

《We should learn to differ respectfully》



Writer: Raymond Zhou

Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. So, when the winner of a beauty pageant fails to win approval from the public, I don't see anything abnormal about it. For one thing, the jury panel may not represent the broad tastes of the populace.

What I found disgusting was the mean spirit that goes with the disapproval.

I don't know how to phrase it euphemistically, but the news of Chinese-American Arianna Quan being crowned Miss Michigan for 2016 was not met with applause in the country of her birth. Judging from online feedback, Chinese netizens did not agree with the pageant judges, to say the least. Well, it's not that they believe other

contestants were more qualified than Quan, but that she is "so darn ugly".

"She would not have a chance even at the first round had it been a Chinese competition," went one of the more polite postings.

Another was less benign: "She's so ugly I wept. Is this some kind of scheme to denigrate ethnic Chinese?"

Most said they could not believe she is only 23. They put her age at 43, 53 or even 63. "It shows how capitalist America quickens the ageing process," said someone who seemed to flaunt his sarcasm.

I lived in the US for more than a dozen years, so I am accustomed to the widely diverging standards that East and West apply to Asian femininity. It is very real. I once saw a billboard on a Beijing street for a giant American company. It featured three Asian women. I told my friend that it must have been designed in New York without being vetted by its Chinese subsidiary. It would never achieve its obvious goal of endearing the brand to Chinese women.

Simply put, Americans favor the supermodel type while Chinese prefer the porcelain fragile kind.

Quan was born in Beijing and emigrated to the US when she was 6. I have friends whose daughters made the same move in their pre-teen years. The funny thing is, they had exquisite looks when they first arrived Stateside, but a couple years later they turned into - how shall I put it - typical Asian American women.

The California sun is partly the reason, but it's not just the sun-kissed skin. Their whole look and feel would change, which seems to defy logic. But I found their new look healthier and brimming with self-assurance. And the way they talk and comport themselves carries charisma that goes way beyond mere appearance.

If you dig deeper, you may find traces of women's independence and equality in the Asian American look while the typical Chinese beauty, as exemplified by Fan Bingbing, could be interpreted as "objectifying women".

The notion of beauty can be shaped by group mentality. The same people who threw mud at Quan could well cheer her had they grown up on the other side of the Pacific. Matters of aesthetics are subjective. What they should learn is how to differ respectfully.