

## Female Workers in Japanese Silk Factories: Did the Costs Outweigh the Benefits?

The **Industrial Revolution** had a quiet beginning but by the mid-1800s the movement from farm to factory was producing an all-out ruckus – steam engines belching, gears grinding, conveyor belts slapping. This was true in Europe, in America, and beginning in the 1880s, it was true in Japan.

Our mental picture of this revolution is often filled with smokestacks and machines. What is sometimes missing are the workers themselves, a coal-blackened underground miner in Wales or a barefoot **bobbin girl** in Massachusetts. This Mini-Q will look at one particular group of this industrial worker population – women and girls in the silk factories of Japan.

Silk factories are part of the **textile** industry. Textile is simply another word for cloth. Textiles can be made from a number of materials including wool, cotton, and silk. In each case the fiber must be drawn out from a raw material like sheep's wool, a cotton ball, or a silk cocoon. It is then twisted into yarn or thread in a process called spinning. The spun thread is then woven on looms to make cloth. Before the Industrial Revolution, spinning and weaving were done by hand in homes or cottages. But with the invention of the **spinning jenny** that could fill several spools of thread at once and the **power loom** which speeded up the weaving process, textile manufacturing moved from the cottage to the factory.

In Japan, this shift from cottage to factory happened about 100 years later than it did in Europe. The reason for the late start was mostly political. From 1603 to 1868 the Tokugawa family that ruled Japan did not want contact

with Europe and America. This changed when the **Meiji period** began in 1868. Under new leaders Japan launched a campaign to catch up economically and militarily with the West. Playing catch-up was made easier by the fact that Japan used machinery like the spinning jenny and the power loom that had already been invented. Also, for reasons that included nimble fingers, Japan followed the European and American example of hiring women and young girls to do much of the mill work. By 1902 one quarter of a million Japanese females were working in textile mills, and most of these were working in silk factories.

It is clear that Japanese women made a huge contribution to the Industrial Revolution in general, and to the textile industry in particular. But what did they get back? Historians continue to debate this question. On the positive side, when young girls and women left home and went to the factory, they became wage earners. For some of the women, wage earning was an important step towards independence

and freedom from the poverty of farm life. On the negative side, some young women were taken advantage of. They could be overworked and underpaid. It is true, for example, that Japanese mill workers received only about half the pay received by mill workers in France and Italy.

At this point you are asked to examine the seven documents that make up this Mini-Q. Weighing the evidence on both sides, develop your answer to the question before us: *Female workers in Japanese silk factories: Did the costs outweigh the benefits?*



## Background Essay Questions

1. England, the United States, or Japan: Where did the Industrial Revolution arrive last?
2. What is the difference between spinning and weaving?
3. Why were women and girls often employed in textile mills?
4. What was one of the positive effects of the Industrial Revolution on women?
5. What was one of the negative effects of the Industrial Revolution on women?
6. Define these terms:

Industrial Revolution

bobbin girl

textile

spinning jenny

power loom

Meiji period

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### Timeline

- 1760s** – Industrial Revolution begins in England.
- 1764** – James Hargreaves invents the spinning jenny in England.
- 1786** – Edmund Cartwright invents the power loom in England.
- 1793** – First successful textile mill in the United States opened
- 1868** – Meiji Period begins in Japan, opening door to Japanese Industrial Revolution.
- 1871** – A Japanese commission visits Europe and US to learn about the West.