ASIA MAJOR

A new crop of models from China, Japan, and South Korea is redefining traditional concepts of beauty. Photographed by Steven Meisel.

Besides the seventies influences, long, fluid skirts, and colors to shock winter darks into submission on the spring runways, there was something else that seemed just as refreshing and relevant: the presence of Asian models from Lincoln Center to the Grand Palais. We saw Liu Wen, with her sculptural, diamond-shaped cheekbones, at Lanvin, Oscar de la Renta, Michael Kors, and more. Tokyo-raised Tao Okamoto, she of the Beatles bowl cut, walked for Givenchy, Carolina Herrera, and Ralph Lauren (she has also appeared in the label's ad campaign). The full-lipped, hypnotic-eyed Feifei Sun from Shandong, China, appeared in 39 shows in her second season. And these women are not just selling high fashion. Poised, porcelain doll–faced Du Juan (she trained as a ballerina in Shanghai) and Shu-Pei Qin, her brows like accent marks, loom large on Gap billboards; Estée Lauder recently took on Wen as a new face, the first ethnic model since Liya Kebede, in 2003, to represent the classically American beauty powerhouse; and Qin, from Henan, China, has signed a contract with Maybelline. In September, *The New York Times* proclaimed Asian designers "the future of fashion," citing the rash of newly emerged talent: Alexander Wang, Phillip Lim, Jason Wu, Derek Lam, Thakoon Panichgul, Richard Chai, and Prabal Gurung. Now these ascendant models of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean descent appear to be redrawing the front lines of beauty, too.

While I am unequivocally rooting for this moment in fashion, I can't help thinking, *They want us?* How I wish I could have seen the Asian models of today staring back at me from magazine pages or television screens when I was a Korean-American teenager in the Midwest, wrestling with foundation shades of "bisque," "honey," and "sand" in my local Walgreens. (I walked around for some time with a mismatched face and neck.) They would have felt familiar, igniting a spark not necessarily of validation, but at least of recognition.

I was adopted in 1976 as a four-month-old by a Caucasian family in a suburb of Minneapolis, a town of Lutheran blondes with two-story houses and Scandinavian or German last names. My parents had my sister within two years, and we grew up wearing matching dresses in different colors (mine, usually red; hers, blue), our long hair curled and tied with ribbons. When I was in junior high school, my mother decided to take me to the counter at Dayton's, where she bought her cosmetics, to get my color wheel done, not in any ceremonial mother-daughter bonding way but in a this-is-how-women-are-expected-to-look way. To my embarrassment, the consultant in her white lab coat seemed flummoxed that I didn't have creased lids on which to apply "my colors"—seashell pink and dark plum that would "open up brown eyes"—though she did muddle through. By the merciful end, I looked like a Bratz doll gone awry with color-blocked clothes, a frizzy spiral perm, and frosty mauve lipstick.

Today's Asian models are not, of course, entirely without precedents. Marie Helvin, born to an American GI father and a Japanese mother, palled around with Jerry Hall in the seventies, and Filipina Anna Bayle joined Yves Saint Laurent's *cabine* around the same time. Of German and Japanese descent, Tina Chow was photographed by Cecil Beaton and Arthur Elgort and was a fixture of the New York art scene in the 1980s. In the nineties, the edgy Jenny Shimizu was known for her CK One ads (and her relationship with Angelina Jolie), and the exotic-alien Irina Pantaeva, with the high cheekbones of a Siberian warrior, was championed by Karl Lagerfeld. As striking as these women were, they were rare, extreme creatures, hothouse flowers in the landscape rather than examples of anyone we—or I in particular—knew firsthand.

With no guidance or role models with whom to identify, I experimented on my own, with disastrous results. Mascara made my downward-curling, sparse lashes clump together, misapplied peach bronzer left me orange, and chunky highlights transformed me into a dead ringer for Smashing Pumpkins guitarist James Iha. Despite all my efforts and the exorbitant sums I paid to achieve my own version of my mother's, sister's, and aunt's ashen highlights, I was no Cindy Crawford; I was not even me. My parents, who used the term *Oriental,* and I rarely talked about my feelings as an outsider. Their responses were more consolation—"You're different; don't worry about it"—than a celebration of difference.

My sense of isolation changed after a college trip to Seoul, organized by the agency that handled my adoption, for adoptees to experience the culture lost to them. Everything I knew about beauty and myself had the opposite meaning in the city of my birth. At five foot six I was not as average as I felt back home, and I was not meant to have fried, brassy hair or a ruddy, blotchy complexion from excessive tanning. Going into a drugstore was a revelation: aisles of hair-dye boxes in shade after shade of dark brown and black. For the first time, I was surrounded by people who mostly looked like me. I say "mostly" because I saw endless variations of facial features and body type and bone structure and hairstyle, all within the Asian race. The experience was electrifying and led me eventually to change my last name to the one I was born with. Under REASON FOR CHANGE on the paperwork I filled out in a government office downtown, I simply wrote "personal preference." "Chang," which I knew from the scant information in my adoption file, was the only tie I had to a culture, my culture. It was a way of connecting to my lineage and identity, a way to present myself to the world as who and what I was. The first time I made a restaurant reservation under my new name, hearing it aloud like a declaration, I felt neither liberation nor relief exactly, only that it made sense.

