

Drawing East Asian Faces

A Brief Guide by Kat Tsai (chuwennie)

Just like every other racial group, East Asians have an incredible amount of genetic diversity. China alone recognizes 56 distinct ethnic groups, all with differing physical traits and genes. Contrary to popular belief, East Asians are not a monolith of people that all look alike! Let's take some time to look at the variety of features that East Asians can have, so that if you ever want to represent an Asian character you can do so with this background knowledge in mind.

*Disclaimer: This knowledge is mostly from my own observation/studies as both an artist and as a person of Chinese/Taiwanese descent. It's by no means a comprehensive account but I hope it will help educate and inform other artists who come from a different cultural background.

**Double Disclaimer: "East Asia" includes China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Mongolia, Korea, and Japan. Southeast Asians and Native Americans can share similar features as East Asians, but this guide is meant to mostly focus on people from East Asia and the East Asian diaspora.

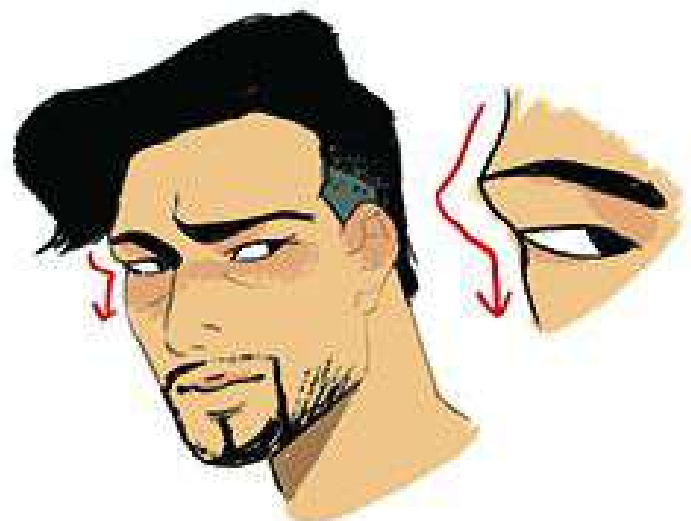
Face Shape



East Asians often have a shallower, softer brow ridge. The bone on which the eyebrows sit is flatter than in European people. As a result, brow ridges usually do not cast a shadow onto the upper eyelid.

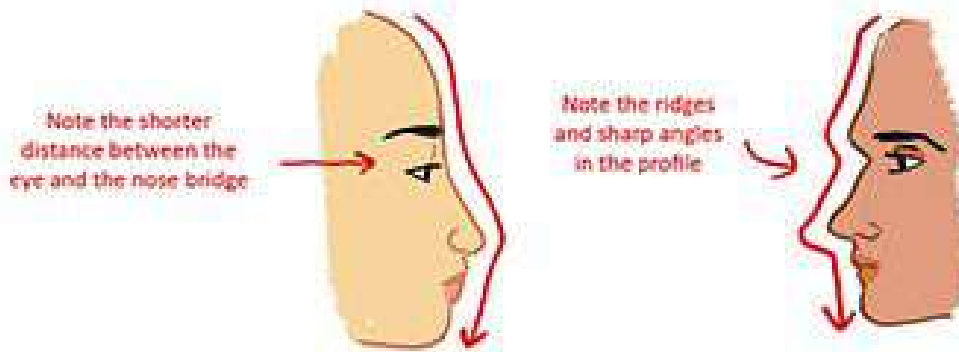
Note the ridge-like browbone and the resulting cast shadow.

However, this is by no means a hard or fast rule because some East Asians can also have defined browbones. (Think of rugged faces like Hanzo's from Overwatch.)





Cheekbones can be high and pronounced, or low and flat.



Asian faces tend to be much flatter and softer in profile than faces of other ethnic groups.



East Asian faces come in all shapes and sizes!



In ancient Japan, *fox-faced* or *kitsune-gao* referred to women who have a narrow face with close-set eyes, thin eyebrows, and high cheekbones. Traditionally, this face structure was considered to be highly attractive.

In China, a vast range of words exist to describe the shape of a person's face.



