as retold by Daryl Brower
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Long, long ago (let's say 350 AD) there lived a Chinese princess who had reached an age at which it was expected she would be married. Now as was the custom of those times and that place, her parents had made a fine match for her when she was not more than a girl, promising her to a Prince of Khotan. The princess was much pleased by this for she was told by all that it was good match, the prince was a handsome and charming man, Khotan was a fine city, and truth be told, she was rather looking forward to the adventure of living in a new land.

There was one thing, however, that troubled her. For though the prince was rich and Khotan was a worldly place filled with all the luxuries to which the princess was accustomed, there was one thing that was not to be found there at any price: silk. And silk was something a princess could not live without. She was a virtuous girl, but put perhaps too much value on her looks and her wardrobe and the thought of living without such a thing of beauty filled her with sadness.

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The making of silk you see, was a secret known only to the people of China. Only the daughters, mothers and grandmothers of the land knew how to properly feed and tend to the silkworms so that they would produce the finest of fibers, and only they knew how to spin, weave, and dye it into a fabric. The women had learned all this from the Empress Lzi-tu, (you can read her story here) and the secret had been kept close for some 3,000 years. The punishment for anyone who revealed the secrets of silk-making—or worse still—smuggle silkworm cocoons out of China, was death.

The princess knew all this, but as her wedding day drew closer and closer, she realized she could not do without this wondrous fiber and decided that she would bring the secrets of silk-making with her to her new home. One night when all were asleep, she slipped into the palace courtyard and carefully gathered a bundle of seedpods and leaves (with the precious silkworm eggs firmly attached) from the mulberry trees that grew there. Returning to her room, she hid these treasures in the elaborate headdress that she would wear on the procession to her new home.

When morning came she dressed in all her finery and rode out to meet her new husband, all the while hiding the wealth of an empire in the voluminous folds of her wedding headdress, and no one was the wiser. It wasn't until many months later that she shared the secret with her husband, showing him the now fully-formed cocoons that she had been so carefully tending. Her husband was delighted with her cleverness and, just as Lei-tzu and had done centuries before, they set up silk making in Khotan, turning a tidy profit as they did so.