**Legend of 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.


Women making silk cloth

**Legend of Silk**

Legend has it that the process for making silk cloth was first invented by the wife of the [Yellow Emperor](http://www.ducksters.com/history/china/chinese_mythology.php), Leizu, around the year 2696 BC. The idea for silk first came to Leizu while she was having tea in the imperial gardens. A cocoon fell into her tea and unraveled. She noticed that the cocoon was actually made from a long thread that was both strong and soft.

Leizu then discovered how to combine the silk fibers into a thread. She also invented the silk loom that combined the threads into a soft cloth. Soon Leizu had a forest of mulberry trees for the silkworms to feed on and taught the rest of China how to make silk.

**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 an important status symbol. At first, only members of the royal family were allowed to wear silk. Later, silk clothing was restricted to only the noble class. Merchants and peasants were not allowed to wear silk. Silk was even used as money during some Ancient Chinese dynasties.

**Keeping Silk a Secret**

Silk became a prized export for the Chinese. Nobles and 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 the [Byzantine Empire](http://www.ducksters.com/history/middle_ages_byzantine_empire.php) managed to smuggle some silkworm eggs out of the country. They hid the eggs inside of their bamboo walking sticks. Silk was such an important product from China that the trade route from Europe to China became known as the Silk Road.

**Interesting Facts about Silk**

* It wasn't until the Qing dynasty, which ruled from 1644 to 1911, that peasants were allowed to wear silk clothing.
* 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.

# Name:

# Legend of Silk Quiz

1. What is silk made from?
 a. A plant called flax
 b. Very fine cotton
 c. The fur of goats
 d. Cocoons

2. Who first invented the process for making silk?
 a. The wife of the Yellow Emperor
 b. The silk dragon
 c. Confucius
 d. Marco Polo

3. What do silkworms eat?
 a. Bamboo
 b. Silk
 c. Mulberry leaves
 d. Rice

4. What was used to loosen the fibers so they could be made into long threads?
 a. Very small needles
 b. Hot water
 c. They were shaken violently
 d. Gunpowder

5. Who was allowed to wear silk for most of the history of Ancient China?
 a. Peasants
 b. Merchants
 c. Farmers
 d. Royal and noble class

6. What was silk used to make?
 a. Clothing
 b. Bowstrings
 c. Fishing line
 d. None of the above
 e. All of the above

7. True or False: The Chinese wanted other countries to learn how to make silk and often trained foreigners on the process.
 a. TRUE
 b. FALSE

8. Where did the monks who stole the first silkworm eggs hide the eggs?
 a. Under the saddles of their horses
 b. In their walking sticks
 c. Under their hoods
 d. In their ears
 e. They did not need to hide the eggs

9. True or false: Silk cloth was considered very valuable in Ancient China and only the nobles were allowed to wear it.
 a. TRUE
 b. FALSE

10. What was the Silk Road?
 a. A street in each town where only people wearing silk were allowed to walk
 b. A very smoothly paved road within the Forbidden City
 c. A road connecting the palaces of the emperor
 d. A trade route between China to Europe