

Interpreting the Origin and Development of Sichuan Silk from a Cultural Perspective

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Abstract: Sichuan Silk has a unique historic origin, and a special process of forming and development. It possesses strong vitality and cultural dynamics that keep renewing with new elements. The development of Sichuan Silk has its own cultural features; originating in several places during ancient times and developing at the same pace, being a key support for the economy of Sichuan (known as Tianfu meaning the Land of Abundance) in the Qin (221BC–206 BC) and Han (206 BC–220) dynasties, being a vital source of the Silk Road in the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties, and being known as the Silk City which was dissolved in the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties.

Keywords: Tianfu; silk; interpretation

1. Origin of Sichuan (Tianfu) Silk

Legend has it that the Yellow Emperor (also known as Huangdi), the mythological ancestor of the Chinese people and one of the Five Emperors, specified dress etiquette and showed his people the proper form of clothing. This was a huge progress in the development of human civilization. The Yellow Emperor married Leizu, a daughter of the Lord Xiling. She initiated sericulture, invented a silk loom, taught her people how to raise silkworms and make clothes with silk. The Yellow Emperor's ruling with dress etiquette demonstrates that he civilized his populace and required them to wear silk clothes and observe the etiquette so that those primitive people developed and advanced toward civilization. This shows that China is one of the earliest countries in the world for sericulture and silk weaving.

The Yellow Emperor and Leizu had a son named Changyi who later inhabited

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in Ruoshui of Sichuan, southwest of China. Changyi married a daughter of the Lord of Shushan and had a son named Gaoyang who was also known as Zhuanxu, the heir to the Yellow Emperor. Although the authenticity of such immemorial legends needs to be verified with further archeological evidence, they demonstrate from another aspect the fact that the clans of the Yellow Emperor and of the Lord Shushan were connected by marriage. In this way, the skills developed by Leizu for sericulture, silk reeling and clothes-making were spread to primitive tribes in the Minjiang River Basin where the Shushan clan lived. This is part of the cultural history about the origin of Tianfu Silk during legendary times. In other words, the cultural origin of Tianfu Silk existed to some extent during the reign of Zhuanxu at the latest.

In the history of the ancient State of Shu (which is believed to be in what is now Sichuan Province), there were five successive periods of sericulture development; Cancong (meaning “silkworm-cluster”), Boguan (“cypress-irrigator”), Yufu (“cormorant”), Bieling (“turtle spirit”), and Kaiming (“enlightenment”). Literally, Cancong means silkworms gathering into a cluster. At the beginning, silkworms were considered as being only food by the primitive people who later discovered that silk could be used to make tools for production and living, such as ropes and nets. This was a great discovery and defined another function for silkworms. Intermarriage between descendants of Leizu and the Lord of Shushan was of great significance in spreading sericulture and clothes-making skills of Leizu to the clan of Cancong in the State of Shu in addition to promoting intertribal exchanges. The clan of Cancong, living in the Minjiang River Basin, thus became the first tribe to rear silkworms and use silkworm chrysalis among the primitive tribes in the Shu area. Moreover, viewed from etymology, the earliest pictograph of

the Chinese character “Shu” resembles the shape of a silkworm, indicating certain social relations and historical links between the Shu area and silkworms during ancient times. From collecting silkworms mainly for food to mastering the skill of using tusser or tussah silk to make production tools and clothes, these clans applied silk more widely to their production and living. This is the great contribution made in the period of Cancong to the development of human civilization.

Archeological evidence also shows the origin of silk application. According to archaeological findings at the Sanxingdui relics, the ruins were home to settlements living in a period approximately equivalent to those of Boguan and Yufu in the ancient history of Shu. It can be determined from the ornamentation and shape of the garb worn by the bronze standing figures unearthed from Sanxingdui that it was made of silk or brocade instead of animal hide, bast fiber or straw. This fully demonstrates that sericulture and clothes-making techniques in the Shu area had already developed to quite a high level by that period, and that silk production techniques were maturing. The reign of Duyu (“cuckoo”), one of the Kaiming kings, is roughly equivalent to the era between the Jinsha Period and the Warring States Period (475 BC–221 BC). During this time, silk application was more extensive and production skills saw great progress, as evidenced by the silk garment unearthed from the boat-coffin burial site at Shierqiao, in Chengdu.

