Silk is an ancient and highly valued fabric. This selection describes silk’s history and explains how the fabric is made. Read the selection and answer the questions that follow.

Silk

The Chinese applied practical technology to the manufacture of fine products. One of the best known of these is the lustrous cloth called silk. Long before most people in the West knew where China was located or what the people there looked like, the wealthy merchants of Greece, Rome, and Persia were crossing deserts and mountains to trade for this highly prized material.

No one knows when the Chinese first learned to raise silkworms, collect and unwind their cocoons, and weave a fine cloth from the tiny threads that silkworms produce. Tradition says that the legendary Emperor Huang-Ti taught them how to do this. Other legends say that it was Huang-Ti’s wife, the Empress Hsilina Shih, who discovered the technique. Some versions of these myths cite the year 2640 B.C. as the time when this happened.

The exact truth about how the Chinese learned to raise silkworms and convert their cocoons into cloth may never be known, but we do know that silk production has flourished in the Yellow River valley area for over four thousand years.

Then, as now, the first step was to raise silkworms, which live on mulberry trees and feed on the leaves. The silkworm moth lays between two hundred and five hundred eggs, each about as big as a pinhead. The eggs hatch into larvae—wiggly creatures that look much like caterpillars.

A silkworm larva grows from about a quarter of an inch (6 mm) to three inches (80 mm) long in about six weeks. During that time it feeds on huge quantities of mulberry leaves. A growing silkworm caterpillar often eats its own weight in leaves each day.

After about six weeks of feeding and growing, the silkworm settles down on a leaf and begins to spin a cocoon around itself. The tiny silken thread that the insect wraps around and around its body makes a continuous strand from 1,200 to 3,000 feet (365 to 900 m) long. These cocoons are collected and heated to kill the larvae inside.

Then comes the tedious process of unwinding the tiny filament of silk without breaking it. The cocoons are soaked in hot water to loosen the sticky material that holds them together. Then the thread is unwound. A Chinese worker takes several cocoons at one time and twists their thin strands together to form the silken thread that will later be woven into cloth. The length of the thread depends on the number of cocoons; this will vary according to the use that is planned for the finished material.

In ancient China much of the silk was woven into cloth by people working in their own homes. Women usually unwound the cocoons by hand, but men often helped weave the threads into cloth. Looms used for the weaving process go back beyond recorded history, although they were constantly being improved. Other labor-saving methods were gradually adopted to replace the slower hand methods of ancient times. A treatise written in A.D. 1090 describes a silk-winding device operated by a foot treadle. Spinning wheels, which are used to twist together short threads at the end of each cocoon, originated in India. They replaced hand-spinning techniques in China early in the thirteenth century. Water wheels came into use during the tenth and eleventh centuries to drive the silk-winding, spinning, and weaving machines.

\[^{1}\text{treatise}:\] a document that describes or explains something
1. What is the purpose of including the legends concerning Huang-Ti and his wife?
   A to explain some Chinese beliefs about the beginning of silk making
   B to demonstrate how long the Chinese had actually been making silk
   C to capture the reader’s interest with stories from the past
   D to discuss the value of tradition in China

2. What does a farmer need in order to successfully raise silkworms?
   A a large supply of mulberry leaves
   B land located near a river
   C thread to help the larvae make cocoons
   D a nearby forest filled with trees

3. What determines how many cocoons are used to produce a particular thread?
   A how sticky the cocoons are
   B what use the thread will have
   C whether the thread is unwound by hand or machine
   D how long it took the worms to make the cocoons
4. Which phrase belongs in the empty box?

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moth
lays eggs

eggs hatch
to larvae

larva
changes to
caterpillar

caterpillar
spins
cocoon

silk thread
collected
```

A silkworm settles on a leaf
B larva eats mulberry leaves
C cocoons collected
D thread woven into cloth

5. According to the selection, which statement about the machines used in silk production in China is true?

A They were originally developed in India.
B They greatly improved the quality of the silk.
C They shortened the time it took to produce silk.
D They quickly changed the silk industry.

6. What is the main difference between looms in ancient China and looms around A.D. 1100?

A The newer looms allowed silk to be woven faster.
B The newer looms improved the quality of the silk.
C The newer looms were produced in greater numbers.
D The newer looms allowed people to work at home.

End of Set

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**Answers to**  
*Grade 7 Reading Comprehension Sample Items*

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