

Cutting Through the Plastic, Part II



Whichever way you slice it, you're sure to stir up quite a bit of controversy whenever plastic surgery is on the table. Particularly with regard to Asian eyelid surgery, some say Asian Americans are being culturally and ethnically subordinated by the scalpel. Others argue it's much simpler than that. But what about the nose, the breasts, the legs even?

Are Asian Americans faking themselves out, or is it just the pursuit of the good ol' American way?

Audrey magazine takes its own look at this much-debated topic in part two of a two-part series.

EDITOR Anna M. Park

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It is true that plastic surgery for Asian Americans — particularly Asian blepharoplasty, or double eyelid surgery — originated from a desire to “Westernize” the Asian eye, an offensive phrase no matter what your stance. Indeed, until recently, textbooks and training on plastic surgery made the assumption that any facial change desired was a change toward a more European look. But today, the trend in plastic surgery is toward “ethnic correctness” — a more natural looking change that complements ethnic features rather than mimicking those of another. Indeed, more and more Asian American women are going to their plastic surgeons requesting natural-looking double eyelids, the kind that occurs in about half of the Asian population *naturally*.

But if the popularity of plastic surgery — Asian or otherwise — is ever increasing in the United States, its ubiquity is unrivaled in Asia. In fact, some argue that Asian Americans’ obsession with plastic surgery stems more from Asian than American influences. There’s no doubt that beauty standards predominant in Asia often have a profound effect on Asian women in America. All sorts of cosmetic procedures originated and proliferated in Asia before trickling their way to the States — leg lengthening in China, where your calf bone is forcibly broken and then slowly, excruciatingly stretched over several months; botox injections and nerve severing in the calves to shrink the muscle for a leaner looking leg; and hyaluronic acid injections to build up flat nose bridges and chins.

Consider these numbers: An estimated one in 10 adults in Korea have had some sort of cosmetic upgrade. In Taiwan, a million procedures were performed last year, double the number from five years ago. And there was a reported 25 percent increase in cosmetic procedures in China in 2003, a country which only two years ago lifted a ban on beauty pageants and in the following year, held its first annual Miss Artificial Beauty competition. Plastic surgery has become so commonplace in some parts of Asia, a recent documentary, *Good For Her* by Korean American Elizabeth Lee, found that cosmetic procedures have become forms of empowerment for social and economic mobility for Korean women.

Eyes On Down

Which brings us to the question: why stop at the eyes? Most articles talk about Northeast Asians and their double eyelid surgery, but what no one seems to talk about is the prevalence among Asian Americans of breast augmentation procedures, rhinoplasty and even jaw reduction through botox injections. Korean American models are practically shamed into getting their nose done while working in Korea, while Japanese American women succumb to micro-liposuction to conform to the hyper-skinny beauty standard of Tokyo.

In Dr. David Kim’s Beverly Hills plastic surgery practice, most of his Asian clientele consist of Filipinos requesting liposuction, breast augmentation and rhinoplasty, and Koreans desiring breast

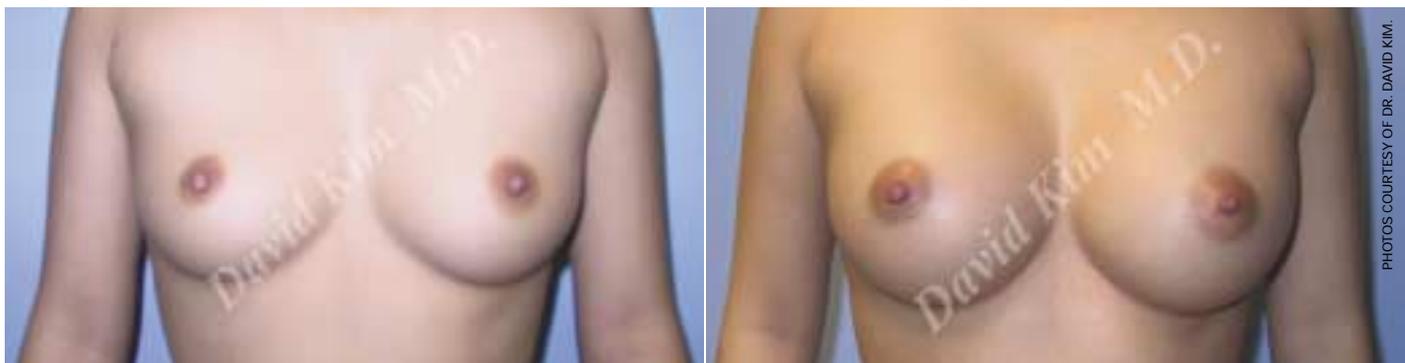
augmentation. “Umbilical breast augmentation is definitely a thing my Asian patients have been asking for because of minimal scarring,” he says of the relatively new procedure in which the implants are inserted through the belly button as opposed to the nipple or the underarm.