We believe that it is of great necessity to further explore and ponder the origins of silk and Tianfu silk from the following aspects:

(1) The origin of silk occurred and developed along with human civilization. During the Neolithic Age, people wore clothes made of bark, straw rope and hide, or bast fiber at the best. That was the concept of so-called “clothes” during primitive times. It took a very long time for people to learn

how to use silk instead of hides or bast fibers to make clothes. Archeological evidences prove that human beings had already invented and utilized silk articles at the early stage of the Neolithic Age. It can be said that silk is an important epitome and symbol of human civilization. The fact that people made and wore silk clothes not only means that they followed etiquette and understood what was dishonorable behaviors, but also shows that they had preliminary aesthetic needs and civilized mentality.

(2) Silk in the Shu history originated from satin. The earliest ancestors in the Shu area made satin fabrics necessary for production and living with filament obtained by beating cocoons of wild or domesticated silkworms. After mastering the ways to make and use satin, people started to produce brocade which featured higher craftsmanship and wider application. Later, they learned to embroider brocade with silk thread to make beautiful patterns. Ornamentation and patterns on the garb of the bronze standing figures unearthed from Sanxingdui prove that people at that time were skilled at making embroidered brocade.

That Tianfu Silk originates from satin is one of the important features of its origin. People first learned to make satin and then brocade, and washed brocade in the Zhuojin River (“brocade-rinsing river”) nearby. The brocade that was washed in the river would have brighter colors after being dried and Shu brocade thus became quite famous throughout the land. Thereafter, people believed that the Zhuojin River was superior to other rivers for washing brocade. That is another important feature of Tianfu Silk.

(3) Silk, as the symbol of civilization, underwent a diversified development at several places, just like the formation of civilization. For many local cultures in the Yangtze River Basin and the Yellow River Basin, there are intriguing legends about the multiple origins of silk, showing strong support for such an

understanding. Tianfu is regarded as an important origin of the Chinese silk culture, just as the Ba-Shu Culture is considered an integral part of the Chinese civilization.

(4) Recent archaeological evidence proves that silk cultures came into being in many places. For instance, the Ba-Shu Culture, the Yangshao Culture and the Hongshan Culture, took shape at almost the same time — about 6,000 years ago. Archaeological activities were carried out in Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces and the Xinjiang Autonomous Region concerning the ancient Silk Road. Unearthed relics include silk made about 6,000, 7,000, or 8,000 years ago. This shows exactly that different cultures in various areas were all connected to silk but with different origins and features.

The Tianfu Silk Culture underwent a far-flung process from satin to brocade, embroidered brocade and then to silk in the modern sense. This is the distinctive evolution of Shu brocade.

In the Tianfu Silk Culture, there are plenty of legends about the birth of Leizu in Yanting (now in Sichuan). This is a very interesting cultural phenomenon. The deity worshiped by the silk trade is generally the inventor of silk. As Leizu was said to be the originator of sericulture, it is quite natural to treat Leizu as the creator of the trade. In fact, there are legends about various places being the birthplace of Leizu or the local where silk was invented or where the silk trade once prospered. These are legends or myths about Leizu through farfetched analogy by later generations of these areas with a flourishing silk trade that honored Leizu as the founding deity. Among others, there are legends about the same strain of Leizu and Cancong as well as Xiling being the birthplace of Leizu. This shows, as a matter of fact, the presence of the customs of worshipping the legendary Leizu in Sichuan.

