In the misty dawn of a spring morning in the year 1908, Yehonala, Empress of China, stood by the lake in her beloved garden in the Summer Palace. As she watched the kingfishers hovering and dipping over the water, their bright hues catching the first rays of the sun, she thought wistfully of the brilliant silks she could not that day wear. It was the third day of the Third Moon, when sacrifices had to be made to that other famous empress, Lei Tsu, who, more than 4,000 years ago had envisioned and made possible the fragile loveliness that now filled the great chests in Yehonala's palace. Within the hour, swift bearers would carry the aged empress to Lei Tsu's shrine in the imperial city, Peking, where, like hundreds of empresses before her, she would offer up prayers for the continued protection of the great Gauze from Noin-Ul, Patroness of Silkworms. It was a portentous day. Never again would an empress of China perform this rite. When Yehonala died a few months later, the mighty empire died with her. Thereafter the shrine of Lei Tsu was deserted, the Patroness of Silkworms forgotten.

Recent discoveries have rendered acceptable to an unbelieving West much of the Chinese traditional history of silk. A fragment on a bronze found at Anyang, where the ancient capital of the Shang had stood, verifies literary references to silk in the second millennium B.C., when it vied with pearls, jade, tortoise shell, and cowries as a medium of exchange. And although no remains attributable to the early part of the first millennium have been found, the records about the growing importance of silk cannot be doubted. The prince of Ch'in who, in the fifth century, refused to accept a ransom paid in coin, demanding silk instead, is perfectly believable. Within three centuries Han emperors were paying their soldiers and bribing their enemies with this fragile commodity and were rapidly establishing a prosperous trade with the West, where silk had apparently, until this time, been unknown.

Legends in Western literature about the silk of the East, which first reached the Roman Empire in the second century B.C., have not been so carefully tidied up. Reading them, and the scholarly comment on them, one is reminded of Chuang Chou, who dreamed he was a butterfly, but, awaking, "did not know whether he..."
was Chuang Chou dreaming he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Chou.” At an early date stories arose in the West to account for these marvelous silken stuffs. Both Aristotle and Pliny recount the legend of Pamphile, who was said to have invented silk-weaving on a Greek island, but the most persistent and confused of the stories had to do with the purported unraveling of Chinese silks and reweaving them into the gauzes so fashionable with Roman women. This fantastic idea was presumably evolved by later writers from a misinterpretation of passages in Pliny on silk culture, and it became widespread. It even reached China, via Greek merchants, and was duly recorded by Chinese historians as a strange custom of the Western barbarians. These Chinese records appear to have lent an unwarranted air of authority to the story. Not until the mid-nineteenth century was it even suggested that the “Roman” gauzes might have been Chinese imports.

Recent discoveries have greatly strengthened the theory that the gauzes were imported. Chinese gauzes datable within the period under discussion have been found, not only in China but in the West as well. The first tiny scrap, discovered near Kerch, in the Crimea, in the nineteenth century, was not identified as Chinese until similar gauzes were found on the Asiatic mainland years later. Both the Kerch fragment and those found in Asia are lozenge-patterned, the Kerch piece having single lozenges, the others more elaborate triple lozenges. That these are truly Chinese weaves is easily demonstrable, such lozenge patterns being already centuries old in Chinese decorative art. In the absence of any tangible evidence whatever of locally woven Roman gauzes, it is therefore not difficult to believe that the ladies of the Roman Empire were “dressed and yet naked” in these lozenge-patterned gauzes from the East.

Legends of this sort furnished no small part of the incentive for modern archaeologists who, early in this century, set out to rediscover the famous trade route over which the Chinese silks had reached the Roman Empire. The great imperial highway which the emperor Wu Ti had, in the second century B.C., forced westward through the frightful desert wastes of Kansu and Chinese Turkestan to Bactria and Sogdiana was the most challenging part of this ancient route. The annals of the Han Dynasty provided fairly accurate information about this area, as did the vivid descriptions of Marco Polo set down many centuries later.

By far the most rewarding of the Han sites discovered along this ancient highway was Lou-lan, in Chinese Turkestan. For several centuries an important oasis way station on the silk route, Lou-lan was abandoned in the third century A.D., when the Tarim desert reclaimed this once fertile area. The Lou-lan graves, protected through the centuries by desert sands, yielded a wealth of artifacts—textiles in silk and wool, bronzes and wood carvings—as well as Chinese documents. Some of these documents
were dated in the third century, but many of the silks and other relics had obviously been reburied here from much earlier graves. On the basis of the most careful analysis, they were attributed to the first century A.D. or earlier.

