“She's Got the Look”

Cultural Beauty Ideals from the Asian American Woman's Perspective

by Dhaya Devayya
Primary Question:

Do 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation Asian American women strive to emulate stereotypically western/American or traditional/Asian beauty ideals?
Additional Questions:

• What are Asian American women's views of traditional Asian, American, and Asian American beauty?

• What motivates and shapes Asian American women's personal beauty ideals?

• How do the perspectives of South Asian and East Asian women compare?

• What level of western influence exists on both the traditional and Asian American views of beauty?
Why Research This?

• College students, especially women, are very conscious of their appearance

• Physical appearance is a major representation of one's identity

• Beauty ideals are different not only between ethnicities but within them
Research Methods:

- Participant observation at an Asian American party
- Interviews of 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation Asian American women of both East and South Asian descent
- Casual conversations/observations throughout my life
Observation Findings
Common Traits:

- Long, straight, dark hair most typical with some exceptions
- Short is okay, but too tall is not.
- Eyeliner is a must
- Generic “going out top” and snug jeans look is most prevalent
Divergent Traits:

• S. Asians wear more makeup; both amount applied and number of products used

• Clothing outliers: E. Asians more trendy, S. Asians more “fobby”

• Each group dresses to suit their general body types: S. Asians flaunt curves, E. Asians show off petiteness
Interview Findings
Traditional S. Asian:

- Fair skin
- Hourglass figure but skinny
- Big eyes
- Full lips
- Small nose
- Long, black hair
- Natural make-up
- Ex: Aishwarya Rai
S. Asian American:

• Desired body more voluptuous than traditional S. Asian

• Highlights, short hair acceptable

• More make-up

• Less emphasis on skin color, tanning

• Ex: Shilpa Shetty
Traditional E. Asian:

- Very skinny and petite
- Very fair skin
- Big eyes, surgery
- Full lips
- “Doll look”
- Ex: Zhang Ziyi and Ayumi Hamasaki
E. Asian American:

• Based largely on white beauty ideals
• Tan skin desirable
• Dye hair blondish brown
• Different “looks”: some more natural, others more “done up”
• Ex: Tila Tequila
Mainstream American:

- “Tall, blonde, tan...”
- Full lips
- Big light-colored eyes
- Small Nose
- Curvy but slim, more muscular
- Wears more make-up than any Asian group
- Ex: Jessica Simpson
Interview Conclusions:

- Big eyes, full lips, and small noses were found to be ideal in all groups.
- Wanting to be tan is an American thing.
- Asian Americans of both groups desire body types more similar to the mainstream American ideal, often unrealistically.
- There is no single “Asian American look”. Asian American women tend to emulate the beauty ideal they are most exposed to.
- Both S. and E. Asian Americans felt Western influence simply reinforced traditional ideals but is not the cause of them.
Interviewees from both groups felt that the desire to fit in with white friends is the primary “Western influence” on their personal look.

E. Asians seem to be more conscious about copying the mainstream American beauty ideals than S. Asians.

Plastic surgery is common in E. Asia, but a rarity in S. Asia. Body hair removal is a large aspect of beauty for S. Asians, but almost a non-issue for E. Asians.

Asian Americans participate in beauty rituals, including those mentioned above, to a lesser extent than their Asian counterparts.
Recommendations:

- Make sure that some eating disorder treatment and education is geared toward Asians
- Create workshops and seminars for women about accepting and appreciating how they look, emphasizing there is more than one definition of beauty
The End