Given the importance of Yanting as a prosperous place and center of the silk trade in

history, the emergence of the Leizu culture is not to be questioned. A prudent and scientific attitude, however, needs to be taken when considering arbitrarily that Leizu was from Yanting. The legends saying that Leizu was actually called Wang Feng and born in Yanting are obviously just reflections and affective attitudes of folk customs and culture. In fact, neither the first name nor the family name about Leizu could actually be a real name of a primitive person in that she would not be named in such a way in those times. All the stories about the first or family name of Leizu clearly apply the way of naming used in the historic period. This demonstrates from another aspect that the statements about the name of Leizu were concocted after the development of the silk trade and are a farfetched analogy of the trade culture of later ages. It was discovered, through meticulous studies, that the above-mentioned cultural legends about Leizu are not only available in Yanting, but also in places where sericulture or the silk trade prospered. So far as Sichuan is concerned, there are customs of worshipping Leizu or legends about her birthplace in many places in the province, including Langzhong, Xichang, Yibin and Leshan. But in Yanting and Nanchong, Leizu has been recognized as the originator or founding deity of the silk trade for a long time. This shows that the silk trade in the two places was once quite prosperous in history.

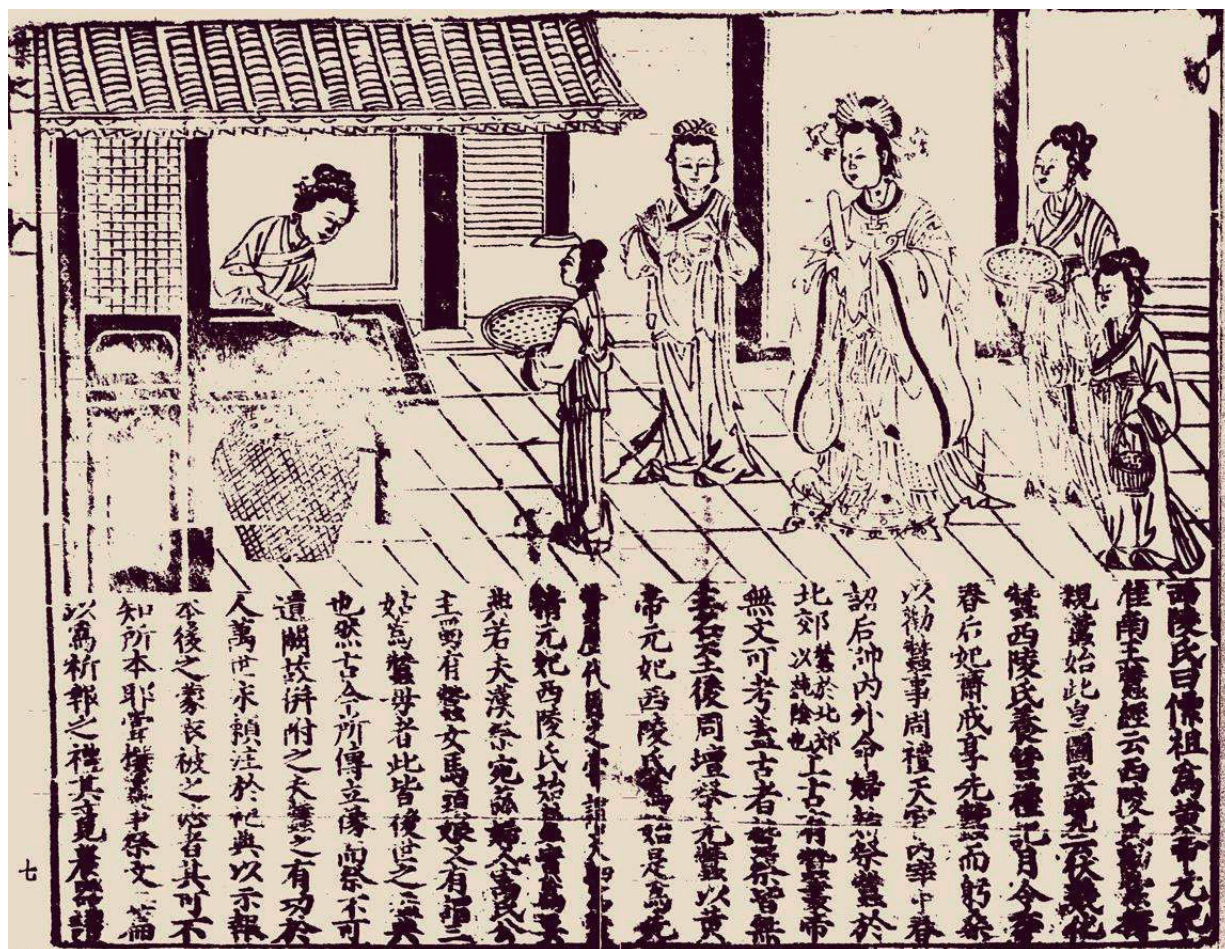
The legend stating that Leizu was born in Yanting reflects people's belief in the founding deity of silk culture and is a real component of the cultural history. Therefore, it is viable to treat the Leizu culture as an intangible cultural heritage and to pass it on to value Leizu and the cultural legends about her. It should be pointed out, however, that these legends are not real historical events. The legends about Leizu's initiation of sericulture are not only heard in Sichuan, but also have similar versions in Jiangsu and Henan provinces. For instance, in

