



A woman performs traditional handweaving work in Kuni-akaiwa.

Shining through Silk

In Gunma's historic silk industry, women continue to play a leading role.

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GUNMA Prefecture is mostly mountainous terrain with limited land suitable for rice cultivation. Consequently, mulberry cultivation on the sloping ground, sericulture, silk reeling, and fabric manufacturing have been practiced here since the Nara period (710-794). In the latter half of the Edo period (1603-1867), Joshu, as Gunma was formerly known, developed into a major center of silk production. Kiryu in particular was a district famed for its production of high-grade silk fabric, comparable to Nishijin in Kyoto.

As foreign trade flourished in the Meiji period (1868-1912), the government began to focus on the development of the silk industry to obtain foreign currency. As part of these efforts, the government established Tomioka Silk Mill¹, introducing cutting-edge Western machinery, in Tomioka, Gunma Prefecture, in 1872. This enabled the mass production of raw silk. From the Meiji period to the middle Showa period (1926-1989), raw silk was produced in various parts of Japan including Gunma Prefecture. In the 1930s, Japan accounted for 80 percent of the world's raw silk exports.

“The Japanese silk industry greatly contributed

¹ Tomioka Silk Mill was Japan's first government-controlled silk mill. It was privatized in 1893, and operations continued until 1987. It was registered as a World Heritage site in 2014.





- 1 Cocoons in Kuni-akaiwa
- 2 Gunma-produced silk fabrics displayed in the old building of the Kiryu Textile Hall Former Building
- 3 Goto Textile Company in Kiryu with its distinctive roofline
- 4 A female worker makes a kimono *obi* sash at Goto Textile Company.

to the modernization of the country,” says Masami Inoue of the Department of Planning and Development at the Gunma Prefectural Government. “In Japan’s silk industry, Gunma is distinguished by the fact that all production centers are still present, from sericulture to silk reeling and fabric making, which is not seen elsewhere. Moreover, women have played a central role in silk production here.”

For sericulture farmers in Gunma Prefecture, the raising of silkworms was led mostly by women. Women made kimonos with handweaving tools available in each household. At Tomioka Silk Mill, many female workers were involved in manufacturing raw silk. This was partly because women, with thinner fingers than men, were more suited for the delicate work of silk reeling and weaving. Meanwhile, men supported the women’s work by performing operations requiring physical strength and maintaining the machines.

After the Meiji period, such active involvement of Gunma’s women in sericulture and silk production became widely known in Japan. Gunma came to be recognized as a region of *kakaa-denka*, a term which generally refers to a family whose wife holds a stronger position than her husband but which carries a slightly different nuance in Gunma.

“Even during the times when the status of women was much lower in Japan, wives and husbands shared housework and were equally paid in families involved in the silk industry in Gunma,” says Inoue. “To people in other regions, it seemed that wives dominated

their husbands, but in Gunma the men were proud to say ‘my wife is the best in Japan.’”

In Gunma Prefecture, the tradition of sericulture, silk reeling, and fabric manufacturing has been handed down through generations. For example, in Kuni-akaiwa, in the northern part of Gunma Prefecture, sericulture farmhouses built in the Meiji period have been preserved and the village has been designated as an Important Preservation District for Groups of Traditional Buildings. Here visitors can see firsthand the traditional methods of silk manufacturing.

In Kiryu, silk fabrics are sold and textile machines are exhibited at the Kiryu Textile Hall Former Building, built as the Textiles Weavers Co-operative Association office in 1934. Textile Museum Yukari, housed in an old fabric factory, also offers opportunities for visitors to experience dyeing and handweaving. At Goto Textile Company, founded in 1870, visitors can tour the wooden factories built from the Meiji period to the early Showa period. Kimono *obi* sashes are still produced by skilled female workers in these factories.

“While the Japanese government currently aims to create a society ‘where women shine,’ women have shone in Gunma’s silk industry for a long time,” says Inoue. “We would like to continue to pass down the history of Gunma’s silk industry, where women played an active role, to future generations.”

All photos: Satoshi Tanaka