Dr. Edmund Kwan, a renowned plastic surgeon in New York City, finds that his Vietnamese and Filipino patients often request nose implants or resculpturing (making a wide nose thinner and raising the bridge). And according to Lynn, a 25-year-old Vietnamese American financial consultant, breast augmentation is commonplace among her Vietnamese American peers. “I see lots of [plastic surgery] advertisements in the Vietnamese language newspaper — sometimes on the front cover,” she says, adding that she also sees many nose jobs in the community as well.

Vincent, a 20-something Vietnamese American male who didn’t want his real name divulged, agrees. “I’d say it is a growing trend,” he says of Vietnamese American women getting breast implants. “Women in general that I see in the nightclubs, a lot have had breast implants.”

“I don’t know if it’s just Asians,” says Dr. Kim of the increased demand in breast augmentation and other cosmetic procedures. “It’s everybody, and Asians are a part of that.” Southern California plastic surgeon Dr. Mervin Low agrees. “I think the young women that get plastic surgery have the same concerns that other young women have, whether they live in America, Asia, South America.”

More and more Asian women are requesting breast augmentation. The newest version — umbilical breast augmentation, shown here — results in the least visible scar, particularly good for Asian skin which tends to develop thicker scarring.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF DR. DAVID KIM.



Specializing in what he terms “profiloplasty,” Dr. Edmund Kwan seeks to achieve harmony and balance in any given face. Photos courtesy of Dr. Edmund Kwan.

They don't want to look like anyone else, he says, “they just want to look better, feel better about themselves.”

Indeed, Dr. Kyeyoung Park, an associate professor of anthropology and Asian American studies at the University of California at Los Angeles, finds that the popularity of plastic surgery among Asians goes beyond just the white American beauty ideal. “Women have been more subjected to this kind of beauty myth than men, regardless of race and ethnicity. I mean, look here in the U.S., what women are doing to their bodies,” she says. “For a long time, women have been more judged by their appearance, so women are under more pressure than men.”

Another procedure that is growing in popularity among Asian Americans, says Dr. Kwan, is “profiloplasty” for the Asian face. When his Asian patients come in saying they want a nose job to look better, Dr. Kwan finds that what they really want is to look more “balanced.” A lot of Chinese and some Koreans have a flattened “mid-face” (located on either side of the nose), with a slightly protruding mouth area and shallow eye sockets, he says. Using implants, rather than shaving the bone, Dr. Kwan says he is able to achieve a more balanced face without the more complicated and invasive rhinoplasty procedure. “I'm not looking at European ideals; I'm looking at symme-

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try,” he insists. “I believe that a beautiful face comes in all shapes and sizes. I think that's what patients need to know.”

And the future of Asian blepharoplasty? Eye enhancement, or opening of the eye without creating a fold. Lately, Dr. Kwan has been getting more and more requests for this procedure. “Especially men and some women,” he says. “They say, ‘I want my eyes to open up bigger, but I don't want a fold.’” Essentially, what Dr. Kwan does is tighten the muscle that opens the eye and tack it to the tarsal plate rather than to the skin. And in a surprise reversal, Dr. Kwan says that he even gets some requests from patients to *remove* their eyelid fold. “They feel like without an eyelid fold, they look better,” he says. “I'm seeing more of it. Not a tremendous increase, but I see some.”

