

For centuries, the monarchs of Europe and the imperial dynasties of China flaunted their wealth by adorning their courts with the world's most sought-after cloth: silk. It was in China during the fourth millennium BCE that humans first produced silk by twisting together the delicate filaments of silkworm cocoons. Compared to other natural fabrics, silk is cool and flowing and has an enchanting sheen when woven into cloth. These properties make the fabric valuable for trade, and it began to spread throughout Asia, eventually passing through what is now Turkey and into the Roman empire through an intercontinental trade route that is still known as the Silk Road. Silkworm cultivation reached Japan during the fourth century CE and arrived in Western Europe by the twelfth.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the major European silk-producing countries of France and Italy struggled with diseases that threatened both their silkworms and the mulberry trees on which they fed. At approximately the same time, Chinese export of silk had been largely halted by the Taiping Rebellion. In response to European demand silk traders turned to Japan, whose silk industry still remained strong. Japan began to modernize during the 1868 Meiji Restoration, and silk production became a major source of profit for its new government. By the early twentieth century, Japan was the largest producer of silk in the world, producing almost 60% of all raw silk.

Japan's rapid growth was facilitated by innovations within what are now Gunma and Saitama Prefectures. The area was home to many pioneers in silkworm cultivation, such as Tajima Yahei (1822–1898) and Takayama Chogoro (1830–1886). The Tomioka Silk Mill and the Arafune Cold Storage, built in 1872 and 1905 respectively, were pillars of the Japanese industrial revolution and expanding silk industry. By chilling the silkworm cocoons in Arafune Cold Storage, hatching could be delayed for many months, and silk production could continue year-round at Tomioka's massive mill. Through the increased production, silk became affordable for the middle class. In recognition of their impact on the global silk industry, Tomioka Silk Mill, Tajima Yahei Sericulture Farm, Takayama-sha Sericulture School, and Arafune Cold Storage were registered as UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 2014. While Japan is no longer a major producer of silk, the protected buildings, sites, and museums in Gunma and Saitama show the important role that silk manufacturing played in Japan's development as a nation.