

Tomioka Silk Mill— a new world heritage site

Japan has long been highly regarded for its silk manufacture—beautiful silk kimonos being one of the most recognisable Japanese products around the world. Japan's latest UNESCO World Heritage Site is a silk mill in Gunma Prefecture, but it is not the beauty of any products that is being recognised. It is the actual mill complex and what its development represents that have been designated as being of international significance.

The Tomioka Silk Mill is no longer operational. Established in 1872, it closed in 1987. The mill complex was built by the Japanese Government with machinery imported from France and is an example of the push to catch up with



western technologies. This was a defining feature of the Meiji Period (1868-1912), when Japan opened up to the world after a period of national seclusion under the so-called *Sakoku* policy (1639-1854). In the case of the Tomioka Silk Mill, not just the hardware but the knowledge too was imported; foreigners were employed to train the Japanese staff and their dormitories still remain.

Located in Gunma, an area renowned for silk production, the Tomioka mill became a model for the country and Japan's previously declining sericulture boomed to the point that in the last part of the 19th century, Japan became the world's largest exporter of raw silk.

As the sole remaining example of a government-built factory from the Meiji Period, the Tomioka Silk Mill is a unique record and an outstanding example of the early industrialisation of Japan. In addition to the mill itself, an experimental farm, a cold-storage facility and a school complete the new world heritage site.

Since 2005, the Tomioka Silk Mill has been open to the public. Find more details and more images at:

www.tomioka-silk.jp/hp/en/index.html

Shiisa: an Okinawan take on the lion dog



The lion dog, *shishi* in Japanese, is a familiar sight in Japan. Pairs of guardian lion dogs called *komainu* (c) are commonly found guarding the entrance to temples or shrines. Their job is to repel evil.

There is also a dance called *shishimai* (b) that is still performed at festivals, particularly at those related to a temple or shrine. Originally a sacred deer, it is now generally a lion dog that performs the dance.

The lion dog (sometimes just referred to as a lion) is said to have come to Japan from the Asian mainland during the Heian Period (794-1185). They are generally made of stone, wood or bronze.



One of the best things about travelling around Japan is discovering the differences of the various regions. Visitors to the Okinawan islands, a sub-tropical chain of islands in the south of Japan, will find that the lion dog seems to be a different breed there.

At first they might even be a little difficult to spot, because the *shiisa*, as they are called in Okinawa, are normally red in colour matching the roof tiles they crouch on (d). Sporting alarmingly pointy teeth, they are a kind of good luck charm (a) protecting the house and the people who live in it.

Perhaps not a surprise in a country that has taken *kawaii* to the world, there are some very cute modern twists on lion-dog statues where the guard-dog element has disappeared—such as the *shiisa* pictured here (e) without a care in the world enjoying playing the *sanshin*.

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