

“Selling Silkworms: How the Lives and Livelihoods of *Bombyx mori* and its Keepers Were ‘co-modified’”

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Raw silk was an undeniably hot commodity in Meiji Japan, well into the 20th century. Production peaked by the 1930s, and for Japan to gain a strong toehold on the export silk market required a fierce familiarity with the ways of the silkworm, *Bombyx mori*. What compromises and opportunities were made and seized upon in order to facilitate Japan’s emergence as a major player in the foreign trade of silk? To understand how sericultural industries could be ramped up in Japan requires an examination of the developments within society and science that underwrote this escalation.

This paper explores the rationalization of silkworm reproduction that gave rise not only to the mass-production of silkworm cocoons, but also to the tensions amongst farmers and experts that had to be negotiated concurrent to policy changes. Attention to the details and characteristics of silkworm production in Japan made sericulture particularly suited for a concerted nation-wide ramping up, in terms of efficiency and compartmentalization, of the ways in which the lives and livelihoods of both silkworms and their human keepers were led. Initially, the fervor of silk export brought about unregulated production of new silkworm varieties. Many people had high hopes of making more silk: this meant robust silkworms that developed faster into bigger cocoons, which produced heavier or longer thread. Scientific research conducted on silkworms since the turn of the twentieth century made it especially possible to regulate silkworm varieties that were necessary to crossbreed hybrid silkworms. As such, this paper takes into account the multiple factors at play that led to a progressively tighter regulation of the production of silkworms in Japan. Consequences of the regulation of the silkworm-rearing industry will be examined in terms of how domains of sericulture knowledge, expertise, and business, became punctuated according to the life cycle of the silkworm even more than it already had been before the Meiji period. The introduction of scientific accreditation brought to bear pressing issues regarding the “entrustment” of some but not all people in the production of silkworms and their highly managed lives.