The extraordinary fineness and complexity of the patterning in these silken fabrics, the earliest ever found, bore witness to the great skill and superior equipment of Han weavers. Here was a galaxy of animal forms, fantastic and real, surrounded and set off by fine cloud scrolls or geometric elements, some multicolored and woven in an intricate “warp cloth” technique, some rendered in monochrome damask weaves. Here, too, were gauzes, exquisite lozenge-patterned gauzes—fine enough in truth for any Roman matron.

The logical tendency to regard these priceless fragments as relics of the export trade must be subordinated to the more likely theory that they represent the personal belongings of the occupants of the Lou-lan graves. Some were the remains of grave wrappings, others were undoubtedly treasure for the use of the deceased in after life. Silk was at this early date in China the prerequisite even of soldiers and of petty officials. The famed historian Ssu-ma Ch’ien tells of a million pieces of silk distributed as bounty by Wu Ti on one of his inspection tours along the watch towers of the Great Wall. The Lou-lan fragments, therefore, must represent in part the most valuable assets of those who manned this lonely outpost, assets to ensure their physical well-being in this world and in the world to come.

Han silks from a very different milieu were discovered quite by accident. At Noin-Ula, in Mongolia, a Russian engineer prospecting for gold came upon a series of well-preserved tombs of wealthy chieftains of the Hsiung-nu, a fierce nomadic tribe who, in Han times, perennially harassed the northern and western territories of the Chinese empire. In their efforts to appease these truculent neighbors, the Han rulers periodically sent rich gifts, and it is clear from Han records that silk constituted the bulk of this diplomatic bribery. One can reasonably conclude, therefore, that the Noin-Ula textiles are the fragmentary remains either of such peace offerings, or of loot from one of the Hsiung-nu raids in Chinese territory. An inscribed lacquer dated 2 B.C. found in one of the tombs established an early first century A.D. date for this site. The silks, however, may be considerably earlier. They closely parallel those found in Lou-lan graves, even to the lozenge-patterned gauzes, and provide a unique chapter in silk history.

The next link in this chain of archaeological evidence takes us back once more to the famous silk route. It was to be expected that tangible evidence of the Chinese export silks would one day turn up within the confines of the ancient Roman Empire. And so it has, at Palmyra, in Syria, one of several fortified outposts along the western reaches of the Han silk route. Two tombs of Palmyra officials, built in 83 and 103, were excavated in the 1930’s. As Palmyra was abandoned in 273, the silks found here are considered to be attributable to the second or third century A.D. Except for the tiny scrap of gauze found near Kerch, these Palmyra textiles are the only remains of Han silk as yet discovered west of the Asiatic mainland.

Most of the patterns of the Palmyra fragments are radically different from those of the earlier Lou-lan and Noin-Ula sites. It was hastily assumed in some quarters that, like the woolen and linen textiles found with them, the silks
had been woven locally, at least one of the patterns being described as Near Eastern, the others dismissed as possible imitations of Chinese designs. It now seems to be well established that all the silks are Chinese, the questioned heart-shaped motives, “pearl” borders, and roundels enclosing paired rampant animals being directly traceable to bronze and jade patterns of Han China.

With the devastating civil wars that began in the third century China lost control of the Central Asian regions and the ancient silk route was abandoned. But the political disruption of this time, climaxing by the invasion of the Toba Taters in the late fourth century, contributed indirectly to a new and brilliant phase of Chinese textile history. The reviving effect of foreign blood and ideas, even when forced upon the country by dictators, has several times in China’s history inspired a great upsurge of political, intellectual, and artistic activity. The rapid spread of Buddhism during the period of the Toba Tatar (Wei) dictatorship gave an added impetus of religious fervor to this far from subjugated race. On the intellectual side, the elaborate and esoteric doctrines of Mahayana Buddhism, which had first to be translated from the Sanskrit and then interpreted for a rapidly increasing clergy, challenged the best minds of the empire. In art, the impact of this new faith was more direct and personal. The gentle teachings of the Buddha warmed the hearts of the Chinese and rendered insupportable the fearsome animism which had dominated every aspect of their lives. In the great cave temples created in honor of the Buddhist faith—virtually the whole artistic output of this period—the painted Paradise scenes surrounding the stiffly hieratic figures of the gods reflect a joyousness never before encountered in Chinese art. Like the Ajanta caves in India, which were the fountainhead of inspiration, these...
scenes revel in a lovely naturalism, full of flowers, birds, and serene heavenly beings. Within a few short years this new grace touched every phase of Chinese art. And in little more than a half century after the Wei regime the pent-up energies of “la Chine joyeuse,” as one historian has described T’ang China, made themselves felt halfway across the world.

