

Gunma and Europe

Historically Japan's sericulture industry was located in the central and northern regions of the island of Honshū. However, the traditional silk fabric industry was consolidated in Kyoto, and by the 1720s roughly 90 percent of all Japanese silk fabric was created in Kyoto. The cocoons were harvested and reeled into long skeins of raw silk thread in places like Fukushima and Niigata, then shipped to Kyoto. This was the system until the late 1800s.

During the 1860s, France and Italy, the preeminent silk-producing nations of Europe, were in a life-or-death battle with silkworm diseases that threatened to wipe out the entire silk industry. Unlikely saviors appeared in the form of Japanese silkworm traders who traveled to Europe in the 1870s with healthy silkworm eggs and raw silk thread from their homeland. Silk quickly became a major source of income for Japan's government.

In 1872, the Meiji government built the Tomioka Silk Mill to ensure the production of high-quality raw silk. The mill was a state-of-the-art facility for the time, incorporating Western technology that included a steam engine and reeling equipment brought from France and installed and operated by French silk expert Paul Brunat (1840–1908). The mill was only part of the thriving silk industry in Gunma, which was home to the first sericulture schools, a massive cold storage facility for silkworm eggs, and an area where many industry innovators lived and worked.

By the early twentieth century, Japan was the world's largest silk producer, responsible for nearly 60 percent of world output. While Europe's silk industry had survived, Japanese silk had become massively popular, and this small area of western Gunma had achieved prominence on a global scale. Locally-born sericulture pioneers such as Takayama Chōgorō (1830–1886), Kimura Kuzō (1845–1898), and Tajima Yahei (1822–1898) had been instrumental in shaping the fortunes of their birthplace and the nation as a whole.