

NANJING
CLOUD-BROCADE

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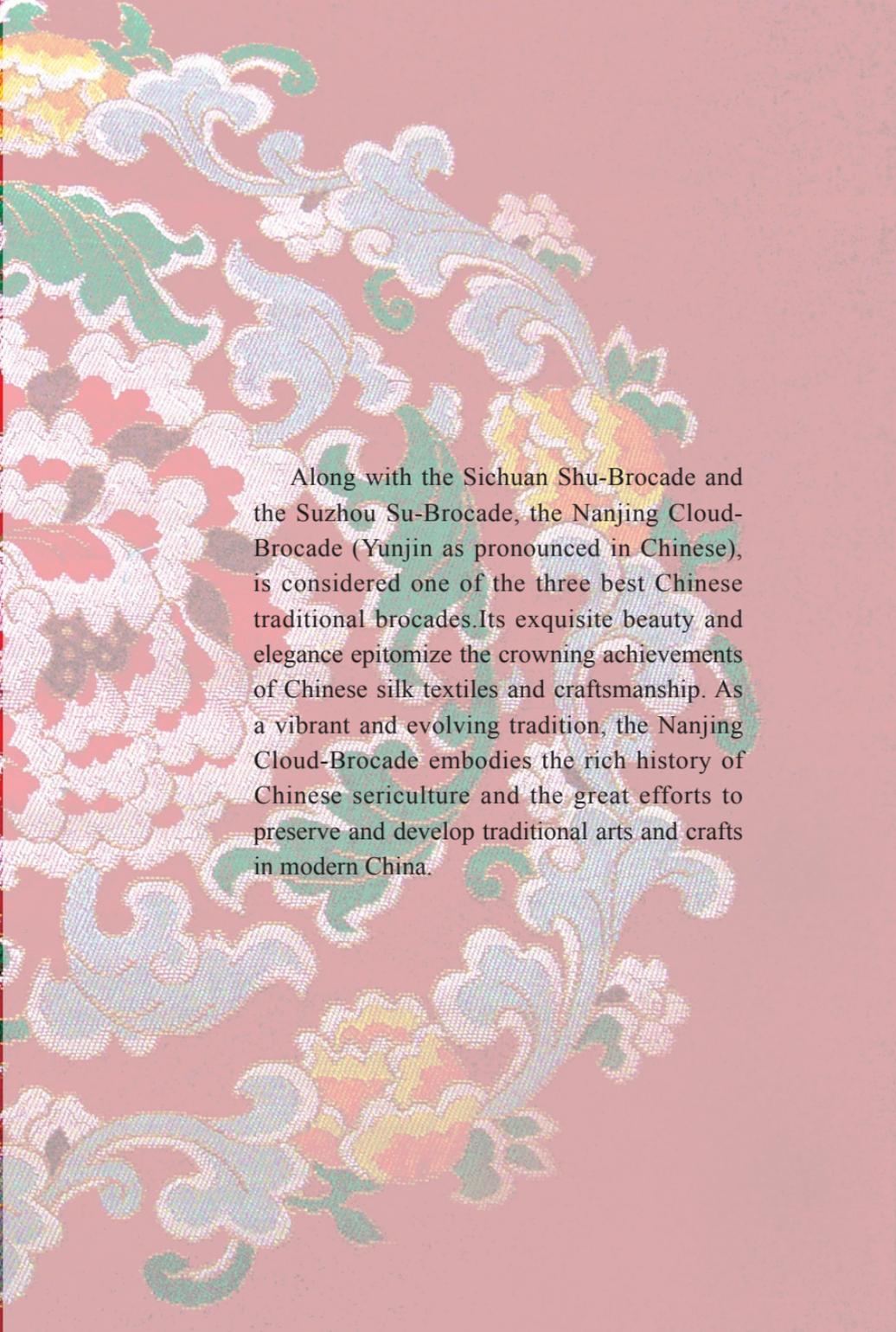
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History and Culture







Along with the Sichuan Shu-Brocade and the Suzhou Su-Brocade, the Nanjing Cloud-Brocade (Yunjin as pronounced in Chinese), is considered one of the three best Chinese traditional brocades. Its exquisite beauty and elegance epitomize the crowning achievements of Chinese silk textiles and craftsmanship. As a vibrant and evolving tradition, the Nanjing Cloud-Brocade embodies the rich history of Chinese sericulture and the great efforts to preserve and develop traditional arts and crafts in modern China.

