

BOTOX'S NATURAL RIVAL

Is cosmetic acupuncture the secret behind the unlined faces of Hong Kong's seemingly ageless elite? It may look like torture, but it feels delicious. The results? Subtle, but discernible

BY GRACEY HITCHCOCK
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Hollywood's hottest new anti-ageing regime seems more gruesome than gorgeous, but looks can be deceiving. It's cosmetic acupuncture, and it's very hot right now. Call it a prickly alternative to the facelift sans the scalpel or the syringe.

Acupuncturists insert up to 50 sliver-thin needles into the face to increase circulation, relax deep creases and smooth out fine lines.

Advocates say cosmetic acupuncture is gaining popularity because it is a natural procedure that doesn't inhibit facial mobility. That's a plus for those who make their living emoting, or hate the idea of injecting anything — however safe — into their body.

As a beauty writer for Russian Elle and beauty director of Vogue Russia, I have experienced some of the planet's most exotic beauty treatments. I have been massaged backstage at the Bolshoi and pummeled by tiny Thai women on the shores of the Andaman Sea. But it wasn't until I landed in Toronto — with its three Chinatowns — that I found several expert practitioners of cosmetic acupuncture. They have a loyal, even international, clientele.

Masha Shaumian, a Muscovite who works for a luxury-goods consortium, calls ahead to book her appointments when visiting Toronto. "It got rid of all the little lines," she says. "It helps with the oval appearance of the face and the double chin thing."

Yvonne Asondue, a Toronto esthetician and shiatsu therapist, is also a proponent of cosmetic acupuncture. "It makes my face brighter. It looks better and firmer. It takes the stress out of my face."

I have been intrigued by the technique since reading about it years ago in a sexy ninja novel, which said it is the secret behind so many of the unlined faces of Hong Kong's seemingly ageless elite.

A branch of Chinese medicine, acupuncture is based on the belief that an imbalance or blockage of the body's energy — or qi — causes disease. Acupuncturists use needles to correct these problems by stimulating points along specific lines of energy in the body called meridians. No one can fully explain how or why acupuncture works. According to Toronto acupuncturist Fanny Ip, most studies indicate it releases endorphins, those chemicals that promote pleasure and relaxation. It also seems to increase circulation and may affect hormonal balance.

Cosmetic acupuncture applies these same techniques to the face. It can look like torture, but it feels delicious — and I think the results are subtle, but discernible.

Fang Wang is a slim, beautiful Asian woman of indeterminate age and a magnolia-perfect complexion. She works from her own small salon near the city's Annex neighbourhood. A doctor of acupuncture as well as a licensed aesthetician, she combines both techniques in her treatment.

When I visited, she began with a facial — using honey and other natural ingredients — that rivaled any I have had in the finest European salons. Next, she inserted needles from head to toe. "The treatment is only effective when we balance your

whole body," she explained. "The needles in your face do two things. The ones on the meridians balance your whole system and help increase circulation to your face. This will tighten and improve the overall appearance of your face. The needles inserted at lines and at stress points are 'acute' treatments. They will relax and soften the muscles that create lines."

Then she stuck small sterile needles into my face. Most slipped in painlessly. A few — around the nose and mouth — hurt, but only for seconds. She blames the abundance of nerves in the area. I could feel her work the needles along my facial contours (and across that line I had begun to detect late at night in my bathroom's unforgiving glare).

After 20 minutes, she slowly removed the needles and massaged my legs and feet, hands and arms. She kneaded my palms deeply, relaxing my writer's wrists. As she removed the needles from my face, I felt a rush of heat. She massaged my face, neck and shoulders with essential oils blended for my skin type. I felt cleansed, renewed and stress-free.

How did my face look? I think fabulous. I looked rested. My skin wasn't red or irritated. My eyes were wide, my jaw taut, and that nasty little line had almost disappeared.