Looking for explanations for the current embrace of Asian models can be elusive—fashion people tend to defend their right to put whim and mood above any socially conscious prerogatives, and some describe the phenomenon as a nonevent. But starkly commercial factors are clearly playing a part.

"It's mostly economics," says makeup artist Dick Page, creative director of Shiseido. "Everybody in the fashion/beauty industry recognizes the importance of global markets, and currently, China, Taiwan, and South Korea are at the forefront. The upshot is that customers want to see some version of themselves represented." Anita Bitton, director of casting at the Establishment, who has booked Wang's shows and Gap campaigns, partly attributes Asian models' visibility and rise to growing access as travel restrictions ease. "Some of these girls," she says simply, "had trouble obtaining work visas."

For their part, fashion designers say race isn't an issue when they hire models. Wang, who was born and raised in San Francisco to parents who emigrated from China, looks for "individuality, energy, and personality." Lanvin's Alber

CHANGING FACE

The fashion and beauty industries are embracing Asian models like Juan (LEFT) and Zhi. Tom Binns Design jewelry. In this story: hair, Didier Malige for Frédéric Fekkai; makeup, Pat McGrath for CoverGirl. Produced on location by ProdN at Art + Commerce. Set design, Mary Howard. Shot on location at the Jumeirah Essex House, NYC. Details, see In This Issue.

Elbaz professes not to see color, either. "I use blonde, brunette, redhead, black, and Asian models—I never do it to be politically correct. I try five to ten pieces on every person. As soon as the dress disappears and you see the woman, I know it's the right one. There are beautiful girls everywhere. After I went to China, I brought over about fourteen girls to walk in my second collection."

According to Kwok Chan, director of international scouting at Marilyn Agency (which represents Wen and South Korean model So Young Kang, who walked for Chanel this season), the public is exposed to images of every race online, and exposure creates acceptance. He sees this as a movement rather than a moment. "It's been ingrained in us that beautiful is blonde and blue-eyed, but the world is getting smaller. Beautiful is beautiful; race is not a trend! I don't see ethnic; I see body proportions. Does she have long legs? Does her face catch the light? Can you really tell where models are from, that just by looking at her, you would know that Caroline Trentini is Brazilian?" Perhaps not, but even if you didn't know Juan was from Shanghai, you would know she was Asian. As you would Bonnie Chen and Lily Zhi, from China, and Hyoni Kang and Hyun Yi Lee, from South Korea. None here are from the United States. "The only way I can explain why there are no big Asian-American names is, Why are photo shoots done in some exotic locale and it looks like you've shot in someone's backyard?" Chan says. "Fashion is fantasy; it's about perception."

Wen grew up in Yongzhou, in Hunan province, idolizing Audrey Hepburn. Besides having the distinction of being the first Asian face of Estée Lauder, she was the first to walk in a Victoria's Secret show. "The challenge for me, and for Asian models in general, has been convincing editors, stylists, and photographers that we can have mass appeal," she says. "But Asian, especially Chinese, models have become a stronger presence. Just a season or two ago, there weren't many models for me to talk with backstage in my *(continued on page 324)*

REINDEER GAMES

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not always the accepted goal of these days in which ideas and intellectual pleasure may be primary. Narisawa used nearly every type of protein the chefs had been given—two bear legs, six snow grouse, and ten wild hares, to which he added several root vegetables—to concoct the deepest possible broth. This was poured over slices of hare and mushrooms and wild herbs in large, white, steeply angled bowls that had been splattered with the crimson juices of wild berries, recalling the blood of the young reindeer whose slaughter had disturbed Narisawa and so many of us.

On our last night, after dinner, the northern lights put on quite a show. The sky was not perfectly clear, and the patterns were not stripes and streaks, as I've seen in photographs, but for a good half-hour, vast swaths of the night sky were luminous with bright veils of moving color, mostly varieties of green. One member of our group, who lives in Helsinki, said that he had seen a display like this only once before in his life.

And none of us had ever had a meal like this. Our mission in Lapland was to subsist on food that lives and grows locally, in the wild. These days, I think, television has conditioned us to expect that an event like this would be a competition, after which the losing chefs would be banished to the forests of Lapland. Chefs who have achieved what ours had are inherently competitive, and it is true that several of them split off to work on their own. (But not to cook competitively. One of them told me that he simply wanted not to present the very worst dish.) Some, who do not specialize in wild ingredients and are not practiced foragers, did find it somewhat nerve-racking to be cooking improvisationally with their peers, and brought fixed ideas from home. But every chef I talked to said he found it exciting and inspiring to work with other chefs of such skill and originality. This seems to have been their main motivation for coming to Lapland.