Suzhou of Jiangsu Province, there are many legends and stories about the birthplace or inventions of Leizu and Leizu was said to be a native there.

As for Xiling which was said to be the birthplace of Leizu, cultural legends about it are widely spread in the Yangtze and the Yellow river basins. This is strong proof for the viewpoint that the silk culture came into being in a number of places and in diversified ways. The feature of multiregional origins of the silk culture is consistent with that of the Chinese civilization which is also characterized by multiregional origins and unity in diversity. They are different embodiments of the same civilization. Just as the Chinese people recognize the Yellow Emperor as our primogenitor, silk cultures treat Leizu as their founding deity or originator, or as a cultural icon. Therefore, Leizu is worshipped across China and regarded as the founding deity of silk trade. This kind of belief in Leizu and legends about the origin of silk are shared and are a significant intangible part of the cultural heritage of the Chinese nation, and a legacy of the experience, knowledge and wisdom of our ancestors, and converge into established cultures of worshipping Leizu.

Therefore, even though cultural legends about the birthplace of Leizu are available in one place, there is no need to exclude other places where similar legends are spread. It is never the case that Leizu cultural resources can only be developed and tapped in one single place. Fundamentally, they are all inheritance and utilization of the legacy of the living silk culture. They therefore constitute the real history of the silk culture. Although they may not be real historical events, they are part of the real history.

It must be pointed out that the most important thing about the origin of the silk civilization is an outlook on unity in diversity of the cultures. In this regard, Nanchong can proclaim that it is the place of origin of silk. So can Chengdu. In terms of inheritance and utilization of the silk culture, the two



Leizu

statements are not mutually exclusive but reciprocal.

From wearing hide and tree leaves to clothes during the reign of the Yellow emperor, the Chinese ancestors underwent a long period of development of civilization. Such a period covers almost the entire early stage of the Neolithic Age, i.e., from 8,000 years BC to AD 5,000 — a span of more than 10,000 years. It can be said that the era in which the entire human civilization took shape is an age when silk culture developed into silk civilization. This is the cultural and historical basis of the statement that Chengdu is the place of origin of silk. It is on the theoretical basis of diversified origins of human civilization that we hold that Chengdu is the place of

origin of silk and the birthplace of a silk culture.

2. Prosperous brocade trade in the Han Dynasty

The combination of Shu brocade and embroidery first appeared in the Han Dynasty. It was a significant progress and enduring achievement in the development history of Tianfu Silk. Archaeological findings prove the fact that the silk trade was flourishing in the Shu area in the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC– 24).

In 2012, four loom models made of bamboo and wood were unearthed at the Laoguan Hill, Tianhui

Town of Chengdu, in a cemetery dating back to the Western Han Dynasty. This was the first time that loom models for making Shu brocade in the Western Han Dynasty had been discovered in China. The four models are prototypes of jacquards and representative of the Tianfu Silk Culture. Along with the looms, unearthed relics also include 16 wooden figures of embroidery and spinning workers. The excavation of the above items from the same place shows that different tasks for Shu brocade making had been clearly divided in Chengdu during the Western Han Dynasty and the scale of the brocade workshop was at the initial stage of a manual factory. The discovery of such looms undoubtedly proves that Chengdu is the southern starting point of the ancient Silk Road and the place of origin of silk products.