1. The Worm Pregnant with Silk

Chinese civilization dawned thousands of years before the Xia (2100 – 1600 BC), Shang (1600 – 1100 BC), and Zhou Dynasties (1100 – 221 BC), which have been officially recognized as the germination periods of Chinese culture. To satisfy every-day needs and aesthetic demands, the early Chinese produced many types of pottery and jade-ware with interesting shapes and multiple functions. The elegant and harmonious decorative geometrical designs on colored pottery demonstrated that the early Chinese had achieved an



Neolithic ivory wine cup with silkworm designs



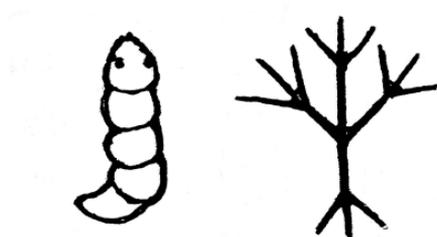
Late Neolithic pottery with silkworm designs

advanced abstract aesthetic sense. Much of the jade-ware used in rites and rituals suggested a high degree of cultural sophistication.

China was the first country to domesticate silkworms, reel silk from cocoons, and weave the silk into fabric. According to archeologists, silk textiles emerged in today's south-eastern China as early as 3000 BC. Silkworm images appear on some Neolithic utensils, which proves that the early Chinese were rather familiar with this silk-producing creature. In 1976, an ivory wine cup with silkworm images was excavated at the Hemudu Site (5000 – 3300 BC) in Yuyao, Zhejiang Province. Another piece of late Neolithic pottery (about 3000 BC)

with a continuous silkworm design was unearthed in Meinian, Jiangsu Province.

By the time the early Chinese began to create a written language, silkworm domestication had become commonplace. Pictographic characters for “silkworm” and “mulberry” can be found on oracle bones. The silkworm is depicted in its larval stage, and the mulberry is portrayed with branches, but no leaves. In a Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 CE) dictionary, the word for silkworm is defined as “the worm pregnant with silk,” and mulberry as “the tree feeding the silkworm.”



Inscriptions for silkworm and mulberry on oracle bones

The image of a plump silkworm in the larval stage made people think it was pregnant, ready to spin silk, thus giving it the dictionary definition of “the worm pregnant with silk.” By the time of the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, silkworm images had become a popular design, often appearing on ritual bronze vessels, either as inline or

interwoven figure. The silkworm image, often with exaggerated eyes and set against a background of thunder and clouds, became a popular decorative design. On most utensils, the silkworm pattern usually appeared on the rim of the vessel, seldom occupying center stage. However, in 1963 a bronze wine ewer from the Warring State period (475 – 221 BC) illustrating silkworm and mulberries was excavated in Hengdong, Hunan Province. Five mulberry leaves, with wiggly silkworms among them, were portrayed on the outside of this bronze wine ewer. Bronze vessels were considered the most sacred utensils of the nation in the Shang and Zhou Dynasties. The image of silkworms and mulberry trees prominently displayed



Silkworm and mulberry designs on a Warring States bronze ewer



Palace of Silkworm Goddess, Qing Dynasty new year folk woodcut pictures



Five deities of sericulture

on such vessels indicated the economic significance and social prominence of sericulture at that time.

