



NARRATIVE REVIEW

The Face in Japanese Aesthetic Categories: Modification Practices and Their Meanings

Sylvia Dobkowska^{1, a†}, Małgorzata Łysiak-Majchrzak^{2, b*†}

¹ Global Languages and Cultures Program, Faculty of Global and Regional Studies, University of the Ryukyus, Okinawa, Japan

² Department of Maxillofacial Orthopedics and Orthodontics, Ludwik Rydygier Collegium Medicum in Bydgoszcz, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Poland

^a  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2954-0310>

^b  <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0611-173X>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20883/jofa.129>

*** Corresponding author:**

malgorzata.lysiak-majchrzak@cm.umk.pl

[†] Each author contributed equally (50%) and is recognized as a first co-author.

ABSTRACT

Japanese aesthetics are based on values distinct from Western traditions, affirming irregularity, ambiguity, impermanence, and simplicity. Categories such as *wabi-sabi* and *kawaii* shape local understandings of beauty by emphasizing naturalness, authenticity, and emotional warmth. Within this context, historically established aesthetic practices such as tooth blackening (*ohaguro*), the traditional removal of natural eyebrows and the drawing of new ones higher on the forehead (*hikimayu*), or the contemporary trend of intentionally shaping dental irregularities (*yaeba*) are not merely fashions but performative gestures embedded in local categories of beauty. They manifest values that stand in contrast to the global pursuit of symmetry and perfection, highlighting the cultural role of the body as a carrier of meaning, identity, and social expectations.

Keywords: facial aesthetics, *wabi-sabi*, *kawaii*, *yaeba*, *ohaguro*.

Introduction

Japanese aesthetics locate beauty in values not always intuitive to external observers, such as

irregularity, understatement, impermanence, and empty space. It is a cultural sphere in which seemingly contrasting values coexist harmoniously. The cultural dimension of beauty is per-

mative – it both presents and actively creates qualities valued within the community. Beauty norms promoted by global media often refer to Western standards of attractiveness [1].

The aim of this paper is to present aesthetic categories demonstrating that local Japanese aesthetics differ from globally recognized ideals. The article argues that historically rooted traditional practices tooth blackening (*ohaguro*), the traditional removal of natural eyebrows and the drawing of new ones higher on the forehead (*hikimayu*), or the contemporary trend of intentionally shaping dental irregularities (*yaeba*) are not merely aesthetic trends but manifestations of deeply embedded Japanese categories of beauty such as *wabi-sabi* and *kawaii*, which historically and presently function in opposition to global ideals of symmetry and perfection.

Wabi-sabi

The aesthetic category known as *wabi-sabi* finds beauty in the aesthetics of experience, in imperfection, changeability, and incompleteness. Unconventional things are considered unique, and therefore beautiful. The category of *wabi-sabi* is associated with tea ceremonies that have been practiced for centuries under the influence of Zen Buddhism [2]. The ritual of the tea ceremony extends to the entire experience as well as to the architecture surrounding the event. This category is broad enough to encompass the simplicity of natural objects, the feeling of an uneven surface beneath the fingertips, as well as the beauty of the passage of time. Rust on an object, the potter's fingerprint on a fired vessel, a naturally uneven and rough branch of a blooming cherry tree all contain charm, beauty, and the potential of delicate flowers. Likewise, a child's smile, with uneven or still missing teeth, conveys such warm beauty. The body is also perceived through the prism of this category – in its naturalness and transience. Moreover, the strong need to belong to society in Japan makes the body an object shaped culturally. The body is not perfect; it is unique, it bears the marks of time, and naturalness and irregularity provide a sense of authenticity. According to *wabi-sabi*, the passing of human existence is not necessarily something to be seen as a loss [3]. The deliberate shaping of the body in such a way that it expresses naturalness aligns with the local canon of beauty.