烧饼脸 (pancake face)
Round and flat face



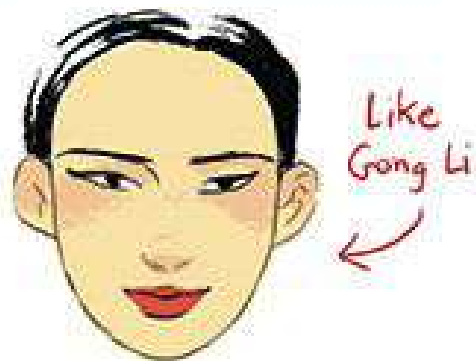
苹果脸 (apple face)
Prominent and round cheeks



国字脸 (square face)
Square jaw and chin.
Ideal face for a man



瓜子脸 (melon seed face)
Oval with a pointed chin.
Considered to be ideal for a woman. (A lot of male K-Pop stars also have this face)



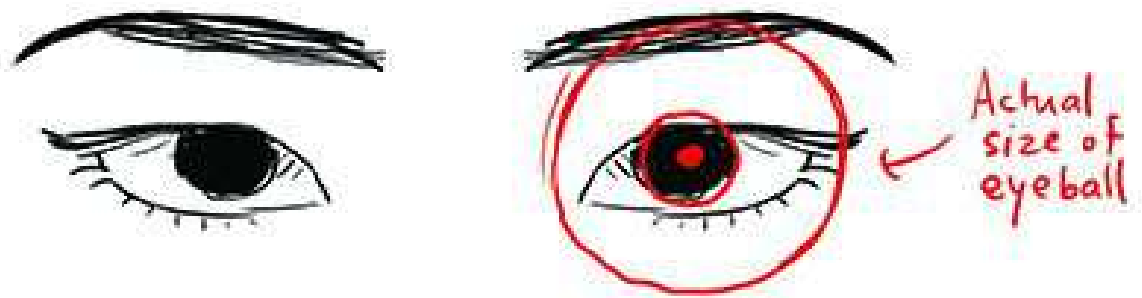
鹅蛋脸 (goose egg face)
Oval with a round chin.
Also an ideal feminine face shape.

Cosmetic surgery has become a prominent part of life in East Asia, especially in South Korea. Nowadays, 1 in 5 women in South Korea ages 19-49 have undergone at least one surgical procedure. It can often be difficult for women deemed less attractive to find success in love and the workforce, thus increasing the pressure to get surgery as a way to merely keep up with everyone else.



South Korean beauty standards include fair white skin, high-bridged noses, a small V-shaped face, and double eyelids.

Eyes



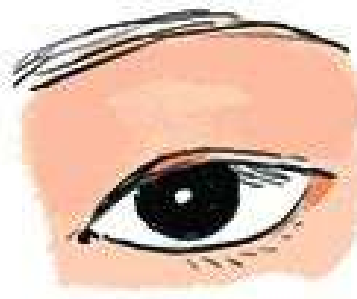
Asian eyes come in a variety of shapes and sizes. The perceived "slant" of Asian eyes results from a fold of skin in the upper eyelid that tends to cover the inner corner of the eye, making it appear narrower.

3 Common Eyelid Types



Monolid (Epicanthic fold)

A pad of fat sits in the upper eyelid, filling it out so that no crease exists. Monolids can be puffy, flat, or show the curvature of the eyeball.



Hooded eyelid

A small crease exists near the upper lash line but it is barely visible because the fatty part of the eyelid hangs over and obscures it.

**This is my eye type and it makes it extremely difficult to apply eyeliner*



Double eyelid

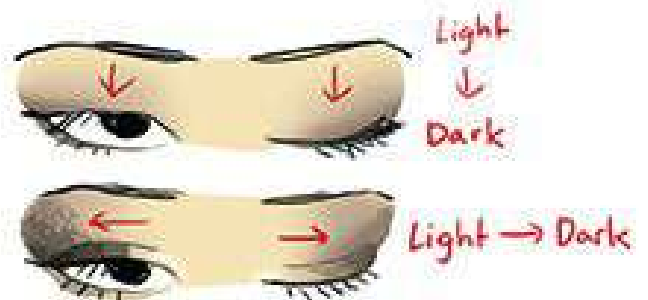
Unlike European double eyelids, natural Asian double eyelids are smaller and sit closer to the lash line.