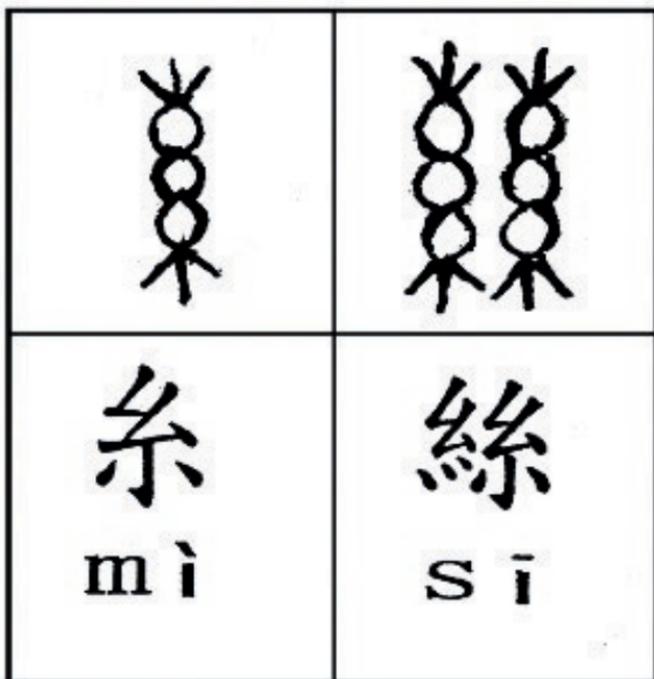
Fascinating silkworm figurines made of jade, pottery, copper, or plated gold are regularly found in tombs from the Shang and Zhou Dynasties and up to the Han Dynasty. In a tomb of the Western Zhou Dynasty (1100–771 BC) in Jiyang, Shandong Province, twenty-two jade carvings of silkworms were excavated. This collection portrayed the entire lifespan of a silkworm from its larval to pupa stages. It is evident that there is a direct correlation between the spread of sericulture and its artistic representation.

The two essential elements of sericulture are the silkworm and the mulberry tree. In the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, mulberry trees were widely planted throughout the Yellow River Valley. Two varieties of mulberry trees, tall and short, were depicted on bronze vessels in the Warring States era. The tall ones were the original mulberry trees while the short ones were the result of artificial manipulation called ground-mulberry. Mulberry planters topped the original trees to control their height, encouraging the growth of lower branches, which subsequently made leaf-picking much easier. Topping also effectively increased the production of tender and juicy leaves to feed the silkworms.

Sericulture is a very complicated business; it starts with planting mulberry trees and hatching silkworms, then reeling silk fiber from a cocoon and finally spinning it into silk thread, which can be used as raw material for



Images of gathering mulberry leaves on a Warring States bronze vessel with ground-mulberry on the upper part and original mulberry trees on the lower part.



Characters for silk on oracle bones

silk textile production.

Many characters relating to sericulture were discovered on oracle bones of the Shang Dynasty. For example, the “mi” character (“糸”) is a pictograph illustrating three strings of thread tied together, representing braided fine silk yarn. Therefore “mi” is used as a particle in building other characters relating to sericulture or silk fabrics. For example, two characters

of “mi” put side by side becomes a new word “si” (“丝”) representing the concept of silk in general. Even before woven into silk textiles, the boiled-off silk yarn was traded at markets by farmers, subsequently becoming a symbol of wealth and fortune.

Archeological discoveries have confirmed information revealed by the pictographic inscription on oracle bones. The analysis of the warp and weft of silk fabric excavated in the Mawangdui Han Dynasty tombs reveals that the yarn was made with four or five silk threads, which in turn were made with ten to fourteen silk fibers. In short, every piece of yarn contains dozens of silk fibers. The string of an unearthed wooden zither is made of sixteen silk threads with multiple fibers.

