilized era. As far as I am concerned, though there were some common factors giving rise to the world’s ancient civilizations, silk culture, belongs only to China.

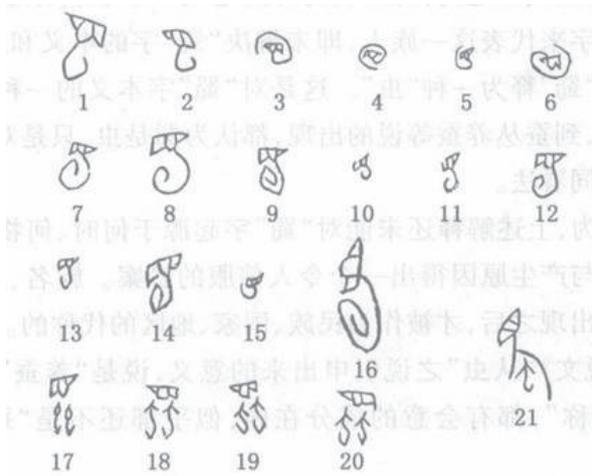
Many ancient stories hold that the Yellow Emperor and Lei Zu initiated the silk civilization. In many places, there had even existed traditions in which Lei Zu was worshiped as “Silk Goddess Xi Lingshi”— founder of the silk industry — since the Northern Zhou Dynasty (557 AD-581 AD). Further analysis has led to an interesting discovery:

The places with the aforementioned traditions are usually birthplaces of sericulture and boast a long history, such as Chengdu, Nanchong and Yanting (all three in Sichuan). Rather than mere ancient myths, those traditions might be none other than the oral history of the origination of silk, which spread to this day by word of mouth. They, combined with supportive archaeological evidence, have proven that China alone is where the silk civilization started. Sericulture did not sprout in the Western countries until 552 AD, when the Byzantine Empire ordered some Nestorian monks to hide silkworms inside bamboo rods and smuggle them back from China. Sericulture was later brought further into Italy, France and Britain during the time of the Crusades in the 12th century.

## 2. Sichuan is an important cradle of silk civilization

Sichuan’s being a source of Chinese silk civilization first lies in its favorable natural conditions for silkworm farming. Many unearthed relics have linked Chengdu with silkworm farming in early human history. For example, the inlaid land-and-water battle copper pot excavated from Baihuatan, Chengdu, vividly depicts scenes of archery and picking mulberry leaves — 16 women in silk dresses, with baskets in hand, climbing the tree to pick mulberry leaves. Some Han Dynasty “mulberry field” portrait bricks were also discovered in Han Dynasty tombs in Xindu, Pengzhou and Pidu (all being near Chengdu), featuring mulberry fields, wooden doors, and women with their hair raised in a high bun, using long rods to pick mulberry leaves. Though they are from the Warring States Period and the Qin and Han Dynasties, these relics are enough to indicate the prevalence of sericulture in Sichuan a long time ago.

Second, silkworm farming was universal in



"Shu" in Oracle Bone Script

ancient Sichuan, providing a favorable cultural background. A copper dagger of the Western Zhou Dynasty unearthed from Jiaotong Lane of Chengdu is carved with silkworms on both sides, indicating their sericulture custom. In Oracle Bone Scripts of the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, the Chinese character for silkworm is “蚕”, in the very shape of a silkworm, while the Chinese character for “Shu” (Sichuan) is “蜀”, resembling a silkworm wriggling and lying on a mulberry leaf, suggesting that the name Sichuan is closely linked with its custom of silkworm farming.

The silk industry originated and developed in Sichuan under the aforementioned two circumstances.

The name of Can Cong (silkworm clustering), the earliest ancestor of the Sichuan people, indicates that Sichuan's sericulture had already started in the most ancient times. Ancient Sichuan people first came from insect-eating clans and they ate silkworms until they found the silkworms could produce silk. Then they began to cultivate domestic silkworms. The name “Can Cong” was in fact in honor of a person's silkworm farming skills.

