**Studying Sericulture at Takayama-sha**

Takayama Chōgorō (1830–1886) started teaching his method for raising silkworms in the late 1860s and formally founded the Takayama-sha Sericulture School in 1884. He then passed the school to Machida Kikujirō (1850–1917), and in 1887, the year after Chōgorō’s death, Kikujirō moved the company and the education program out of the village of Takayama and into the town of Fujioka.

Education at the Takayama-sha Sericulture School consisted of two distinct courses. One was the *honka,* a three-year program teaching theory and practical skills through hands-on practice in classes conducted throughout the year. Students in the *honka* program were required to live at the school in Fujioka and pay tuition. The *honka* program included academic subjects such as science, math, and Japanese in addition to sericulture. From January to March of their third year, students learned about theories of silkworm growth and silk production, then took their final exams.

The other program was the *bekka*, a two- to three-year special program, taught from April to July (the spring silkworm workshop) and July to September (the summer and autumn silkworm workshop). Instead of tuition fees*, bekka* students would pay the school a percentage of their earnings after completing the program. Most *bekka* students were taught at branch schools rather than the main school in Fujioka. By the time the school closed in 1927, students had come to study at the head school in Fujioka from all over the Japanese Empire, including Taiwan and Korea.

**The Branch Schools**

*Bekka* students attended *bunkyōjō*, or branch schools. After entering a school, they were separated into groups, with each group responsible for raising its own silkworms. Each group had its own silkworm-rearing room, and the students fastidiously recorded data such as the amount of mulberry leaves consumed and the number of cocoons produced. Takayama-sha staff checked on the students’ work and supervised the silk-rearing process. The most successful graduates were able to take an exam to become licensed sericulture teachers.

Teachers from the program would be sent throughout the Japanese Empire to teach the Takayama-sha style of sericulture, or they would be assigned to run a branch school. Most of the branch schools were built in Gunma Prefecture; at Takayama-sha’s peak there were 116 branch schools in Gunma, Saitama, Chiba, and Ibaraki prefectures and 22 other branch schools located throughout the Japanese Empire.

**Women and Silk**

Women have been involved in raising silkworms and spinning silk in Japan since the introduction of sericulture to the country in the fourth century CE. Even so, only men could attend the *honka* program at Takayama-sha until the Women’s Department was created in 1906. After that, women could graduate from the *honka* program with the same qualifications as the men.

The *bekka* program, however, accepted women from the very beginning. After the end of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1867 many former samurai families turned to silk production as a way to survive. Sons and daughters were sent to schools like Takayama-sha to learn the skills necessary to raise silkworms. The free branch schools, with their focus on practical skills, were ideal for families that could not afford tuition fees.