According to archeologists, sericulture and silk textile production were widespread throughout China after the Warring States period. Many places began to manufacture unique silk products with distinctive local characteristics. By the time of the Han Dynasty, silk textile production was highly developed, especially in today’s Shangdong and Sichuan regions. Government-sponsored factories were set up in cities such as Xiangyi and Linzhi to produce silk fabrics for the royal court. The factories paid high wages to attract women to employment.



A Qing Dynasty Cloud-Brocado design

2. Man Tills and Woman Weaves

Agriculture and sericulture were fundamental to the economy of ancient China. On the domestic level, it meant that men tilled the fields while women wove textiles; to some extent, the development of Chinese culture evolved around the model of tilling men and weaving women. Although men had a social status superior to that of women, nonetheless, women played



Dance with silk (Han Dynasty stone relief)

an essential role in the socio-economic structure, thus earning them the esteem of “holding up half the sky”.

In the Han Dynasty, the economic progress greatly due to the use of oxen in tilling the land and the widespread practice of family-based textile production. This development is reflected in Han Dynasty stone reliefs. On “Dance with Silk”, a stone relief excavated in Xuzhou, a woman held a parcel of silk yarn while a man carried a bundle of silk fabric. Dressed in luxurious clothes, they were either happily dancing together or on their way to market. On a stone relief unearthed in Zhucheng, Shangdong Province, two silk yarn bundles were carved on lintel in addition to the traditional good luck symbols such as curtains and coins to bring the family prosperity. The prevalent portrayal of silk on stone reliefs indicates that silk had achieved the status of an emblem for wealth and fortune.

Thus, images of weaving and spinning were particularly popular on Han Dynasty stone reliefs. One relief clearly illustrated how silk was made in a family workshop. This relief consists of three segments. The upper part displayed a busy scene of spinning and weaving with yarn bundles hanging on the wall. In addition to the spinner and weaver, there was another person weighing silk yarn bundles. The middle portion of the relief depicted a happy scene of people playing musical instruments. Perhaps this illustrated laborers entertaining themselves after work. The bottom part of this relief presented a scene of people traveling on



Spinning and weaving scene (Han Dynasty stone relief)

horseback and in a carriage. The relief therefore possibly represents the work, recreation and social activities of an affluent family.

The loom often appeared in stone reliefs with a weaving motif. For example, a loom and a yarn processing machine were portrayed on a relief unearthed at Honglou, Tongshan. A woman next to the machine was filling the silk. Archeologist Xia Nai and others reconstructed a Han Dynasty loom according to this relief, pointing out that it was used only to weave plain textile. This loom contained a beam to reel the warp, a take-up roll to trundle the fabric, and heddles to create a shed space for inserting the shuttle. Below the loom were treadles which controlled shafts to raise warps for shuttling. The treadles were operated by foot, which freed the hands of the weaver to throw shuttles or examine the fabric. The treadle appeared on the stone reliefs around the first or second century CE, implying that as late as the Eastern Han Dynasty the Chinese pioneered the usage of treadles on looms, and was indeed the first country to do so. It was not until the sixth century CE that the treadle first appeared in Europe, and it was not until the thirteenth century that it became widespread. Many believe that the treadle was an invention of the Chinese, introduced to the West along with the draw loom.

