

In 1872, Tajima Yahei (1822–1898) established the Shimamura Kangyo Company, a cooperative of Shimamura silkworm farmers and the first public silkworm egg company in Japan. Their business was the grading and the sale of high-quality silkworm eggs in the port town of Yokohama, which opened to foreign trade in 1859. Because silk trade in Europe was suffering from silkworm blight, in the late 1800s there was a large demand in Europe for raw silk from Japan. In 1879, the company decided to try selling their eggs directly on the international market. They sent Yahei, along with two other men, to travel to Italy. This was one of the first recorded instances of anyone from Gunma traveling to Europe. They traveled east across the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, and on their return journey continued east through the Indian Ocean, circumnavigating the globe. Yahei set up a base in Milan, where they were able to sell around 30,000 sheets of silkworm eggs. The company continued to bring back foreign culture and new ideas during the course of four subsequent international trips. Tajima Keitaro (dates unknown), a younger relative of Tajima Yahei, went on the third and fourth missions and brought back seven microscopes from Italy, which allowed the company to adopt Western methods of checking silkworm eggs for disease. The first Christian church in the area, called the United Church of Christ in Japan, was built in Shimamura in 1897 as a result of this intercultural exchange.