The craftsmanship for making Shu brocade was of a high level in the Han Dynasty. During that period, production and sales of Shu brocade were on a relatively large scale and a specific administration was assigned to manage the trade. Gaining its name from producing and selling Shu brocade, Chengdu is also called a Jinguan (official brocade-weaving base) city, Jincheng or Jinli. These names appeared during the Han Dynasty and the Three Kingdoms period (220–280). In the *Chronicles of Huayang*, written by Chang Qu, an historian of the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317–420), it was mentioned that, “At the beginning, Wen Weng set up a public school made of stones... to its west, there used to be a city of brocade”(Chang, 1984, p.227). It was also stated in the *Records of Yizhou* (now Sichuan), written by Li Ying, a celebrity and official of the Eastern Jin Dynasty that, “The city of brocade lies in the south of Yizhou, east of the Zuoqiao Bridge, and on the southern bank of the Liujiang River. It used to be the place where brocade was made under protection

during the Shu period and was thus called Jinli. The city walls have remained.”^① The above statements show the prosperity of brocade production in Chengdu during the Han Dynasty and the Three Kingdoms period.

A variety of descriptions have been found in literature works of the Han and Jin (265–420) dynasties, stating the flourishing production and trading of Shu brocade and reflecting the bygone achievement and glory of the brocade industry in the Han Dynasty. As stated in the *Miscellany of the Western Capital*, about the writing skill of Sima Xiangru, a man of letters of the Western Han Dynasty, it says, “A ci (lyrics) writer is like a weaver. He writes an article with vivid and proper dictions to support his thoughts just as a weaver makes a piece of cloth with colorful threads to present beautiful patterns. Just like a piece of cloth is made up of warps and wefts, a fu (Chinese rhymed prose) consists of Gong and Shang modes” (Xiang, 1991, p.91). It was by simulating the way of brocade weaving and organizing that Sima Xiangru composed and created his style of “grand fu.” The comparison of brocade weaving methods to writing skills demonstrates that the brocade trade and weaving methods were quite popular in the Western Han Dynasty. In *A Rhapsody on Metropolitan of Shu*, Yang Xiong, a Han Dynasty scholar wrote, “Those people are so brilliant to make marvelous brocade on their own... Those pieces of brocade are so resplendent that the skills will be passed on from generation to generation”(Li, 1997, p.27). This reflects the exquisiteness and brilliance of brocade weaving in Chengdu at that time. It was mentioned in *Book of Shu: Biography of Zhuge Liang* that, “The people are poor and the state power is weak now. We can only rely on brocade to raise enough resources to defeat our rivals”(Li, 2000, p.3624). This shows that

① *Records of Yizhou*. Xu Jian. The primary anthology (Vol. 27). The complete library in four branches of literature.

Zhuge Liang, the most accomplished strategist of his era, took sericulture and the brocade industry as the key economic pillar for making the Shu State rich and its army powerful for supporting its northern expeditions. Qiao Zhou, an official of the Shu State during the Three Kingdoms period, mentioned in his work *Records of Yizhou* that, “After a piece of brocade is made, it is washed in the river and its color gets brighter and its patterns more beautiful than its original appearance”(Li, 1981). This illustrates that the brocade making and rinsing techniques in Chengdu were already full-fledged at that time. In the *Records of the Shu State* which is Volume 3 of the *Chronicles of Huayang* written by Chang Qu, it was recorded that, “To its west, there used to be a city of brocade. Brocade made from there would look brighter if it is rinsed in the Jinjiang River but would not look so if it is washed in any other river” (Chang, 1984, p.226). This means that the river in Chengdu can make the Shu brocade appear more resplendent and have a higher quality than any other river.