In his book *Japan—A Short Cultural History*, Sir George Sansom has provided a memorable word picture of the T’ang Empire:

“Politically China was at this moment perhaps the most powerful, the most advanced, and the best administered country in the world. . . . The frontiers of her empire stretched to the borders of Persia, to the Caspian Sea, to the Altai mountains. She was in relations with the peoples of Annam, Cochin China, Tibet, the Tarim Basin, and India; with the Turks, the Persians, and the Arabs. Men of many nations appeared at the court of China, bringing tribute and merchandise and new ideas that influenced her thought and her art. . . . Along the streets of Ch’ang-an there passed in those days Buddhist monks from India, envoys from Kashgar, Samarkand, Persia, Annam, Tonkin, Constantinople, chieftains of nomadic tribes from Siberian plains, officials and students from Korea, and, in now increasing numbers, from Japan. It is easy to imagine the effect upon the eyes and the minds of these last of a capital so rich in interest and excitement; their despair at the sight of such profusion, their proud resolve to rival it, if industry and courage and restless ambition could eke out their country’s material shortcomings.”

Out of these wide contacts came many new influences that are reflected in the arts of the T’ang dynasty (618-906). The wholesale importation of T’ang culture by Japan in the seventh and eighth centuries is of particular moment to Chinese silk history because far more of these easily perishable forms of T’ang art have been preserved in Japan than on the mainland. The most famous collection of early silks in the world is to be found in the eighth-century Shoso-in repository at Nara. Here are preserved more than sixty thousand fragments of Chinese silks and a few still intact banners and covers of various sorts, the fragmentary remains of the palace and temple furnishings of the Emperor Shomu (reigned 724-748). A much smaller group of fragments of the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries, formerly in the Horyuji, a
Embroidery mounted as a scroll, showing a Taoist magician releasing bats from a bottle. 
XII or XIII century. Fletcher Fund, 1947

seventh-century temple at Nara, is now part of the imperial household collection in Kyoto. A few of these, sold at the time of the transfer, are now in Western collections.

The whole repertory of T’ang techniques and patterns to be seen in these Japanese collections are verifiable from silks found in T’ang sites in Central Asia by twentieth-century archaeologists. In their new essay into naturalistic patterning the Chinese silk designers appear to have been remarkably successful. Here are the lotuses of Ajanta, sometimes rendered in graceful arabesques, more often conventionalized in medallion form. Here too are classic vine arabesques treated freely or disciplined into stylized formations without losing their vitality and grace. It was from these early experiments with natural forms that the Chinese developed a skill with floral patterns which subsequently became world-famous. Much less permanent were the borrowings from Sasanian Persia and Byzantium. The roundel schemes with their stiffly posed animals, birds, and mounted horsemen were, in the main, too reminiscent of the static traditions of earlier centuries to be adopted permanently by these newly converted devotees of naturalism. The T’ang creative genius transformed these foreign motives almost beyond recognition.

Chinese silk history after the end of T’ang can be treated only in shadowy outline. Documentary evidence is scanty and inconclusive, and it is therefore difficult if not impossible to assign specific dates to many obviously early textiles. But the high esteem in which the Japanese continued to hold the silks of China during the post-T’ang centuries, and the care with which they preserved them, again to some extent provide a valuable mirror of Chinese textile history. Most of the Japanese-owned silks attributable to the Sung Dynasty were specifically designed for use in the tea ceremony, a ceremony inaugurated by the Ch’an Buddhists in China and later developed into an almost absurdly esoteric cult in Japan. The tea-ceremony rules prescribed a subdued elegance for all the paraphernalia of the rite. The silks, accordingly, were white or muted monochromes, with miniature patterns of flowers, insects, birds, and ani-
mals, in medallions and in free motion, against a background of waves, clouds, cobwebs, or geometric forms brocaded in gold or inwoven in a single delicate color. The small-scale pattern of the famous brocade from Pope Benedict’s tomb shows the influence of the Sung tea masters and must be considered the work of a late Sung weaver.

