Textiles on the move, through time and space

Ancient and medieval Chinese textiles
In the Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection, Washington, D.C.

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.

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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 Jin jin were patterned with clouds, animals, and inscriptions. While some Jin 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 (恩泽, bounty, benefit received from above), a phrase that implied a special favour granted from the emperor or a high official.

As illustrated by the Jin in Figure 2, inscriptions can offer insight into the preoccupations of the imperial state and its fashionable imports in China. The Cotsen collection includes four fragments of a complicated Jin with clouds, a flying immortal, tigers, qilin, deer, rabbits, and the inscriptions zhongguo daochang xi jiu fu le anding xi ting ziyang (中國大朝應秀安寧天長), 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. Contemporary 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, jin xi (錦絹), 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 peacocks arranged in a design format of pearl borders, eventually showed clear influence from cultures to the east. 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 document Chou 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 merchants 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 (河朔), a third-generation member of a family that had immigrated from Central Asia, whom the emperor asked to make copies of Persia silks that were said to surpass the originals.

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 ofloom 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 midths 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 tapestries woven in Central Asia were made of wool, but by the Tang dynasty, weavers in this region were producing tapestry-like weaves to imitate the manufacture 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 how international exchange 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 emulate the new technology, 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 and cultural traditions influenced 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 their 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 phoceans with five-plumed tails flying among peonies, birds and flower scrolls remained popular in the design of tapestry-woven silks. The birds 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 gold as a portable store of wealth.

Although small and fragmentary, the early and mid-eighth-century Chinese silks in the Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection provide a valuable resource for scholarship. These textiles catch our eye with their rich and varied designs, and illuminate formative aesthetic and technical developments arising from trade and cross-cultural exchange along the Silk Road.

Notes

1 https://museum.gwu.edu/cotsen-textile-traces-study-collection
2 http://chinesenotes.com/suishu/traces-study-collection.html

Suggested reading