Asian



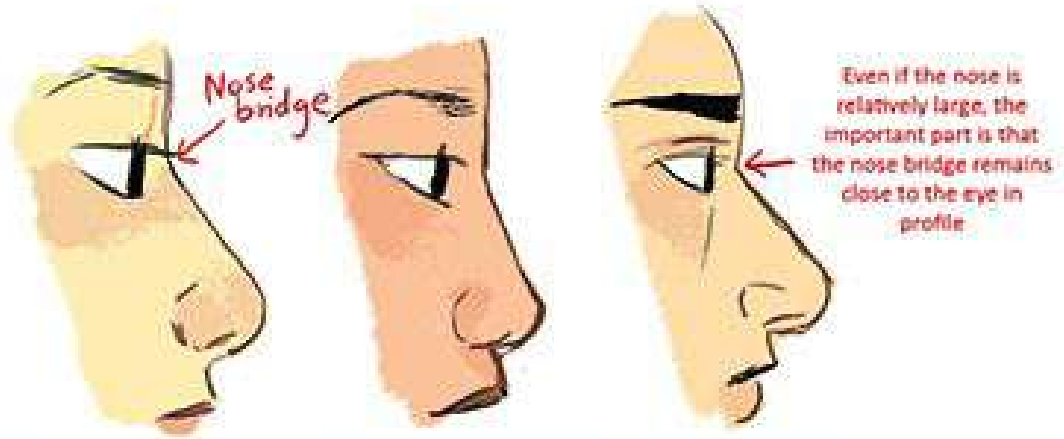
Non-Asian



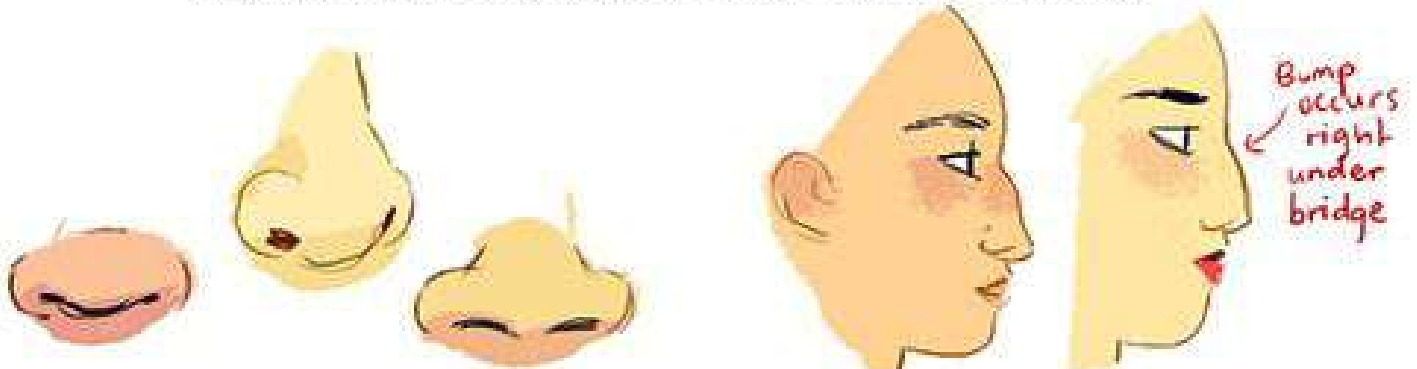
Eyelashes are short, black, and straight. They point downwards rather than curling outwards, and are often difficult to see as a result.

While double eyelids apply eyeshadow dark on the outside and light on the inside, monolids often apply makeup as a gradient that is dark near the lashline and light near the browbone.

Noses

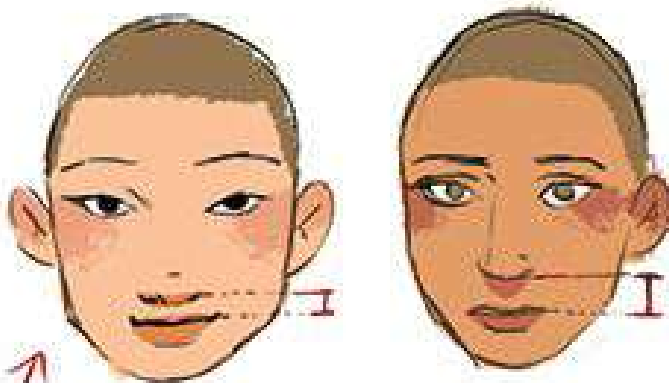


Asian noses tend to be low and flat, especially at the bridge of the nose.

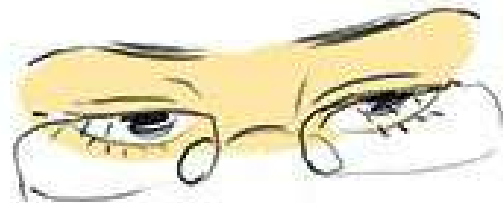


Nostrils and the tip of the nose are often shallow and can be round or wide.

