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Dye for Two Tones: The Story of Sustainable Mud-coated Silk

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Abstract

Since the early beginnings of Chinese silk production many forms of silk textiles have been created. *Jiāo-chou* and *Xiang-yun-shā* are two types of Chinese silks that use eco-friendly vegetable dyeing and iron-rich mud-coated techniques to create a unique texture and two-tone color—shiny black on one side and reddish brown on the other. Mud-coated silks, which have been around since the fifth century, are making a comeback in the fashion world as high-end, luxury textiles. This trend has been initiated by boutique stores and high-end fashion designers with Asian cultural roots who know of the fabrics. These silks are specialty products

of Guangdong and enjoy good reputation due to their purely natural dyeing and processing techniques, as well as their cultural significance. The production process for mud-coated silks is very labor intensive and season specific making these fabrics rare and valuable. Mud-coated silks are culturally significant, rare, and valuable but there has been very little research involving them. This article discusses characteristics of mud-coated silk, the dyeing and mud-coating process, sustainability, adoption by current designers and boutiques, and the battle of patent for this silk-producing technique.

KEYWORDS: mud silk, black silk, gambiered silk, *Jiāo-chou*, *Xiang-yun-shā*

China has gained world recognition for silk production or sericulture, which according to Confucius began in the twenty-seventh century BCE when Chinese princess Xi Ling Shi was the first to reel a cocoon of silk after the cocoon had fallen in her cup of tea (Harris 2004; “The History of Silk” 2010; Vainker 2004). Since the early beginnings of Chinese silk production many forms of silk textiles have been created. *Jiāo-chou* and *Xiang-yun-shā* and are two types of Chinese silks that use eco-friendly vegetable dyeing and iron-rich mud-coated techniques to create a distinct two-tone color and texture.

Sustainability and Mud-coated Silks

Mud-coated silks, which have been around since the fifth century, are making a comeback in the fashion world as high-end, luxury, eco-friendly textiles. These silks are specialty products of Guangdong and enjoy good reputation due to their purely natural dyeing and processing techniques. Eco-friendly and renewable fashion is part of the new sustainable design trend that is aimed at producing products where environmental and social responsibility are supported. Many fashion designers have begun using environmentally friendly materials and socially responsible methods of production.

When considering the sustainability of a textile there are many elements to take into consideration including: the renewability and source of the fiber, the process of how the fiber is turned into a fabric, the working conditions of the people involved with making the textile, and the textile carbon footprint. Mud-coated silk falls into the sustainable textile category because it is a natural protein fiber that comes from a renewable resource and therefore does not deplete the earth of natural resources. Production does not use harsh chemicals that can cause harm to workers when being produced or harm the environment. Silkworms including their food source, mulberry leaves, are renewable resources and have been raised and bred for their cocoons, which have been spun into silk for several thousands of years. To create silk, cocoons are placed in hot