

History of Beauty Standards in Japan Since Edo Period

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ABSTRACT

This paper goes through the evolution of Japanese beauty ideals, beginning with the Edo period's elaborate aesthetics and continuing through the Western influences of the Meiji era, the emergence of the "Modern Girl" in the Taisho period, and the complex interplay between modernity and tradition in the Showa and Heisei periods. Exploring how these standards have been influenced by factors such as social hierarchy, gender roles, and global trends allows us to gain a deeper understanding of Japan's cultural history and the way beauty has been used to express identity, status, and societal values. This paper aims to focus on the various ways in which beauty standards in Japan have both resisted and embraced change. It offers insights into the broader cultural forces that have shaped them. It not only provides a historical overview but also raises questions about the ongoing influences of these standards in contemporary Japanese society.

Introduction

Beauty standards not only determine what is beautiful in a particular context, they are also reflective of a context's societal values and cultural identities. Such a pattern is visible in the history of numerous countries; for instance, in Brazil they emphasize curvaceous, toned bodies and sun-kissed skin. In Japan, beauty standards have undergone many transformations that speak to different shifts in social norms, cultural interactions, and historical developments. From the traditional customs of the Edo period, to the global influences of modern times, Japanese beauty standards have been a blend of tradition and adaptation.

The essay proceeds with a review of beauty standards in Japan during the Edo period. From there, the remaining sections cover the following periods up until the present day. The beauty standards in Japanese history demonstrate both continuity and transformation. While pale, clear skin and an emphasis on elegance remained central to Japanese beauty standards over the last 400 years, makeup styles, hairstyles, and clothing styles changed significantly due to various societal changes and external influences. This adaptability emphasizes the beauty standard's role as a way of understanding broader historical and cultural transformations in Japan.

Edo Period (1603-1867)

The Edo period was a significant era in Japanese history in which life was defined by a rigid social hierarchy. Ruled by the Tokugawa Shogunate, Japan had the four-class system, including samurai, farmers, artisans, and merchants. Women existed outside this four-class system and were often marginalized. Their roles were defined by their family's social class, usually supporting their families or upholding societal order. This era was defined by exceptional economic growth that translated into a culture that emphasized traditional Japanese values and aesthetics. Beauty standards in the Edo period prized elegance and sophistication and often functioned as a way for elites to display social status and identity. The ideals toward grace, modesty, and refinement symbolized traditional cultural values. In addition, a

person's appearance, including clothing, hairstyle, and makeup, was a key indicator of their identity, role, and position within the social hierarchy.

The beauty standards during the time had some similarities with that of modern days. They preferred pale, smooth skin as it symbolized purity and refinement. There were also some beauty practices that were quite distinct to that era. Ohaguro, for example, was a beauty practice of blackening teeth with a lacquer-like dye among married women and courtesans, which symbolized maturity, beauty, and loyalty. Hikimayu was also a unique practice where women would shave their natural eyebrows and paint new ones higher on the forehead. With a round or oval shape, Hikimayu emphasized delicacy and elegance. Beni is a vibrant red lip pigment that women apply to create a striking contrast with pale skin that is designed to enhance femininity and allure.

Hair was a major element of beauty during the Edo period. Elaborate hairstyles with intricate hairpieces and pins indicated a woman's social rank, marital status, and cultural sophistication. Long, straight, and glossy black hair was particularly prized. With respect to clothing, the kimono was more than a garment, but served as a cultural statement signaling one's personal identity, social status, and even political affiliations. Intricate patterns, vibrant colors, and diverse textures of the fabric were used to express aesthetic values.

The name of the Edo period comes from the city of Edo, which is modern day Tokyo. Over time, beauty standards that developed in Edo made their way to other parts of the island. Edo grew to become a center of fashion and beauty innovation as courtesans and entertainers popularized trends that trickled down from the elite to the popular classes. For instance, Kabuki theater and its onnagata actors, male actors playing female roles, heavily influenced beauty trends. They meticulously studied femininity, setting beauty standards based on men's interpretations of women's grace, movements, and demeanor, which became a cultural standard. By creating beauty standards, men reinforced societal expectations for women to embody specific traits, emphasizing the dominance of men and social norms where obedience was expected from women.