Can Cong's homeland is said to be in Canling of Minshan. There was once an ancient stone tablet inscribed with “Town of Canling” in Maoxian. Unfortunately, it was destroyed by earthquakes and floods. In *Search of the Supernatural*, a Chinese compilation of legends, short stories, and hearsay concerning Chinese gods, Chinese ghosts, and other supernatural phenomena) authored by Gan Bao (a historian at the court of Emperor Yuan of the Eastern Jin Dynasty), a myth passed down from the Can Cong era was related: A Sichuan lady got wrapped by mulberry leaves, turned into a silkworm and finally became the Horse-skin-Covered Silk Goddess. Thanks to Can Cong's efforts to popularize silkworm farming, sericulture boomed in Sichuan. The rise of the Can Cong clan fully proved west Sichuan to be a cradle of Chinese silk civilization.

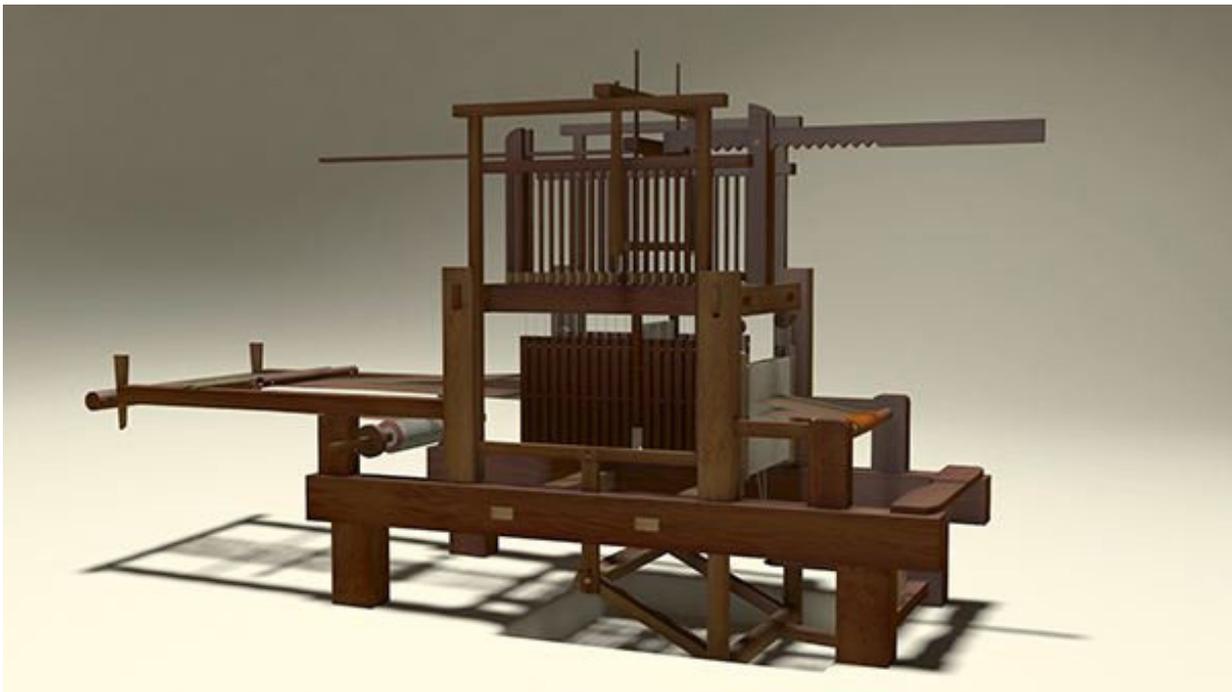
It can be inferred that Can Cong was an honorific title of the emperor of Sichuan, that “Shu Shan Shi” was to honor the clan good at silkworm farming, and that Lei Zu was famous for having invented the technique of silk weaving. Later, the Zhuan Xu clan (Chang Yi and the Gao Yang families) and the Shu Shan clan (Chang Pu and the Zhuo Zi families), both of whom were offspring of the Yellow Emperor and Lei Zu, tied the knot, thus perfectly combining their distinctive advantages, namely silk weaving and silkworm farming, contributing to a unique system of the silk civilization that covers its origination, development and inheritance.