It cannot be assumed that the fine sweeping floral patterns of T’ang were given up in Sung times, although little evidence of their popularity has been discovered. The proof of their continuation is to be found rather in the following period, when the most dazzling naturalistic patterning, bold and free, made its appearance in the marts of Europe.

The pictorial tapestries and embroideries designed by famous artists of the Sung Dynasty constitute a unique phase of Chinese silk history. Created for mounting as scrolls or in albums, many of these achieved the status of great painting and were listed in the manuals of Sung painters. Not many of those so recorded have reached the West, but the work of fine artists is recognizable in a few of the anonymous examples in our museums. Most of these occupy a somewhat anomalous position in the West. Though classed with paintings, they are too often accorded less honor than the work even of inferior painters.

The dynamic vitality of the early Yüan (1280-1368) silk patterns that reached the West over the reopened trade routes of the Mongols confirms the belief that all was not restrained elegance in Chinese silk weaving during the preceding period. These floral patterns are full of restless vitality, and often full also of roistering animals, real and fabulous. The impact of this lively style on the static patterns of Europe was immediate and revolutionary and can easily be


Damask with lotus or cloud palmettes and shou, or longevity, characters in the centers and tips. Found in a XIV century Saracenic tomb in Egypt. Fletcher Fund, 1946
Double twill with birds, animals, and cartouches, XIII century. Anonymous gift, 1946

Plain compound cloth with geometric pattern. XV or XVI century. Fletcher Fund, 1934
Plain compound satin with dragons, fēng-huang, and tigers treated as arabesques. Irregular color accents give this silk great distinction. xvii or xviii century. Anonymous gift, 1946

traced in the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century silks of Lucca and Venice.

Some of the Yüan silks that have been preserved in the West were woven to order for the Christian church and were probably acquired by the Franciscan monks who reached China during this period. These almost invariably have a lively Chinese animal or two peering out amongst the somber symbols of Christianity. Others destined for the Mohammedan world have bold, free patterns of palmettes and conventionalized longevity characters strung together on foliate stems or floating cloud fillets. A number of damasks decorated in this way, found in Saracenic tombs in Egypt, may have been part of the gift of seven hundred textiles recorded in an Arab source as having been despatched in the year 1323 by the Mongol emperor to Muhammad Al-Malih en-Nasir, Mamluk Sultan of Egypt.

The age of exploration brought the merchants of Europe to China’s door in increasing numbers between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. The sailing vessels of the Portuguese, Dutch, Spanish, and English are known to have been laden with the silks of China, but most of these appear to have vanished into some mysterious limbo. The pretty chinoiserie patterns of eighteenth-century France reflect their influence, but as a fleeting, evanescent fad, in no sense comparable to the Italian borrowings in earlier centuries. The majority of the Chinese textiles attributed to this period that are now in Western collections have come from China.
Brocaded satin with lotus and chrysanthemum sprays on a diapered ground. From the tomb of Prince Kuo Ch'in Wang, seventeenth son of K'ang Hsi, who died in 1738. Fletcher Fund, 1935

within recent years. Though virtually all of these are undocumented and are difficult to date accurately, they show an expanding repertory of patterns, superb artistry in the use of colors, and great technical proficiency. That they in no way represent the full picture of Chinese silk-weaving during this period is apparent from the fabulous descriptions of Spanish galleon cargoes which in the sixteenth century were carried first to Acapulco, in Mexico, and thence to Spain. Of all this richness brought to our own shores, some of it undoubtedly left with the Spanish grandees in Mexico, there is today scarcely a trace.

In all probability there are more verifiable fifteenth- and sixteenth-century silks in Japan than the few tea-ceremony textiles attributed to these centuries which have been publicized, for the Japanese silk-weaving industry did not become self-sufficient until the seventeenth century. Most of these are undoubtedly in private collections and are thus not easily available. And in the long unopened storage vaults of the Imperial Museum in Peking there may well be a wealth of documented Ming and Ch’ing silks of which we presently have no knowledge. When these can be searched out and studied, the later chapters of China’s silk history can be set down in much greater detail than is now possible.