



Fig. 1 (above): Fragment with confronted dragons, phoenixes, and wild beasts. China, Zhou dynasty, Warring States Period, radiocarbon dated 308–207 BCE. Silk; warp faced compound plain weave, 23.50 x 34.60 cm. Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection T-2537.



Fig. 2 (above): Fragments with auspicious animals, birds, flying immortals, clouds, and inscription *zhongguo dachang siyi fu le anding xing tianwu jiang* 中國大昌四夷服樂安定興天毋疆. China, Han dynasty, radiocarbon dated 127 BCE – 72 CE. Silk; warp-faced compound plain weave. Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection T-1215a-d.

Fig. 3 (right): Glove with cloud pattern. China, Han dynasty, radiocarbon dated 120 BCE – 90 CE. Silk; plain weave embroidered in chain stitch, 15.20 x 39.40 cm. Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection T-1483.



Ancient and medieval Chinese textiles

In the Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection, Washington, D.C.

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The Cotsen Textile Traces Study Center, a newly opened resource for textile scholarship at the George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum in Washington DC, houses nearly 4,000 small-scale textiles, many of them fragments. Created across the globe and dating from antiquity to the present day, these textiles are available for study in person and online.¹ The collection includes an important group of ancient and medieval Chinese textiles, with more than sixty fragments dating from the Zhou (ca. 1046–771 BCE) through the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) dynasties, and over one hundred examples woven from the end of the Han through the Tang (618–906) dynasty. This era witnessed the zenith of the so-called Silk Road, the network of trade routes linking China and the West. Chinese fragments in the collection illustrate how the movement of textiles through commerce and cross-cultural exchange influenced Chinese textile design and technology during this formative period.

Fig. 4 (below): Fragment with lions, peacocks, horses in roundels with inscription *ji xi* (lucky, auspicious). China, 6th – 8th century. Silk; warp-faced compound plain weave, 24.80 x 39.40 cm. Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection T-2729a.



The earliest fragments in the collection date to the Zhou dynasty. From the Zhou through the Han dynasties, the most prized textiles were patterned silks called *jin* (錦), which at the time were warp-faced compound plain weaves. In weaving *jin*, alternate picks separate the series of warp ends so that one shows on the face of the fabric, and the others remain on the reverse. The front surface is covered by warp floats, which hide the weft and create the pattern.

During the Zhou dynasty, *jin* typically featured geometric designs, but the finest

examples included bird and animal motifs. The example in Figure 1, radiocarbon dated to 308–207 BCE, is patterned with a lozenge-shaped cup and trees, paired phoenixes and birds, the sun and stars, confronted beasts, and a small band of dragons. While the dyes derived from plant sources do not survive well, the red pattern, created with the sulfide mineral cinnabar, remains vibrant. Silks woven with colourful designs were exceedingly costly symbols of wealth and high status at the time.

China alone possessed the secret of sericulture during the Zhou dynasty, but silks

were exchanged internationally along trade routes sometimes called the “Grassland Silk Road,” particularly active from the 5th to the 3rd centuries BCE. Chinese silks made their way across the Altai Mountains and over the Mongolian plateau into the steppes, as evidenced by Chinese fabrics excavated at archeological sites such as the Pazyryk tombs in Siberia.

The Han period saw the development of the westward, “desert-and-oasis” Silk Road, which carried Chinese textiles as far as the Roman Empire and Europe.



Fig. 5 (left): Fragment with floral medallion. China, 8th-9th century. Silk; weft-faced compound twill, 26.67 x 10.16 cm. Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection T-1803b.

Fig. 6 (below): Fragment with tiger and bird on a floral ground. China, Xinjiang, 13th century. Silk; tapestry weave, 26.7 x 26.7 cm. Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection T-1474.



Fig. 7 (right): Fragment with phoenixes and peonies. China, Yuan Dynasty (1271 - 1368). Silk; tapestry weave, 18 x 15 cm. Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection T-0833.



Jin remained one of the most prized fabrics, and improvements in silk weaving technology led to finer, more detailed designs. *Jin* production was largely under state control, and the state often presented these luxury goods as tokens of favour to individuals and neighbouring polities. The most typical Han *jìn* were patterned with clouds, animals, and inscriptions. While some *jìn* featured auspicious words and phrases, others bore inscriptions that referenced the receiver and their relationship to the imperial court. One such example depicts clouds, deer, and tigers along with the Chinese characters *enze* (恩澤, bounty, benefit received from above), a phrase that implied a special favour granted from the emperor or a high official.

As illustrated by the *jìn* in Figure 2, inscriptions can offer insight into the preoccupations of the imperial state and its relationship with its neighbours to the west. The Cotsen collection includes four fragments of a complicated *jìn* with clouds, a flying immortal, tigers, qilin, deer, rabbits, and the inscription *zhongguo dachang siyi fu le anding xing tianwu jiang* (中國大昌四夷服樂安定興天毋疆), which can be translated roughly as “China will prosper greatly, the four kinds of barbarians will be defeated, the people will be happy and safe, the glorious days will have no end.”