Daniel Adler is a "Zen acupuncturist" who works out of a dojo in Toronto. I found it intriguing that cosmetic acupuncture would be practiced alongside spiritually introspective disciplines such as yoga. The Kokoro Dojo is a beautiful and serene oasis off a busy street. Adler is young, in his late 20s, but his soothing manner and lilting South African accent radiate confidence.

The day I met him I had a blinding migraine so intense I almost cancelled my appointment. I reclined on a white futon in a white room perfumed by incense. He began a deep and penetrating massage.

"For the treatment to be effective," he said, "I first have to address whatever other problems there are in the body. Today it was your headache."

He uses only 18 needles, and he placed them at specific points on my face to stimulate energy and increase circulation. He doesn't target specific wrinkles with the needles. Then he continued the massage. I felt warmth spread through my body and my headache melted away.

After he finished, Adler brought me Japanese tea and insisted I rest. I felt terrific and energized. My face looked great. I was glowing. He says his approach is designed to remove stress from the body and the face. "We create beauty from the inside out," he said.

Adler doesn't have a problem treating clients who have had Botox or dermafillers. "Most of my clients come to me because they don't want to do Botox or anything like that," he told me.

Fanny Ip, a hip young acupuncturist, says she's been doing cosmetic acupuncture for about three years, but it has recently become very popular. "Usually a patient will come in for another reason and then they will ask me about it." I met her at my doctor's office in a busy downtown medical clinic. She has a Bachelor of Science from the University of Toronto and gets most of her patients from physician referrals. Like Adler, she views what she does not as a face lift but as "facial rejuvenation." She inserted needles in me from head to toe in order to balance my body's energy and address "the core issues."

Then she targeted that evil forehead line that has begun to haunt me. After inserting the needles, she massaged my head to bring qi energy to my forehead and rejuvenate cells there.

After the treatment, I felt much better. But my face didn't seem much different until an hour later. The line had almost vanished and my face looked beautiful — smooth, white and calm.

I've become a devotee, and so has everyone I know who has tried it. Some people combine it with Botox and other treatments. Others like it because they don't want injections — not yet, or ever.

Gerda Neubacher, an artist and owner of Neubacher Gallery, was an instant convert. "My face was fresher," she says. "I felt no pain, I just drifted away." Her son, Manny, thought she looked great, "nowhere near her age," and booked his own session.

So does it work — or is it just another Hollywood fad?

It can't drastically change your appearance overnight — and no practitioner I talked to claimed it would. On the contrary, they warn clients it won't.

What can it do? My experience suggests pretty much what it claims: improve skin colour, clarity, reduce puffiness and tighten up the skin. Deep lines and creases seem to relax and fine lines disappear — temporarily.

It isn't permanent, but what is? To maintain the effect, most people have to go about once a month. Like everything else that's part art and part science, it's important to go to a good practitioner.

It's rare, but there can be side effects. Yoga teacher Graydon Moffat experienced severe pain during her first treatment and developed a slight bruise on her forehead the next day. But acupuncture has worked for her in the past, she says, so she plans to try cosmetic acupuncture again — with a different practitioner.

The results are subjective, but that can be said of many new rejuvenation procedures — even those done in medical offices. And while Botox, dermafillers and surgery give definite results, some people are still disappointed because of unrealistic expectations.

Today many people want subtle non-invasive procedures. It's impossible to judge objectively how much tighter, firmer or smoother many of these treatments make anyone look. It's a matter of opinion. That's the trade-off — softer, subtler, more natural as opposed to something more definite, defined and invasive.

What cosmetic acupuncturists do works for me. I also like what my skin doctors can do for me too. So I go to both and have the best of both worlds. I'm pretty sure that's true for Hollywood, too.

Fang Wang 416-530-4195; 60 minutes \$75

Daniel Adler 416-963-9783; 60 minutes \$60

Fanny Ip 416-977-7463 (local-234) 45 minutes \$60