Meiji Period (1868-1912)

The Meiji period was a transformative time in Japanese society and culture. Internal economic strain, social dissatisfaction, and external pressures from western powers contributed to the collapse of the Tokugawa shogunate from the Edo period. The Meiji period allowed Japan to become a powerful, modern nation through rapid industrialization, urbanization, and Westernization. The beauty standards during the Meiji period also changed as the country went through modernization and westernization. The blend of traditional aesthetics with new influences from the West created a dynamic shift in beauty ideals. Beauty practices became a way to express progressiveness and sophistication especially among urban and upper-class women.

Pursuit towards pale, white skin continued to be a dominant beauty ideal that symbolizes purity, refinement, and high social status. It gained additional importance as Japan adopted Western skincare routines. The practice of blackening teeth, Ohaguro, began to fade and was banned by the government in 1870 as they tried to modernize and adopt Western norms. While delicate, small facial features remained ideal, the western preferences for more defined eyes began to influence makeup practices. Double eyelid surgery started to become popular among the elite in 1896, reflecting the growing impact of Western beauty ideals. Makeup products that enhanced facial features in a more Western style became popular. Red lipstick was used to accentuate the lips, and makeup started to emphasize larger, more defined eyes.

While decorative hair pieces still remained popular, western hairstyles such as buns and shorter cuts also became popular. Long, glossy black hair remained common, but their elaboration diminished in favor of simple and practical styles inspired by Western fashion such as simplified designs of Victorian dresses. Traditional kimonos persisted, but there was an addition of Western accessories like bonnets and leather boots. Western clothing became a symbol of modernity and urban sophistication. Garments such as corsets, dresses, and hats gained popularity among the upper class and urban women. As women blended traditional Japanese elements with Western fashion, Japan was modernized while retaining its cultural heritage.

In cities like Tokyo and Osaka, rapid urbanization created new opportunities for fashion and beauty to flourish. This drove the adoption of Western trends among the middle and upper classes. Modernization during the Meiji period was not just a cultural transformation but also an economic and social revolution. Women began working in factories, and education and expanded services played a vital role in this transformation, highlighting the importance of Japan's rapid industrialization. Geishas, female performing artists, continued to influence the beauty trends as they also incorporated Western elements into their appearance while maintaining traditional Japanese aesthetics.

Taisho Period (1912-1926)

The Taisho Period was a time of social change and greater individual freedom which was reflected in the evolving beauty standards of the era. The rise of the Taisho Democracy movement expanded political participation, introducing universal male suffrage in 1925. Industrial growth provided new opportunities for women and the middle class, leading to modern lifestyles and cultural expressions. The beauty standards were a unique hybrid style, combining traditional Japanese aesthetics with Western trends. The period was marked by a sense of individualism, especially among women, who began using fashion and beauty to express their independence and identity.

Pale, smooth skin still continued to symbolize purity and femininity. People still used white powder to achieve the look, though it was less exaggerated than in previous eras. A blemish free complexion gained importance as hygiene and skin care techniques by Western culture became popular. As western concepts of hygiene included bathing and soap, handwashing, and toothbrushing, clear skin became associated with health and cleanliness. Following the evolution of beauty standards, people used red lipstick and eyeliner to enhance their eyes and lips. Eye makeup, in particular, emphasized larger and more defined eyes.

Traditional Japanese updos and hair ornaments continued to be popular and to be worn for formal occasions. While hybrid styles, a mix of Japanese tradition with Western trends, were also popular such as short haircuts. The bob haircut, known as the "moga cut," became a symbol of modernity and liberation among young Japanese women. The hairstyle symbolized a break from traditional gender roles, and the adoption of Western styles. With a new hairstyle emerging, the "Modern Girl" (Moga) style also influenced what clothes women wore and how they wore their clothes. These women wore short skirts, streamlined dresses, and accessorized with cloche hats and gloves. The moga style, with clothes primarily designed for working women, reflected a growing sense of independence, which challenged traditional gender norms. Traditional kimonos were still worn but were increasingly adapted with modern accessories or designs to fit the urban aesthetic. Instead, people, especially urban women, wore flapper-style dresses, high heels, and stockings, influenced by global trends.