Kawaii

Following this image of serene and warm beauty, the aesthetic category of *kawaii* (cute, sweet, nice) emerges. It is a category that defines the image of beauty not only in contemporary culture, but has been known in Japan for several centuries [4]. The word *kawaii* is used mainly as an adjective describing people or things. Historically, the meaning of this term was associated with the blush on the faces of embarrassed young people, and later it began to be linked with feelings of pity, love, tenderness, and care toward weaker members of society [4]. Hiroshi Nittono, in the article "The Two-Layer Model of 'Kawaii': A Behavioural Science Framework for Understanding Kawaii and Cuteness," defines this category in an ambiguous way – as an emotion and as a socially shaped value. He relates it to positive emotions that arise when observing a small child and to the social need to protect and support individuals who evoke such feelings [4]. According to Reina Takamatsu, being cute makes society care for a given person. Such individuals evoke sympathy, care, and kindness [5]. It is also a tool for expressing the desire to belong to society. *Kawaii* also functions as a tool of foreign policy. In the years 2009–2010, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan appointed "Kawaii Ambassadors," whose aim was to promote Japanese culture around the world [4]. The aesthetics of *kawaii* are known from manga and anime, and one of the most characteristic figures, present since the last century, is Hello Kitty, an anime character recognized globally. In Japan, the character is visible in many official spaces, for example on trains to Kyoto. Another example of the use of *kawaii* in social and administrative space is the assignment of symbolic characters to individual cities in Japan. Cartoon characters assigned to cities, towns, as well as villages are used in official government correspondence and are reflected in everyday objects, such as manhole covers. This category evokes strong and positive reactions from audiences, which is also why it remains popular in Japanese society.

Ohaguro

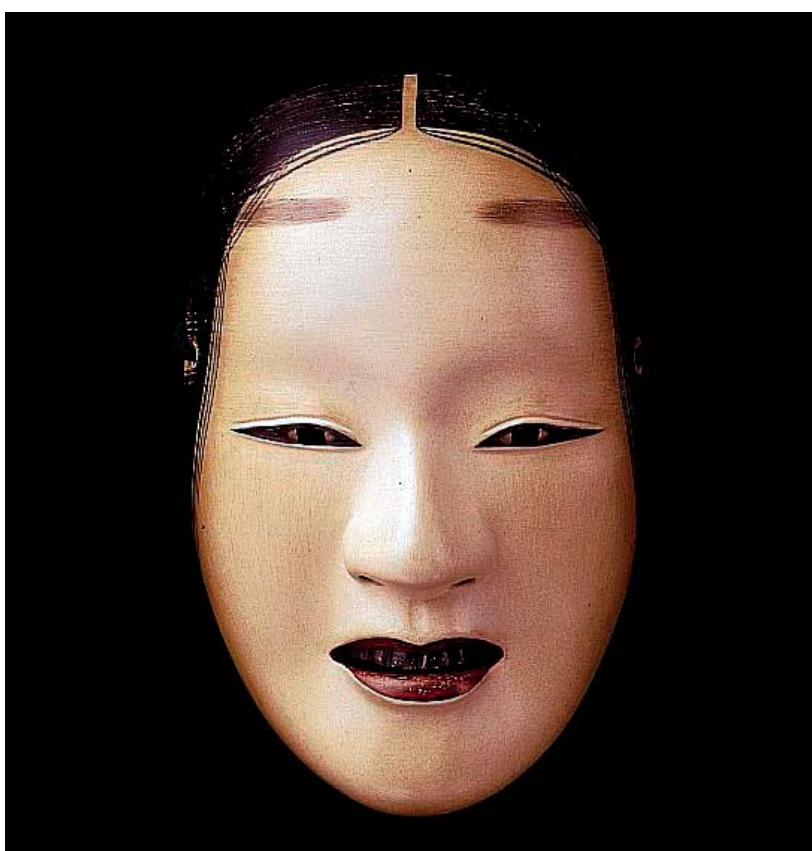
Proof that local canons of beauty may differ significantly from global ones is the custom of blackening the teeth. It was practiced not only in Japan, but also in other countries of East Asia.

The tradition of teeth blackening, called *ohaguro*, consisted of painting the teeth with a solution made from iron filings mixed with sake, vinegar, and plant-based dyes [6]. The shine of the uniform black pigment resembled lacquer, highly valued in Japan. In Japan, black is the color of elegance, formality, and maturity. Historically, it was not associated with funerals – in Shinto, white is the color of the funeral kimono and symbolizes both purity and mourning. As early as the 8th century, there were mentions of women, men, and children at court who practiced teeth blackening. Interestingly, even a samurai before battle made sure that his teeth were carefully blackened [6]. This custom was deeply rooted in court culture. Masks in traditional *Nō* theatre (see **Figure 1**), performed mainly for the samurai class, also have dark teeth. Teeth blackening was a sign of maturity, and over time the practice became limited exclusively to women after the age of 18. Later, the custom also symbolized marital fidelity [6]. It was also intended to protect the teeth and gums from disease. An additional advantage was the favorable color contrast with a white face and red

lips. The absence of visible teeth, which could be associated with aggression, was considered a sign of elegance and etiquette. White teeth did not constitute an ideal of beauty – they were perceived as animalistic and associated with primitive aggression. Grace was expressed by covering the mouth while laughing (behavioral etiquette). The custom of teeth blackening was banned by the Meiji government in 1870 [7,8], after the opening of Japan to the Western world. The performative character of *ohaguro* lay in the fact that it was a cultural act that functioned socially by signaling status, maturity, and marital fidelity. Both the tradition of *ohaguro* and contemporary *yaeba* indicate the cultural significance and performativity of the smile as a socially regulated gesture (see **Figure 2**).