Zuo Si, a litterateur of the Western Jin Dynasty (265–316) described in detail products, mountains, rivers and customs of Ba-Shu in *Rhapsody on the Capital of Shu*. He depicted especially the thriving sericulture and brocade industry in Chengdu as, “There are buildings after buildings and mulberry trees after catalpa trees ...Looms are working simultaneously in a huge number of workshops. Pieces of beautiful Shu brocade are made and rinsed in the river. Sales bring in a vast amount of gold” (Yang, 2003, p.10). This is a vivid description of the flourishing sericulture and brocade industry in Chengdu at that time.

The above references regarding the production and sale of Shu brocade indicate that it was made with unique techniques and a special water source for rinsing and played a crucial role in supporting the economy of the Shu State. This fully demonstrates that the techniques for making Tianfu silk and

brocade were the most advanced in China from the Han Dynasty to the Jin Dynasty.

With the sale of lacquerware, Tianfu Silk became one of the key commodities sold to foreign countries or regions, including Mongolia, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Central Asia and Western Asia. In 1995, two pieces of brocade cloth were unearthed from a burial site dating back to the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220) and Wei (220–265) and Jin dynasties. The site is in the ruins of Niya in Minfeng County, Hotan Prefecture, Xinjiang Autonomous Region. One piece was embroidered with characters meaning “Five stars rise in the east, benefitting China” and the other piece with characters meaning “Put down NanJiang.” With patterns of many auspicious birds or beasts like peacocks, red-crowned cranes, Pixie and tigers, as well as shapes of stars and flowing clouds, the two pieces of cloth have distinct features of the Han culture. They have bright colors, complex textures and amazing patterns, proven to be superior works of Shu brocade. The embroidery of characters or images of mountains, rivers, birds and beasts on Shu brocade signifies that people at that time had already mastered superb skills for embroidering on brocade and the excellent integration of Shu brocade and embroidery.

The first piece of brocade mentioned above was an arm protector used in archery. But from a current point of view, it contains much information about trade, history and the culture of its time. On the one hand, it shows that Shu brocade had long been one of the key commodities traded along the ancient Silk Road. On the other hand, it proves that Chengdu was part of the Road a long time ago and was one of the centers of the trading network across China as Chang'an (now Xi'an) was for the Road. Represented by Shu brocade and embroidery, Chengdu had become an important silk center in China and an authentic production place of silk. Moreover, the character patterns contain



"Five stars rise in the east, benefitting China"

very important cultural messages. It was stated in *Records of the Grand Historian · Astronomy* that, "Five stars rising in the eastern sky is auspicious to China"(Sima Qian, 2015, p.186). There are similar records in *Book of Han*, *Book of Jin*, and *Book of Sui*. Scholars generally believe that the five stars refer to Chenxing, Taibai, Yinghuo, Suixing and Zhenxing, corresponding to Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn respectively. According to explanations of Confucian scholars in ancient times, if the five stars all appear in the eastern sky, it is auspicious for the central plains dynasty to send armies beyond

its territory. The embroidery of such ideological words on Shu brocade indicates that an important historical mission was carried by Shu brocade a long time ago to spread thoughts of great unity and orthodoxy of the Chinese nation as well as the awareness of cohesion based on the Central Plains culture to the outside world. This demonstrates from another aspect that the Ba-Shu culture yearned for the Central Plains culture thousands of years ago. The unearthed two pieces are the most desirable historical proof. The role played by Shu Brocade in spreading the ideology of great unity of Chinese

culture to the Western Regions and other countries demonstrates to a certain extent that Chengdu was spreading actively the core concept of the great unity of the Chinese nation — cohesion. That had been a vital tradition of the Ba-Shu Culture. The discovery of the first piece of brocade underpins our narrations about the Silk Road and Shu brocade.

In addition, the second piece of brocade also reflects the wishes of people during that period for great unity and stability after years of chaos caused by wars and their opposition to national secession and ethnic separatism. It is of great cultural and ideological value as the first piece and the spirit it carries is worth studying and applying.

