

Silk in Japan Before 1868

Archaeologists believe that silk fabric was first made in China around 12,000 years ago, and that the technology was brought to Japan around the third or second century BCE. During the Asuka period (552–645) a large number of people from the Chinese mainland and the Korean Peninsula came to Japan. They brought with them techniques and skills previously unknown in the archipelago, including innovations in sericulture, silk-reeling, dyeing, and weaving.

The Japanese climate is well suited to sericulture, but the country's self-imposed international isolation during the Edo period (1603–1867) meant that European technical advances in sericulture remained completely unknown. Japanese sericulture remained a cottage industry until the late 1800s.

This is not to say silk was not lucrative. Silk merchants were some of the wealthiest and most powerful people of the merchant class. Silk was a fabric for the upper classes: samurai, merchants, and the royal court. Often the merchants not only sold the silk, but managed silkworm farms, reeling operations, weavers, and dyers.

In 1868, the Tokugawa shogunate was replaced, and Japan started to rapidly modernize. The central government was eager to move forward with ambitious industrial and agricultural programs to bring Japan to the same level as the Western powers. Silkworms were dying from disease in Europe, and the Japanese government began to promote silk as a commodity that could make the country rich through exports. In 1872, a new state-of-the-art reeling mill was constructed in Tomioka, Gunma Prefecture. Japan's "Silk Revolution" had begun.