

# The Gilt Bronze Silkworm: Spinning Yarns of War and Peace

By Rachel Choo



Silkworm ornament, Han dynasty (206BCE - 220CE), photo courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum

The gilt bronze silkworm ornament in the Asian Civilisations Museum's (ACM) China Gallery represents the animal that for three millennia has helped to create one of China's greatest gifts to the world. The silkworm is the caterpillar of the *Bombyx mori*, the native Chinese silkworm moth. Today the species is completely domesticated, although in ancient times other wild silk-producing caterpillars may also have been used in textile production. *Mori* caterpillars have huge appetites and are fed on leaves of the white mulberry. After 45 days a caterpillar reaches a maximum length of 7.5cm, roughly the size of our bronze specimen (7cm). It then pupates within a cocoon that it spins from a single silk thread about 915 metres long. To harvest the silk, the cocoon is heated to kill the unfortunate pupa and prevent it from rupturing the thread when it emerges as a moth.

It is said that Cancong (mythical founder of the Shu kingdom, whose ruins may be those discovered in the 1980s at Sanxingdui and related Neolithic to Shang dynasty sites in modern Sichuan province) bequeathed silkworm-rearing to his people as his greatest deed. He also had thousands of golden silkworms made, presenting one to every family at the start of each year. Live silkworms domesticated by these families then multiplied vastly, after which the people returned the king's golden worms. Wherever Cancong stopped during tours of his realm, silkworm markets were formed. Temples were dedicated to him in western China. It has been posited that original images of Cancong as the god of sericulture took the form of silkworms; his name literally means 'silkworm cluster (蚕)'.<sup>1</sup>

The ACM's bronze silkworm may, however, relate to a more mainstream myth of the Yellow Emperor's wife, who gleaned the key to silk-making upon unravelling a cocoon that fell into her teacup while she sat beneath a tree. In fact, a slew of other mythological and religious figures also relate to the silkworm. Because they have mostly been presented as royal, aristocratic or official personages, they suggest a connection between the early Chinese state or aristocracy and silk production.

The mythic status accorded Empress Xiling and Cancong for their gifts of sericulture also reveals the Chinese conception of their nation as a unique font of highly civilised living. It is no coincidence that foundational characters in Chinese culture are regarded as inventors and transmitters of a luxury affordable only by a sophisticated culture. Bronze replicas of the worms that produced this luxury substance, tiny but heavy, have been thought to act as weights to hold in place silk shrouds in Han tombs. The animal's association with the fine fabric reiterated the wealth and standing of the deceased. Legend even has the wife of an earlier king being buried with over a thousand real silkworms.

By the Han dynasty an international silk trade stretching as far as imperial Rome made China sufficiently famous for the Romans to call it 'Sera', an appellation believed to derive from the Chinese word for silk, *si* (丝). It would not be the last time that China's name was closely bound up with its economic produce.

The humble silkworm has been more than a player in China's economy. Han emperors used silk as diplomatic gifts, not least of all to placate the invasive nomads who roamed China's landward periphery. Silk production was a highly guarded secret until silkworms were allegedly stolen during the sixth century by two monks at the bidding of Byzantine emperor Justinian.

More recently, in the 1980s, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation dubbed particular early Chinese-engineered missiles as Silkworms – alluding perhaps to the power of these worm- or cocoon-shaped weapons. Inadvertently, this recalls the mythological belief that a dragon can fill the space between heaven and earth or shrink to the size of a silkworm as it pleases.

The tiny creature is a fitting metaphor for much that is small but important in Chinese history.

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