by Daryl Brower

Long, long ago (2700 B.C.E., if you must be exact about these things) there lived a wise and kind Chinese empress named Lei-tzu. Being an empress, she was a relative lady of leisure and much enjoyed spending her time wandering about the palace gardens. It was her habit to take her afternoon tea under the shade of one of the many mulberry trees in the garden. One day whilst doing this, she made a most amazing discovery.

Now mulberry trees were much desired in China, both for their pleasing appearance and their medicinal value. Lei-tzu, of course, knew this. But what she didn't know (at least not then) was that mulberry leaves are also the most favorite food of *Bombix mori*, a creamy white moth that's better known today as the silkworm. Now if you know anything about moths of any sort, you know that *Bombix mori* begins life as a rather ugly worm. In this form, it feasts to the point of bursting and then spins itself into a tight little cocoon that stays settled in the tree until the moth is ready to emerge. But sometimes a too-strong breeze or rustling of branches can push a cocoon off its comfortable perch.

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Illustration by Adriana Hernandez

One afternoon as Lei-tzu sat in the shade and sipped her tea, a cocoon dropped from the leaves and landed in her cup with a tiny splash. Though startled, Lei-tzu quickly regained her composure (she was an empress after all) and with as much ladylike elegance as she could muster, attempted to fish the offending matter from her cup. As she did so, she noticed a most remarkable thing. The cocoon was not a cocoon any longer, but one long, luxurious filament of silky fiber.

Now Lei-tzu was a thoughtful sort of woman, and so rather than dump out her tea in disgust, she took a closer look at the thread that now filled it. The fiber was soft with a lovely sheen to it, and Leiz-tzu thought it quite beautiful. Intrigued, she called for a servant boy and sent him scampering up the tree to find more cocoons. These she unwound in the same manner as the first, soaking them in her tea until the cocoon unraveled, and then carefully retrieving the beautiful lengths of fiber.

When several cocoons had been unwound, Lei-tzu began twisting the fibers together to see what could be made of them. She found that the twisting created a fine, soft, and surprisingly strong thread. “A fabric woven from this would make a fine robe for my husband,” she thought. And so she quickly set out to find him.

Illustration by Adriana Hernandez

Lei-tzu’s husband was the great emperor Huang-di, a most clever and powerful man—some say a god—who not only founded both the nation of China and Taoism (or so it is said), but also invented such marvels as the bow and arrow, the chariot, and an amazing mechanical wagon that, through a series of gears, would always point out the way south no matter which way the wheels turned.

Haung-di was equally enthralled with Le-tzu's discovery (being a shrewd soul, he quickly saw the value in producing such a fine fiber). "Wife," he said. "You have found a wonderful thing. We must put it to good use." So they taught the people of China to care for the silkworms, setting them on beds of clean straw and feeding them mulberry leaves all through the day and night. And when the cocoons were ready, Lei-tzu showed the peasants how to carefully reel the silk and weave the threads into fine and costly fabrics. For two thousand years, none but those taught by Lei-tzu knew the secrets of making silk. For many years after, Lei-tzu was known as Si Ling-chi or Lady of the Silkworm. How silk came to the rest of the world is a story for another time.

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