

Industry in Shirakawa Village

More than 95 percent of the land in what is now the municipality of Shirakawa is mountainous and unsuitable for growing rice or other typical staple crops. The local people traditionally earned a living mainly from industries that relied on cultivating plants that could be grown on the hillsides of the Sho river valley. Mulberry leaves were harvested for silk farming and mugwort for the production of saltpeter, an essential ingredient in gunpowder. Villagers also subsisted on forestry and trading in related commodities, including urushi sap harvested for lacquer-making. Records from 1898 show that the goods sold from Shirakawa to Toyama Prefecture were mainly varieties of raw silk, followed by timber and grain, while goods brought in from elsewhere in large quantities were rice, cotton fabric, seafood, salt, and sake. Demand for saltpeter, traditionally a crucial product for Shirakawa, declined precipitously after Japan began importing a cheap alternative from Chile in the late 1880s. Despite this, the 1898 ledger shows a positive balance of trade, indicating that Shirakawa was a relatively prosperous area at the time.