Some Asians with taller noses can also have nose bumps!



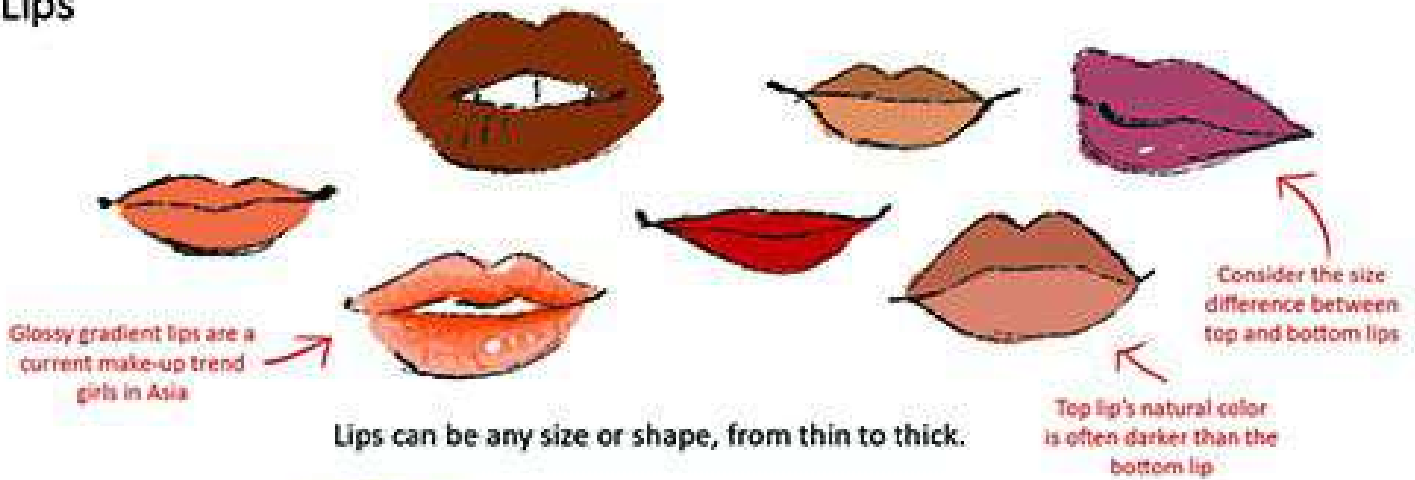
Nose-to-lip distance tends to be shorter in East Asians.



Glasses in the West are often made with Western/European features in mind. Thus, having glasses that slip down one's face and refuse to stay in place are a common problem for many with low nose bridges.

TIP: When drawing Asian noses from the front, I will often only delineate the nostrils and nose tip and lightly suggest the nose bridge or leave the nose bridge out entirely.

Lips



Thin lips are a desired trait among some Japanese girls, as they are thought to be an indicator of girliness or innocence.



Full lips are commonly seen among both men and women.

Skin Color



East Asians can be any range of shades, from very pale to a medium brown. In general, skin tones tend to have an olive/golden undertone. Historically and still today, fairness was considered to be most beautiful because of its association with wealth. Having pale skin meant that one could afford to sit in the shade, rather than labor outside all day. Nowadays, being pale is still the beauty norm, as singers, entertainers, and actors are all expected to have pale white skin. Recently due to Western beauty standards, tanned skin is perceived as having more "sex appeal" and darker-skinned Asian entertainers might try to bank off of that perception.

Mixed-Race



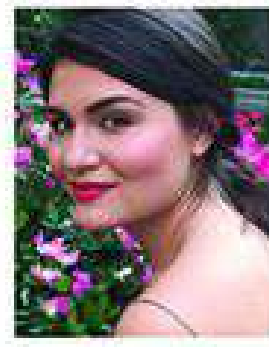
Arthur Mariano
(half Portuguese, half Japanese)



Daniel Henney
(half Korean, half Irish)