Clouds were perhaps the most widespread motifs on Han luxury textiles. Contemporaneous literature reveals that clouds were auspicious symbols associated with immortality. Perceived as exceedingly good omens, clouds were thought to serve as vehicles for the immortals. The well-preserved glove in Figure 3 features clouds rendered in embroidery, another highly prized textile patterning technique at the time. *Jin* and embroidery were so highly esteemed that the combination of these two words, *jìn xiù* (錦繡), came to refer to the best and finest of all things.

Luxury silks flowed into and out of China along the Silk Road. Textiles from the Central Asian region of Sogdiana, around present-day Uzbekistan, were particularly fashionable imports in China. Popular patterns on Sogdian silks, such as confronted animals in pearl-bordered roundels, eventually were incorporated into the Chinese design vocabulary. The ornament of the sixth- to eighth-century Chinese silk shown in Figure 4 shows clear influence from cultures to the west, with new motifs such as lions and peacocks arranged in a design format of pearl hexagons. The culture in China became quite cosmopolitan from the Han through the Tang dynasties, and large cities such as Chang’an and Luoyang were home to foreign traders and settlers who introduced new styles and skills. The text *Beishi* (北史), one of the official histories of the Northern Dynasties (386-581), relates the biography of He Chou (何稠), a third-generation member of a family that had immigrated from Central Asia, whom the emperor asked to make copies of Persian silks that were said to surpass the originals.²

Fabrics imported from the West influenced Chinese weaving techniques as well as textile design. Whereas earlier Chinese silks were warp-faced, during the Tang dynasty weft-faced compound twill, a structure originating in the West, became the favoured weave for Chinese luxury silks. The adoption of weft-faced patterning permitted weavers to create more complex designs, and to produce larger motifs and wider lengths of silk since this new technology allowed the expansion of loom width. As evidenced by the fragment in Figure 5, a new style emerged in the eighth century, featuring large floral medallions, often with floral devices in the interstices. Medallions of a central flower or cluster of flowers circled by rings of flowers became the most common motif on Chinese luxury silks of the eighth century and were widely used in other decorative arts. By the middle of the eighth century, floral medallions had largely replaced the Sogdian-style roundel patterns in popularity. Chinese textiles with floral medallions were widely exported and emulated throughout East Asia.

Another technique that arrived in China along the Silk Road was tapestry weave. The tapestry weave technique seems to have originated in ancient Mesopotamia and spread eastward over the centuries. The earliest tapestry weaves in Central Asia were made of wool, but by the Tang dynasty, weavers in this region were producing tapestry-woven textiles made of silk. Woven around the 13th century in eastern Central Asia (present-day western China), the example in Figure 6 features a blue tiger, gold bird, and multicoloured flower blossoms and leaves. The pattern reveals active international exchange, with stylistic influences from cultures to the east and west. Tapestry-woven silks made in Central Asia at this time often featured brightly coloured animal and floral motifs. During the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127), workshops in China began to produce silks woven in the tapestry technique, typically patterned with animals and birds on a floral ground. The lack of precedent for this weave structure and ornamental scheme in China suggests that perhaps Uighurs from the west played a role in introducing the technique and patterning of silk tapestry.

International exchange intensified during the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368), when the Mongol empire spread from China all the way to eastern Europe. This political unification of disparate peoples facilitated international trade and cultural interchange. In their conquests, the Mongols typically spared the lives of skilled artisans such as weavers, and they relocated artists from many different regions to work together in administrative centres across the empire. Silks were traded extensively across Europe and Asia thanks to the expansion of international commerce under the Pax Mongolica. As evidenced by the fragment in Figure 7, showing phoenixes with five-plumed tails flying among peonies, birds and flower scrolls remained popular in the design of tapestry-woven silks. The bodies of the birds are woven in gold, with gold leaf applied to an animal skin substrate. Silks woven with gold yarns became particularly popular under the patronage of the previously nomadic Mongols, who valued textiles woven with precious silk and gold as a portable store of wealth.

Although small and fragmentary, the ancient and medieval Chinese silks in the Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection provide a valuable resource for scholarship. These fabrics document many of the main techniques and motifs used in the manufacture of Chinese luxury textiles over a long period of time, and their study illuminates formative aesthetic and technical developments arising from trade and cross-cultural exchange along the Silk Road.

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Notes

- <https://museum.gwu.edu/cotsen-textile-traces-study-collection>
- <http://chinesenotes.com/suishu/suishu068.html#?highlight=>

Suggested reading

- Kuhn, Dieter, editor. *Chinese Silks*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012.
- Wardwell, Anne E. and James C.Y. Watt. *When Silk Was Gold: Central Asian and Chinese Textiles*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997.
- Zhao, Feng. *Chinese Silk and the Silk Road*. Montreal: Royal Collins Publishing Company, 2020.
- Zhao, Feng. *Treasures in Silk*. Hong Kong: ISAT/Costume Squad, 1999.