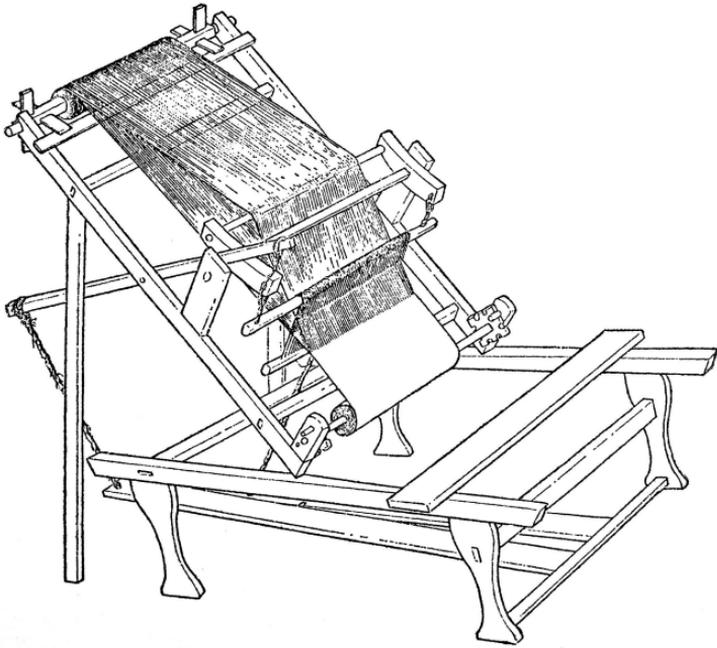
Looms that appeared on Han Dynasty stone reliefs were simple ones that could only produce plain textile. However, excavated fabric from that era clearly indicates the existence of complicated designs. There are two



Spinning and weaving scene (a partial Han Dynasty stone relief)

possible explanations for this mystery: First, the loom which could create embroidery effects on cloth did exist in the government-sponsored factories or wealthy family workshops; second, using a “knitting baton” on a simple loom, a practice widely used on the primitive back-strap looms, could create elaborate patterns. Even today, women of the Li ethnic group in Hainan Province are still producing the famed “Li Brocade” by using this technique.

Widespread family-based silk production and the specialization of royal court-sponsored textile workshops were the foundation of Nanjing Cloud-Brocade. Without such a popular base and technical expertise, Cloud-Brocade could never have been born and developed.



A replica of a Han Dynasty loom

According to archaeologist Jiang Zanchu, the Yangtze Delta centering around Nanjing has been a sericulture center since the Three Kingdoms era (220 – 280 CE). Once the Kingdom of Wu established its court in Nanjing, a royal textile workshop was created to produce lavish fabrics. The workshop expanded to employ almost a thousand workers by the end of the Wu era. After the defeat of the Wu by the Western Jin Dynasty (265 – 316 CE), the Wu royal workshop was disbanded. Scattered



Spinning and weaving scene(Han Dynasty stone relief)

workers contributed greatly to the further development of silk production in the Yangtze Delta region. In the late Eastern Jin Dynasty (317 – 420 CE), General Liu Yu conquered a northern kingdom(the Late Qin) and brought hundreds of craftsmen from its royal silk factory back to Nanjing, launching his own Brocade Bureau in the year 417 CE. The Late Qin was a kingdom founded



A thinking beauty (Han Dynasty stone relief)

by nomadic tribes who unified Northern China. Its silk craftsmen were descendants of the Han, Wei, and Jin royal silk mill weavers, highly skilled in creating textiles in the traditional imperial styles. They also incorporated into their fabrics the gold threads loved by the nomadic people. The dexterous silk craftsmen from the Late Qin Kingdom were therefore pioneers in the production of Nanjing Cloud-Brocade.

3. The Silk Road

Deeply rooted in the socio-economic model of men tilling and women weaving, sericulture was greatly developed throughout China, producing elegant and luxurious silk textiles to satisfy both domestic and overseas markets. The enormous demand from Rome was responsible for the opening of the Silk Road, a network of trade routes connecting central China to the Mediterranean coast. From the Han to Tang Dynasties (618 – 970 CE), the Silk Road was the essential path for cultural communication and economic exchange between the East and the West.

Sericulture was the most important handicraft industry of the Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 24 CE). The variety and quantity of silk textiles produced by craftsmen at that time was massive, fulfilling the demands of the royal court, people in the government, and common citizens. Silk was also widely used as rewards from emperors to courtiers, and even as diplomatic gifts to

foreign countries. For example, Zhang Qian (195 BC – 114 BC), the great explorer of Xiyu (today's Xinjiang Province and parts of Central Asia), brought with him loads of silk to impress and bribe the local tribes. Tang Meng, responsible for opening the route to Yelang (today's Guizhou Province), also used silk as the key to open up that remote region. The popularity of silk in the Roman Empire made it a highly profitable commodity of international trade. Caravans transported Chinese silk first to Central Asia and then to the Mediterranean coast.