Hikimayu

Hikimayu is a traditional Japanese cosmetic practice consisting of shaving the natural eyebrows and painting new ones much higher on the forehead (see **Figure 1**). This originally Chi-



▲ **Figure 1.** Historical representations of *ohaguro* and *hikimayu* as illustrated by a mask from traditional *Nō* theatre. Source: <https://i.pinimg.com/736x/6e/44/8e/6e448e8f80c070f3b9fe8b5461053b65.jpg>



▲ **Figure 2.** Contemporary applications of the *ohaguro* and *hikimayu* practices. Source: <https://t1.daumcdn.net/cafeattach/1IHuH/2f8051f8b5db194f717e5df79a0377df2227e1ef>

nese tradition reached Japan during the Heian period (794–1185). The oval or round shape of the eyebrows was meant to emphasize grace and elegance. By the Edo period, in a slightly different form, it was commonly practiced by noble women. The tradition of removing the eyebrows – or, in contemporary terms, covering them with a waxy substance (in traditional makeup) – also had a practical dimension, as eyebrow hair did not look aesthetically pleasing with face makeup based on whitening the skin with powder mixed with water (*oshiroi*). Painted eyebrows served as a clear sign of maturity and social status, as well as an element of an aesthetic that emphasized refinement and the emotional restraint inherent in the ideal of Japanese femininity (see **Figure 2**). *Hikimayu*, alongside practices such as *ohaguro*, highlighted the symbolic detachment of appearance from “naturalness” and the subordination of the body to the cultural norms of the time [9]. In contemporary research on emotional expression and facial aesthetics, Japanese people often make stronger use of the eye and eyebrow area to express emotions and assess attractiveness than, for example, Americans [10].

Yaeba

The example of *ohaguro* is not the only historically known method in Japan of enhancing women’s appearance through interference with the look of their teeth. Another example of striving to achieve a particular social reception resulting from being *kawaii*, and of the influence of this aesthetic on appearance, is the deliberate shaping of teeth based on creating irregularity, namely *yaeba*. *Yaeba* means a multilayered or double tooth [11]. This trend began in 2011, when many fans wanted to resemble the actress and singer of the group AKB48, Tomomi Itano [12]. The phenomenon persisted among young women who deliberately wished to obtain a smile like that of the artist. An irregular arrangement of teeth is associated with an aesthetic of beauty based on unevenness and *kawaii*. There is a certain paradox in this, because emphasizing natural beauty through imperfection is not the work of nature, but of a professional. The uniqueness associated with naturalness also remains in contrast to the precise replication of the trend and the actress’s image (see **Figure 3**). The process of creating *yaeba* is planned in eve-



▲ **Figure 3.** A girlish *yaeba* smile. Source: https://rocketnews24.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/02/IMG_1594.jpg?resize=1024,768

ry detail, and there is little room for uniqueness. The sense of authenticity evoked by this type of smile is illusory, since in selected variants of *yaeba* the additional dental overlays can be removed at any time.

Yaeba causes a person to be perceived through the prism of beauty categories specific to their society, culture, and distinct aesthetic tradition. While globally beauty is framed through correction and the pursuit of symmetrical perfection, in Japan there is also a styling of imperfection. Such an arrangement of teeth gives the smile features associated with a child's natural smile, which increases trust as well as feelings of care or the need to look after a given person [4]. Mainly young women choose this way of shaping their smile, which means that their image is sometimes simplified to childlike and less threatening. Harmony in Japanese society has enormous cultural significance, and a pleasant and non-threatening image conveys a sense of predictability and calm. Moreover,

the beauty of the transient world, known from Zen Buddhism and for centuries preserved in *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints (pictures of the floating world), constitutes another example of how youth is valued for its ephemerality. This can be compared to the previously mentioned branch of a cherry tree or, even more aptly, to the flower of the blooming cherry tree (*sakura*), which is a symbol of Japan. *Sakura* is a representative example of this kind of beauty, because at the moment of full bloom its petals are carried away by the wind, and the fullness of its bloom quickly disappears.

