

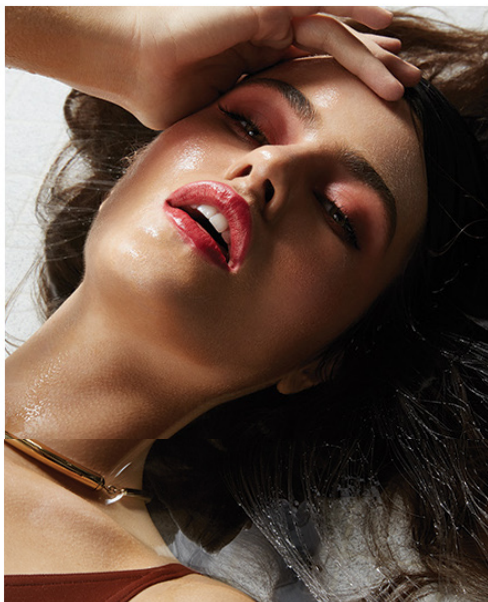


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## The Latest Asian Beauty Trend Is... Water, a.k.a. "Essences"

The latest glow-promising skincare trend? Water 2.0. Wing Sze Tang takes the plunge

May 19, 2015 [Wing Sze Tang](#)   2



PHOTOGRAPHY ANDREW SOULE

Ever since the aquaholics of ancient Greece invented the spa as we know it—believing that habitual soaks could do everything from balancing bodily humours to curing unsightly skin diseases—water as prettifier has held promise. And now Asia, hub of the world's reigning beauty arbiters, is taking H<sub>2</sub>O to the next level with cosmetic waters.

While Europeans happily slather on rich creams, Asian women prefer wispy-light textures, hence the popularity of "watery care," according to Florence Bernardin, founder of Information & Inspiration, an agency that dishes intel on the cutting-edge eastern market to brands like L'Oréal. "More than 90 percent of Japanese women use a cosmetic water. It's a fundamental product in Asian beauty," she says.

Indeed, some consider cosmetic water, also called a treatment essence, to be the most crucial part of the notoriously elaborate Asian skincare routine (which in Korea includes up to 12 steps, notes Bernardin). Until now, SK-II's celeb-hoarded bestseller—supposedly the secret behind Cate Blanchett's porcelain perfection—has been the most famous one outside of Asia, but this spring, beauty empires like Chanel, Biotherm and Clinique are all launching fluidy concoctions here (see products below).

An essence is used post-cleansing, but don't mistake it for stinging, alcohol-loaded toner. This liquid concentrate is meant to add hydration before a separate serum and moisturizer are applied. "It prepares skin, allowing for better absorption of the next formula," says Dr. Gee Young Bae, a Seoul-based consulting dermatologist for Kiehl's, which launches its Iris Extract Activating Treatment Essence this month.

In recent years, it's been au courant to oil-slick our faces, but these liquids can do what the greasy stuff can't. "Most 'traditional' active ingredients [such as vitamin C and certain peptides] are water-soluble," says Dr. Geoff Genesky, chemist and head of Kiehl's skincare lab. "By nature, oils cannot deliver them." Cosmetic waters are more suitable for ferrying these molecules. They're also more intensely hydrating, since it's easier to pack humectants into a thinner formula, he adds. That doesn't mean you can skip your regular moisturizer, though; you need to seal in that hydration with the types of barrier ingredients (shea butter, beeswax) found in lotions and creams.

Of course, there's a proper way to dabble that's nearly as ritualistic as a tea ceremony. Put several drops in your palm and press the product onto your skin until it's absorbed, then repeat two or three times, suggests Bae. Or do as Blanchett does: decant the potion into a purse-sized spray bottle for an anytime, anywhere refresh.

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