



S-I-L-K-Y!

What would you do if you found a cocoon in your cup of tea? Throw it out? Think again! Folktales say the wife of a Chinese emperor discovered silk about 5,000 years ago. Seeing a thread unwind from a cocoon that had fallen into a cup of hot tea, she worked with the threads until she found a way to weave them into cloth — and that’s how we first got silk!

DID YOU KNOW?

- Silk is produced by most moth caterpillars, but the finest silk comes from the large white moth caterpillar commonly called the silkworm.
- Adult silkworm moths do not eat. They live only a few days, long enough to mate and lay 300 to 500 eggs.
- The larval stage for a butterfly or moth is called a caterpillar. The pupa stage in moths is called a cocoon. The pupa stage in butterflies is called a chrysalis.

FROM SILKWORM TO SILK

Did you ever wonder where silk comes from? It’s remarkable! Silkworm larvae (caterpillars) raised by silk farmers spin the fine threads used to weave silk cloth. Silkworms take a lot of care. On many farms, the eggs are collected after they’re laid and kept in a cooler all winter. In spring, the eggs are carefully warmed in an incubator. Tiny silkworms hatch from the eggs. For about five weeks they are fed fresh leaves from mulberry trees. Then the fully grown three-inch worms crawl into small wooden houses made by the farmer. The caterpillar spins a 1,000-foot-long silk thread around its body to form a tough silken case. On a silk farm, most of the cocoons are placed in ovens before the adult moth comes out of the cocoon. Farmers do this to prevent breaking the cocoon, which would ruin the silk thread. (A few pupae are allowed to become adults to breed and produce more eggs.) The cocoons are soaked in hot water to loosen the silk fibers, much like the cocoon in the Chinese lady’s teacup. The fibers from many cocoons are twisted together to make a strong thread. The threads are woven into silk cloth. Silk is smooth, shiny, and soft to touch. It is lightweight and can be dyed in neat colors.

It takes many cocoons to make silk thread. Do this math to figure how many cocoons it takes to make one pound of silk cloth!

$$(326 + 674) \times 20 = \underline{\hspace{2cm}} \text{ cocoons}$$

WHAT’S YOUR ANSWER?

(Write your answers on the back of this page.)

1. Clothing made from silk often costs a lot of money. From the information above, why do you think silk is expensive?
2. Why do many people like to wear silk clothing? Why do you think jockeys wear silk during horse races? (A jockey’s colors at a race are even called his or her “silks.”)

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