Brocade and embroidery symbolize the highest level of the Sichuan silk civilization. Weaving technologies had already existed in Sichuan in early history. For example, pottery and stone spinning wheels, rope-patterned and grid-patterned pottery (indicative of weaving skills) were found during Neolithic archaeological work in Chengdu. In the Sanxingdui Moon Bay Site, the Chengdu Shi'erqiao Site and the Zhihuijie Site, pottery and stone

spinning wheels were unearthed. And the giant bronze human statue unearthed from the Bronze-Age Sanxingdui Site, wearing brocade clothes delicately embroidered with patterns of dragons, ibis and animal faces, and decorated with woven ribbons signifies that brocade clothes and silk embroidery, the precursor of today's Sichuan brocade and embroidery, already existed in Sichuan during the Bronze Age.

From the Qin and Han Dynasties to the Three Kingdoms period, brocade became a major income source of Sichuan. Even Zhuge Liang (a chancellor and regent of the Shu Kingdom) once commented, "In times of material deficiency, brocade is the only thing we could count on to beat our enemies." Back then China had three distinctive silk centers; Linzi of Shandong with its white silk cloth, Xiangyi of Henan with its "Zhicheng brocade" and in particular Chengdu of Sichuan with its satin brocade, whose delicacy had no rivals.

Sichuan brocade and embroidery got their official name in the Qin and Han Dynasties. According to the research of Xu Zhongshu (1898—1991, a historian in contemporary China), brocade is in fact embroidered satin brocade; satin, which is made glossy through a special craft, is peculiar to Sichuan's silk civilization. In the famous verse *On the Capital of Shu* authored by Zuo Si (250AD—305AD), there is a sentence: "Shell-like brocade has been freshly made, and is now being washed in the river." Two points are implied here. First, there was the "shell-like brocade," a well-known brand of Sichuan brocade in the Han Dynasty, whose name was from *Book of Songs* and meant that the brocade looked like colorful shells. Second, the brocade must be washed in the upstream water of the river so as to get brighter and better than other brocades. The river was thus called "Jin Jiang" (Brocade River). And the official residence for brocade weaving administration placed along the Jinjiang River was



A jacquard machine unearthed in Laoguanshan Han Dynasty tomb of Chengdu (model)

named “Jin Guan Cheng (official town of brocade)”. The area that housed “Jin Guan Cheng” was called “Jin Li.” In light of all this, Chengdu is sometimes called “Jin (Brocade) City.”

Weaving tools were significantly improved as well. In the Han Dynasty, hand embroidery was replaced by advanced jacquard machines, which before 2013 had only appeared in historical documents or on the portrait stones unearthed from the Zengjiabao Han Dynasty Tombs. These were not discovered until 2013 when four wooden loom models and 14 painted lacquered wooden weaving craftsman figurines were excavated from the No. 2 Han Dynasty Tomb of Laoguanshan, Tianhui town of Chengdu. It is the earliest tangible trace that China and even the world have found of the looms used in Sichuan brocade production. The looms adopted a technique which made warp threads and filling threads densely interlaced, and the technique was inherited by the latest Dingqiao jacquard looms. The unearthed loom models bear solid testimony to how Sichuan brocade and embroidery drove the birth and evolution of the world’s silk civilization in its own manner.

Sichuan’s silk civilization in turn exerted a profound influence on its agricultural development. During the Tang and Song Dynasties, Chengdu and Yangzhou became metropolises known for wealth accumulation and outbound cultural communications, as was seen clearly in the saying “First Yangzhou, Second Yizhou (Chengdu).”