A Changing Ideal

So what's in the future for Asian Americans and plastic surgery? Is it only

going to get worse? Or is globalization, the rising economic power of Asia, and what some experts are calling the emerging international standard of beauty — one that transcends race, ethnicity and nationality — a sign of the changing times?

After decades of a predominance of a white beauty standard, Dr. Park finds that there is an emerging backlash in Asian cultures — particularly Japanese and Korean — of wanting a return to or rediscovery of what is originally “Japanese” or “Korean.” Asians have for too long tried to apply the white American standard to themselves, she

says, and they're realizing that it just doesn't work. “I think [self esteem and beauty ideals] reflect the changing structure of the political economy,” she continues. “Now [that countries like Japan and Korea] are developed, they are able to look back and see what's going on, what we have done to ourselves. ... They can't really apply the [standard] that Euro-American women apply.”

And as an anthropologist, Dr. Park sees this current obsession with Western beauty as just a phase. “Culture is forever changing,” she says. “Aesthetics and our body ideal, fortunately or unfortunately, always undergoes some kind of change, so I would say that the beauty ideal is socially and culturally constructed.” She cites the constant appropriation and borrowing of Asian aesthetics — whether they be Indian, Chinese, Japanese — in American and European art and design. “We are constantly borrowing and learning from each other.”

Indeed, as the world media becomes increasingly globalized with the proliferation of the Internet, the standard of beauty is expected to morph into something more multiracial and complex. But that doesn't mean we can just passively sit back and wait for that change. Like the "Black is Beautiful" movement that African Americans went through in the 1970s, Dr. Park believes that the Asian American community needs to go through a similar transition. "We really have not had this kind of decolonizing movement ... saying yellow is beautiful," she says. "This may be only about aesthetics, but I think this is important, how

we understand our bodies." The Asian American community needs cultural workers, people in the media, to portray the diaspora of Asian American men as well as women, says Dr. Park, "so that people are able to see — it doesn't look that bad, or it even looks beautiful.

"For example, I saw the movie *Sideways*," she continues. "I don't think Sandra Oh has double eyelids. I think that will be a really great thing. If she becomes very popular I'm sure it will impact other Asian American women here, [that] one doesn't have to have a double eyelid."

Sure, maybe plastic surgery — and especially Asian blepharoplasty — does have its roots in a desire to conform to some sort of Western beauty standard. After all, the popularity of the procedure seems to have cropped up in history every time an Asian country had some sort of significant Western influence, whether it's the Korean War or Commodore Perry's opening of Japan to Western trade in 1868. And maybe Asian

Americans, surrounded as we are by the blonde, blue-eyed standard of beauty that is traditionally American, can't help but see ourselves through the lens of the round eye. But is that really different from what we would face if we were to live in, say, Japan, where a little pooch on a 115-pound body is cause for measures considered culturally taboo? Or if we were living during the Italian Renaissance when that same 115-pound frame would be cause for shame for its lack of rotundity?

What I take comfort in is the increasing desire of more and more Asian American women, if they do decide to undergo plastic surgery for whatever reason, to keep their ethnic identity, to maintain a look that is naturally Asian, whether it's a more prominent nose or double eyelids or larger breasts. I don't think there's any doubt — here in the U.S. or anywhere else in the world — that the Asian face is indeed beautiful. Just look at the popularity of Zhang Ziyi, Lea Salonga, Aishwarya Rai. What is most important, I think, is that we as Asian American women embrace who we are, our ethnic and cultural heritage, and the beauty that may be found therein. Whether we decide to modify our physical appearance with liquid eyeliner, a magic straightening perm, or saline implants, hopefully such decision will be motivated simply by a desire to enhance what we already have, and not by a desire to deny who we are.

In fact, I don't know about you, but lately I've been eyeing, with no small amount of envy, mind you, the long, lean eyes of such beauties as Devon Aoki, Malaysian-born model sisters Ling and Ein (most recently seen in the "I Am Ann Taylor" ad campaigns) and SuChin Pak. To me, the uncluttered and minimalist look of small, angled eyes against pale skin seems very modern, very urban, very much of the future. Hmm ... I wonder how much that double eyelid reversal procedure would cost ❀

**Names of patients have been changed.*



The coveted single eyelid changing the face of beauty.