

## Weaving in Snow Country

Tokamachi has a long-established and diverse weaving culture that includes both plant-fiber and silk fabrics. It is particularly known for Echigo *chijimi* crepe, a lightweight fabric made from an herbaceous plant called ramie that grows abundantly in the Shinano River Basin.

The availability of ramie is one reason that weaving first flourished in Tokamachi. The earliest evidence of ramie textiles in Japan comes from the early Jomon period, approximately 7,200 to 5,400 years ago. The thick, knitted ramie textile produced in Tokamachi came to be called Echigo *angin* and is still produced today, along with its more finely woven descendant, Echigo *jofu*.

Climatic conditions in the sheltered Shinano River Basin supported the development of a local weaving culture. Ramie grows well in regions with an abundance of water; humid regions are also ideal for weaving. Arid air makes threads brittle and causes them to snap when they are pulled and twisted during the weaving process. Humidity, on the other hand, makes them more pliable and resilient.

Weaving was traditionally a winter activity in Tokamachi. Women in nearly every farming household used ramie and other plant fibers to produce homespun cloth that was sold to supplement the family income. Working in winter also allowed weavers to cure the finished product on top of the snow in a process called *yukizarashi*, which removes yellowing, making whites brighter and dyes more vivid.

Echigo *chijimi* and Echigo *jofu* fabrics produced by Tokamachi's cottage industry were highly regarded across the country. Wholesalers exported them from the mountains of Niigata to Kyoto, Osaka, and Edo (present-day Tokyo), where they fetched high prices. Echigo *chijimi* was even used to make the robes of shogunate officials.

The demand for ramie cloth was in decline by the nineteenth century as prevailing tastes shifted to silk. Local weavers decided to take up silk weaving as well, although the more complex production process required full-time artisans. This shifted much of the weaving from individual households to centralized workshops. However, unlike other silk production centers where individual artisans specialize in a particular step, many weavers in Tokamachi still learn the entire process.

Tokamachi's skilled weavers also developed new fabrics such as Akashi *chijimi*, a thin summer silk with tightly twisted weft threads that give the fabric its distinctive crepe wrinkling. This prevents it from sticking to damp skin and allows for better air circulation, keeping the wearer cool.

Tokamachi weavers continue to craft elegant kimonos based on traditional techniques and patterns handed down from generation to generation. However, they are also committed to finding innovative applications for their fabrics that appeal to modern consumers, so that their craft may survive for generations to come.