### 3. The most culturally valuable Sichuan brocade arm shield

Silk products from the Han Dynasty have been discovered through archaeological efforts such as the colorful brocade unearthed from Huai’an of Hebei, the Niya Site of Minfeng County, Xinjiang, the Ancient Kroraina Site, the Nuoyinwuna Site in

Mongolia and the Lelang Commandery in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, mostly woven with auspicious words wishing for health, longevity, offspring, prosperity and wisdom. Among them the Sichuan brocade arm shield unearthed from the Niya Site of Minfeng County, Xinjiang along the Silk Road, is perhaps the most unique, for its script is of the greatest cultural significance. The brocade arm shield was found in 1995, and dates to sometime during the Eastern Han Dynasty to the Three Kingdoms Period. It was filled with a colorful pattern of peacocks, red-crowned cranes, a countering-evil tiger, clouds and five stars. What’s most interesting about this arm shield is the eight Chinese characters it includes, “simultaneous appearance of five stars in the east sky is a propitious sign for the Middle Kingdom.” According to the “Astronomy Treatises” in the *Records of the Grand Historian*, when the five stars were gathered in the east sky, under which *the Middle Kingdom* China was located, things would turn out good for the country, especially for its political influence and stability.

People in the Han Dynasty believed in the philosophy of “unity of heaven and man,” in which the five stars’ position in the sky was closely linked with the movements on the earth, especially with important national affairs like sacrifices and wars. The “five stars” in fact had two meanings. First, the “five stars” referred to the five constellations distributed in the five different directions, namely; Zigong (central), Fangxin (east), Quanheng (south), Xianchi (west) and Xuwei (north). The other meaning of the “five stars” was the five stars that helped the world run, namely the stars of water, fire, gold, wood, and earth. Make lines of longitude out of the constellations and lines of latitude out of the latter five stars, interlace them and the whole world would be divided into several sub-spaces. And the astronomers’ responsibility was to watch the variation of those sub-spaces and help the rulers

make important decisions by telling them whether the omen was good or not. For example, “if the five stars were simultaneously gathered in the east sky,” it would be a good opportunity to crush a rebellion and solidify a regime. The idea was successfully adopted by Chinese rulers during the Han Dynasties and the Three Kingdoms Period, when they had to identify the right time to conquer the insurgents in the south and unify China.

The script on the brocade arm shield, to some extent, displays China had gained cultural recognition at the time. Even in the most ordinary crafts, advanced techniques were most creatively used to inject a profound spirit. The meticulous creativity and relentless pursuit of quality reflected here even inspired Sima Xiangru (179BC-117BC, an ancient Chinese poet, writer, musician, and official who lived during the Western Han Dynasty) in writing his most beautiful verses.

#### 4. Sichuan's historical contribution to the Silk Road

Sichuan, known as “Land of Abundance,” is the birthplace and center of the ancient civilization on the upper reaches of the Yangtze River. It is an important cradle where the Chinese civilization and the Chinese silk civilization originated and developed. During the Han and Tang Dynasties, when the world fell into the darkness of the middle

ages and many cities began to decay, only Chengdu and Yangzhou never ceased creating their glory along the Silk Road through cross-border trades and cultural exchanges.

Sichuan boasts an oral history of how the silk clothing civilization originated, unique archaeological discoveries and close ties with commodity exchanges along the Silk Road. It has made special contributions to the Northern Silk Road, the prairie Silk Road, the Maritime Silk Road, the Southern Silk Road, and the Silk Road to the Southwest. Generations of Sichuan people, just as Sima Xiangru described in his verses, never daunted by the inaccessible geography, have kept fighting their way out with a most courageous spirit.

History has shown that Sichuan and the Silk Road are symbiotic. They can never be separately assessed. Today, we are launching the Belt and Road Initiative in which Sichuan, just as it once devoted itself to the Silk Road, will carry on and count on its cultural ideas, historical advantages and experiences and play its due part. It is now eager to link deep into the Belt and Road Initiative. Here is an example. Every day, since its opening this January, the “Featured Exhibition of the Spirit of the Silk Road & The Land of Abundance and the Silk Road” at Chengdu Museum in Tianfu Square is drawing more than ten thousand visitors, which is definitely a persuasive number .

*(Translator: Wu Lingwei; Editor: Xiong Xianwei)*

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