The seven thousand kilometer-long Silk Road was a network of transcontinental trade routes, starting in Chang'an (today's Xi'an), capital of the Western Han Dynasty, extending westward through the Gobi Desert, Pamir Plateau and central Asian grasslands, and finally reaching the eastern coast of the Mediterranean. The Roman Empire in the West and the Han Empire in the East were two great nations on either end of the Silk Road. For more than a thousand years, trade caravans on camel back traveled this long and rugged road to satisfy the Roman Empire's insatiable appetite for silk.

In *The Origin of Chinese Civilization*, Xia Nai wrote that after the Romans occupied Syria in 64 CE, they discovered the beauty of Chinese silk. Light as a feather, colorful as wild flowers, and delicate as spiders' web, Chinese silk soon enchanted the Romans. Special markets were built to exclusively retail Chinese silk, which was sold for its weight in gold. Some scholars even deduced that the fall of the Roman Empire was partly caused



Brocade archer's forearm protector

by the outflow of gold and silver as a result of Roma's enormous demand for silk. Others alleged that the rise and fall of the Roman Empire had a close relationship to the accessibility of the Silk Road. Such statements might greatly exaggerate the role of silk in Roman society, but there is no doubt that Chinese silk played an important role in the cultural transmission and commodity trade between the East and the West.

Little was known about the silk exported to the Roman Empire from the Han Dynasty until excavations were made along the Silk Road. Judging from the quantity

of silk remains discovered in today's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, it is evident that the Han Dynasty had a mature brocade industry which could produce enough textiles for both the domestic and foreign markets. Most brocade patterns are auspicious animals and geometrical designs. To illustrate the symbolic meanings of the ornamental figures, Chinese characters and phrases were often woven into the silk. The commonly used phrases were "promised longevity," "wishing one to have many descendants," "wealth and rank," and "happiness forever." Using Chinese characters on textiles has long been a part of Chinese craftsmanship, showcasing the pictographic beauty of the writing system and expressing best wishes and auspicious meanings.

After the Han Dynasty, the Tang was another prosperous and powerful period for China. With the development of the marine routes, traders during the Tang Dynasty were no longer limited to the land route of the Silk Road, and land transportation was improved by the use of horses and horse-drawn carts. Silk was still the most important and lucrative commodity of international trade.

There has never been any one-way commercial or cultural transmission among nations. The Persians learned how to weave brocade during the Tang Dynasty era, but still sought to obtain fabrics from China. The close trade relationship between China and Persia at that time made it possible for the Chinese to learn new weaving techniques from the Persians. For example, the Chinese acquired



Brocade with auspicious animal pattern

the “Pearl Medallion” pattern from the Persians, widely applying it to silk textiles. A typical Pearl Medallion is a round image with a central figure, such as animals, plants or humans, surrounded by a string of white pearls. Plant motifs in square shapes are inserted between the medallions to generate a continuous effect. Because each medallion is identical, it is easy to repeat it throughout the whole surface of the fabric. The Chinese soon adopted this design, creating a similar version called the “Swirling Pattern.”

The Persian style of fabric design has been widely used on Cloud-Brocade. Round medallions, big or small, appear in rows on the fabric. Each row may have three

or four big medallions, or more than a dozen small ones. Every medallion is considered as a design unit, called a “ze.” The more “ze” on each row, the more intricate in the design.

It was said that the “Pearl Medallion” design was inspired by astrological phenomena in ancient Persia. It first appeared in the Buddhist grotto arts at Duanhuang during the Northern Dynasty(386 – 581CE). It was not until the Sui (581 – 618CE) and Tang Dynasties that the Pearl Swirling Pattern became a norm in brocade design.

