

Japanese industrial growth exploded in the late nineteenth century, and then again after the end of World War II. Japan joined other top industrial countries as a leading innovator, and the phrase “Made in Japan” came to signify high quality and reliability throughout the world. The evolution of the Jobu Silk Road exemplifies the changes that took place during Japanese industrialization and offers perspective on a unique side to Japanese history that cannot be seen in the modern megalopolis of Tokyo or even the thousand-year-old city of Kyoto.

Although the silk industry in the Jobu region is no longer as prestigious as it once was, it is still the center of silk production in Japan. Today, tourists come not just to experience the continuation of an ancient tradition, but also to purchase high-quality silk goods. The natural proteins in silk, including collagen, have been found to have excellent cosmetic benefits, and the region is now a leading producer of luxurious silk soaps. Several biotech companies in the region are also researching the use of silkworms for medical purposes such as vaccines and diagnostic agents. Recently, the world’s first genetically engineered silkworms were produced here. Some were created to make extra-fine, extra-soft silk, while others spin fluorescent silk that may soon be available for purchase.

Although it no longer dominates the world silk trade, the Jobu region will continue to have an important place in world history for its innovation in the silk industry. The history of silk in Japan is not just a history of interactions with foreign cultures, but the history of domestic industry and Japan’s technological evolution—a history that continues today.