

**The Textiles of the Han Dynasty & Their Relationship  
with Society**

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## Declaration

NAME.....Heather Langford

PROGRAM.....Master of Arts by Research

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## Summary of Thesis

The basis of this thesis is the textiles of the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE). The textiles themselves deserve specific study, but this thesis takes an overarching view to discover how and why they were made so long ago, when every part of their construction and equipment was slower.

These unique textiles enlighten present day researchers in many fields. Therefore, the overall aim of this study was to find out about the textiles and the people who made and used them. To do this, the thesis investigates the technology of spinning, weaving and dyeing, including the various processes involved. However, the most important aspect of the thesis is not just a technical study, but to place the textile into a social context to understand why they were made, who were the artisans who made them as well as the various levels of society who wore them.

A background of the Ancient China and the early Chinese people required investigation to be able to understand the importance of such highly sophisticated, technically sophisticated beautiful cloth. The social structure of the government and the beliefs of the people was needed to appreciate the textiles themselves. Textiles did not, and still do not, exist in a vacuum without giving clues of the lifestyle, structure of society, class systems as well as climate, lifestyle and technology. Knowledge about these factors is diverse, so this thesis has used an inter-disciplinary approach from material culture, history, archaeology, reproductions and visits to China to see the textiles and equipment still available from the past.

China was very unusual as it did not just make textiles for clothing and other artefacts, but it was an integral part of the economy. Textiles were one form of tax, making their manufacture different from other countries such as Rome, where textiles were a commercial product. Though most of the cloth made was for everyday wear, it is the small percentage of cloth made for the highest section of society with so many unique features worthy of study.

Therefore this thesis has been able to supply some of the answers to the questions of who were the people, what were the sources and how they actually made the cloth. The ability to dye and decorate such a utilitarian commodity two hundred years ago displays their wealth. The textiles are a mark of the society. The importance of these textiles cannot be underestimated.

### Glossary of Textile Terms

|                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| <b>Brocade:</b>            | Brocade consists of a compound weave of polychrome threads across the ground fabric with a pattern formed by warp floats. It is used with or without a double weft to make the pattern and the binding of the threads.                    |
| <b>Cloth, fabric,</b>      | These are interchangeable names for textile articles, usually made by weaving, knitting or felting. In ancient times, all textiles used natural fibres.   |
| <b>Cotton</b>              | Fibres surrounding the seeds of the cotton plant ( <i>Sp Gossypium</i> ). It has a short staple length up to about 7 cm. It originated in India, but was not grown in China until the Song dynasty (960 CE 1279 CE)                       |
| <b>Damask:</b>             | Monochrome fabric with woven patterns usually performed in a twill weave. A plain (tabby), monochrome weave background with a warp float pattern where the warp threads progress over the top of several weft threads.                    |
| <b>Embroidery:</b>         | This is a decorative method of placing a design on the finished, woven fabric. Chain stitch was the common stitch of the Han dynasty, but some knotted and satin stitches were used.  |
| <b>Gauze, leno</b>         | A fabric made by twisting adjacent threads together giving an open weave diamond pattern.   |
| <b>Heddle(s):</b>          | Are a number of parallel cords or wires usually set in a frame with eyes (holes) for the threading of the warp threads By raising or lowering the set of threads attached to the heddle, a shed is formed for the shuttle to pass through |
| <b>Hemp:</b>               | <i>Cannabis</i> Is a bast fibre (from the stem of the plant) It has been treated and spun into various grades of cloth since ancient times,   |
| <b>Jin silk:</b>           | Brocade silk fabric   |
| <b>Linen:</b>              | A bast fibre from the flax plant, <i>Linum usitatissimum</i>  |
| <b>Loom</b>                | The mechanism used to make cloth. Here it refers to the hand operated looms   |
| <b>Plain (tabby) weave</b> | Each weft thread crosses over one warp and under the next warp. In the following row, the threads are alternated.   |
| <b>Ramie:</b>              | <i>Boehmeria nivea</i> is a flowering plant in the nettle family <i>Urticaceae</i> . It is native to eastern Asia.  |
| <b>Reeling wheel:</b>      | A mechanical device to simultaneously wind the continuous filaments from several cocoons at the one time.   |
| <b>Selvedge:</b>           | The edge formed when weaving by the warp thread as it returns across the loom   |



|                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| <b>Shed:</b>        | The opening formed by the set of threads threaded in the heddle so that a shed (tunnel) is produced so the weft threads on a shuttle can be passed through to the other side.                            |
| <b>Spindle:</b>     | A rod attached to the whorl to turn and twist the fibres into a yarn. A drop spindle is the apparatus combining the rod and the whorl (weight) used for hand spinning                                    |
| <b>Spinning:</b>    | Spinning is the twisting together of two or more threads to join if the fibres are short, and to strengthen the yarn. The thread is then double and twisted to produce even stronger threads for weaving |
| <b>Treadle:</b>     | A foot lever (s) of the loom, set to operate the raising and lowering of the heddles. There is usually more than two in a hand loom  |
| <b>Twill weave</b>  | The character of the weave has diagonal ridges on the front of the fabric caused by advancing the pattern one thread each row.   |
| <b>Warp faced</b>   | The warp threads made the patterns in brocade weaves. The pattern is vertical.   |
| <b>Warp thread:</b> | The strong threads set onto the loom in ready for weaving. The warp runs down the length of the cloth  |
| <b>Weft faced:</b>  | The pattern is made using the weft threads horizontally across the weave   |
| <b>Weft:</b>        | The thread which traverses over a set of warp threads and under another set to form the cloth. It passes from one side of the loom to the other.   |
| <b>Whorl:</b>       | A weight attached to the rod to form a drop spindle for spinning by hand. The whorls were different sizes and shapes depending on the fibres and fineness or coarseness required.                        |

### **Chinese Dynasties**

Taken from University of Maryland History Department site  
[http://www.chaos.umd.edu/history/time\\_line.html](http://www.chaos.umd.edu/history/time_line.html)

**NOTE:**

This table is included on page xviii of the print copy of the thesis held in the University of Adelaide Library.