

Silkworm cultivation spread through trade routes to the Korean peninsula and reached Japan by the fourth century CE. Wealthy Japanese wore silk kimono as a way to show their status. During the Edo period (1603–1867) demand for silk was high, and much of the silk in Japan was imported from China. Throughout the Edo period domestic silk production steadily increased, and while the amount of silk made in Japan continued to grow in the 1800s, production techniques remained largely unmechanized.

Most silk production was done by single households; families raised their own silkworms and twisted the silkworm cocoons together on hand-powered wooden spindles. They raised the worms in the spring and summer and spun silk in the autumn. While silk production became mechanized in France and Italy and silk weavers had to struggle to compete with new inventions such as the Jacquard loom, Japan continued to be isolated by its government's restrictions on trade with the West, and silk production techniques remained unchanged. When the country was forced to open to Western trade, the Japanese silk production was still centered around a household model. During the rapid cultural shifts of the Meiji Restoration, the silk industry began to modernize, particularly in the areas around Tomioka, in modern-day Gunma and Saitama Prefectures.