Urban hubs like Tokyo became the center of fashion and beauty innovation, eventually leading Japanese clothing styles to become heavily influenced by Western trends. As Western influence grew, the Japanese cosmetics industry changed, introducing modern products like foundation, lipstick, and blush, following the western trends. Women advocated for education, suffrage, and greater social participation, and later their movements rose during the Taisho period. As they gained more power, beauty practices became a way for women to assert their identity and freedoms.

Showa Period (1926-1989)

As one of the most transformative eras in Japanese history, the Showa Period went through the destruction of World War II, the economic boom, and even cultural globalization. This era reshaped Japan's identity and brought it up on the global stage. The nation went through events such as World War II, reconstruction, and their rise as an economic powerhouse. The beauty standards during this time period reflect the social changes Japan underwent. Japanese designers continued to preserve cultural heritage while embracing Western trends, sometimes combining the two to create unique designs.

People continued to pursue pale, blemish-free skin. Face powder remained popular, but it was less exaggerated compared to earlier periods. Due to the economic constraints caused by World War II and the post-war years, women were forced to create their own make up by improvising with homemade products. Later in the Showa Period, the economic boom brought modern cosmetics inspired by global trends such as eyeliners and foundations. The makeup style reflected Hollywood and Western beauty ideals: larger eyes, contouring, and bold lips. Still, subtle makeup styles inspired by traditional Japanese aesthetics with natural lip color remained popular.

Traditional hair styles and western-inspired hair styles still remained popular. Later in the 1960s and 1970s, Japanese beauty was influenced by global trends such as voluminous hairstyles and perms. Regarding the clothing styles, kimonos continued to be a symbol of traditional beauty and were worn for formal occasions and cultural ceremonies. After World War II, Western-style dresses, skirts, and suits became common. During the later years of the Show period, the rise of high fashion influenced Japanese women's styles with global brands and designers.

Economic hardships during the post-war period led to a focus on practicality and minimalism. Women joining the workforce also caused the shift toward practical and professional styles. The economic boom in the 1950s to 1980s allowed Japanese women to have greater access to global beauty products and trends. The Japanese cosmetics industry flourished after the war. For example, the brand Shiseido introduced innovative products that combined traditional and modern elements.

Heisei Period (1989-2019)

The Heisei Period is an era defined by rapid globalization, technological innovation, and the rise of media culture. The beauty standards are more diverse and individualized during this era. The beauty ideals shifted towards self-expression and individuality. The Heisei era emphasized youthful beauty which took the form of appearing fresh, healthy, and vibrant.

While a lot of beauty ideals remained the same, such as pale, clear skin and natural lip colors, there were some differences. Unlike previous eras, the Heisei period emphasized a natural, dewy, glowing skin which aligns with global trends for healthy, radiant skin. Western makeup techniques remained popular, but increasingly Korean makeup techniques have also become influential such as gradient lips and glass skin (a crystal-clear, poreless, translucent, and luminous skin).

Hairstyles also became more diverse, from natural long hair to short bobs and pixie cuts. It reflected individual preferences and global influences. Hair coloring, which contrasts with the traditionally preferred black hair, also became popular. The rise of K-pop also influenced hairstyles, causing layered cuts and voluminous waves to gain popularity. The influence from other nations on fashion also grew compared to earlier periods. Western-style clothes and high-fashion brands like Louis Vuitton and Chanel became popular. In contrast, there were some experimental styles, too. Subcultures such as Lolita and Gyarū gained international recognition, showing bold, youthful, and unique fashion styles.

Conclusion

The evolution of beauty standards in Japan underscores the mix of cultural heritage and societal progress. Each period brings unique adaptations based on the shifting political, economic, and cultural factors. While Japan has embraced Western influences, it has never fully abandoned its traditions. Its change of beauty standards reflects both modernity and historical continuity. Contemporary beauty standards are also neither 100% Western nor 100% traditional. Contemporary Japan is influenced by not only the West but also Korea.

This paper makes the study of Japanese beauty standards a lens through which to understand the nation's broader cultural and historical evolution. While this research paper covers beauty standards from the Edo period to the

Heisei period, it does not delve deeply into the contemporary period, Reiwa era. The role of media and technology in shaping modern beauty ideals should be more investigated in further research.

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