During the Tang and Song Dynasties, the economic center of China moved from the Yellow River Valley and Delta to the South-East coastal region, including today’s Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Shanghai, Anhui, and even Fujian provinces. The affluent Jiangnan region celebrated by traditional literati mainly refers to Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces. Historically, the Jiangnan region was settled and developed later than the North, but eventually caught up to it. Sericulture penetrated into every village of the entire region. Abundant silk textiles were produced to satisfy both the domestic and export demand.

The Northern Song Dynasty established its capital in the North, while the Southern Song Dynasty selected Hangzhou, a southern Chinese city, as the seat of its court. Throughout the Song Dynasty, the court gave special attention to intellectual and civil affairs. As a result, an urban and commercial culture developed rapidly. Ceramic manufacturing and silk textile production reached a new height. Depiction of scenes of “tilling and weaving” in



Pearl medallion brocade with Noble character

multiple media, such as stone relief or woodblock prints, reflected the significance of sericulture in the economy. The earliest version of the tilling and weaving scenes



Pearl medallion brocade with "King Hu" pattern

was created by Lou Chou, a twelfth-century county administrator who painted two sets of pictures with the themes of “tilling” and “weaving.” The “tilling” series was composed of 21 paintings, beginning with “seed soaking” and ending with “putting grain into barns.” The “weaving” series included 24 pictures, opening with “bathing the silkworm eggs” and finishing with “cutting the cloth from the loom.” The entire tilling and weaving collection had 45 paintings. Each picture was complemented with a classic style poem. The poem and the picture jointly illustrated idyllic rural scenes of men



Petit-flower medallion brocade



Colored ceramic plate with tilling and weaving scenes,
Qing Dynasty

tilling the fields while women wove cloth, and everybody enjoying a peaceful and prosperous life. It was said that the happy images of the tilling and weaving series won the admiration of the emperor at that time. He mandated the paintings be inscribed onto stone tablets in order to preserve and publicize this idealized portrayal of

agriculture and sericulture. The original inscriptions are lost, but copies made by later generations can still be found, even in Japan.

The Qing Emperor Kangxi saw these paintings on one of his imperial inspections of the South, and ordered them to be redrafted based on the original content. The Imperial Commissioned Scenes of Tilling and Weaving series was comprised of 46 paintings, 23 for each theme. The artist for this series was Jiao Bingzhen, a court painter from Shandong who was influenced by Western-style painting techniques brought to the royal court by Jesuit missionaries. He used perspective in his version of the tilling and weaving scenes, and achieved great success. Zhu Gui and Mei Yufeng, two of the greatest woodblock cut printers of that era, made prints of this series and produced a great impact on folk art.

In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the Yangtze Delta had become the heart of Chinese sericulture. The silk industry reached its zenith in the early Qing Dynasty with more than fifty thousand craftsmen working directly for the silk mills. Hundreds of thousands more were employed by suppliers, such as makers of looms, shuttles, patterns, and frames, as well as workshops for dyes and paper. A similar employment situation could be found in Suzhou, another center of sericulture. As early as the Jiajing (1522 – 1566) and Wanli (1573 – 1620) periods of the Ming Dynasty, the north-east half of Suzhou City had formed a silk production zone, employing thousands of families specializing in silk manufacturing. The numbers



A Ming Dynasty Thangka

of families with silk weaving looms reached ten thousand by the Qianlong period (1735 – 1795) of the Qing Dynasty. Towns and villages surrounding Suzhou often witnessed the number of silk producing families jump from scores in the mid-Ming to hundreds in the mid-Qing. The booming silk industry attracted merchants from all over China to Suzhou. As a result, dozens of guild halls were built to provide professional services for traveling businessmen.

The thriving silk producing capacity and techniques in Nanjing and its adjacent areas provided the necessary conditions for the development of the Cloud-Brocade.



Zhuanghua brocade, Ming Dynasty