Beauty norms associated with *kawaii* also influence the shaping of the *yaeba* trend. People perceived as cute evoke positive emotions, which constitutes an advantage that may translate into real benefits, including material ones. A cute person may find it easier to receive a job offer or to find a wealthy partner. A certain kind of social pressure connected with the functioning of the categories *tatemae* and *honne*

means that the choice of the *kawaii* aesthetic is not always entirely free. In order to fit into social norms and be accepted, one must function in two dimensions: *tatema*, that is, the official stance that maintains harmony and proper behavior – in the case of *yaeba* aesthetics signaling gentleness and approachability – and *honne*, that is, true thoughts and behaviors that are not revealed publicly. Perhaps this is why non-permanent forms of *yaeba*, which can be removed at night or while eating, allowing one to maintain a distinct public and private image, are so popular among supporters of this trend. The performative character of *yaeba* lies in the fact that appearance plays a social role and communicates youth, approachability, and gentleness, thereby aligning with the *kawaii* aesthetic.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the traditions described in the article demonstrate that beauty is relative and constitutes a manifestation of aesthetic categories embedded in local culture. In Japan, beauty has many dimensions that seem to contradict global aesthetic trends. Historically rooted traditional practices such as *ohaguro* and *hikimayu*, as well as the phenomenon of *yaeba*, show that beauty in Japan is not merely a visual matter, but also a tool of social relations, emotions, and cultural expectations. These practices reveal how diverse and counterintuitive aesthetic categories are and how greatly the local understanding of beauty differs from global norms based on perfection. The traditional blackening of teeth (*ohaguro*), the painting of new eyebrows (*hikimayu*), and the custom of deliberately forming dental irregularities (*yaeba*) confirm the distinctiveness of Japanese aesthetic sensibility, focused on imperfection, transience, and subtlety.

Declarations

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding sources

There are no sources of funding to declare.

References

1. Buetow S, Wallis K. The beauty in perfect imperfection. *J Med Humanit*. 2019;40(3):389-394. doi: 10.1007/s10912-017-9500-2.
2. Koren L. *Wabi-sabi for artists, designers, poets & philosophers*. Berkeley (CA): Stone Bridge Press; 1994.
3. Wilkinson D. Wabi-sabi: a virtue of imperfection. *J Med Ethics*. 2022;48(11):937-938. doi: 10.1136/medethics-2021-108074.
4. Nittono H. The two-layer model of 'kawaii': a behavioural science framework for understanding kawaii and cuteness. *East Asian J Pop Cult*. 2016;2(1):79-95. doi: 10.1386/eapc.2.1.79_1.
5. Takamatsu R. Measuring affective responses to cuteness and Japanese kawaii as a multidimensional construct. *Curr Psychol*. 2020;39(4):1362-1374. doi: 10.1007/s12144-018-9836-4.
6. Smith CA. So tasteful: a note about iron-gall ink. *Book Pap Group Annu*. 2003;22:127-129.
7. Venugopal A, Marya A. Return of the ohaguro. *Br Dent J*. 2021;231(2):69. doi: 10.1038/s41415-021-3280-9.
8. Colla E. (In)tangible archaeology of colours: permanent marks on anthropomorphic haniwa and tattooing in Kofun-period Japan. *Conserv Patrim*. 2025;(49):86-95. doi: 10.14568/cp36234.
9. Lim S. History of beauty standards in Japan since Edo period. *J Stud Res*. 2025;14(1). doi: 10.47611/jsrhs.v14i1.8907.
10. Sano T, Kawabata H. Cultural and gender influences on facial attractiveness: a comparative study of Japanese and American raters using geometric morphometrics. *Psych J*. 2026;15(1):e70065. doi: 10.1002/pchj.70065.
11. Simonitch S. Why Japanese women go for fake crooked teeth [Internet]. Tokyo: Japan Today; 2013 Jan 31 [cited 2026 Aug 18]. Available from: <https://japantoday.com/category/features/lifestyle/why-japanese-women-go-for-fake-crooked-teeth>.
12. Kumakura J. Yaeba dentistry: the appeal of pointy teeth [Internet]. London: BBC News; 2018 Jul 20 [cited 2026 Aug 18]. Available from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-44364278>.

Article submitted: 2026-03-27

Acceptance for publication: 2026-05-12