

## Tokamachi's Weaving Culture

Tokamachi has a long-established and diverse weaving culture that includes both plant- and animal-fiber fabrics. Over the centuries, the region has produced textiles that are sought-after nationwide.

The earliest textiles in the area date to the early Jomon period, around 7,200 to 5,400 years ago. They were made from ramie, an herbaceous plant that grows abundantly in the Shinano River Basin. Now called Echigo *angin*, versions of this thick knit are still made today, along with its more finely woven descendant, Echigo *jofu*. A lightweight crepe version called Echigo *chijimi*, developed in the 1670s, became one of the region's most famous products. Shogunate officials and other upper-class samurai coveted it for their summer robes.

Echigo *chijimi* and Echigo *jofu* were made by the women of Tokamachi households during the long winter months spent indoors. They sold the fabric to wholesalers to supplement the family income.

By the nineteenth century, the demand for ramie cloth was in decline as prevailing tastes swung toward silk. In response, Tokamachi also adopted silk weaving, but the material's more complex production process required dedicated artisans, not part-time side labor. This shifted much of the weaving from individual households to centralized workshops with specialized workers. Even so, weavers in Tokamachi were—and continue to be—trained in every step of the production process.

From the new silk-weaving workshops came innovative fabrics such as the thin summer silk known as Akashi *chijimi*, which is still prized today. Its tightly twisted weft threads give it a distinctive crepe wrinkling that prevents it from sticking to damp skin and allows for better air circulation to keep the wearer cool.