The rest of us watched as each new dish was carried to the two long tables at which we sat, eager to see how new feats of ingenuity and technique had opened up new possibilities of cooking and eating wild. Most chefs in big cities (and especially in the United States) are content with ordering their daily provisions on the phone. But others, including many of those with us in Lapland, have been foraging for several years, and René Redzepi has been their inspiration. Is this the future of gastronomy? No, not in a practical or literal sense. If everybody foraged for his food in the wild, soon enough there would be no nature left. But as a way of bringing nature into the kitchen and the dining room, it seems indispensable. The purpose, as René put it, is for accomplished young chefs to see how things grow, to harvest and cook it themselves, and to acknowledge the vast diversity available to them. □

ASIA MAJOR

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native Mandarin. Now I usually have no trouble finding someone at any show."

The daughter of architects, Juan also thrills to the shift she's a part of. "There still are brands or clients that would not consider using an Asian model, but things are changing dramatically and quickly. I am not so sure if being Asian was or is a hindrance. In fact, I think it is a plus."

As these women challenge the notion of what beauty is here, they're doing so at home, too. "Traditionally the Chinese favored a classic kind of beauty—big, round eyes, cute small mouth, a high nose, and very fair skin. The Chinese models who have made it internationally are not beauties in the traditional sense, so they are modernizing the concept of beauty in China," says Angelica Cheung, editor in chief of *Vogue* China, which launched in 2005. "When I was growing up in the seventies, everyone wore a blue, gray, or green Mao suit—there was no chance for women to be glamorous or different. Now you see young Chinese trying to be radical by dyeing their hair blonde or blue, sporting tattoos. It is a combination of copying what they see is popular in the Western world and trying to stand out in a nation where almost all of the 1.3 billion population have straight black hair and brown eyes. I like to joke that in less than a decade, China has gone from Karl Marx to Karl Lagerfeld!"

The first time I saw a picture of Okamoto, I was inspired to cut my own hair into that statement, silken mushroom cap. She was my newly shorn Linda Evangelista, circa 1988. She gave me license to have fun with my appearance, instead of searching for an elusive ideal as I once did. "The hair was my idea. I tried to look like what I felt inside, to express myself," she says. "I know it's difficult to find your way, but you need to believe in yourself when you do." That, to me now, is what beauty is.

—SAMANTHA V. CHANG

IN THIS ISSUE

Page 80 (cover look): One-sleeved silk asymmetrical column dress and silk-and-fishnet corset, both priced upon request; Tom Ford boutiques. **Vogue.com 84:** Bottom, from left: phone, $6,500; select Versace boutiques. Green patinated copper-and-white-gold earrings, price upon request; hemmerle.com. Leather Neo Patch bag, $870; Longchamp boutiques. **Excerpt 104:** On Mulvihill: Marni printed dress; select Marni boutiques. **Up front 142:** On Beal: V-neck cardigan, $530; select Prada boutiques. Cashmere skirt, $2,260; Chloé, NYC. **Flash 153:** Zippered top, $345; Barneys New York Co-Op, NYC. **154:** On Maren, far left: cotton pants with leather panels, $530; Elizabeth Charles, NYC. **Life with André 176:** Flower-embroidered dress, $3,200; Marc Jacobs, NYC. **View 179:** Tulle dress and patent leather heels; hm.com. **180:** Bags; (212) 604-9200. **182:** Black-silver bib necklace, price upon request. **188:** Top: cashmere sweater and laser-cut leather skirt. Bottom: Burberry Prorsum python belt, $850; burberry.com. Manicure, Jenny Longworth at CLM. **190:** Green crocodile sandals. **192:** Platform heels; pierrehardy.com. **194:** On Sudano: Tom Binns Design earrings, price upon request; Tom Binns Megastore, NYC. Yves Saint Laurent suede belt, $495; Neiman Marcus stores. Giuseppe Zanotti Design platform wedges; www.giuseppezanottidesign.com. On Ramirez: Eddie Borgo necklaces; eddieborgo.com. Alexis Bittar oversize gold bangle, $250; alexisbittar.com. Lanvin patent leather wedges, $1,280; Jeffrey, NYC. Manicure, Debbie Leavitt at Cloutier Remix for Dior Beauty. **198:** Bracelet with rubies, sapphires, emeralds, and diamonds, $78,500; also at David Webb, Beverly Hills. **Wear it now 200:** Minaudière, $5,570; also at louisvuitton.com. 18K-white-gold ring, $10,100. **Beauty 203:** Silk-georgette shirtdress, $775; (212) 933-1674.