

All About Tomioka Silk Mill



①Tomioka Silk Mill is the first model silk-reeling factory which Japanese government established in 1872. At the end of the Edo period of Japanese history, in the mid 19th century, Japan opened its doors to the world and in 1859 began to trade with Western countries. At that time, the most important Japanese export to the

West was raw silk. However, because raw silk was produced by hand, insufficient quantity could be produced to meet export demand. Also, there were problems caused by the widespread availability of low-quality raw silk and the fact that some unscrupulous merchants falsified the quality to sell the silk at a higher price. The reputation of the Japanese raw silk had gone down.

②The Meiji government pursued a policy of promoting modern industry in order to stimulate the modernization of Japan and achieve equal status with Western countries. In order to raise funds for it, the government thought that export of raw silk would be most suitable. Then, the government decided to set up a model factory equipped with modern silk-reeling machines from Western countries to enable mass-production of high-quality raw silk and to train Japanese people in the techniques of machine-reeling and to become leaders in their home towns.

How did the government recruit women workers ?

③In 1872 the government began to recruit women to work as mill hands at Tomioka Silk Mill. At first, this was not successful, partly because it had been rumored that the French drank blood. The Japanese had seen the French drinking red wine and they had mistaken this for blood. The government tried to deny this rumor and emphasized the importance of Tomioka Silk Mill.

Junchu Odaka who was the first head manager of Tomioka Silk Mill employed his own daughter, Yuu, as the first mill hand, in order to encourage more people to apply for jobs at the mill.



What were the working conditions of the women workers?

④When the mill complex started to operate, the women worked for 8 hours a day on average, and had a holiday on Sundays. For late 19th century Japan, such working condition was very advanced and Tomioka Silk Mill was the first factory to adopt this system in Japan.

Great importance was attached to the welfare of employees and, within the mill complex, there was a clinic for employees, and also a French doctor. In addition, employees received help with food and medical expenses during the government-operated period.

①unscrupulous 悪徳な, 悪辣な, 無節操な ③mill hand 紡績工

★Ice breaker for active discussion★

1. How was the transition of Edo era to Meiji Era?
2. What are the significant characteristics of the two eras?
3. Aside from the story about French people drinking blood, do you know any other misconceptions that the Japanese believed in during the Meiji Era?
4. What is your opinion about women staying at home and women working outside building their own career?
5. What is the importance of Tomioka Silk Mill being designated as a UNESCO's World Heritage site?
6. Please introduce one of your favorite UNESCO World Heritage site in Japan.
7. Make sentences using the following words : reel, insufficient, unscrupulous, mass-production, mill, rumor and complex.

フランスの器械製糸技術と日本の伝統的な養蚕技術と組み合わせ生糸の大量生産システムを世界に戻したことがイコモスから高く評価された富岡製糸場。1939年に三井家より操業を引き継いだ片倉工業は生糸の世界的な価格競争を受けて1987年に操業を停止したが、閉鎖後も日本の産業近代化の歴史を伝える遺産として「木骨煉瓦づくり」の建物を守り、世界遺産登録を目指すにあたり富岡市に建物を無償譲渡した。