3. Tianfu silk and embroidered brocade in the Tang and Song dynasties

During the Tang and Song dynasties, the brocade and embroidery industries in Chengdu were flourishing, making the city second only to Yangzhou, a city of Jiangsu Province in eastern China. This truly shows the fact that Shu Brocade was an important product for trading in China. During this period, Shu brocade was acclaimed as one of the four famous brocade styles in China, along with Yun (Nanjing) brocade, Song (Suzhou) brocade and Zhuang (Guangxi) brocade. A few of Chinese idioms meaning flowers blooming like a piece of brocade or adding brilliance to one's present splendor are related to Jin (brocade). Although there are few relics of Shu brocade and embroidery made in the Tang Dynasty, the prosperity of production and trading of Shu brocade can be easily found in verses written in that period. For instance, Du Fu, a prominent Chinese poet of the Tang Dynasty once wrote, "Dawn sees saturated reds; the town's heavy with blooms" and "Where is Zhuge Liang's ancestral temple? Outside Brocade City, deep in

a cypress grove." Liu Yuxi, a poet of the Tang Dynasty once wrote a poem titled Waves Washing the Sand, "Flowers are blossoming on the banks of the brocade-rinsing river. With the spring breeze blowing, the waves are pushing the sand. Young women cut out pieces of brocade and wash them in the river. They look like sunset clouds glowing in the water." The first two lines depict the beautiful spring scenery of the Jinjiang River. The latter two lines highly praise the bustling Shu brocade production and the gorgeousness of the rinsing process. During the Tang Dynasty, Shu brocade was leading in China in terms of its quality and especially its distinctive patterns and variety of styles. Lu Guimeng, also a poet of the Tang Dynasty mentioned in Records of Brocade Garments:

Li Jun, an Imperial Clerk from Zhao Commanderies, was fond of mountain and river scenery... presented a piece of brocade. It was four chi (ca. 0.33m) long, with the lower part wider than the upper part. The lower part was six cun (ca. 3.33cm) wider than the other while the upper part was three and a half cun less. On its front-left side, there were 20 embroidered cranes seemingly flying up, with their legs crooking and flowers in their beaks. On the right side stood parrots in the same number. The two kinds of birds were of different sizes and in-between were filled with flowers evenly so that no vacancy was left. On the cloth, there were four lanes pointing to four directions and dotted with small patterns.

The dexterous application of patterns, embroidery skills, layout and colors manifested the superior craftsmanship of Shu brocade making in the Tang Dynasty.

Among Shu brocade made in the Tang Dynasty, the Lingyanggong (Duke of Lingyang) Pattern was acclaimed the model of its kind in terms of pattern selection and design. Zhang Yanyuan, a painter of

the Tang Dynasty, introduced in his book — *Records of Famous Paintings in the Past Dynasties*— the Shu brocade and embroidery designed by Dou Shilun who was in charge of public affairs in Yizhou as follows:

Dou Shilun, courtesy name Xiyan, was a son of a top official of the Tang Dynasty. At the beginning, he acted as a consultant in the office of the King of Qin who later became Emperor Taizong of Tang, and then as the Adviser to the Army and to the Chancellor, and was later given the honorable title of the Duke of Lingyang. He introduced designs of paired animals. These patterns became famous for their resplendence and brocade with such patterns were well received at courts of the first two emperors of the Tang Dynasty, and the designs came to be referred to by the Shu people as Lingyanggong Pattern and used from then on (Zhang, 2005, p.151).

Brocade with patterns of paired pheasants, goats, flying phoenixes or roaming kylins was referred to as propitious brocade. This creation greatly enriched the craftsmanship and represented the superior level of Shu brocade and embroidery.

4. Dissolution of the Silk City in the Ming and Qing dynasties

Quite a few records about Shu brocade and embroidery of the Song and Yuan (1271–1368) dynasties are well preserved. For example, Su Jiong, a poet of the Song Dynasty wrote a poem titled *The Brocade-rinsing River* to depict vividly the exquisite art of making as well as the beautiful patterns and splendid texture of Shu brocade. Fei Zhu of the Yuan Dynasty wrote, “The State of Shu was renowned across the country for its brocade. Its capital was therefore called the Brocade City and the river within the city was called the Brocade-rinsing River.” However, the Shu brocade and embroidery industry suffered from unprecedented