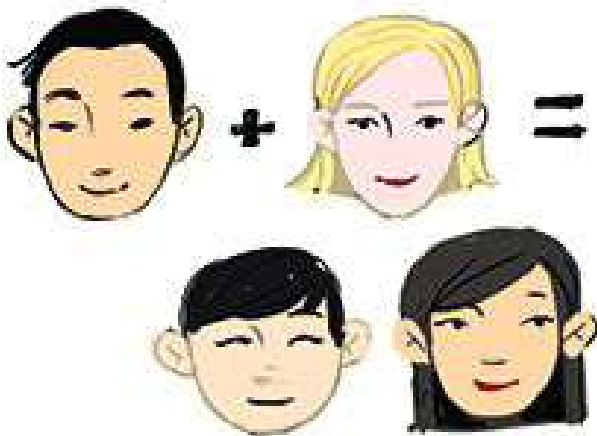


Ariana Miyamoto
(half Japanese, half African-American)



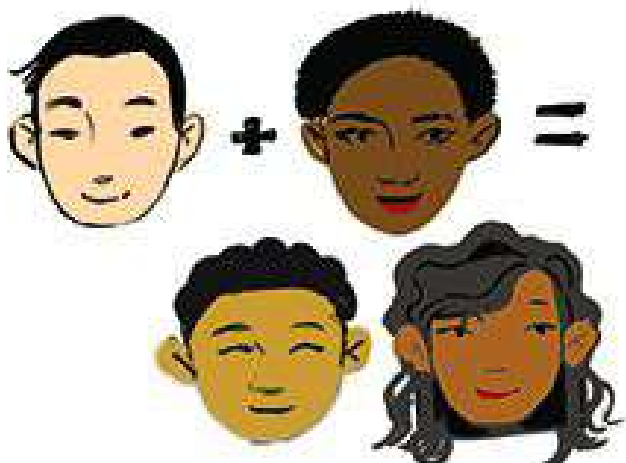
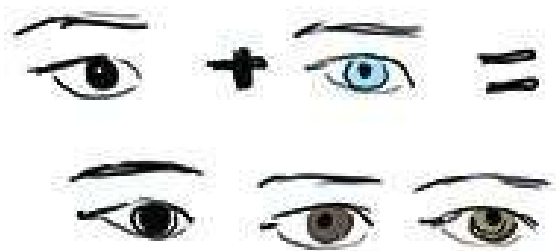
Philippa Soo
(half Chinese, half European)

Mixed race people are incredibly common in the Asian diaspora, and are becoming more common in East Asia due to increasing globalization. In general, mixed-race people have traits from both of their parents. When drawing mixed features, you can usually mix and match as you like, with a few hard rules that are almost always true.



When a light-haired person and a dark-haired person have a child, that child's hair color will always tend toward a medium-to-dark shade. Generally speaking, Asians cannot be naturally blonde, although in some ethnic groups a rare gene does exist for red hair!

Mixed-race Asians will generally have medium to dark colored eyes, even if one parent has very light blue eyes. This is because a recessive gene for blue eyes is required from each parent to have a blue-eyed child, and the gene for blue eyes does not exist in the Asian gene pool.



Hair kinkiness/curliness exists on a spectrum. When a person with extremely kinky hair and a person with straight hair have a child, that child's hair will typically be somewhat curly or wavy.

Cultural Differences

Tattoos



Traditional
yakuza
tattoos

Tattoos in Japan are a big no-no, unless you are drawing a rebellious delinquent or a criminal. Tattoos are associated with organized crime, and people with tattoos are often forbidden from hot springs and swimming pools.



Margaret
Cho's tattoos

However, lots of Asian-Americans and members of the Asian diaspora have tattoos because of the decreased stigma in the West.

Hair Color

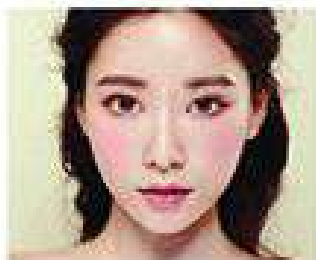


Dyed hair is a popular trend among young people in East Asia, but the range of acceptable colors falls within natural shades of browns and reds. While K-Pop stars might be able to get away with candy colored hair, in everyday life it's not considered a socially acceptable look.



In America and the West, it's much more common to see bright and unnatural shades of hair dye. Streaks and ombre are especially popular.

Makeup



Asian-style makeup is usually kept soft and subtle, to emphasize natural features and give off a look of youth and innocence. Having smooth, flawless skin is the most important part of the beauty routine.



Western makeup utilizes darker colors and more sultry looks. Tanned skin is considered beautiful in the West, and Asians living in the West might embrace that feature when applying makeup.

I hope this guide was useful and informative! If you have any questions, feel free to contact me on Tumblr or Twitter (@chuwenjie). Now go forth and draw some Asian characters!