

In 1872, the Meiji government built the Tomioka Silk Mill, one of the country's first mechanized silk reeling factories. With it, they were hoping to achieve mass production of silk while maintaining a high level of quality. The government also sought to adopt Western technology and imported a silk reeling machine from France, along with the steam engine that powered it. Even with mechanization, workers were still needed to feed the cocoon filaments into the steam-powered silk reeling machines, but these machines greatly improved the quality and quantity of the silk produced at the factory. Tomioka silk impressed visitors to the 1873 Vienna World's Fair, and the name "Tomioka silk" spread through Europe. The mill's success led to the construction of twenty-six other machine-reeling factories based on the Tomioka model around Japan between 1873 and 1879.

The Tomioka Silk Mill was the largest reeling factory in the world at the time it was built. The mill was constructed using an interesting mix of Western and Japanese designs. Western elements include brick walls, glass windows imported from France, and a truss roof that made the traditional central columns of Japanese buildings unnecessary. The Japanese elements include traditional lime plaster finish on the interior walls, Japanese roof tiles, and Tajima Yahei's (1822–1898) *yagura* raised roof for ventilation. The mill was privatized in 1893 and changed ownership several times until it was bought by the Katakura Company. The company introduced automatic reeling machines to the mill in the 1960s, and these were used until the mill finally ceased operation in 1987. Using these machines, it is possible to automate almost the entire silk reeling process, and they are still the most advanced form of silk reeling machines used today.