severe damage since the Yuan Dynasty as continual occurrence of wars caused huge destruction to the society and economy of Sichuan and there were few inheritors of such techniques so that the industry declined dramatically and almost disappeared during the Yuan Dynasty. In the early-middle period of the Ming Dynasty, the industry and relevant trade resumed and developed to a certain extent with the gradual return of social stability. Acclaimed as one of the four famous embroideries in China along with Suzhou embroidery, Guangdong embroidery and Hunan embroidery, Shu embroidery is well known at home and abroad. It usually illustrates images of mountains, rivers, human figures, flowers, birds, insects and fish. It shows new creativity whether in its form, texture, color and spatial presentation or stitches and purpose of decoration. Especially its “cross-stitch” technique fully reflects its legacy and innovation. With current innovations, embroidery of different panda images on both sides of a fabric as been created with double-faced embroidering skills. This embroidery is a wonderful combination of Shu embroidery and modern culture and art. The lovely pandas are embroidered at the same time but in different forms, either leisurely or active. As an important intangible cultural heritage of the silk industry, stitches and techniques of Shu embroidery provide new ideas for it to go global and open up a new era for its modernized development of a higher level. Embroidery products of the Ming and Qing dynasties, however, were inferior to those made in the Han and Tang dynasties, whether in terms of craftsmanship, product quality or market share. Especially with the flourishing of marine transportation, Chengdu’s role as the source and output center of silk products was decreasing. Its position as the silk city dissolved with the changes in social, economic and transporting situations of the Ming and Qing dynasties and the historically important role played by silk in this city’s

development was gradually replaced by porcelain and tea-horse trading.

It is necessary to point out that the ancient Silk Road was an overland route that was pioneered by Zhang Qian who made expeditions to Xiyu (the Western Regions), during the Western Han Dynasty(202BC—8). The route started from Chang'an and stretched through current Gansu Province and the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China, Central Asia and Western Asia and connected China to countries near the Mediterranean Sea. The Silk Road derives its

name from the lucrative trade in silk carried out along its length. The term was coined by Ferdinand Freiherr von Richthofen, a geologist and geographer from Germany, in his works titled China: The results of my travels and the studies based thereon in 1877. He wrote that from 114 BC to AD 127, there was a route connecting China with Xiyu (including Central Asia and India) with silk trade as the medium and he gave it the name “the Silk Road(s),” which later gained widespread acceptance and popularity among the public. But the connotation, value and significance of this term have gone far



embroidery of different panda images on both sides of a fabric as been created with double-faced embroidering skills

beyond the narrow scope defined by some scholars of history or archeology. The most significant point lies in that the Road is endowed with new value and connotation in different historical backgrounds and thus has new implications and emphasis. Its unique features of openness and keeping up with the times vary with the development of sociocultural and are undergoing enrichment, gain or loss on the basis of practical needs. As far as Sichuan is concerned, the earliest or rudimentary connotation of the Silk Road during the period of agriculture civilization was merely a major passage for connecting silk production and trading centers and transporting silk products. With the change in the political, economic, military and cultural position of Sichuan in China and even in the world in modern times, as well as the alteration in the routes that connected Sichuan with the outside, the connotation of Tianfu Silk varied accordingly. There may be some replacement, reduction or increase in the object representing it. For example, after the Song and Yuan dynasties, the position of silk as an economic and strategic product

was declining with the emergence of tea-horse trade. The role and position of Sichuan as a link along the Silk Road was not as important as before. Especially with the rise of marine transportation in the Yuan Dynasty, Sichuan as a source of product, a center of technique, research and development, and a base for output for the Silk Road was weakened. The role played by Tianfu Silk in exchanging with the outside world was far less significant than that during the Qin and Han dynasties. Yet, as a key object for external exchange of the Tianfu Culture, a contributor and witness of the development and prosperity of Sichuan, Tianfu Silk with its rich dynamics and enduring cultural influence is rising in brand new forms. Especially in the current IT-based era, new contents and vigor are continuously infused into the value and connotation of the Tianfu section of the Silk Road. This land is given new missions and roles in economic and cultural development as well as international exchange so that it will keep growing with new vitality and vigor.

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