This article examines the trends of the Japanese cosmetics industry from the 1870s to the 1980s to reveal the changes in the Japanese sense of beauty and their causes. The results consist of two main findings: (i) after the Meiji period (1868-1912), the Japanese sense of beauty was affected by westernization but changed very slowly; and (ii) the westernization was followed by a backlash, resulting in the creation of a new sense of beauty unique to the Japanese.

It is generally considered that in the Meiji period, cosmetics were commercialized and became popular among ordinary women and they started to powder their faces. In actual fact, however, skin care products such as soap, skin lotion and cream were developed earlier. Japanese women preferred simple makeup and thought light powdering was enough. Their reluctance to wear lipstick and eyeshadow in those days was much stronger than we can imagine today; therefore, it was difficult for them to accept the western sense of beauty.

In the 1930s, the sales of skin cream, toothpaste, and scented oil products expanded; however, soon all the cosmetics products disappeared from the market due to the frugal habits and drastic commodity tax hikes during the Second World War. From after the war until around 1960, Japanese women used skin care products such as skin lotion and cream but hardly wore makeup.

Western-style makeup techniques began to penetrate into Japan through the Roman Pink Campaign of Max Factor starting in 1959, also receiving a nice tailwind from the start of color TV broadcasting in 1960. In 1966, the advertising campaign starred a half-Japanese model, which resulted in a huge success. Many women admired her light suntanned skin and big eyes. This served as a great impetus for the spread of western-style makeup techniques.

However, once the campaign starring the half-Japanese model with light suntanned skin finished in the early 1970s, Japanese women reviewed their sense of beauty once again. In the 1980s, when a desire for the soft, natural look became prominent and pop stars started to appear in cosmetics advertisements, the Japanese shaped their own unique image of female beauty that was soft and natural by emphasizing “cuteness” in the 1980s.

Key words: A sense of beauty, a sense of hygiene, westernization, cosmetics, mass advertisement